

**Homily for St Aloysius' Garnethill**  
**Mass to Mark the 160<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Sisters of Mercy in**  
**Glasgow**  
**1949-2009**

*"Bless the God of all things  
who has acted towards us in his mercy.  
May he grant us cheerful hearts."  
(Ecclesiasticus 50 24-26)*

These words are found towards the end of the Book of Ecclesiasticus, a book originally written in Hebrew and translated into Greek as part of the Septuagint, and as such part of the Canon of Scripture of the Catholic Church. These seem appropriate words with which to commence a homily as we mark 160 years of the presence and work of the Sisters of Mercy in the Archdiocese of Glasgow.

I repeat again those sentences: *"Bless the God of all things who has acted towards us in his mercy. May he grant us cheerful hearts."* – Who has acted towards us in his mercy.

Interwoven in the historical fabric of the Church is the strand of mercy. It has never been lacking, as a glance at the early pages of the Acts of the Apostles shows. Indeed the establishment of the Order of Deacons was motivated entirely by a desire to ensure that the widows and orphans received their portion of the Church's care. Saint Paul collected money in his missionary journeys for the poor of Jerusalem. The Fathers of the Church, particularly Saint John Chrysostom, appealed to the wealthy for the support of the Church's works of mercy, memorably upbraiding those who would adorn the church with costly vestments and ignore the nakedness of the poor.

The monasteries became centres of relief for those in need, whether hungry or homeless. The hospice for pilgrims to Jerusalem eventually became a great work of mercy towards the sick in the foundation of the Order of Saint John, better known as the Order of Malta. Many Religious Congregations, such as those of Saint Vincent de Paul or of Don Bosco, set their sights on the needy of their day and were hugely practical in addressing them.

The International Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, founded by Frederic Ozanam in Paris, inspired by the work of Saint Vincent de Paul, continues to provide a network of charity. Throughout the Church one could detail further examples, and one need only look to the Religious Communities within our own Archdiocese to see their extent, commencing perhaps with our own Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, the Little Sisters of the Poor, to the Sisters of Nazareth, to the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul, the Helpers of the Holy Souls and to more recent examples; that of the Franciscan Sisters Minoresses, the Religious Sisters of Charity with the Hospice at Clydebank, Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity. I haven't

mentioned them all. Obviously missing from that list is the Congregation for whose thanksgiving we assemble today.

If that is the historical context for the work of the Sisters of Mercy, the evangelical context is that provided by today's Gospel passage.

When he saw the crowds Jesus felt sorry for them, because they were harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd. He said the harvest is rich but the labourers are few, so ask the Lord of the Harvest to send labourers to his harvest. And as he sent out the twelve he told them: *"Proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is close at hand, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils"*.

That call was heard by a generous wealthy woman, Catherine McAuley, whose heart was touched by the experience she had in Dublin of seeing homeless people, uneducated children roaming the streets, and the general poverty and neglect of both the elderly and the ill, many of whom lived in houses often unfit for human habitation. This was a picture not unique to Dublin, but commonplace in many of the cities of the Industrial Revolution, including our own City of Glasgow. Catherine McAuley founded her work in Dublin in 1831 when she had gathered around her a group of women fired by her spirit of generosity and compassion, hearing echoes of the words of our Divine Master, and perhaps also encouraged by the many examples throughout the history of the Church to which we have referred.

Four Sisters of Mercy came to Glasgow from Limerick in 1849, two years after the Franciscans of the Immaculate Conception. Indeed the history of these two communities has been happily interwoven ever since. The first Convent of Mercy was in Charlotte Street. A short time later the Sisters moved to Saint Mungo's parish to teach in the Girls' and Infants' School. In 1859 the Sisters moved again to Garngad to a house which they were unable to maintain, since they themselves were poor and those they served poorer still. This house, however, became the Convent of the Little Sisters of the Poor. A few years later the Sisters established a small community at Garnethill at the invitation of the Society of Jesus, and their connection with the Society and with this location has been consistent ever since, but the Sisters have now had to face the need to dispose of their convent here on the hill, but, as in the case of Garngad those many years ago, it will not cease to be of service of the Church. The Sisters were prepared to sell the house to the Society of Jesus for the expansion of St Aloysius' Schools.

Naturally I am dependent on the Sisters themselves for the history that I am giving you in very telegraphic form. But I need to share this passage in full with you.

*"The early years of the Sisters of Mercy were marked by suffering and early deaths of many Sisters from typhoid, cholera and malnutrition. They taught in the schools for little or no financial remuneration, and provided 'breakfasts'*

*for children who arrived early from homes where there was great poverty. The Sisters lived very poorly and frequently depended on the charity of people who appreciated what they were doing. To eke out an existence the Sisters baked altar breads which they distributed over a wide area of the West of Scotland and the Highlands. Not until the 1970s were the Carmelite Sisters able to take over the baking and distribution of altar breads."*

I myself am a *Mercy Boy* and I remember down the corridor from our Primary School Classes was the room in which the breads were baked and packaged for distribution to parishes throughout the North East and North of Scotland.

The Sisters educated generations of young Catholic women in the Faith and into the professions, notably the teaching and nursing professions. I recall in Elgin they had a Commercial School and so many of the secretaries and typists engaged in local firms had their education in another part of the same building in which I as a boy received my Primary education.

As in the case of Elgin, which expanded to several other convents in the Diocese of Aberdeen, the Sisters here in Glasgow branched out and established several other communities of Sisters, all engaged in one way or another in addressing the educational, social and spiritual needs of people of all ages.

### **Educational**

In 1894 the Sisters opened a Convent School at which pupils were presented for the Scottish Leaving Certificate and the University Preliminary Examinations. By 1926 they were presenting candidates for the Scottish Higher Leaving Certificate and girls came to Garnethill from well beyond Glasgow. As well as in this school Sisters taught in other schools of the Archdiocese. As in the case of other Orders their work has been continued in part by those they themselves educated and by others who have followed them in their dedication to Catholic teaching. But it was the Sisters who laid the foundations and said something of the character and spirit of these schools.

### **Social and Pastoral**

In 1993 the Sisters opened a house in Lambhill, in one of the more deprived areas of the city, where they worked in the parish and in the local community and from which they also provided help in Glasgow University's Catholic Chaplaincy, Turnbull Hall.

### **Spiritual Needs**

From the beginning the Sisters have not overlooked the spiritual needs of those whom they have been serving, whether in their schools or within the wider community. They have recognised people's need for understanding, love, support and practical help. In this they have followed Catherine McAuley, whose gift lay in her sharing of a wholesome estimate of human

beings and their potential. She saw people as made in God's image, and deserving of love and respect, which is why I believe that the Sisters still have a role to play in this Archdiocese and elsewhere both now and in the years to come.

It is an immense privilege to me, but also a particular pleasure given my long connection with the Sisters of Mercy to thank them publicly on this occasion for all the great work they have achieved in this Archdiocese, and to wish them well in the future. I cannot do better than to adopt the words of Saint Paul addressing the Corinthians: *"Never stop thanking God for all the graces you have received through Jesus Christ; the witness to Christ has indeed been strong among you. He will keep you steady and without blame until the day of Our Lord Jesus Christ"*.

The day of Christ, His birthday, will shortly be upon us. It always brings us joy. However, we look forward to another day of which this first day is the harbinger and guarantee, namely the day when Christ will come again in His glory. In the meantime "May he grant us cheerful hearts".