CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY LIVES

3.1. Research Methodology

To simply write a historical analysis of the founding Mercy sisters' response to the communities' needs of Birr and Nenagh in mid-19th century Ireland, was unsatisfactory. I needed to examine whether the flame that was lit by the imagination and creativity of a radical woman like Catherine McAuley was carried on or had been changed between the 1840s and the 1990s. The oral testimony of sisters interviewed, would help to clarify how her inheritors responded to the needs of women and girls in contemporary society and the vision they hold for its perpetuation.

In an effort to discover the calibre of women who entered the Mercy sisters in recent years, contact was made with the congregation to discuss the possibility of talking to sisters across a range of age and initiatives.

When agreement was reached with some sisters, they were telephoned to set up appointments. They were also sent a letter explaining the purpose of the study and the nature and confidentiality of our conversation. Not all sisters approached were willing to be interviewed. There was a reluctance among some sisters to agree to talk about themselves in a personal way. While they were willing to be helpful and to discuss the nature of their work, there was a difficulty initially about getting them to make personal disclosures.

To assist the interview process, a questionnaire was designed (Appendix E) to facilitate a semi-structured interview. The purpose of sending this to the sisters was to let them know the type of issues to be discussed. It also offered them time to reflect on changes which they lived through and how these changes affected their own lives.

The interviews took place in the convents at Birr, Nenagh and in a Dublin office. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. With permission of the sisters, all interviews were recorded, with the exception of one.

The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed for more relaxed communication. In some cases conversation continued informally after the tape recorder was switched off. The topics and initiatives varied between participants, but there were
themes common to each interview, and it was possible to draw up broad category headings under which a number of sub-categories emerged.

The themes common to the discussions of all the sisters were Spirituality, Service and Status. The tensions that were evident within these areas reflect the cultural, social and personal dimensions of their lives. The repetition of similar experience points to existing structures, particularly in religious formation, that define and limit women's lives.

- The Sisters, with one exception, agreed to speak using pseudonyms.

3.2 Contemporary Lives

Sr. Ann was the eldest of a large family. Her mother was a Mercy girl and she herself attended a boarding school run by the order. On completion of her leaving certificate she had the option of university, teacher training or the civil service. She entered the Mercy sisters in 1934. One other girl entered at the same time. There was a big sense of loss when she left family life, where religious observances, like the family rosary, taking holy water and blessing yourself before you went out, were part of their daily routine. She described the spiritual year they did was one “done with a vengeance.” Contact with the outside world was forbidden for the year with the exception of a letter written home at Easter. Emphasis for the year was placed on reading “The Imitation of Christ” by Thomas a’ Kempis.

A’ Kempis wrote his classic in reaction to the intellectual aridity of the 14th century scholasticism and in so far as he rejected the intellectual tradition, some would say that this gave rise to the Reformation. A number of sisters referred to the fact that this book “The Imitation of Christ” was required reading. His view was that the world contaminated, “the more often I go out the less I return a good man.” This thinking reinforced the isolation from the world, which was a feature of convent life at the time. The outward manifestation of this thinking, was the requirement to wear special visitation cloaks and a prohibition on casual social intercourse with the outside community.

Sr. Ann has witnessed great social change in Ireland. When she graduated from university in the 1930s, she was not paid by the government for the first three years of her teaching. After three years, she was paid a small sum. This applied also to the women lay teachers employed by the sisters. They were paid only what the sisters could give them.

Her first intimation of social change was when the war was over and jazz began to emerge in competition with more traditional music. There was an increase in the
employment of lay teachers. The secondary school was still sited in the building negotiated by Mother Anastasia Beckett in 1887. It was overcrowded and unsuitable and Sr. Ann recalled the agony of trying to make the decision of whether to build a new school or not. The option was whether to provide education for a limited number of girls, or for the sisters to take on the responsibility of building. They did not have any reserve of finance and there were no funds available in the 1950s for state grants to build. When she asked “who will gain and who will lose if we decide not to build?” the answer was, it will be the poor and less well off girls, so they made the decision to build.

This was a huge undertaking for women whose resources were very meagre to make. It is often forgotten that the sisters put a lot of their own resources into the building fund. One sister I spoke to remembered the personal sacrifices made during this time, by the savings they made. Purchases by the community were at a minimum with little new clothing provided, and items like stockings were darned. These personal efforts were supplemented by countless hours organising bazaars, sales of work and raffles, to ensure the progress of the building.

