CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN AND THE CHURCH IN EARLY MODERN IRELAND
CATHERINE MC AULEY
THE FOUNDING OF THE SISTERS OF MERCY

1.1. Women and the Church in Early Modern Ireland

With the introduction to Ireland of English Common Law in the seventeenth century, women lost their legal and political status and their primary role was as wives and mothers. By the nineteenth century the world of women in Ireland was circumscribed by legal, social and cultural boundaries. Legally they had no entitlement to vote and once married had limited property entitlements and were considered the chattels of their husbands.

Limited by society's expectation of their 'rightful' place, many middle class women found an acceptable outlet in philanthropic work. They had to be active and manipulative in order to survive or have their cause survive. Being imaginative and inventive was important whether one was a paupers, prostitute, nun, servant or suffragist.¹

Much of the wealth of the country was concentrated in Dublin, which was once the second city of the Empire. This situation remained until after the Act of Union in 1800, when the seat of power in Ireland moved from Dublin to Westminster. Social structures were strictly hierarchical, from the nobility at the top to the wealthy elite of merchants and distillers and to the poor who resided at the bottom. Poverty was viewed as a kind of moral malaise curable by the discipline of hard work. Dublin Corporation's concern over the issue was based on the assumption that there was a strong relationship between poverty and crime.² It was this notion which propelled the government to establish a house of industry in every county in 1772.³

The Established Anglican Church enjoyed a special position, politically and economically, in the country. Catholicism, the religion of the majority, was suppressed by the penal laws. These were gradually repealed after 1760 and full Catholic emancipation

³Ibid., p.101.
was achieved in 1829. Catholic education was forbidden but by 1824 many had acquired a basic education in the 'hedge schools' which numbered about 9,000 and catered for almost 400,000 children. Despite the multiplication of schools many of the poor were still illiterate before 1831, especially in the rural areas. Pastoral directives and ecclesiastical assessments assume that a great number could not read.

The Napoleonic wars in 1805, brought prosperity to Irish farmers who benefited from Britain's requirement for food imports, but after the defeat at Waterloo in 1815, food prices fell, causing the collapse of the agrarian market. The depressed state of Irish agriculture, which lasted from 1815 until the mid 1830s, caused many landlords to re-examine the management of their estates. It was no longer profitable to sub-divide holdings and to permit a large increase in the total number of tenants. The collapse of home spinning and weaving left many families short of money which had previously paid the rent, while the effort of collecting rents from several hundred holdings was considerably greater than from several dozen. Following on unemployment and eviction, an underclass of poverty-stricken paupers crowded from rural Ireland into Dublin city.

The imprisonment of young children with adult criminals was a feature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and they were regularly committed to the jails and bridewells. In April 1817 there were over 2,500 inmates including nearly 900 children in jail. Catholics as a class did not have the resources to initiate specifically Catholic rescue charities. Protestant Orphan Houses, incorporated in 1800, unlike other private orphan bodies, were given an annual parliamentary grant which continued for many years.

Evangelicalism, a religion of personal experience based on the individual's intense conviction of his or her salvation through God's grace, had been growing in importance since the later eighteenth century, and there is no doubt that it played a significant part in encouraging many among both clergy and laity, to adopt a more conscientious approach to religion and its duties. This mainly affected Protestant women which propelled them to take a more active role in lay voluntary societies. There was a certain proselytising dimension to this work. For example, the Kildare Place Schools were perceived by

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5. Ibid., p.112.
6. Ibid., p.120.
Catholics as promoting the Protestant religion in the guise of teaching the bible "without comment." This in turn spurred Catholic women to respond to the social and educational needs of the Catholic poor. In contrast to Protestant women who could form themselves into autonomous welfare associations within their respective churches, the primary philanthropic route for Catholic women was to either join a religious congregation of women or to establish one. Quaker and Protestant women generally took a more active role in lay voluntary societies than their Catholic counterparts.

The roots of female religious life run much deeper in Irish history. In the early medieval Celtic church, nuns played a more central role in church life than their counterparts in Europe. The most famous of the Irish double monasteries was Kildare, established by St. Brigit in the fifth century. Brigit of Kildare exercised jurisdiction not just over a female monastery, but over a male monastery also. She provided counsel to eminent leaders of the Irish church and abbots as well as saints sought instruction at Kildare. Monasteries were not just centres of religious activity and learning, they also played a role in the social and educational needs of the people. Furthermore they did not have the rigid structure of later, post Norman years and within this framework, were at liberty to allow women to exercise their creative leadership.

