



A poem for Catherine

Catherine Mc Auley --- Abu

James Mc Gauley gladly fed them – mind and body,
Those hungry Dublin children – gaunt and shoddy;
His blond-haired toddler Catherine doled out food,
With her Papa - the Sunday interlude!

In seventeen eighty three God called James Home,
His little helper – not yet five –used roam alone
Since Mama Elinor ne'er showed
Desire to tend the poor near her abode.

The widow's income from her real-estate
Ere her demise did all evaporate,
So when she died, in seventeen-ninety-eight,
Her three offspring were forced to separate.

Mary and James with Protestant Armstrongs stayed,
While Catherine , with Uncle Owen a brief home made.
He became bankrupt; she, uprooted once more,
Was led by Providence, to the Callaghans' door.

This childless Quaker couple were impressed,
By qualities and manner she possessed,
And valuing the caring by her shown,
Soon wished to adopt her as their own.

In the Apothecaries Hall each day,
William Callaghan works the hours away,
In Coolock House – his home – as daylight ends
He joins extended family and friends.

Here so many of Catherine's needs are met,
Her mid-life now is truly blessed – and yet
She yearns to progress, in adult ways,
Her knowledge of her Faith of earlier days.

Patient, in quiet prayer, she now will wait,
See to the needs of the poor in th' estate,
Trust she'll get guidance some fine day.
To lead her safely on the Christian way.

At a Milliner's shop, and in no great hurry,
She fitted in a call to Daniel Murray –
A curate in St. Mary's Parish then -
Who guided her in living faith again.

Her foster-parents, glad this news to hear,
Asked that no catholic emblems did appear
Within the home – where most guests did not relish
The faith that Catherine did so dearly cherish.

The foster-mother's health was rather sickly,
And in eighteen o six it worsened quickly;
Now Catherine nursed the invalid , night and day,
And eased pain and distress in every way.

The patient, watching Catherine, now believed
That, from the sacraments, she help received;
To know their power herself, - before she died
At Coolock House a priest was by her side.

William missed his soul-mate - true and kind,
Concern for Catherine's future filled his mind;
Discerning her compassion for the poor,
He made her then financially secure.

Desiring that a Catholic he would die,
She asked him allow a priest come by;
He made his will, - an heiress she became,
He even wished that she would take his name.

And as his life did slowly ebb away,
Her sister – Anne – dying of TB – did say –
“Keep safe my baby Teresa in your home –
And watch the other five , where'er they roam”

Once Catherine's legacy was made secure,
Her plan to serve the poorest did mature;
She leased a plot of land on Baggot St.
Where it with poorer Herbert St. did meet.

In July twenty four building began,
To none did Catherine yet divulge her plan –
A fact for which she was not ever sorry -;
Her brother Willie dubbed it “Kitty's Folly”

At Coolock Catherine often did reside,
At Military Rd. – did frequently abide –
To help with rearing Mary’s children – five-
And now she sees her “Folly” come alive.

Anna Marie Doyle did volunteer,
To join a venture to her heart so dear;
The heiress asked her young niece, Catherine Byrn,
To join with them; All three would live and learn.

Anna craved a date for an open door,
And Catherine named September twenty four,
Neither realised, till later on,
The name of the feast they’d hit upon.

The House of “Our Lady of Mercy” – to be sure!
So apt a name for this home for the poor!
The “House of Mercy” was soon its shortened name;
It really looked imposing, all did claim.

There followed the sale of Coolock Estate -
Meantime the new building was causing debate –
Homeowners in Baggot St. now did complain
On seeing rag tag people usurp their domain.

Her mentor Edward Armstrong, to Catherine did say
To put her whole trust in God alone each day;
To Archbishop Murray he lauded her vision,
And his own legacy to her was support for her mission.

Destitute youngsters in droves came to find
Food for the body, the spirit and mind;
Young women and girls constantly came to stay,
To be safe, and prepare for employment someday.

The wretched slum hovels where lay sick and dying,
The ladies did visit – on shank’s mare relying;
Access to the hospitals, in her Swiss carriage,
Miss Mc Auley and Co by astuteness, did manage.