She recalled her fear that there might be friction when she discovered the parish priest was having a collection for some venture of his own at this time and her pleasure that he gave them “full permission to go ahead.” Viewed from the vantage point of the 1990s, it is difficult to comprehend how a capable women like her felt somewhat intimidated by the local clerical leadership of the time. She was building a large school, designed to serve the needs of the local Catholic community, and yet she felt that her collection might be viewed as in opposition to some project initiated by the parish priest. Given her perceived inferior position, she felt compelled to go and seek permission from the parish priest for her collection and also felt elated that he had granted it. Nowadays, contemporary sisters would not accept this inferior role and would expect that all the parish would facilitate the reduction of the school debt.

The Mercy sisters vision for these years, in Birr and Nenagh, was focused primarily on education and health care. They may not have considered themselves to be radical but they had a vision that by education, they could provide girls with an option. To “raise up” and “uplift” were recurring words used to describe the aims the sisters had for girls. In pre free education days, they assisted girls practically by the provision of scholarship, free tuition, and later the sourcing of training and job opportunities.

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1 Interview with Sr. Clare, June 8, 1998.
Sr. Clare entered the Mercy sisters in 1930s and her focus was also education. She entered after her leaving certificate and described her home life as extremely happy and grounded in spirituality. Her mother was a religious and philanthropic businesswoman who had a commitment to the poor in the town. She exercised a strong influence on Sr. Clare. She recalled nuns coming around the schools in the 1930s telling the schoolgirls about life on the missions in Africa and places “where bananas would grow on your backyard trees.” Entering the convent was her first permanent break from home and she found it a great sacrifice not to be able to go home for three years and then, only with an escort. The pain of the death of a dear relative was exacerbated by not being able to take comfort in the support of family and attend his funeral.

She taught for a number of years in Nenagh and in 1958 in response to a request from a parish priest in Mississippi, U.S.A., for sisters to staff a grade school, she and six others volunteered to go. This was a huge leap for the sisters to take, going from the relatively secure environs of Nenagh to the deep south of U.S.A. They had to learn to cope with the horrendous humidity while still confined to wearing heavy woollen habits. They had to establish structures and learn for themselves the intricacies of a vastly different world. This extended from opening bank accounts to coping with the demands of an inter-racial society. They spent their summer holidays attending college to attain the required American qualifications.

Three years later she and five others undertook to open a school and convent on a green field site in Gulfport, Mississippi, U.S.A. Telecommunications systems were in their infancy in Ireland in the 1950s and communication with the home base was difficult so the sisters were in reality, reliving the enabling notion of Catherine McAuley’s vision of authority.

Sr. Vincent entered the Mercy convent in 1954 on finishing secondary school. She had received a call to teacher training college and was disappointed not to have been allowed to accept it. She quickly learned that in convent life, it was not what you wanted to do that was important. The hospital needed nurses and she was sent for training to the Mater Hospital in Dublin for general training and midwifery. She recalled always wanting to be a nun, and during her novitiate she always worried that she would be considered unsuitable and sent home. The restrictions of convent life did not impinge too much as there were prohibitions at home as well.

The restrictions of wearing the habit were a huge pressure when she was in training. The effort of carrying out hospital duties was made more difficult when movement was restricted and vision impeded by a veil.
She grew to love nursing and when talking to woman patients, she became aware of serious social issues with regard to women. Injuries were not always caused by accident and when she talked to them, women made her aware of the violent abuse which existed in some of their lives. In her capacity as Matron of the hospital, she tried constantly to improve services which might allow for extra time for women recovering from hysterectomy or other surgery. She felt many were sent home too soon, to “carry on as if nothing had happened.” Deficiencies in the system angered her. There were constant battles with a bureaucrat who boasted that he had the hospital running “on a shoe string.” To get something she required for the hospital, she enlisted the support of the male surgeon, as his request would be granted.

In response to the Vatican II directive, “go back to your roots”, a decision was taken by the community, at chapter in 1972, that sisters would step out of key posts in education and health. Sr. Vincent was delighted to move out as matron of the hospital and a year spent studying, afforded her the opportunity to reflect on the direction of her future path. Her experience of hospital life had exposed the gaps which existed in the state provision of any form of social services or after hospital care. She set up a social service and spent the next ten years working for the poor and deprived in North Tipperary. She described the great poverty in which some people lived in the mountains in the 1970s - the loneliness, isolation and bad housing, some without running water. She negotiated for grants for repairs to the houses and put together a team to implement the repairs. She felt she had “come into her own.”