The dissolution of the monasteries at the beginning of the sixteenth century affected both male and female establishments. While male religious often remained in close proximity to their former monasteries for years after the dissolution, this did not happen with female monasteries. Therefore, for a period of over sixty years, there was no female religious presence in Ireland. Tentative steps toward the return of religious women in Ireland began with the return of the Poor Clares, in 1629, followed by the Carmelites in 1640, and the Dominicans in 1644. All of these were suppressed from time to time under the penal laws; charitable works such as the running of schools could not, under these circumstances, be systematically carried out by them.

Religion allowed women to exercise their maternal and moral skills in the service of the poor on a broad scale and religious support validated women's work in this area. In the early 1750s, two women, Teresa Mullaly and Nano Nagle set up elementary schools for the catholic poor in Dublin and Cork respectively. Nano Nagle, a rich woman, founded the Sisters of the Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Cork city in 1776.

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11Ibid., p.29.
Teresa Mullaly used a small inheritance to run a free school for Catholics simultaneously with Nagle’s in Cork. The two women corresponded for several years.13 After Nagle’s death in 1784 her congregation found itself severely financially constrained and the non-enclosed order as envisaged by Nagle was resolved in 1805 into the congregation known as the Presentation Nuns. In 1810 Dr. Daniel Murray, Archbishop of Dublin, approached Mary Aikenhead and Frances Ball, two wealthy upper middle-class women and asked them to lead two new congregations. The Irish Sisters of Charity was established in Dublin in 1815 by Aikenhead and in 1821 Ball’s foundation known as the Loreto nuns established Loreto Abbey, a school for middle-class girls with a poor school attached.16

The gradual repeal of the penal laws and the re-establishment of the church infrastructures, in both rural and urban Ireland, saw a strong revival in Catholicism throughout nineteenth century Ireland, which even the Famine did not dissipate. Women played a central role in consolidating and passing on this vibrant Catholicism. As Maria Luddy states: The overwhelming importance of religion in the lives of nineteenth century Irish women cannot be over emphasised.17 This revival took place within a society where patriarchal values were being consolidated, both from the post Tridentine Catholic ethos itself, and the wider Victorian culture.

The interpretation that woman was man’s subordinate dominated society’s and the church’s thinking. St. Paul wrote that women should keep their heads veiled because they were not, like men, made in the image of God, but were the glory of their husbands – the reflection of the reflection of the ideal.

Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. (Corinthians 11:9) Humility for a woman was lauded as the greatest of the Christian virtues. By defining the limits of womanliness as shrinking, retreating acquiescence, and by reinforcing that behaviour in the sex with praise, the myth of female inferiority and dependence could be and was perpetuated.18

Although limited by the pervasive patriarchal autocracy, many middle-class altruistic women developed benevolent institutions for the betterment of the poor, particularly children. Until the passing of the Irish Poor Relief Act of 1838 provision for charity children in Ireland remained inadequate, unorganised and in the case of the government supported institutions, subject to serious abuses and deficiencies.19

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13Clear, Nuns in Eighteenth Century Ireland, p.49.
14Ibid., p.50.
15Addy, Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century Ireland, p.2.
While the preoccupation of many of the voluntary societies lay in religious conversion, rather than simply the welfare of the poor, the restrictions of the penal laws hindered the Catholic Church’s counteraction. As already mentioned, there were religious women in Ireland in the eighteenth century, but the fact that they were enclosed meant they could not respond to the social needs of the time. It is probably true that Catherine McAuley took inspiration from these women but she wished to break out of the strictures with which a male dominated society had surrounded their lives. She set about creating a new way whereby women, motivated by Christian faith, could respond to the needs of those women who lived on the margins of society.

The use of the term feminist to describe a woman born in 1778 and who died in 1841, may appear to be anachronistic but Catherine McAuley was a woman a modern day feminist would be proud to claim. Her intrinsic response towards poor and marginalised girls and women of nineteenth century Dublin was practical, committed and originitative. She used her sizable inheritance to establish a women’s community-movement and built what she later called a House of Mercy, in 1827, which housed a number of initiatives which presaged modern day social services.

