

Written by Sister Regina Kelly, President Mercy Ireland in 1992

Mercy Ireland 1992

Over the past decade, the very earliest convents of the Sisters of Mercy have each in their turn celebrated their 150th Anniversary. In that century and a half these convents have sent out foundations throughout Ireland and all over the world. Due to the circumstances of that particular time and the limitations regarding communication, travel etc., these foundations operated very successfully in small autonomous groups, each with its own 'motherhouse'. With the renewal of religious life inaugurated by Vatican 2 and its recommendation that 'communities who belong to the same religious family...should try to form a Union' (P.C. 22), the Mercy Sisters recognised in these words a call to align themselves with this new direction. Consequently, throughout the 1970's a Union was formed in many dioceses in Ireland; similar movements took place among Mercies in other countries e.g. Australia and the Americas. This coming together in larger groups enabled Sisters to deploy their resources more effectively while at the same time experiencing greater mutual support.

During this period too the Mercy Association was formed with the purpose of heightening awareness of our common origin and shared identity, and promoting communication, collaboration and friendship among the numerous Mercy communities in the country. In 1985 this Association re-shaped itself into a policy making body under the new title of 'Mercy Ireland'. A full time team of three was elected, with two back-up members from each of the four archdiocesan regions. This group was given a two-fold task; to explore possibilities of a still closer bonding and to assume responsibility, in the name of all Irish Mercy Sisters, for examining significant issues affecting Irish society e.g. homelessness, youth, women and laity, and that documentation and information be collected and initiatives for corporate action be taken in the years ahead.

Since then Mercy Ireland, which comprises all the Mercy Sisters in the country, has been giving much time and energy to these goals. Commissions were set up, with a member representing each diocese (the Sisters of Mercy are in every diocese in the country, North and South). Each commission has a particular area of interest: Justice, Health Care, Formation. Members meet regularly to set goals and plan ways of improving their response as individual communities and as a corporate group to the needs of Irish society today. The Justice and Health Care Commissions in particular aim at heightening awareness in the area of social justice and strive to influence public opinion and government policy in favour of the poor and marginalised.

Fresh ground was broken in 1986 when Mercy Ireland set up a small Mercy community in Ballymun. This new group came together not from any one congregation but from the total Mercy family in Ireland. These Sisters live in one of the high rise flats, and share the life of the people. With the local clergy, they form a parish team which works in collaboration with the various organisations in the locality. The Sisters are particularly involved in community development, and home visitation. The latter is in liaison with the two local primary schools. A similar venture was undertaken in January 1990, when three Sisters were missioned, again on a national basis to work with the Franciscan Fathers in Nharira, Zimbabwe.

With regard to the second goal of Mercy Ireland – a closer bonding between Mercy Sisters nationwide – this has proceeded steadily through an on-going communal discernment over the past six years. The Mercy Ireland Team has been in continuous communication with all the communities. They have met with the Sisters repeatedly at various venues around the country, consulting them on their desired future, giving input on developments among Mercy Sisters in other countries and putting proposals to them for consideration and evaluation. Through this reflective process, the feeling began to grow that, in a country the size of Ireland, a more cohesive structure would be both possible and desirable.

In order to then gauge the amount of support that this new thrust had among the entire membership, in October 1987 three options were put to the Sisters:

- (a) Stay with the present structure – autonomous diocesan congregations with the Mercy Ireland Team acting as a co-ordinating body.
- (b) Form a canonical Federation.
- (c) Unite into one single congregation.

The third option was favoured by 75%. The above result pointed the way towards a referendum on the desirability of exploring a Union Model appropriate to Ireland and to the Sisters who have been missioned from various Irish convents to work overseas. 90.7% of the membership declared themselves in favour of such exploration.

Sisters were then invited to write their vision of Mercy Life and mission as they would hope to experience and live it as one united group. 'The Sisters of Mercy of Ireland'. The response to this gave impetus to the drawing up by the National Executive of two alternative models of Union. These models were studied at community and regional level and Sisters were given the opportunity to make suggestions and recommendations. From the ensuing reflection and discussion a final draft of a Union Model emerged.

