TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

THE "WALKING NUNS" ARE STILL WALKING:

A STUDY OF MERCY SISTERS IN IRELAND:

in partial fulfilment of the M.Phil. Degree in Women's Studies.

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For my friend de Lourdes – a remarkable woman
ABSTRACT

This dissertation looks at the radical philanthropy of Catherine McAuley, whose empowerment of impoverished girls and women in 19th century Dublin, challenged the prevailing concepts of the causes of poverty and the role of woman in society. Her strategy for the survival and continuity of her institute was the founding of the “walking nuns”, the Sisters of Mercy. The study looks at the annals of the founding period of two Mercy congregations, Birr and Nenagh, and how the impulse which propelled Catherine McAuley survived through the hierarchical and state conservatism of the first sixty years of this century. It acknowledges that, during this period, the Mercy sisters were co-opted by the dominant culture of a conservative church and a conservative state. Central to this dissertation is an examination of how the McAuley charisma is responded to today. Conversations with a representative group of sisters indicate that in recent years the “walking nuns” have returned to the original inspiration of their founder.
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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation looks at the life and work of a remarkable woman called Catherine McAuley in the early part of the 19th century. She emerged out of a distinct social economic background, where women's voices were barely heard because of massive social, cultural, and political constraints. This was a brutal society where many people lived in appalling poverty, especially women. It appeared that structures were so intractable that they could not be changed, and so the plight of the poor would continue.

Catherine McAuley responded to this situation in a number of ways. She wanted to empower women, she wanted to protect them, she wanted to give them their own voice. She found it impossible to do this because there was no model within the Catholic church for lay women to take such bold initiatives.

Chapter One, will describe how one woman on her own, responded to the plight of the poor. She used her financial resources to purchase a large house and open a shelter and school for poor girls and women. Only when it became very clear that it would be very difficult for her to carry on this work, outside the umbrella of religious life, did she yield to the pressure to form a specific religious community. Even then, she tempered her Rule to reflect the fact that she did not see women in a subservient role. She and her “walking nuns” responded to the needs of poor women, and yet refused to accept the contemporary model of female enclosed religious life. Catherine McAuley, though deeply grounded in religious faith, sought to move out into the contemporary world. Her mission took her beyond the cloister walls, where the concerns and values of women were respected.

She set up autonomous units of sisters to respond to the particular challenges in local communities. In Chapter Two of this thesis, I will look at two such communities, Birr and Nenagh. Birr was a garrison town with a very clear ascendency ethos. The Catholic community, however, was riven by bitter divisions, caused by the fact that two priests repudiated the authority of the bishop of the diocese and caused what is known as the Crotty schism. Catherine McAuley responded to a request from the local parish priest to make a foundation in the town to help bridge the gap between rival factions in the Catholic community and effect reconciliation. In the succeeding decades, the sisters set up a number of schools for girls, including an industrial school, and a small industry.

The situation in Nenagh, though separated by just twenty miles, was very different from Birr. The town, which retained more of its Gaelic character was surrounded by good land, much of which was in the hands of the Anglo-Irish population. The famine took a
greater toll on the population of Nenagh than it did on Birr. In 1849 there were 3,009
inmates in Nenagh Workhouse with 1,000 deaths reported in a six month period in that
year. The effects of poverty and the plight of young women were the main reasons for the
Mercy sisters moving to Nenagh. One important element in the Nenagh story is the
dominant influence of an English Catholic convert called Mother Anastasia (Marianne)
Bckett. The main focus on my exposition on the nuns in Nenagh centres on the provision
of educational services. Starting from humble beginnings, the vision widened to embrace
the requirements of girls and women in Nenagh.

There is a paradox in the sister’s attempts to improve the lot of girls and women,
while they were themselves oppressed. In some respects religious were doubly oppressed:
by patriarchal structures, ecclesiastical and lay. Bishop Power refused to give Mother
Anastasia Bckett permission to leave Birr to set up a foundation in Stourbridge. However, the paradox was that he sought her advice and help when he was sick in Rome,
and her friendship and concern is evidenced by the immediate provision of a prescription
and light sustains. The annals I had access to, with one brief exception, had few personal
insights on the lives of the sisters themselves. The self-effacing language conceals the
impact of their achievements. The health of the bishop or local priests, the death of
community sisters, decisions made about the purchase of buildings, the nature of bequests,
and contemporary accounts of local history, were some of the events noted in the annals.

Chapter Three sets out to show how the inspiration of Catherine McAuley
continued to motivate women in the early mid 20th century, to address needs of women
and girls, similar to those she addressed in mid-19th century. The historical and
ecclesiastical situation had of course changed. Modern Catholic Ireland was in resurgence.
Both the church and the post independent state had developed a rigidity and a certain
hostility to other strands within the culture. The desire for order, and clarity, was
predominant. Many of the tensions that mark the modern Irish Catholic experience are
reflected in the interviews with a number of sisters who range in age from 39 to 85 years.
The experiences of these women straddled two important cultural changes; the impact of the
second Vatican Council, and the economic changes that took place in Ireland in the 1960s.