1.2. Catherine McAuley: Biographical Details

She was one of three children, two daughters and a son, born in 1781, to James McAuley and his wife Elinor Conway. McAuley, a Catholic was an enterprising builder who amassed a fortune as the industrial revolution gained momentum. His death marked the beginning of financial instability for the family who came to rely on the goodness of their Protestant relatives. The benevolence he had shown to the poor inspired his daughter Catherine, who remained secretly committed to her Catholic religion when the family became Protestant. In 1803 she became a companion to Mrs. Callaghan, and household manager of the Callaghan estate in Coolock, northeast of Dublin. Mrs. Callaghan was a Quaker and traditionally Quaker women developed an independent and secular tradition of philanthropic involvement. Severe unemployment existed among young women in the Coolock area, and initially Catherine McAuley acted on her employer’s behalf in dispensing charity, but cognizant of the needs she found, she organised sewing co-operatives and a retail outlet for the sale of their goods to encourage self-reliance among the girls and women.

Luddy, Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century Ireland, p.23.
Upon the death of William Callaghan in 1822, Catherine became the sole residuary legatee of their estate with a considerable inheritance, of about £25,000, property, Coolock House and the furniture and plate. She was now forty-four years of age and according to the "Derry Large Manuscript By One of the First Sisters of Mercy."

At that time she lived in what is usually called good style, that is, she kept a carriage, dressed well, went into society and sometimes gave parties in 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 Street.

With her inheritance, in 1824 she purchased a site for a house of Mercy on Baggot Street, to provide a school for poor girls and a shelter and training centre for homeless and servant girls and women. The premises were planned to contain apartments for ladies who might choose, for any definite or indefinite time, to devote themselves to the service of the poor without the restriction of vows. The foundation stone was laid by her friend Michael Blake, parish priest of Saint Michael and John's, in Dublin. She travelled to France in search of pedagogical expertise and on her return visited the Kildare Place Society Schools. The society disclaimed proselytism but did not have the trust of the Catholic church, who saw all education as interpenetrated with religious sentiments and considered the attempted demarcation between religious and secular learning as invalid. She visited the House of Refuge run by the Sisters of Charity in Stanhope Street to acquire information on management which might assist her in the direction of her proposed institute. She was convinced that the principles on which it was conducted were incompatible with her plans. She was confirmed in her resolution never to admit the interference of a non-resident committee and never to close the doors of the institution against anyone because they had experienced its protection before.

Commitment to her dying sister's five children prevented her taking up residence when the house was opened in 1827. She took up permanent residence in 1828 when Coolock House was sold. Anna Maria Doyle and a young adopted cousin became the first associates of the house and under Catherine's supervision began the poor schools and shelter there in September 1827. Anna Maria Doyle had plans to enter a Presentation convent,

but being the then only child of aged parents, I felt much, and the prospect of being able to visit them determined them, and myself, in the choice of

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23 Ibid., p. 45.
24 Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p. 46.
uniting with Revd. Mother in the formation of the new establishment. Letter to Clare A. Moore in 1844.\textsuperscript{23}

The Archbishop of Dublin, Daniel Murray was known to Catherine for many years since she consulted him for religious instruction. He came to the house in 1828 to receive her niece into the church and granted diocesan approval to the House of Mercy. He gave permission to the community for the visitation of the sick, which they commenced immediately.

Sir Patrick Dunne's 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.\textsuperscript{26}

Although it was a secular institute, the religious motivation for the work was essential to it.\textsuperscript{27} The group structured themselves from the beginning on religious community lines. There was an oratory fitted up in a room on the great corridor. Every morning prayers were read, followed by meditation. The young women protected by the institute and young girls of the neighbourhood joined in the night prayers.\textsuperscript{28}

On the death of her brother-in-law, her sister's husband, in 1829, Catherine became adoptive mother of his five children, ages seven to seventeen. These were Mary, James, Robert, Catherine and William. The two girls came to live in Baggot Street and the boys were enrolled in a boarding school. She was already the adoptive mother of at least four other children, two young cousins and at least two orphans. The care of orphans was added to the work of the Institute when a child was left homeless on the death of its mother. What is clear is that her plan was for a society of

pious secular ladies, who would devote themselves to their service, with liberty to return to their worldly life when they no longer felt inclined to discharge such duties. She did not like the idea of religious vows, and disapproved of conventual observances.\textsuperscript{29}

The poor school catered for large numbers of girls and from the beginning the Institute provided safe lodging to poor females. From the beginning the Discalced Carmelites Fathers from Clarendon Street were active friends. As early as September 10th 1828, she wrote to Fr. Francis L'Estrange, Prior of the Discalced Carmelites

\textsuperscript{23}Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p.37.
\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., pp. 49-50.
\textsuperscript{25}Cleary, Nuns in Nineteenth Century Ireland, p.50.
\textsuperscript{26}Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p.54.
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., p.102.
The objects which the charity at present embrace are the daily education of hundreds of poor female children and the instruction of young women who sleep in the house.30