When she was invited to take over the administration of the planned day-care centre in Nenagh, eleven years ago, she referred the council representative to the Mother General because she felt she did not have the authority to accept. The Mother General’s response was an illustration of the sea change the Mercy order had gone through. Her question to the council was, “why are you asking us to do this - is it for economic reasons.” No longer were the Mercy sisters prepared to step in to the breeches left by the state, and in essence underpin the existence of a cheap state welfare system.

From a young age Sr. Elizabeth wanted to dedicate her life to the Lord. She realised later that her deep faith, even as a teenager was unusual. Educated with Mercy sisters, when she announced her intention to enter the order on completion of her leaving certificate in 1955, she received little encouragement. Called to teacher training college her mother encouraged her to go. She felt the loss of her family particularly because of the strictures of the times. She remembers as a postulant walking inside a big wall, trying to come to terms with the idea that she “would be here for the rest of my life.” Of the two options available at the time, nursing or teaching, she chose teaching.
She loved teaching and in her capacity of school principal she saw the need for home/school liaison. Administration duties and the demands of teachers and parents meant she had to defer plans until she stepped down as principal. Sr. Elizabeth has a Masters degree in counselling, and to respond to contemporary needs as she saw them, she set up a counselling service for the secondary school girls, and a “rainbows programme,” which provides bereavement support for children who have lost a parent through death or separation. She trained women to facilitate the programme and “rainbows” operate now in each of the town’s schools. She acknowledges the huge pressures on young girls to succeed but tells them that failure is important too. “We grew up learning to know failure and do without. They have everything and everything doesn’t satisfy either.”

She received a grant of £500 per year to organise courses for lone parents. In May 1995 in response to a newspaper advertisement, she applied for an E.U. grant for disadvantaged people. A townswoman and herself designed a project and drew up a plan for a number of marginalised groups in the town which included women’s and travellers groups, lone parents, the unemployed and “youth at risk.”

They received a grant of £300,000 for three years. They call themselves Nenagh Community Network. She set up an office, employed a manager, a development officer and a secretary. The women have formed a women’s group for women travellers and other disadvantaged women. The network, under Sister Elizabeth’s guidance, gives leadership courses to women.

She felt that lone parents are the most deprived group in the town. The Network organise six week courses in the morning on parenting skills and courses in personal development. The lone parents are aged between 16 and 30 years of age. In her capacity as chairperson of the network they negotiated with a state agency to pay the lone parents a subsidy while attending the courses.

Through the Mercy justice group, she has been involved since the 1980s in lobbying local politicians to effect change with regard to policy in voluntary housing. The Mercy justice group provides a voice for the poor who do not have a voice to speak on their behalf but she feels a more structured method is needed long-term to influence policy decisions. Recently the Urban and County Councils have initiated new strategic policy committees with local representation and her name was put forward.

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Sr. Elizabeth lives in a modern housing estate with four other sisters all of whom work in the community in the following roles: counsellors, home-help organiser, parish work organiser and special needs teacher.

**Sr. Frances**, the principal of the local girls national school was also interviewed. She lives in a modern house with ten other sisters. Her motivation for entering religious life in 1957 was love of God and a commitment to the ideal that the only way to serve God was through religious life. There was no vocation for the laity at the time and it was acceptable to become a nun. There was respect for religious life as something that was worthwhile and valued. She wanted to be a teacher and felt that one was not encouraged to do so, without becoming a nun as well. She saw convent life as an somewhat artificial world - not that they were feminist but that they could run their own little empire without men. She saw injustices in the convent system, “those who conformed were those who got on” but it never occurred to her that to leave was an option worth taking.3

There wasn’t a career as such, except for a small minority of women in 1950’s Irish society. If one went into the civil service one was forced to resign on marriage and “that was it, you stayed at home then.” She felt Mercy sisters set out to fill the gaps that they saw in society by educating girls to a higher degree. She thought Catherine McAuley was a rebel in her own way in thinking that change could be effected through education. But Sr. Frances didn’t think her generation of sisters were rebels. They were carrying on because they saw that it was a good thing to do and it was acceptable. People wanted education for their daughters and anyone who provided it was providing a social service but it was not recognised as such. The vision was to better lower middle class people and get them up a little bit more. Education was seen as the key to open the doors.

