

OPENING DOORS - MERCY MEANS SHELTER FOR ALL



KIWIS Judy Hindrup and Mary Shaw, serving as volunteers at Mercy International Centre at Baggot Street, Dublin, the house built by Catherine McAuley and opened in 1827.

Standing in front of the iconic red doors at Mercy International Centre in Dublin are New Zealanders Judy Hindrup (left) and Mary Shaw. The pair, who worked together for many years at Atawhai Mercy Assisi Home and Hospital in Hamilton, where Judy was CEO and Mary in charge of food services, are spending eight weeks as volunteers at Baggot Street.

“At the door we’ve often had young males ringing the bell, asking for a cuppa and sandwiches,” says Judy. “But this morning we began a four-day programme for a pilgrimage of nearly 70 young Mercy leaders, accompanied by 14 university staff and other adults.” Judy is glad to be back at Baggot Street which she first visited on a Mercy pilgrimage in 2002. “To return in this Year of Mercy, as Ireland marks the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising, makes our travel extra special,” says Judy.

From the day it opened in 1827 on September 24, feast of Our Lady of Mercy, Catherine’s house served a multitude of purposes. It provided a home for herself and the young relatives entrusted to her care, as well as for the growing band of women who joined in her ministries to the sick and poor of Dublin. It included classrooms for girls and young women, a prompt and safe place of refuge for women abandoned on the street, an infirmary for the sick and dying, as well as a chapel where Mass and prayers could be regularly offered.

The open doors gave a welcome to many with nowhere else to go, and while the house was built largely from Catherine’s own finances, she had a gift for making others feel entirely at home. There’s the well recorded instance of her remonstrating with a group of residents, asking them to be quiet as a sister’s painful illness brought her close to death. “Humph, indeed, what a fuss she makes,” she overheard one of them say. “I thought the house was built for us, not them!”

For a hundred years or more, Baggot Street was the launching pad for other foundations in Ireland and England, Newfoundland, Australia and the US. Our own first Mercy women from Carlow passed through Baggot Street to catch their boats to Britain and beyond. In more recent years, Catherine’s house has become a place to welcome Mercy people returning from around the world to touch the base from where their story started, and the spirit from which their own Mercy fire was lit.

No one can be involved in Mercy for long without learning that we can each make a difference that counts. In the words of Catherine's biographer, Mary Sullivan rsm, "One person at a time, one embracing of the stranger, one welcoming of the other, one sharing of our bread and milk, one person at a time." As Mercy Day comes round each year, there is always reason for giving thanks again for the magic that Mercy works. This year, in Aotearoa New Zealand, Mercy people are gathering a few days in advance of September 24 before the steps of Parliament, to witness to our belief in 'shelter for all' as a basic human right, especially for those who struggle to achieve it.

The Year of Mercy is about the small things, notes the latest newsletter from Mercy Hospice Auckland. Says hospice CEO Peter Buckland, the temptation is to dismiss Mercy's call as being about the 'big stuff' of famine, war and ecological disaster and thus beyond our influence. "But perhaps the Year of Mercy is more straightforward," he says. "For each of us to put mercy into practice in our everyday world: helping the stranger who needs a hand lifting their groceries, acknowledging the homeless person we walk past every day, helping the family member in trouble, supporting the neighbour who is dying."

The God whom Jesus came to reveal is a God who prefers good deeds done in secret, deeds that don't attract attention, which God will reward as only God can. The perfection Catherine McAuley sought depends "not so much in doing extraordinary actions, as in doing extraordinarily well the ordinary actions and exercises of every day." May the God of small things bless and prosper what each of us brings to what remains of this Year of Mercy. May your Mercy Day be greatly blessed!

Taihoa, spare a moment.....

You're invited to end this reflection by responding to these questions, prompted by the approach of another Mercy Day on September 24, 189 years since Catherine McAuley's first House of Mercy opened in Baggot Street, Dublin.

- *'The God of small things', title of a well-known modern novel, captures the theme of this month's reflection. What small thing do you think you could do this month, to make a difference to the life of someone else?*
- *What is it about the story of Catherine McAuley that inspires you most? How might you mirror that same quality in your life right now? What would have to change, for this to happen?*

- **Dennis Horton**

He Inoi: Prayer **God of small things**

*E te Atua o nga mea iti, e whakanui ana:
Great God of small things, we praise you
as another Mercy Day approaches.*

*We give thanks for the witness of
Catherine McAuley's extraordinary life:
for her deep conviction that, by your grace,
she could make a difference that counted.*

*We praise you for the grace that abounded
as she began to call others to share in her work,
for the vision of mercy which inspired her,
and for her belief that every encounter
could be a turning-point of hope and new life.
Gift us today with that same profound faith
that we too may be channels of your tender love.*

Amen.