With co-workers technically temporary - all-
And lest a mishap to their building befall,
Catherine, in her wisdom, decided she must
Carefully set up a Baggot St. Trust.

For Christmas Day dinner, in eighteen – two- eight,
Both Catholic and Protestant did goodies donate,
And Daniel O’Connell, while carving the meat,
Joked with the children; their joy was complete.

Sometimes there was bigotry – tempers did rise
As when Dr. William did come to realise
That both his dearly loved Marys, daughter and wife,
Had secretly become Catholics during their life.

Still young he caught fever and his death was near;
Catherine cared for him and calmed his fear.
Left free to choose their guardian, his kids opted for their aunt –
So Catherine took them to her house, and never said “I Can’t”.

To these five and another five she was adoptive mother,
And had crazy Mrs. Harper, too, who acted like no other.
And even when her three nephews to Carlow College went,
She always was responsible for how their time they spent.

By eighteen thirty five it did seem that all was going well,
And yet, through signs, overt and covert, Catherine could tell
She needed to discern now, if, despite innate aversion,
She should consider, for her venture, a really new digression.

Her ladies served within the house, but equally without,
And countless Nosey Parkers queried what they were about;
In every quarter there were those who saw them flout the norm,
And said that, to prevailing customs, they should now conform.

The slogan of these critics was – “Become nuns now, or scatter -,
Just join with an existing group, which one it does not matter”!
Though quite upset at such a thought they would discern and pray,
And trust that God, in his Mercy, would guide them on his Way.

On September eight the co-workers all felt a certain chill,
As Catherine, Ann and Elizabeth set out for “George’s Hill”,
Where Presentation Sisters would help them to prepare
To become Sisters of Mercy for the needy in their care.

The three pioneers had a strict regime of prayer and work each day,
While, in the House, the other ten – to overwork a prey –
Did rise too early, eat too little and did toil too late,
Decline in health, - and even death – was very soon their fate.

Catherine was in “Georges Hill” when Caroline passed away,
The House had still no local plot in which the dead to lay,
But Carmelite Fathers in Clarendon St. quickly came to the fore, -
They buried her body in their Church’s vault, and later another ten more.

December twelve in eighty three – “the” day it came to pass –
Our trio they professed their vows during an early Mass;
A brand new Congregation was founded there and then –
Three Mercy Sisters hurried home to Baggot St. again.

Such smiles, and tears and hugs galore awaited them at base!
Their religious garb was scrutinised - that coif around each face!
So glad to hear that as "walking nuns" they'd still do Visitation –
Catherine, herself, at fifty –three, felt 'twas good news for the Nation.

Next day Archbishop Murray called and addressed her as "Reverend Mother" –
She never wished for that title – for "Superior" or any other;
From now on Mary C. Mc A. was her signature;
She was humble, cheerful, compassionate – generous and mature.

Preparation for eight ladies for Reception was completed –
Elizabeth, dying of T.B., was from the list deleted ;
The ceremony private, the habits makeovers – such fury raged without,
That ever since, for all ceremonies, the public were never locked out.

A first bazaar was organised, as costs were running high,
Just then the rumours circulated – cholera was nigh;
One night Catherine did carry home, in her own shawl wrapped up well –
A cholera victim's baby whom she settled to sleep in her cell.

The Board of Health converted for use the Depot in Townsend St;
Eight Mercies bravely toiled there – the needs of the victims to meet;
Catherine also supervised eighty lay nurses there;
Archbishop advised that the Sisters, pro tem, have port wine and chops for their fare.

For seven long months the valiant eight served in shifts from dawn till late,
Their early zeal to change clothes and fare, due to fatigue, did soon abate;
Catherine – ever striving their spirits to raise – constantly , in doggerel, their efforts did
praise;
Her naming a Sister's knees, - swollen and sore – put "Cholera" and "Cholerene" on record
for evermore.

To compile a Rule and Constitution for the Congregation,
Catherine worked and prayed, - and not always with elation!
Propaganda Fide was so slow in giving approbation,
And a decade elapsed awaiting Gregory Sixteen's confirmation.