It was education that was not of the questioning kind. They did not set out to produce women who would challenge the system as she felt Catherine McAuley did. She thinks that children cannot be mass produced and be expected to follow whatever they are told. They will develop if they have some basic tenets to follow. She regrets the tardiness of the sisters in not recognising that co-educational schooling was now the preference of parents and one with which she would concur, and concludes that “… it is not an age of faith any longer and people accept different values.”4 But the sisters did the work when the welfare state hardly existed and in a way she feels, they were instrumental in bringing about their own demise. The sisters provided health care and education so “that the system could continue without us and we should be proud, but you „could be sad as well.”5

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3Interview with Sr. Frances, June 9, 1998.
5Ibid.
The loss of the distinctness which the wearing of the habit afforded “meant a merging into society which is part of the death of the whole thing” but the values and structures have changed dramatically during the past 25 years and she has attempted to move with the times. She reiterated how a particular historic moment shapes people’s personal and vocational life. For example, Catherine McAuley who would have preferred to have remained a laywoman, had to become a nun in order to make her work acceptable, whereas “we became nuns in order to serve God first and foremost and it was other people down the line after that.”

One of the most important new initiatives in the 1980s is that the perspective of Mercy sisters is now globalised. This stems from a recognition that in our modern world, the bulk of poverty is to be found in the Third World and that often this poverty is a direct result of neo-colonial policies of northern countries, corporations and financial institutions. Here once again, Sisters of Mercy are attempting to take a stand in solidarity with the poor. One particular focus worth highlighting in this dissertation, is their concern for alleviating the burden of third world debt.

The last sister I interviewed was Sr. Suzanne, who is Congregational Justice Co-Ordinator for Mercy International. She entered the Mercy convent in 1978 when she was eighteen years of age. The novitiate built to accommodate the large number of entrants in the 1950s and 1960s was no longer viable and was closed, so she joined sixteen entrants in a common novitiate. Of the sixteen entrants, only two remain in religious life. Because she has few contemporaries in religious life, it can sometimes be lonely.

She had the opportunity of working in Peru for four years and feels it was a wonderful experience. “Mercy women are most at home among the poor and the poorest of the poor are to be found in Peru.” To be in a relationship with them was very important to her - they were not just statistics or points on a map. The new mindset reflecting the changes wrought by Vatican II allowed Sr. Suzanne to maintain her relationship with her family.

She accepts that she did not have to make the sacrifices made by the older sisters in terms of loss of family, although when she entered, sisters were still restricted to two nights at home. She experienced great loneliness in her first year in the novitiate and when she went to Peru. She spoke of the pain expressed at a recent assembly of Mercy sisters, in which some older sisters spoke, some for the first time, of their family of origin and "to

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5Interview with Sr. Frances, June 9, 1998.
6Ibid.
7Ibid.
8Interview with Sr. Suzanne, July 28, 1998.
talk about it in a way where both the pluses and minuses could be acknowledged was palpable." The grieving process was stunted for a great number of older sisters.

When she studied geography at college it opened her eyes to the structures of injustice across the world and she began to ask questions about the impact of transnational corporations. As Co-ordinator for Justice of Mercy International she is in a position to use the passion which began in her earlier studies to question with authority companies like Nestle, for instance, for their unethical advertising of baby milk products.

Mercy International was formed in 1996, from the local congregations of 26 dioceses in Ireland, and the Mercy unit from South Africa. Mercy Ireland and each of the four provinces in Ireland has a leadership team and a person responsible for promoting justice and peace issues. They have congregational leadership and within Ireland, each of the four provinces has provincial leadership, which keep contact with its mission areas also. Each of the provinces in Ireland has a justice group and each of them has a named person, three of them working full-time on justice issues in their area. Sr. Suzanne as the justice and peace co-ordinator for Mercy Ireland, meets with these people to plan and review their local and global justice and peace apostolate.

At the Mercy International Justice Conference in 1996, there were Mercy sisters from perhaps twelve nationalities, with a huge range of personalities and experiences. From discussion and debate, the focus that emerged was the impact of unjust economic structures on women and the environment.

