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Book Review: The Path of Mercy: The Life of Catherine McAuley

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The Path of mercy: The life of Catherine McAuley .2012. Mary C. Sullivan. Four courts press. 500pp. (Hardcover). ISBN 978081321873. \$49.95.

Reviewed by Busisiwe Magagula¹

The path of mercy is a biography of Catherine McAuley's life written by Mary C. Sullivan. The book tells the story of a young woman who used a fortune that she had inherited from family friends to build a 'House of Mercy' for poor women and children in order to provide them with education, shelter and religious services. The book was written to clarify or rather give another perspective on the life of Catherine McAuley, as there are many variations to her life story. The Author attempts to share the life of Catherine McAuley from the perspectives of those that were closest to her as she uses what they remembered about her life in the different contexts of life in Dublin, Baggot Street to tell her story.

Sullivan relates that Catherine McAuley's beginnings are an issue of debate because her exact date of birth is not known. Some authors place her birth after the death of her father whereas others place her at time close to his death. Although the author states that she set out bring clarity about Sister McAuley, the date of her birth in this text as in previous texts remains unresolved as her birth is placed by historians at anytime between 1778 and 1781. Furthermore her family residence is thought to have been Stormatown or Fishamblein Dublin, Ireland, based on lease records that may or may not be accurate according to Sullivan. The date of her confirmation into the Catholic Church is also is placed between 1789-1796. These questions regarding the beginnings of her life add more intrigue about her life, and Sullivan manages to detract from these questions by telling the story of Catherine MacAuley in a captivating and heartfelt manner.

Sullivan describes Catherine's family and how after being orphaned at an early age, 18 years of age, Catherine went to live with relatives and family friends until the age of forty when her dream of starting on a home to help women and children (to be later known as the House of Mercy), was conceived. In this instance she describes the role that family friends, the Callaghan's, played in the establishment of the House of Mercy through the inheritance that they left for her when the last person in the family, Mr Callaghan died. The inheritance became the seed money that helped to establish the house of mercy in 1831. The author further describes the incidences that occurred from the beginnings of the house of mercy in 1827 up to 1841 when Catherine lost her life to tuberculosis.

The House of Mercy was formally blessed by Archbishop Murray in 1829, having been operational from September, 1827 when Catherine's inheritance from the Callaghan's was finalised. Catherine together with her co-workers entered the convent of the Presentation Sisters on George's Hill, Dublin in 1830 in order to begin her training in religious life and to solidify the existence of the Sisters of Mercy as a religious community. In 1831 Catherine and her co-workers finished their religious education, and made their profession to Christ and the Catholic Church. Through their profession on that day, the Sisters of Mercy were established as a religious community, aimed at taking care of poor women and children.

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The sisters of mercy came at a time where the Catholic Church was not accepted in Ireland. Most of the people that converted to the Catholic Church did so in secret at first and had to face possible rejection from their loved ones because of the polarisation of the Protestant movement. The author notes an instance whereby another Catherine had converted to the catholic faith without the knowledge of her husband, and although there were rumours of him knowing about his wife's conversion, he remained cordial toward his wife even up to her death. The Catholic faith only became formally accepted in 1829 in Ireland, and even thereafter those who were members of the church were limited in the positions that they could occupy in the society.

Catherine McAuley is described as a fearless, humorous, kind and spiritual woman who took great strides to ensure that her vision for the house of mercy was realised in spite of the opposition that she received. Her character traits as described in the book seem to be what made her a powerful force that she was in showing acts of mercy to the poor.

The Sisters of Mercy, as Catherine McAuley and her assistants came to be known, vowed to serve people who suffer from poverty, sickness and illiteracy with a special concern for women and children. Members, that is the women that join the Sisters of Mercy, took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the evangelical counsels commonly vowed in religious life, and, in addition, vows of service. They were encouraged by Catherine to participate in the life of the surrounding community. In keeping with their mission of serving the poor and needy, many sisters engaged in teaching, medical care, and community programs. The Sisters of Mercy did not start as a congregation as such but rather as a place where women who were destitute or orphaned children could be taken care of.

Her acts of mercy were not shown to strangers who were poor only but also to members of her family, Catherine took in her nephews and nieces whose parents had passed on. The acts of mercy that were conducted by the sisters even went to a point whereby they were not afraid to lose their lives for their cause, in the midst of the illness and diseases of the time the Sisters of Mercy went out to serve the poor and aided them, visited the sick in hospitals.

Sullivan notes that Catherine gave of her life and her finances to ensure that the house of mercy continued to provide for the poor in their time. The house thrived because of the support that Catherine received from her friends and family. Catherine also inspired the same selflessness to her novices; they also gave of the financial support toward the work of the house of mercy when they enlisted in the house of mercy. Catherine also faced various criticisms to the work that she was doing, she was criticised because it was expected that she should marry and take on a traditional female role, but she opposed that in order to offer assistance to those who experienced poverty. She faced opposition, according to Sullivan, from the convents that existed at the time, as her motives for starting the house of mercy were often questioned, especially because she was not linked to any congregation at first and because of her reliance on her own finances to run the Sisters of Mercy. Catherine was opposed because initiatives such as the house of mercy were associated with the church and not 'lay' women.

Catherine's faith, resilience and vision seem to be what encored her through the most difficult times of her life. In the book she recited verses from the bible and wrote verses herself, to encourage herself and others that needed encouragement. Sullivan also reports that she had the ability to turn grim situations into humorous ones as in the case where she made fun of a cholera epidemic she named the knees a novice, 'cholera and cholerene' because she worked so hard that she did not walk up straight any more but remained on her knees during her duties.

In the book Catherine is described as being a woman of many virtues, not only did she have a giving spirit but she was also wise woman, knowing how to act and react to situations that she was faced with. Sullivan notes that Catherine could have motivated by the following to pursue the kind of life that she lived;

(a) her belief that human life is a spiritual journey, centred on God and toward him, (b) her confidence in the accompanying providence and mercy of God, (c) her understanding that Jesus Christ came as God and of the gospel as a call to corresponding human self-bestowal, (d) to a following of God's generosity through Jesus Christ, (e) her faith in and resemblance of Jesus Christ as a beckoning example, (f) her focus on the 'cross' of Jesus Christ as the fullest human expression to partake in that bestowal, and on the historical invitations to participate in that bestowal, (g) her belief in the thoroughness of Jesus Christ's compassionate and tender identification with the least, and (h) lastly a focus on God's mercy as shown in the person of Jesus Christ.

She saw her vision as being greater than assuming a traditional female role. She had possible suitors, good looking, with blonde hair and having a bit of wealth to her name; but she chose to give all that up to live a sacrificial life.

The fact that this book relies on narratives that were told by others and on historical facts that are debatable, is a weakness. It is difficult to ascertain facts when there are many variations to a single story. Much of the story is told about Catherine's life at the point when the House of Mercy and the congregation of Sisters were established, but not a lot is said about her upbringing in Dublin and what could have possibly inspired her to live her life as she did.

The narrative in the text is relevant, because the values and virtues that seem to have shaped Catherine's life are in line with the culture of collectivism, that is seeing one's existence in relation to others and honouring one another's humanity instead of being entirely self-preserving, that is common in African cultures. This book appeals to a wide variety of audiences from those interested in the beginnings of the Catholic Church in Ireland, specifically women movements within the church, and to church historians, social workers, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists even lay people.