Catherine McAuley had many societal connections which she was not afraid to use. She enlisted the aid of “her fashionables,” who included the Lady Mayoress and Lady Templemore, among others, to organise bazaars, which were fashionable for a short time, and were patronized chiefly by Protestant friends. Among the gifts they received for sale were samples of fancy work by the Duchess of Kent and her daughter Princess Victoria, the future Queen.31 To meet additional expenses notes were sent to the wealthy of the city and although the initial response was poor, the institution became better known. She invited women, “who prefer a conventual life, and are prevented embracing it from the nature of property or connections,” to retire to the house.32 The women who came daily to assist in the poor school were generally educated women of independent means.

Our foundress became acquainted with the family of the great O'Connell and the Misses Costello of Merrion Square. Both these families distinguished for their talents and accomplishments assisted her in every way, taught in the school and sometimes in the work room.33

At Christmas 1828 Protestant and Catholic benefactors sent in contributions of food and Daniel O'Connell “ever a benefactor to our institution,” attracted great attention for the institution by his attendance at Christmas dinner.34 While there were many who supported her, there were others who made no secret of their disapproval. A young girl denied admission at the House of Refuge in Stanhope Street, was told as some consolation, that a Miss McAuley had a great house where every sort of people were let in. The new establishment was coming in for severe lay and clerical criticism. The implication seems to be that the lay supporters of the Sisters of Charity feared the House of Mercy would divert public attention from their interests. When Archbishop Daniel Murray dedicated the chapel in the house in June 1829, Michael Blake preached a sermon in which he praised Catherine McAuley highly.35 The archbishop recommended that the chapel in the house be opened to the public and that the money from Sunday collections be used to support the women and girls sheltered there. This cannot have found favour with the local clergy who would not have approved of parish funds diverted in any way. One of the priests, who had officiated

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33Ibid. p.201.
34Ibid. p.50.
at the mass, showed by his comments later that he neither liked the foundress nor the institution. Some days later an anonymous note, directed to C. McAuley Esq. contained the most mortifying, the most insulting strictures on Miss McAuley's proceedings.  

The dress they adopted also "excited the disapprobation of some who considered it an assimilation to a religious dress to which they had no claim."  

The Administrator of the parish in which the institute was situated, Matthias Kelly, testified to the dominant consciousness regarding women and his attitude specifically with regard to Catherine McAuley.

This gentleman had no great idea that the unlearned sex could do any thing but mischief by trying to assist the clergy, while he was prejudiced against the foundress whom he considered a parvenue.

His opposition to the Institute was implacable. He came to the house and said, without authorisation, that the archbishop intended giving the House of Mercy to the Sisters of Charity. This illustrates the inferior position of even middle class, lay unmarried women, in the early 19th century. A member of the clergy felt free to walk in to her own house and tell her what was planned for its future. She wrote to Daniel Murray and he responded by coming immediately to assure her that he never intended depriving her of her property. Because of her vulnerability, as a lay woman, she was encouraged, even by a friend and supporter, in the direction of religious life. Her friend Michael Blake, who was vicar general, advised her to associate the institute with a religious order.

The work of the institute continued with great success. The schools were crowded. A second dormitory was furnished for poor young women. The House of Mercy was an asylum for many young women of respectability and the protection and recommendation of servants was a much valued service. Some alteration was also made in the daily routine structures of the house. The community rose at the same hour and assembled in the chapel for morning prayer. The chaplain said mass at half past seven. After breakfast while they still remained in the refectory, Miss McAuley read from the Lives of the Saints or from the Sinner’s Guide. At the close of 1829 there were nine sisters in the community.

There was increasing pressure on the community to form themselves into a recognisable category but still she was loath to take the step. Her habits were formed among Protestants, she did not like ceremony and some of the ceremonies used in

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Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p.53.

 Ibid., p.157.

 Ibid., p.157.

 Ibid., p.108.

 Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p.54.
convents, such as kneeling to the Superiors, were particularly distasteful. But Dr. Blake urged her and Fr. O’Hanlon agreed to help her with the various canonical requirements.⁴⁶

There was no room for the radical philanthropy of the kind envisioned by Catherine McAuley in the Catholic church of the day. In order to ensure the continuance of the Institute, she and her eleven associates decided to found a religious congregation of women. In September of 1830, Catherine McAuley, now aged fifty-two, Mary Ann Doyle, her first associate, and Mary Elizabeth Harley entered the Presentation Convent on George’s Hill, Dublin to begin an approved novitiate.