For Sr. Suzanne, destruction of the environment at local, national and international level is a key justice and peace issue. So often women are not even free to address these issues as many do not have the luxury of buying organic foods, free of insecticide and pesticide residue, because these cost more. Budgetary pressures mean that they will buy the cheapest food no matter how it is produced or how nutritious it is. Women suffer most because of environmental destruction. A fall in the water table often means that women have to walk another hour or two for the back breaking work of fetching the daily water supply. They are often exploited by transnational corporations who pay them very low wages and minimise on health and safety regulations.

The burden of Third World Debt also falls heaviest on the shoulders of women and children. The Structural Adjustment Programmes forced on many Third World Governments by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, have led to the

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destruction of education and health care programmes in many of these countries. When schools are closed in outlying villages, the people first affected are young women. So it makes sense for Mercy sisters to highlight the specific women’s dimension of Third World Debt and environmental pollution.

What Sr. Suzanne sees as particularly significant is that women are not in positions of power. “We are afraid of the word power. I often notice Mercy women are afraid of that word and it is because of the patriarchal definition of it and the experience of it within patriarchy, whereas we need to find woman power. So in any issue we find that women are in a position of less power than men.”10

She believes that perhaps the strength of the local relationship of Mercy sisters to the community needs is what holds back the global vision. The stronger Mercy gift is to work in the local area, whether it is the sister working with the bereaved girl in Tipperary or the sister in Nairobi whose children come to school for something to eat.

Tensions exist between local and international issues. The justice group is always aware that women tend to face worse whether the issue be local, national or international. “When you have polluted water in Nenagh because of a huge corporation like Proctor and Gamble, the impact is local but this is because of their global employment and environmental policies.”11 Globalisation has often meant a lessening of health and safety regulations and environmental requirements. But there is a growing awareness among women that the personal is political. When Sr. Suzanne works with women’s groups, she finds they might not be so interested in the environment as a general issue, until she asks if any of their children had asthma, or if any of them had allergies. Then they became very anxious and willing to do something about it.

Many of the anti-dumping groups right around Ireland at the present time are composed predominantly of woman concerned with the effect of toxic waste.

There is a need to raise awareness through education that large corporations are impacting and often exploiting local communities, in a systematic and often destructive way. Sometimes people are not even aware of this because the mainline media does not highlight it. Because Mercy sisters are working on the ground in Third World countries, they can share their experience and analysis with their first world colleagues and thus have an impact at a global level.

11Ibid.
One such example of this global co-operation is the fact that for the past number of years, the Mercy congregation in the United States had N.G.O. (non-government organisation) status at the United Nations. They have recently been granted consultative status, the highest status that an N.G.O. can have at the U.N. Mercy International Association have appointed two sisters there, who are both members of the core group of the association.

The whole question of the North of Ireland is very important and in the week before the Good Friday Peace Agreement, they collected over 6,000 signatures for peace. The association has engaged a Mercy sister in a full-time capacity on the Mercy justice desk in Belfast.

It is important to remember that the perception of poverty is relative. Globally more than two and half billion people live below the poverty line, and one and half billion live in absolute poverty. There is a huge change in the perception of the causes of poverty. Although the middle classes still perceive poverty as a malaise caused by laziness, with reference made to the deserving poor, it is clear that it is structures which impoverish people.

The Mercy Justice group, through their local justice organisations, are actively involved in the Jubilee 2000 campaign. This campaign wants to celebrate the coming millennium by lifting the burden of crippling debt from the shoulders of the poor in the poorest countries of the world. To achieve this goal they are calling for a one-off cancellation of the backlog of poor country’s debts. It is going to be the biggest petition ever put together in the world and one in which Irish people can take part by appending their signature.
3.3 Summary

Each of the women interviewed come from a background that was Irish, Catholic, rural and middle-class. The age range was from thirty-nine to eighty-five. Two of the sisters entered religious life in the mid and late 1930s, one in 1940s, two in 1950s and one in 1978. All were independent women, who had options of teacher training college, university or family business. They chose religious life as their most powerful option as women and were aware of the special status they felt this accorded them. Prayer was a key component of their spirituality and vows of poverty, chastity and obedience were taken as manifestation of their commitment to the service of Catherine McAuley's vision of helping the poor and marginalised, especially women.

