



God will finish in us the work God has begun

By DENNIS HORTON

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NEAR the end of her life, Catherine McAuley was asked by a young sister what would happen to the Congregation she had founded. According to tradition she replied, “If the Order is my work, the sooner it falls to the ground, the better. If it is God’s work, it needs no one.” Yet her total faith in Providence never weakened Catherine’s insistence that we should act as though everything depended on us. Nothing less than our all will allow God’s mercy to reach to where it waits to go.



Taihoa – spare a moment

Name in your heart the particular gift you bring to enable God’s work to be fulfilled in you.

Photo – Sculptor Gael O’Leary

This promises to be a year of radically new beginnings for Mercy in our land, as Whānau Mercy Ministries moves through a sea of detailed planning into the full light of day. While no precise deadline has been set for the task to be completed, we anticipate a system of lay ownership and governance ultimately without direct involvement of sisters yet sustained by the same charism with which these ministries were founded and nourished.

Plans by Ngā Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand to establish a ministerial PJP are a reminder of how the Congregation founded by Catherine McAuley has always counted on support from competent lay women and men to carry its vision of God’s merciful love to where it is most needed. From the beginning, Catherine drew on the skills and expertise of a broad range of associates to help convert her plans for the poor into decisive action. They included churchmen and politicians, accountants and doctors, medical and educational experts, and women especially who shared her dream and caught a spark from the fire of her faith.

Our own story has been enriched by the experience of sisters who, after years of teaching and administering in Mercy colleges, embarked on studies including canon law, to find the path to lay governance of ministries which had been managed almost single-handedly by the Congregation. From the 1980s onwards, other sisters studied and initiated programmes of mission integration to ensure that lay partners became involved in this process. Another rich part of our story has been the growing commitment of Sisters of Mercy in New Zealand to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and a recognition that their relationship with Tangata Whenua as the indigenous people of this land is a key component of their charism and mission.

As part of the silver jubilee celebration of Mercy International Centre in 2019, the garden at Baggot Street, Dublin where the centre is based, was redeveloped. Among the highlights of the work is a life-sized bronze of Catherine McAuley, inviting people to ‘come, sit awhile’ on the bench beside her and to take some time for quiet reflection. Sculptor Gael O’Leary says she wanted to show Catherine as ‘a woman of compassion, faith and hope,’ a symbol for all Mercy people today ‘who seek to combine their need for prayerful reflection with the call to be engaged with those in need.’

The reflection which opens every occasion when Mercy people meet to tackle what Catherine termed ‘the business of our lives’ is not just a convention for getting started, but an opportunity to remember as she herself insisted that ‘this is not our own work, but God’s.’ The Statement of Purpose which will lie at the heart of all Whānau Mercy Ministries reminds us that it is out of God’s mercy that we are able to walk compassionately with those who seek the support we give. ‘If we are humble and sincere,’ says Catherine, ‘God will finish in us the work that God has begun.’