

Remembering The Story

The Sisters of Mercy, founded by Catherine McAuley, in Dublin, Ireland, 1831, have over the course of their journey embraced organisational change in response to the call of their ever evolving Charism.

Reconfiguration for the Sisters, has been guided and informed by their desire to respond to Mercy Mission, in every cultural time. Their commitment to the *Gospel Call* with particular focus on the *Relief of Poverty*, has shaped the course of their journey.

Autonomous Houses

In the beginning, over a period of ten years, Catherine McAuley, opened 10 Houses from the founding house in Baggot Street. These initial Foundations were in Ireland and in England, each with its own autonomy. Catherine was very alert to local conditions - "each place has its own feelings and differences which must be attended."

In the early years of the *Order* locally-based configurations emerged in terms of a school, a hostel, a work-place (laundry) and visitation of the sick.

Eventually more diverse ministries developed - hospitals to provide the best medical care to those without means to pay, field hospitals in war zones in the Crimea and USA, teacher training colleges, refuges for abandoned children, shelter for ex-convicts in Australia, and many others.

Mother House and Branches

With time, an organisational pattern of *Mother House and Branches* developed, bringing a certain stability in an organisation of rapidly increasing membership and growing demands of Ministry. This new pattern enabled Mission outreach to places like Newfoundland, Alabama, South Africa, Perth and, at the call of the Maori People, to New Zealand. This period saw huge increase, at home and abroad, of **many small independent communities** expanding into larger ones and founding new houses as the need arose.

The First Hundred Years

The first 100 years of the Religious Order was a period of growth and stability, marked by a common Mercy culture. This held together until Vatican II asked new questions. Numbers grew from 100 Sisters in Catherine's time to something like 15,000 worldwide, a mere sixty years later, and to more than 22,000 worldwide within another sixty years. A strong overseas mission-energy marked the early decades but this began to decrease towards the end of the 19th century.

After 1950

In the 1950's and 1960's a new period of outreach occurred. Different 'Motherhouses' responded to requests to go to dioceses in the USA to provide Catholic Primary School Education. Many new foundations were set up in the poorer States of the USA, and in South America and Africa.

Diocesan Entity

In the aftermath of *Vatican II* most Motherhouses and their Branch Houses fused into Single Congregations, one in each diocese in the country. Some areas had already done this merger - places like Dublin, Elphin and Cloyne.

Twenty Six new formal, Diocesan entities were established with mission areas across the world. The new Diocesan structure was a significant evolution and it ended the governance pattern that had existed for over 130 years. The uniformity of the Convent-based community gave way to smaller communities living “on the ground” with vulnerable people.

For the next quarter of a century these 26 Congregations (within dioceses but of pontifical right), nurtured diversification of Ministry and strong affiliations.

Mercy Association

The 26 Diocesan Congregations established close links over time and became more formalised by the establishment of the **Mercy Association** in 1973. This Body was to become a precursor of the Union which would take place 20 years later.

The Mercy Association brought together the Congregational Leaders on a regular basis for collaboration and discernment. Through this connection, many joint committees and projects were established and mission fields extended.

A Common Mercy Constitution

A **Common Mercy Constitution for Ireland** was completed and approved in 1985. In that year, 1985, the Mercy Association was reconstituted to become a policy-making organisation for Mercy Sisters and it was renamed, **Mercy Ireland**

To see the Mercy Association Chronology, please [click here](#).

Mercy Ireland

The Remit of the new organisation was to explore closer union among the diocesan entities and to continue inter-collaborative ministry projects. With **Mercy Ireland** the call for greater cohesion gathered momentum with a desire to give deeper expressions to Communion and to progress Mercy Ministry for the relief of poverty, in its diverse forms.

At this time membership size in each Congregation was widely different, varying from 40 – 400 approximately. It was evident that diocesan configuration was no longer sufficient. The need for Reconfiguration became a focal point for Mercy Leaders. **Mercy Ireland** called for a time of discernment and courage.

A long process of consultation, canonical protocols, Chapter decisions and a plebiscite of some 3,500 members, took place. **The decision to bring the 26 independent Congregations into One Union was reached in 1992, with over 90% agreement.**

The Independent Congregation in South Africa, who had already adopted the Irish Mercy Constitution, requested to join the New Union.

The Spirit of the New Beginning was palpable and widespread.

To read Regina Kelly's article, please [click here](#).

July 14th 1994

The Congregation of The Sisters of Mercy

On July 14th, 1994 the **27 Independent Mercy Congregations**, each of pontifical right and one from South Africa, gathered in Tallaght Stadium, in Dublin, to inaugurate the **Union of all Independent Congregations**. There were 2,000 Sisters present, together with Church Representatives, friends and colleagues. Once again the Sisters of Mercy embraced Change, in the service of all people.

To view Press Release, please [click here](#)

To view Declaration from Booklet of Sisters of Mercy, please [click here](#)

To view Fax Announcing Provinces, please [click here](#)

Seven Provinces

Within the New Union the Congregation organised itself into **Seven Provinces**:

The United States Province

The South African Province

The Kenyan Province

The Northern Province

The Southern Province

The Western Province

The South Central Province

This new entity would be directed by a Central Leadership Team which exercises a Unifying, Animating and Guiding Role for the whole Congregation.

In this New Structure the **Province** became a significant part of the whole Body with responsibility for a web of local communities. It had to forge a new sense of identity, blend its constituent cultures and traditions and keep the purpose of Mercy Mission in its vision.

Each of the Four Provinces in Ireland was made up of a fusion of several diocesan units.

The USA and Kenyan Provinces were established from a combination of many small groups which had been mission extensions of larger diocesan units in Ireland.

The *Province* became the tangible functioning structure of the New Union with a high level of autonomy, according to Canon Law and with a specific governance section in the Constitution,

Out of the vibrant waters of our time, the pain of humanity calls us to be bridge builders in a broken world. (Chapter Statement 1994)

The Call still echoes in the heart of the Sisters of Mercy