For some sisters, discussion about their family and the loss endured was very painful and caused them to cry. The reality of family was seen, by the patriarchal church as a threat which would over-ride other issues, and was tied in with the ideology behind the vow of chastity. Loss of family could allow for the larger community issues to take precedence and the theological issues of the gospel which espoused compassion for “orphan and stranger.”

The sisters recalled with some amusement how some nuns bent the very rigid rules to suit their own agenda. At a time when sisters were not allowed outside the convent without permission, one sister would ask to visit her brother a priest, but actually take a trip up to Dublin. Another would abide by the rule to be in bed at the required time, but then she would get up and do what she needed to do.

There was underlying regret at their past passivism. Sr. Elizabeth reflected: “How were we so blind that we never reflected, that we never asked questions, that we never thought about how women were treated. We did our part for helping the disadvantaged but we didn’t work within the system to change the system.”12 The irony was not lost on some of the sisters that while they were trying to improve the lot of women and girls, they themselves were oppressed by societal values and the wider church structures.

Although anger was not formally expressed, it was an underlying current in some recollections. Many of the sisters were under no illusions that their own work was of equal or even more value than that performed by some of the male clergy. The absurdity of interference in decisions about how many nights a nun was allowed to stay at home, was referred to, “especially when there were major concerns to be attended to in the church.” In

fact some bishops were not enthusiastic when the congregations amalgamated, because it lessened their own power over the sister’s lives.

However within the convent, Reverend Mother was the power broker. Some were powerful women who would brook no interference from the clergy, while some who “couldn’t handle situations handed over some of the authority to the bishops.”\(^3\) The recollection of the restraints placed on a family outing by a Reverend Mother, elicited the response that it was stupid but they were the rules. Two sisters spoke of the classism of the two tiered-system within the convent, where the youngest postulant ranked higher than the lay sister. The lay sisters spent their lives in the service of the other sisters mainly in cooking and housekeeping tasks. “This unfortunate part of Mercy history is linked with social history and the dowry system.”\(^4\)

The changes which have occurred in religious life since the 1970s were seen as a big gain, though one sister remarked that in some ways, life nowadays is more demanding, now that one has to take responsibility for one’s own life. In the past, the emphasis was on obedience and organisational structure. Nowadays there is much more holistic development of the person, a greater encouragement of initiatives within the communities and a more mature spirituality.

What this researcher found striking and moving about many of the sister’s reflections, had to do with their lives as women. One sister grew up with the idea that women were definitely inferior to men, and that the service that women provided was not at all equal to that of a man. She still has to remind herself to stop thinking like this. Ill-health was alluded to by two sisters as “being hard when it happened.” The respondents did not volunteer information about significant relationships in their lives. Obviously this is an area that would need an in-depth study.

Community life and community support was obviously important to these women. Many recalled how their individual initiatives were encouraged and supported by other sisters in the community. The sisters I spoke to had a number of things in common when they entered religious life. All of them entered religious life at age eighteen, all were Mercy women, their mothers were strong role models, and most felt keenly the loss of their family. The interviews illustrated how all of them were influenced by the huge societal and ecclesiastical changes which have occurred in the timespan. The changes were of an extraordinary nature, and impacted on the cultural, social, political, and economic life of the country. Nothing similar had taken place in the previous century. There was a profound

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\(^{3}\)Interview with Sr. Elizabeth, June 21, 1998.
\(^{4}\)Interview with Sr. Francis, June 9, 1998.
change in pattern of the ways in which men and women related to each other. What is impressive is that young women who entered a rigidly structured institution, constrained by the ideologies and patriarchal patterns of behaviour in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, developed and responded so creatively to the challenges which these changes occasioned.

In recent times there has been a growing sense of their power as women, which reflects the growing role of women in modern Ireland. Rather than being slotted into predetermined roles in teaching, or in education or in nursing, they have been encouraged to develop their individual talents in response to social needs like, lone parents, alcoholism, school/home liaison, marital breakup and this has given great satisfaction. The work of justice which Sr. Suzanne described is grounded in the fundamental belief that poor and vulnerable women need to be given many different kinds of options in their lives. Mercy sisters can play a significant role here because they are called to be prophetic. The central dimension of the prophetic call is to challenge existing exploitative or unjust structures: “Our call is to those on the margins. We need to be to the forefront to show a prototype of what is possible to enable those with vision to put it into effect.”

It was this vision that propelled Catherine McAuley in her time and today the focus for her inheritors remains the same.

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