

# Foundress best known by deeds for ‘the least’

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! Mary Sullivan, the US Sister of Mercy who arguably knows more about Catherine McAuley than anyone else, has just published what is likely to be the definitive biography on the foundress. Titled *The Path of Mercy*, the 419-page volume shines a light of very thorough scholarship on what we know – and don’t know – about this remarkable woman.

The uncertainties about her life begin with the date of her birth. The day was September 29, but the year could have been any from 1778 to 1781; no birth or baptismal record has been located. Some of the sayings that have been attributed to her owe their life to other sources. Her dying wish for her sisters was ‘a good cup of tea’, not a ‘comfortable’ one as some early biographers suggested; her hope was that God might ‘comfort them’ as they shared it.

The maxim about ‘three things the poor prize more highly than gold’ may come from an early writer rather than Catherine herself, and even the hallowed quote ‘my legacy to the Institute is charity’ is more likely to have been written by a biographer than by the foundress. The phrase would have been entirely out of keeping with Catherine’s “estimate of herself and her view of God’s role in the Sisters of Mercy,” writes Mary Sullivan. “However, unhistorical claims have a way of perpetuating themselves.”

What is in no doubt in this biography is Catherine’s tireless energy on behalf of the poor and her determination to “get up again” to meet their needs. Perhaps the clearest glimpse of this comes in what Mary Sullivan notes as the “striking irony” which marked the last full year of Catherine’s life:

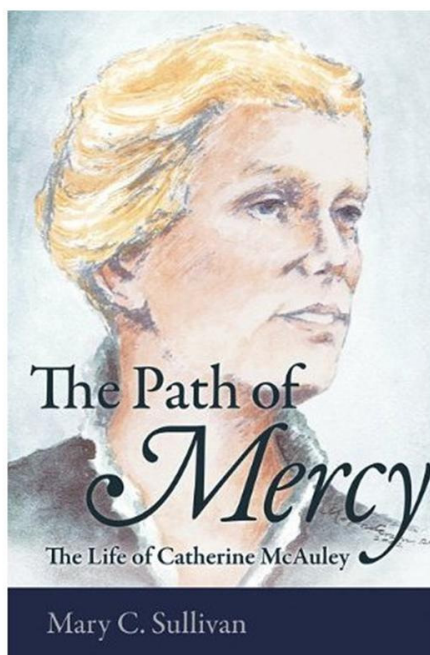
“As she aged, she became more and more youthful in her desire to respond to human needs. As her cough and stomach ailment became more troublesome, the calls on her mercifulness expanded. As her fingers grew more stiff, there were more letters to write. As her financial resources became more and more reduced, she made new plans to give away more. It was all the mysterious paradox of being ‘centred in God – for whom alone we go forward – or stay back.’ It was the humanly inexplicable generosity of ‘bestowing ourselves most freely and relying with unhesitat-

## Risen again through our love

As Easter’s light bursts afresh,  
we pray that we may work to bring new life  
to those who wait in darkness for light to shine.  
May the Christ who gave himself for the ‘least’  
live once more in our willingness to serve them.  
Let the witness of Catherine McAuley,  
who saw her gifts as blessings to be shared,  
inspire us to get up again for those who look  
to us to fill the emptiness in their lives.  
May the poor who knock now on our door  
find what they need today, not next week,  
in mercy’s name. Amen.

Produced by Pou Atawhai Centre for Mission,  
Auckland © April 2012

## Imaging Mercy Today



‘Her confidence in God had nothing to do with thinking that she ever fully embodied such loving...  
‘She believed that she was unfinished, that she was only a pilgrim on the way....  
‘But still she persevered in her desire.’  
- Mary Sullivan

ing confidence on the Providence of God’.”

Mary Sullivan’s brief introduction paints a graphic and well documented sketch of the poverty that faced the bulk of Irish people in Catherine’s day, and of the burden it placed particularly on single women and young girls. Against this bleak backdrop, a flesh-and-blood Catherine emerges, a single woman “of great intelligence and a certain beauty,” endowed with a sense of wit and humour and a love for poetry and dance.

The author is cautious about attributing motives to Catherine, but in a chapter headed ‘Beliefs and Motivations’ she names some of the key forces at work in her life; the sub-headings speak for themselves – ‘a spiritual journey’, ‘confidence in the providence and mercy of God’, ‘generosity as self-bestowal’, ‘resembling and following Christ’, ‘the cross of Christ’, ‘Jesus’ tender identification with “the least”, ‘mercy, the practical rendering of God’s love’.

Our best idea of what Catherine really said or thought comes, not from other published or unpublished memories, but from her own handwritten letters, more than 320 of them already collected and edited in another of Mary Sullivan’s scholarly works. But it’s in her deeds that the real story of Catherine’s life is written – actions that flowed from her resolve to share the blessings of a loving God with whoever could benefit from the outpouring of her love. The challenge this book poses for every reader is to know - and nurture - what will get them up again to meet the ‘least’ in need, “today, not next week.” - Dennis Horton