

Mercy Girl Effect Leadership Conference - Youth Keynote

Hello everyone, My name is Ava McGinn and it is my greatest pleasure to be in your company today. It has been on three occasions that Sister Deirdre has kindly extended an invitation to this conference, and alas our mission has been accomplished third time lucky!

I would like to extend my deepest thank you to Sister Deirdre Mullan and Mrs. Eileen Killeen for their determination, kindness, and guidance in the run-up and during our conference this week.

So - let us begin!

I stand before you today as a 19-year-old “Derry Girl”, born in and bred in the city centre of Derry, located just at the top middle-point of Ireland. I’ve been raised by two wonderful parents, both of which have taught me great resilience, kindness and love, and not to mention my younger (but much taller!) 16-year-old brother who is my best friend in everything I do. Three of my four grandparents have sadly passed away, which leaves my Granny Sally: a very special lady and role model in my life. In true Irish style, we’ve got quite a large extended family, with many many cousins, scattered here there and everywhere. As for me, I enjoy nothing more than spending time with my family and friends, getting lost in a piece of piano music or going for a nice cold swim. Last September, I embarked on probably my biggest milestone yet - university life. I am currently studying a Bachelor of Science in Psychology at the University of Bath in England - just across the Irish Sea from home, and I could not be happier with my course, my friends and the city. However, none of this would have been made possible without my secondary education and continuous support gifted by one of our mercy schools - Thornhill College.

For some brief background, Thornhill College was founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1932 and nurtures the gifts of approximately 1500 girls. Behind the many school traditions, be it colour runs, fashion shows, or sports days, lies a community strongly rooted in the mercy values of Catherine McAuley. Staff and pupils of Thornhill College have attended conferences here in the past, absorbing and delivering inspiring discussions to us back home. And in 2015, I walked through the gates of Thornhill College for the first time. My blazer swallowed me up, my schoolbag was heavier than me and yet, the butterflies of excitement in my stomach flew me through a magnificent seven years of education. I distinctly remember my first religious studies assignment; to create a presentation on the life and work of Catherine McAuley. In my third year, I received the honour and responsibility of Junior Head Girl, something I truly never expected. Alongside the junior prefect team, we led junior school assemblies, greeted parents and prospective students at open days and volunteered for local charities in the city. And in my final year, I was gifted the role of Head Girl of Thornhill College, coincidentally on the very same day as our virtual conference together two years ago. I worked alongside five prefects to catalyze what we called ‘our recovery year’ with a vision to pick up the lost pieces of our school community impacted by the pandemic and strengthen our pupil, parent and staff support network. It was through the lens of both leadership roles, that I began to see first-hand the impact of a mercy education across our school community. Today, I wish to share with you the three perspectives a mercy education has instilled in me.

Firstly - the nature of mercy.

What is Mercy?

When taken literally from a dictionary, mercy may be defined as ‘compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one’s power.’ Whilst at a basic level, this is correct, for me the term ‘mercy’ means much more.

Mercy is a skill acquired beyond academia; it is a lesson for life and not an exam.
Mercy is an attribute of God, bringing creation closer in faith and forgiveness.
Mercy is a gift positively given and positively received.
Mercy is a universal language; demonstrated not just in our words but in our actions and recognized globally.

When researching the term 'mercy' I stumbled across a Shakespeare monologue titled 'The Quality of Mercy Is Not Strained.' Personally, I feel that the opening passage encapsulates the nature of mercy perfectly and I will share this with you now:

*'The quality of mercy is not strained:
It drops on to the world as the gentle rain does - from heaven.
It's doubly blessed.
It blesses both the giver and the receiver...
It is an attribute of God himself.'*

Secondly - mercy in action.

How do we demonstrate Mercy?

We, as students of a mercy education, know the values of mercy; compassion, respect, innovation to name a few, but it is how we thread these through our daily lives and is sometimes challenging. As a psychology student, I have discovered the importance of social learning; that is reading, responding, and mirroring the queues of those around us. This is exactly how mercy has and will continue to spread across our world - we learn from the mercy demonstrated in the Bible, by those before us and by one another. So today I thought I'd recall a story of my own.