The superior when they entered, treated Catherine with a degree of deference but in the second year of their novitiate, a superior was chosen who had opposed the admission of subjects not to be professed for their own order and openly declared herself against differences and privileges.⁴⁷ She kept Sr. Elizabeth Harley employed cleaning shoes and utensils in a damp underground kitchen, without fire, which fostered her constitutional tendency to consumption. She died soon after profession and is buried in the vault of the Carmelite Priory at Saint Teresa’s Church, Clarendon Street.

On 12th December 1831, Catherine McAuley, Mary Ann Doyle and Elizabeth Harley, professed their religious vows in the presence of the archbishop and left Georges Hill immediately to return to Baggot Street. The following day, December 13th, the archbishop appointed Catherine McAuley superior and the Sisters of Mercy was founded.

⁴⁶Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p.204.
⁴⁷Ibid., p.205.
1.3. The Founding of the Sisters of Mercy  
Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy.

The most important of Catherine McAuley's writings is the original Rule and Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy. The manuscript, handwritten in black ink in a copybook, is preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy, Dublin. She sent to several convents requesting a copy of their Rule which she duly reviewed with the community. A preference for the Presentation Rule emerged as it seemed more adapted to the purposes of the institution. The primary purpose of Nano Nagle's congregation was evangelical work among the poor, and after her death in 1784, her original plan was considerably modified when the congregation was canonically formed in 1805, as the Presentation nuns. An issue for Catherine McAuley was that the Presentation Rule reflected a male view as it had been written by a man, and while basing her Rules on those of the Presentation order, the Rule of the Sisters of Mercy was rewritten to reflect a women's standpoint. It is the most comprehensive written expression of her thought now available, and when it is compared with the Rule and Constitutions of the Presentation Sisters, which was its basis, the qualities of Catherine's composition emerge in striking ways.

Her language about women is deliberately non-sexist. This is evidenced in her elimination of some of the more traditional patriarchal provisions for women religious. She submitted her manuscript to archbishop Daniel Murray for his review and his penciled additions and deletions are clearly visible in the original. (Appendix D) In article 1 of the chapter on chastity she makes a significant change by the omission of a clause.

As Chastity is a most angelical virtue, consecrated in the Person of Jesus Christ and recommended in the Evangelical Law, with the most distinguished encomiums, the Sisters shall esteem nothing more precious than this Heavenly Gift, but as they carry this most valuable treasure in brittle vessels" she omits the final Presentation clause, "But as they carry this most valuable treasure in brittle vessels."

She is clearly refusing to acquiesce to the prevailing notion of the frailty of woman. Far more significantly, she omits the entire second article of the chapter in the Presentation Rule, which Daniel Murray does not restore. Part of it reads:

When spoken to by men of any state or profession they shall observe and maintain the most guarded reserve, never fix their eyes on them, nor shew

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Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p.52.
Cleary, Nano in Nineteenth Century Ireland, p.49.
Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p.10.
Ibid., p.313.
themselves, in conversation or otherwise, in the least degree familiar with them, how devout or religious soever they may appear to be.\textsuperscript{49}

The deletion of this chapter manifests her integrity. As a mature autonomous woman, she would not insert a Rule for others to follow which would not apply to her. In her capacity as superior of the Institute, she communicated with many men on a business level. She inspired lifelong fidelity and friendship from good men friends, notably Michael Blake and Redmond O’Hanlon.

In Part II of the Rule of the Mistress of Novices, Catherine made several significant changes. In general she described the role of Mistress of Novices in more restrained language. She changed “exercise them” to “instruct them,” and in the 3rd Rule “She shall instruct them in modesty, meekness and humility, encouraging them to conquer those petish and childish humours, especially in the female sex.” She omits “especially in the female sex”\textsuperscript{47}, a clear acknowledgment of the existence of childish humours in other than the female sex.