While deriving its meaning and inspiration from the Gospel, the whole orientation of the new structure is outward, facilitating wholehearted involvement in society and commitment to its evangelisation. It is designed to serve Christ's mission to the world and to enable Sisters to maximise their potential for the service of the poor and the needs of God's people. In this model a very high value is placed on subsidiarity and participation at every level of the Congregation. Great emphasis is placed on communal discernment, interdependence, communication and mutual accountability. It is hoped that this new structure will have within it the potential for the transformation of Mercy life and mission, so that 'becoming one' may be a truly life-giving, refounding experience.

Organisation-wise, the new structure will have at its centre the Congregational Leader and Team who will be the focus of unity for the entire Congregation. A certain number of provinces will be established in Ireland, each with its own Provincial and Team. Every province will have a high degree of responsibility to work out its own life and mission. It is within the provinces that personnel and resources will be deployed. Since the mission areas for the most part have not the same level of resources as a province or the same capacity to provide for their future, they will to a greater or lesser extent be dependent on the Congregation. It is therefore likely that Regions rather than Provinces will be formed in these areas, each with

its own Regional Leader and Team. Particular concern for the cultural individuality of the Region will be stressed.

In December 1990, the Model and structure of the Union were submitted to Rome and permission was received to proceed with the three-staged voting process using an agreed formula. The first stage was designed to ascertain the position of each Sister regarding the proposed Union: this indication would serve as a guideline for the second phase in which a Special Chapter held in every congregation voted on the acceptability of the Union for that group. The necessary majority (two-thirds) was secured in all 26 congregations. This result opened the way for the third and final stage. Here each Sister, taking into account the decision of her Chapter, declared her own intention regarding participation in the new 'Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Ireland'. In January of this year the result of the voting process was forwarded to Rome from Mercy Ireland, accompanied by the relevant documentation and including a petition from each of the 26 groups to become part of the new Congregation. While awaiting formal approval of the establishing of the Union by the Sacred Congregation, planning for the future has commenced and it is hoped that the First Congregational Chapter will take place in Summer 1994.

In the course of the discernment process described above, a request was received from a 27th group to be allowed to join the new Congregation. This group was established in South Africa in 1897 by a few Mercy Sisters from Strabane. The present community comprises South African Sisters as well as Irish. In their search for a way to implement the recommendation of the Council, these Sisters were drawn to explore the possibility of linking up with the Sisters here in Ireland. Consequently, they have followed the same procedure as the Irish groups and have also presented their petition to Rome.

The incorporation of the South African Sisters will add an enrichment and further strengthen the international dimension of the new Congregation. In addition to this group, approximately 400 other Mercy Sisters have been missioned from their respective congregations to various parts of the world. These Sisters work mainly in North America, Canada, England, Brazil, Nigeria, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Peru, - over the past ten years native vocations have emerged in the two latter countries. Representatives from all the above overseas countries will be present at the First Chapter of the new Congregation. Their contribution should give a much wider vision of mercy and a greater understanding and appreciation of the needs, struggles and aspirations of people from other cultures and from very different situations.

In 1994 then, a single Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Ireland will come into being. The primary motivation for the re-organisation of Mercy life has been the needs of God's people. A structure which will reduce the number in full time internal administration, and ensure that the gifts of all will find appropriate expression, will it is hoped, enhance the Mercy Sisters' contribution to society and to the Church. In working out the necessary structures for the new Congregation, great care was taken to ensure that, in keeping with the mercy charism, the focus of endeavour will continue to be the needs of the local area.

For the Mercy Sisters, this is a time of transition – a time which is mingled with pain, regret for the past, as well as enthusiasm and hope for the future. It is truly a ‘death, resurrection’ experience as they face a new life together as ‘one united group’. In this process of coming together, it is hoped that the Order will be re-energised through the joy and struggle inherent in creating a more relevant alternative structure for Mercy life.

There is now a two year preparatory period before the formal establishment of the new Congregation. This will be an opportunity to re-discover together the vision and spirit that animated Catherine McAuley and to identify again our Mercy charism and mission, so that the heart of our unity will be a radical re-commitment to Mercy. For Catherine, the decision to embark on new ventures was always made in response to the cry of the poor wherever it was heard, and so, for Mercies, the road has always stretched beyond the horizon. A demand which could not be addressed by one of the present congregations may now be met somewhere in the combined talents and resources of the entire Mercy group. One Congregation then, united in heart and spirit could be a vibrant force for Mercy in present day society, bringing Christ’s compassionate love and kindness to all, especially to the unwanted and marginalised, seeking justice for the poor, and in this way helping to bring fullness of life to all.