Meanwhile with Mercy spirit her Sisters she imbued,
Increase in the membership often ensued;
Through suffering, illness and deaths she always led the way –
Nine Irish towns and two English cities got convents in her day.

'Twas Fr. Matthew pleaded for a foundation for Birr –
A town where deep divisions for ages did occur;
The first stage of the journey there was anything but banal,
Eight hours of snow on a slow flyboat atop the Grand Canal.

Despite being "petrified with cold" she soon called Birr her "pet foundation",
Its only flaw – the "toy tea-cups" – just five refills for one libation!

A full six weeks away from base some of the bishops thought excessive –
Poor Catherine’s cough, acquired in Birr, was proving to be quite progressive.

She summoned excellent doctors to treat the ailing sisters,
But, in her own case, she self – dosed, avoiding medic misters;
To cover basic costs for the upkeep of nine foundations,
Bazaars, charity sermons and begging, too, were sources of vital donations.

She lived union and charity and plain common sense –
Action and trust in Divine Providence –
Acceptance of crosses, hearing Jesus’ advice -
To know he desires “mercy not sacrifice”.

Ere she set out for Birmingham in October forty-one,
Catherine wrote to Baggot St. to say what needed to be done –
To prepare an infirmary –room to suit her needs aright,
Lest her incessant coughing disturb others through the night.

Through pain filled days and sleepless nights the Mercy life she shared;
She suffered in stomach, mouth and lung, but her mind was not impaired;
No directives she gave about who’d succeed her – or any other matter –
Just joined the sisters, when she could, in light-hearted peaceful chatter.

At nine a.m. on November eleven it did come to pass
That Rev. O’Hanlon, Carmelite, presided at a Mass,
The sisters assembled round her bed, - all of them white cloaks wore –
And all those who were gathered there bright lighted tapers bore.

And as her final hours wore on, till ten to eight that night,
The Foundress, - ever quite alert – and pitying the sisters’ plight –
Asked that, at her going, they’d all come together, for comfort and “a good cup of tea”.
Concluding, with conviction, that in God their real comfort would be.

On November fifteen, after Office and Mass, the funeral cortege did wend its way,
From Carmel Chapel to garden – cemetery, to lower the coffin down into the clay;
A small white wooden cross then marked the spot where her mortal remains lay,
And people come to her tomb, to pray, up to this very day.

If Catherine - now Venerable since nineteen-ninety-four – were to come back to Dublin to-
day –
She’d wonder why her House – in appearance so unchanged – might now be called M.I.A.
To the Mercy Global Family Baggot St. is now home for all of twenty years –
Congregations, Institutes, Associations of Mercy have shared there both laughter and tears.

Just two Mercy Sisters – C.Mc A. and M.A. Doyle! – beginnings were quite small!
Over fifty thousand have now served the needy – answering the Mercy call;
How the digital explosion expanded its influence and still expands it to-day!
The Mercy World E News – Hurray! – the ON-LINE NEWSLETTER OF M.I.A.

Within thirty years of Catherine's demise, dozens of Convents dotted our land –
From them willing groups of sisters set out to follow the destitute emigrant band –
To the vastness of Canada, the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Kenya and Argentina;
Some more sailed for Turkey to nurse the war-wounded; Florence Nightingale was there in
the Crimea.

In the past thirty years there's a contrary flow, -immigrants needs are now to the fore;
Their provenance varied, their culture diverse, - most adrift as never before;
The acronym MECPATH signals Mercy's efforts to end trafficking people and child
prostitution.
Creatively offering to social injustice a possible practical solution.

To promote the vision of Catherine and its influence to grow,
Mercy Global Concern, set up sixteen years ago,
Brings the Mercy spirit to the UNO.

The God, who is rich in Mercy was Catherine's inspiration,
The '31 Divine Mercy Message is spreading to every nation;
The encyclical "Rich in Mercy" came from the pen of "John Paul Two",
Pope Francis begs that we make MERCY the hallmark of all that we do.

Venerable Catherine ABU!

Sheila Costello rsm
Western Province