In the Rule on the election of the Mother Superior, she made significant changes, by the elimination of the final phrase, she is affirming the authority of the community and politely curtiling the intrusion of the bishop or his delegate. “Where there are not seven professed to make the election, the Bishop shall appoint to the Office of Mother Superior and to the other principal charges, after having consulted the eldest sister of the Community, and the Priest appointed to have the direction of it. She changes “eldest sister” to “senior sister” and omits “and the Priest appointed to have the direction of it.”\textsuperscript{48}

Her compassionate sheltering of servant girls was an implicit criticism of the prevailing social system and of sexist householders within it. She composed a completely new chapter 4: “Of the Admission of Distressed Women”, an astute, business-like chapter consisting of five articles about the care, instruction, and employment of women and girls sheltered in the House of Mercy.\textsuperscript{49} It is interesting to note that although this is the chapter which informed the Magdalen Homes, there is not a single reference to what she was sheltering distressed women from. The House of Mercy was to be an empowerment of these women, by improving their capacities for employment.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{49}Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy., p.265.
\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., p.324.
\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., p.321.
\textsuperscript{49}Ibid., p.263.
\textsuperscript{50}In conversation with Mary C. Sullivan, 29 June, 1998.
The core of Catherine McAuley's vision is contained in the following two tenets. Article 1, Rule 1 of the Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy.

The Sisters admitted into this religious congregation besides the principal and general end of all religious orders, such as attending to their own perfection, must also have in view what is peculiarly characteristic of this Institute of the Sisters of Mercy, that is, a most serious application to the Instruction of poor Girls, Visitation of the Sick, and protection of distressed women of good character.

In the Rule: Of the Schools, article 5, which states in her own words,

The Sisters shall feel convicted 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 the station they are destined to fill, their example and advice will always possess influence, and where ever a religious woman presides, peace and good order are generally to be found.

From the outset (Appendix A) her vision was that poor girls and women, cramped by poverty, could be released by empowering themselves through education, in an era when girls, especially poor girls, had few opportunities to do so.

Throughout the text, she uses words that are kindly, non judgmental and assured. She uses the word Superior rather than Superioress, she changes "dear little ones" to "the children", and "pattern to her little flock" becomes "pattern to the Community". The long list of amendments and omissions to the Rules and Constitutions of the congregation, by Catherine McAuley herself, gives some valuable insights into her sense of her own power and her knowledge that she could effect change.

In 1832, seven of the remaining ten women who had been living and working at Baggot Street were formally received into the Sisters of Mercy at the first reception ceremony on Baggot Street. Her decision to hold these receptions in private in the house, to avoid expense, caused so much confusion and offence, that it was later decided that in the future, reception ceremonies would be more public.

One of Catherine McAuley's urgently stated maxims "The poor need help today, not next week," informed her work and that of the community. Solidarity with the sick elicited an immediate response from her. When there was an Asiatic cholera epidemic in Dublin, in 1832, the Board of Health wrote to obtain the cooperation of the Sisters of Mercy in the cholera hospital. The archbishop gave his sanction and laid great stress on the

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unobtrusive manner in which they should appear and act, appealing to Mother Catherine’s experience of the unpleasant feelings always excited in Protestants when certain points of difference were drawn prominently forth.52 “and above all things that the cross and beads might be concealed.” Mary Clare Augustine Moore in her memoir, said “Revd. Mother described to some of us the sisters returning at past 9, loosening their cinctures on the stairs and stopping, overcome with sleep.”53

When Michael Blake was appointed to St. Andrew’s parish, within which the convent was situated, he sent her the contents of the poor boxes that food might be provided for the poor whom he should send to the house. “There was soup to be made for a hundred, sometimes more”.55 His continuous high regard for her and the work of the Institute was manifested in many practical ways. When a legacy of £700 Grand Canal Debentures was bequeathed to him, he had them transferred to the Institution.55

Following the granting of Catholic emancipation in 1829, a range of social reforms was introduced in the 1830s and education was an area on which much public attention focused.56 In October 1831, the government decided to ‘constitute a board for the superintendence of a system of national education in Ireland,’ more commonly referred to as The National Board. One of the main objects of the board would be ‘to unite in one system children of different creeds.’57 The main use the Catholic church authorities made of their enhanced status was to press their claims in the educational matter. By the middle of the nineteenth century they were firmly committed to the principal of denominational education at all levels.58

Education was a maximum priority for Catherine McAuley and she made application for affiliation with the new education board in 1834. The application was signed on her behalf by eight men, including some notable Protestants including the Surgeon General, Sir Philip Crampton, Sir Henry Marsh and presented by Daniel Murray.59 In 1839 the Beggot Street School was accepted into the National School plan. Student statistics for the period 1839-1841 are as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pupils</th>
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<tr>
<td>1839</td>
<td>223</td>
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<td>1840</td>
<td>237</td>
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<tr>
<td>1841</td>
<td>274</td>
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52 Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p.64.
53 Ibid., p. 207.
54 Ibid., p. 209.
55 Ibid., p.64.
56 Coolahan, Irish Education: History and Structure, p.13.
58 Connely, Religion and Society in Nineteenth Century Ireland, p.35.
60 Boler, Catherine McAuley Positio p.725.
There was some hierarchical opposition to the National Schools on the basis that they would contaminate the faith of the pupils, but she shared the view, with archbishop Daniel Murray that the plan should be given an opportunity to prove itself. Her perception is manifest in her reasons for seeking affiliation.