The lifestyle of the Sisters of Mercy and their work in the community in health and
education remained much the same for the first part of the 20th century. Poverty and
emigration increased dramatically in the 1930s during the economic war with Britain.

2Birr Annals, C.12, Central Archives, Baggot Street, Dublin.
3Ibid.
4Murphy, Ignatius. The Diocese of Killaloe: 1850-1904 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995),
p.185.

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World War II in the 1940s led to an increase in emigration from the localities of Birr and Nenagh as large numbers went to England to join the British army and to seek jobs in munitions factories. The sisters made a number of references to the great poverty existing in the towns and countryside and attempted to respond to it by educating young women on a number of levels. The motivation of the aspirants to religious life was, in many ways, in continuity with that of Catherine McAuley, but as women of their time, they reflected the prevailing ethos of an Irish, Catholic, rural, middle class society.

Recovery from the impoverishment began in the late 1950s but the major seismic changes came in the 1960s, both culturally and religiously. Economic reforms led to an opening to the global economy and a sense of prosperity which Irish people generally, had never previously experienced. This led to a challenging of various institutions, in an Ireland becoming rapidly less insular and parochial. The founding of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement in the early 1970s detailed discriminations against women in the law, in the workplace, in relation to educational opportunities, in areas of family planning and equal rights. The initiators of this new movement were both articulate and challenging. Their views had provoked much indignant comment in the media and newspapers.

The Vatican Council reflected societal change. John XXIII who initiated the Vatican Council in 1962 wished "to open the windows and to let fresh air in." It was a root and branch attempt to modernise an ancient institution. The bishops who gathered in Rome for the four years, issued documents on every aspect of church life, including a document on religious life. They also issued an extraordinary document on how Catholics should interact with the modern world, not from a defensive condemnatory stance, but from one of dialogue and service. The pre-Vatican stance was one which was critical of an evil world - a world that contaminated.

This new vision for a church in the modern world was responded to by active religious like the Sisters of Mercy. It encouraged them to return to their roots and rediscover the motivation and inspiration of their founder. A strategy of amalgamation was put into place in 1973. The congregation of all 26 dioceses, are now united into four provinces under the leadership of a provincial superior and an umbrella group called Mercy Ireland. Mercy Ireland began looking at ways and means of being mutually supportive in their response to present day needs and acted as a co-ordinating group for all Mercy convents.

It is interesting to note that many of the concerns identified in the new mission statement of the Mercy Ireland group of the 1980s reflect the original issues that preoccupied the founding members of the Mercy Order of the 1830s. Sr. Claire Agnew's
prints, dated 1840, (Appendix A to C), illustrate that many of the challenges that women face today, are not dissimilar to those which she encountered in the 1830s. The captions are: "I was abused and you gave me support and comfort", "I was sorrowful and you comforted me", "I was a stranger and you took me in", "I was in need and you clothed me", "Those that instruct many unto justice shall shine like stars for all eternity", "Enable and support women and children." It is obvious that from the foundation of the Institute, Catherine McAuley and her sisters, addressed issues such as domestic violence, poverty and homelessness, among women and girls.

A feminist perspective underpins this study. My understanding of feminism recognises that women have been oppressed in the past and continue to be oppressed today. Feminism is a movement that seeks to realise the equality of women in all areas of life, by seriously engaging in political action to transform this oppression. Feminism recognises that sexism is possibly the primary expression of the patterns of patriarchal domination which control our world. The vision of feminism is to build a world of mutual relations between women and men to provide a mutual base for empowerment.

Therefore in this study I will use a feminist methodology by critically reflecting on women's experiences. This involves a process of feminist analysis which begins with the sharing of personal experiences. Of its nature, a feminist history of religious life requires an interdisciplinary approach. The contemporary voices heard in Chapter Three will give an insight in the Mercy sisters' modern day response to Catherine McAuley's own observation, "every place has its own peculiar ideas and feelings which must be yielded to when possible." We need to hear voiced the testimony of women religious today and ascertain from their present experience of religious life whether there is a resonance between current practice and the original vision of Catherine McAuley. The study highlights changes in the sisters' lives which are a reflection of similar changes in the lives of the wider society. The sisters' sharing of similar personal experience points to the fact that their lives were defined and limited by existing structures.

In this dissertation I will attempt to represent a radical woman, who challenged the ideology of womanhood in mid 19th century Dublin, and claim that the imagination and creativity of the founding period of the "walking nuns" is preserved and given modern expression today.

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5MacCurtain, Margaret. "Late in the Field: Catholic Sisters in Twentieth-Century Ireland and the New Religious History", p.43.