When the pandemic hit, the mental health and wellbeing of our communities declined. Social isolation replaced social interaction and students became more comfortable behind the screen than in the classroom, thus making the return to school very difficult for some. This period coincided with 'our recovery year', and as Head Girl I was heavily involved in the creation of a nurture room within Thornhill College, with an aim to embrace the social, emotional, and behavioural needs of individuals in a comfortable, safe and confidential environment. We even decided to give the room a name - 'Cuan' - which is Irish for 'Haven', mirroring its atmosphere of safety, tranquility, and peace. Both students and staff were entitled to visit Cuan for a period of 15 minutes before, during or after the school day to relieve them of their everyday stresses and worries. This was certainly no quick fix to destigmatizing mental health post-pandemic, however it is the little acts of mercy that add up, and in no time, the positive impact of this space was evident. Our past alumni and local communities have since contributed donations to uphold the facilities, staff and pupils have conducted breathing exercises and yoga classes within the space, and a new support network of wellness ambassadors have emerged from its creation. Ultimately, cuan was created by all to nurture all, stemming from our school vision of mercy.

Mercy places an equal emphasis on both the big and little things. Demonstrating mercy does not demand huge innovative ideas - showing patience to those struggling with tasks, offering a helping hand, gifting kindness to those who hurt you - these are just some examples we can employ in our daily lives. Additionally, mercy places an equal emphasis on both outward and inward actions. When studying my A-Level in Religious Studies (a type of exam completed when you are 18 in Northern Ireland), I came across a quote by St. Francis de Sales, a French Bishop, who once remarked "Be patient

with all things, but most of all with yourself.” As we strengthen our relationship of mercy with others, we too must do so within ourselves. Relating back to the world of psychology - clinical psychologist Jane Becker views self-mercy as an internal four stage process - first; acknowledge your feelings, second; commit to forgiving, third; relinquish revenge and finally; alter your perspective.

I have not yet mastered the art of mercy - I believe very few have. I stand before you as a 19-year-old still making sense of the world. And as cliché as it may sound, uncovering, understanding, and displaying mercy is a journey and I’ve only just stepped foot over the start line. And even though I’m only at the beginning, I amongst many have been met with challenges and it is important that we as a group today and when we return to our educational settings, recognize and acknowledge these challenges as part of our development in this area.

This leads me to my final perspective - mercy and the challenges it faces in today’s world.

Throughout our education, we have been exposed to the self-reflection and evaluation of our mercy values and behaviour. For example, this very conference is a great opportunity to deepen our understanding of the Mercy Tradition and to hear from our own peer group. In doing so you will naturally develop a self-awareness of what your values are.

But let us call it as it is. Our values of mercy are being overshadowed by today’s world - people are becoming increasingly more concerned with themselves, society is constantly trying to maintain happiness, consumerism and commercialism are increasing the gap between the rich and the poor, individuals are prioritizing their never-ending treadmill of materialistic desires - as young mercy ambassadors of our future, this is our challenge. I admit, at times it is very difficult to resist the temptation of having the very best of everything because society demands it and says we are entitled to it. But we must adjust our mindsets to today’s world. Take for example the Sisters of Mercy - they faced challenges at every turn around, poverty and disease to name a few. We must embody their determination and outpouring mercy in the face of challenge.

So, what do you and I stand for? Where do the values come into play?

Acting out from these values will and should take us out of our comfort zone. In today’s world it is very easy to settle for a cozy life surrounded by self-desires and selfish thoughts, but we need to become mercy ambassadors within and beyond our peer groups. I am in no way suggesting that we all leave this conference and act perfectly without putting a foot out of place and demand that others do so too. This is not realistic or possible. My ask of you today is rather to demonstrate the values of mercy with confidence, consistency, no self-doubt, no apologies. Complete your mission of mercy to the best of your ability and your work will be recognized. Whilst our mercy schools are divided by distance, our small acts of compassion, generosity and forgiveness will send ripples to unexpected places here in America, across in Ireland and to all our sisters and brothers, too many of whom live in poverty.

Thank you very much for listening.

Ava McGinn
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