She saw the new system of education as an important apostolic challenge. A planned course of study, which would include the secular branches of learning taught uniformly throughout the country, would raise the general school standard. There were definite advantages in the examination scheme of the new Board of Education. Critics of religious institutes who were then very vocal in their opposition to the National Board, would have less cause for complaint if schools administered by religious were seen to be under the supervision of the National Board. Her inherent practicality found the annual grant allotted to the National Schools very acceptable.61

When the Baggot Street school was accepted into the National Board Plan, in 1839, Mother Catherine had Sister Vincent Whitty officially enrolled as a monitor in the newly approved teaching establishment, making her the first sister of Mercy to be trained under the new government-sponsored system.

The education of poor females, whether carried out by religious or lay women, centred on providing them with those skills which were thought essential for their future as wives and mother. Domestic skills also equipped a girl to become a servant, and practical skills, such as knitting and sewing, could be used to supplement an income.62 The vast majority of Irish domestic servants were daughters of small farmers, or unskilled workers. The lack of alternative employment in Ireland meant the choices available to them were emigration or domestic service.63 Before a girl could hope to obtain a situation a good character reference was mandatory. By providing accommodation and references for these vulnerable girls, the House of Mercy was providing a valuable social service. Catherine McAuley’s letter to Rev. John Spratt in 1831 explains the working of the employment agency in Baggot Street and her anxiety at the possible repercussions consequent upon her recommendation - in good faith - of a young girl who did not come up to expectations.64

When Michael Blake was made bishop of Dromore in 1832, he was succeeded by Dean Meyler, a man who did not share Blake’s regard for Mother Catherine. One of the

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61Ibid., p.721.
62Luddy, Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century Ireland, p. 74.
64Boister, The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1827-1841, p.8.
first things he did was to contravene permission accorded by the archbishop and forbid the second Mass on Sundays to be celebrated, for the public, in the chapel. This deprivation caused economic hardship for the charity. Her claim that the community and fifty or sixty homeless women and young girls who sheltered in the house had a right to a chaplain, was ignored. This dispute continued for some years and was the cause of great distress as her letters testify. When she informed Meyler of her intention to inform the archbishop that the chapel which he blessed "is now under some kind of condemnation; that even a friendly priest is not permitted to celebrate Mass..." his reply began thus: "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 too straightforward a person to be caught by your juggle."  

This correspondence is a blatant expression of gender oppression. In an age where inverse sentiments were often couched in elegant phraseology, Meyler’s letters are an extraordinary expression of disregard for Catherine McAuley and her associates. The tone is sarcastic and bullying and one feels had the implication contained in the last sentence of this particular letter been made to a man, it could be seen as an imputation of honour which could be challenged.

The greatest trial of all to her were the frequent deaths of the sisters. In the period 1830 – 1841 twenty sisters of Mercy died, five through contracting typhoid fever during visitation of the sick poor during the epidemic in Dublin in 1837. The death of her adopted nieces, Mary McAuley in 1833 and Catherine in 1837, was a great blow. Catherine entered religious life in 1834 and when she died of consumption, Mother Catherine wrote "we feel just now as if all the house was dead."  She is remarkably open in some of her letters, sharing her grief at the death of her beloved niece and many of the sisters.

The primary influence on Catherine McAuley’s theology was her experience of the sufferings of servant women and young girls which led to the development of her life project. An immediate response to needs was a core tenet of the Mercy apostolate, and the care of orphans was no exception. This initiative followed on the discovery of a child orphaned by the death of her mother. When the poor law system was created, following the passing of the Poor Relief Act, in 1838, Dublin orphan children, in the main came to be cared for in the workhouses.  From the outset the government had set itself firmly against the provision of outdoor relief for any category of pauper.  According to a report prepared

[9]Ibid., p.29.
by an ad hoc board of health in 1833, about 1,000 children had been orphaned in Dublin during the cholera epidemic and had become wandering beggars.89 A Protestant clergyman addressing his parishioners in Dublin, in 1833, claimed that the sisters of Mercy were carrying out proselytising activities by their care of orphans.90 Mother Catherine was implicit in her criticism of the workhouse system.

The workhouses have not lessened our number. We have at this moment fifty-two, and to speak of the poorhouse to any of them is a kind of condemnation. There is such a mixture of immoral persons unavoidably admitted that the reduced, moral, orderly person cannot bear to go.91

Vulnerability was a feature of the life of young working class girls in mid 19th century Dublin. Everyday the House of Mercy received “sorrowful applications from interesting young creatures, confectioners and dressmakers, who at this season, cannot get employment, and are quite unprotected.”92 The plight of two girls, who could not be admitted to the house because of overcrowding, concerned her, “their deserted faces have been before me every since” as is the regret that she had no money to give them.93 To her legal adviser she requested the interest due on a bond soon, “as we begin to feel the want of it.”94 A legacy of £1000 bequeathed to the Institute was used to build a laundry at Baggot Street in an effort to make the House of Mercy self supporting, since the closing of the chapel had greatly curtailed resources. Subscribers to the Baggot Street Charities gave their donations now to the poor Law Tax on the understanding that all existing charities would benefit, but this was not the case.

In her efforts to secure tax exemption for the House of Mercy, Bishop Blake was her adviser and support.95 He also commended her practice of placing girls from her school in teaching positions, by referring to the Institute, “the principal of a most respectable Establishment for the education of young ladies,” who required an assistant teacher.96

Despite the financial constraints operating in Baggot Street, the first Mercy foundation outside Dublin, was made, in 1836, in Tallaght. To make an impression on the public mind and “to induce them to enquire into its spirit and duties” she brought a number of sisters with her to the reception ceremonies. From 1835 to 1841 Catherine McAuley founded eleven autonomous convents.

89Ibid., p.157.
90Ibid., p.122.
91Note, The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1827-1841, p.216.
92Ibid., The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1827-1841, p.169.
93Ibid., p.169.
94Ibid., p.19.
95Ibid., p.8.
96Ibid., p.19.
Kingstown (1825) Limerick (1838)
Tullamore (1836) Birr (1839)
Charleville (1836) Galway (1840)
Carlow (1837) Birr (1840)
Cork (1837) Birmingham (1841)

The model of leadership which Catherine McAuley espoused is particularly striking, and her approach to authority was extraordinary. She established autonomous entities, rather than keeping centralised control over the foundations. This means of course that she expected the sisters in each convent to respond to the local needs and concerns that they found, in a creative and responsible way. The brief in Birr for example where the community was divided by a bitter schismatic quarrel was very different to the challenges faced in Nenagh or elsewhere.

Autonomous entities encouraged initiative by the leadership of the local convents. Local superiors were not encouraged to refer every decision back to her at a centralised location. This was a real breakthrough when one realises that the Catholic Church in the nineteenth century, both at a local and a global level, was promoting a centralising agenda. Within thirty years for example, the first Vatican Council would consolidate papal authority through the defining of papal infallibility and universal jurisdiction. Prelates like Cardinal Cullen promoted this agenda assiduously, so it follows that clerics who shared his mindset were not particularly happy to countenance autonomous institutions, where women took decisions about their own lives and the work in which they were involved.

The organisational structures that Catherine McAuley put in place were effective. The institution grew and thrived as the nineteenth century unfolded. This was particularly apparent in the Killaloe diocese. From the group of four women brought by Catherine McAuley to Birr in 1840, there were 76 Mercy sisters in four houses, (Birr, Emn, Nenagh and Kilrush) in 1870 and thirty years later, in 1900, there were 175 Mercy sisters - already a larger group than the priests of the diocese.77 One can contrast this with Fr. Mathew’s temperance movement. From 1839, to 1844, immense crowds were flocking to his temperance movements. However the organisation was so centred on the charismatic abilities of Fr. Mathew that the movement disintegrated very soon after he died. There was no viable structure in place locally to perpetuate the movement. In civil society there were hardly any women in similar positions of authority. Her enabling notion of authority was encouraging her sisters to relate to clergy, or people of local prominence, many of whom were decades older than these young women.

An examination of the register of Mercy sisters in the archives in Baggot Street, reveal the assurance and faith Catherine McAuley placed in her young colleagues. The women appointed as superiors to a number of these foundations were women in their twenties. For example when Elizabeth Scott went to Birr as Superior she was twenty-six years of age. A more authoritarian person than Catherine McAuley would have regarded that these young women should be still subject to her authority in Baggot Street.