

# History and Heritage of Gwynedd-Mercy College

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Prepared by the Mission and Values  
Committee

# Program Overview

- Background Information on Catherine McAuley, Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy
- Chronology of the Religious Sisters of Mercy
- Direction Statement of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas
- Brief History of Gwynedd-Mercy College

# Background History on Catherine McAuley

- Catherine was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1778 to a wealthy, middle class, Catholic family.
- Her father, James, was a well-respected gentleman who exhibited great concern for the poor of Dublin. He provided them with food, clothing, medicine, and instruction in the Catholic Faith.

# Ireland in the Late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries

- To be a Catholic in Ireland at the time of Catherine's birth was to be regarded as a criminal.
- Penal Codes, enacted by the English in 1695, were designed to deny Irish Catholics their civil liberties. The goal of the codes was to eradicate Catholicism.
- Unless Catholics agreed to take a qualifying oath, they were denied education, land ownership, and medical treatment. They could not enter the legal profession or hold government office.

# Anti-Catholic Sentiment

- The qualifying oath required Catholics to denounce Catholic doctrines including the Eucharist, the holy sacrifice of the mass, belief in the Virgin Mary as intercessor, and the veneration of the saints.
- Since no Catholic could take such an oath, Catholics were effectively disenfranchised.

# Catholic Relief Acts

- A series of Acts repealing sections of the Penal Codes were initiated in 1777, the year prior to Catherine's birth.
- Change was gradual. By 1782, Catholics could own a horse, become school masters, and lease land. By 1793, Catholics could enter the military, the legal profession, and some trades. A middle class began to arise; however, most Irish Catholics continued to lead impoverished lives.

## Forces Shaping Catherine McAuley's Early Years.

- James McAuley died when Catherine was 7 years old; however, his commitment to the relief of the poor was his legacy to her.
- Her mother, Elinor, did not share in James' passion for the poor. She was preoccupied with caring for the family. She died when Catherine was 11.

# Upbringing of the Orphaned Catherine

- After Elinor's death, the orphaned McAuleys were adopted by relatives who were rigid protestants.
- Catherine continued to practice her faith in secret.
- Later, Catherine was adopted by distant relatives, the Callaghans, who were supportive of her desire to work among the poor.
- The Callaghans eventually converted to Catholicism and later left their estate and financial resources to Catherine to fund her good works.

# Life on Baggott Street

- In July 1824, Catherine purchased a site in fashionable Dublin and built a refuge for “distressed women of good character”.
- The House of Mercy was officially dedicated on the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, September 24, 1827.
- Other women came to assist Catherine in her ministry. At that point, Catherine had no intention of founding a religious community.

# The House of Mercy

- The location of the house was deliberate. Here the poor could interface with the rich. Employment opportunities for young women were plentiful.
- Within months of its opening, 500 girls were enrolled in the school at the House of Mercy.



# The House of Mercy- A Safe Haven

- Young women were trained in needlework, laundry, and other domestic services. An employment agency operated from the House.
- Single women employed in the trades in Dublin could reside in the House of Mercy.
- Religious instruction and training in good manners were also emphasized.

# Establishing the Sisters of Mercy

- Once Baggot Street was well established, the staff adopted a lifestyle similar to that of a religious community.
- Archbishop Murray urged Catherine and her associates to consider choosing the religious life.
- On September 8, 1830, Catherine and two of her associates entered the novitiate at Presentation Convent in Dublin.
- They were professed on December 12, 1831 as the first Sisters of Mercy. They then returned to Baggot Street.

# New Foundations

- Mother Catherine McAuley was besieged by requests for the Sisters of Mercy to alleviate the sufferings of the poor.
- Between 1831 and 1841,
- Catherine founded 14 convents of Mercy and her community of Sisters grew to over 400.



# Apostolates of the Sisters of Mercy

- The Sisters of Mercy were active in the communities where foundations were established. They differed from other communities of the time which were enclosed or cloistered. The Sisters were committed to the practice of both the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.
- Service to others included care of the sick and dying, establishing schools for both poor and rich, and the instruction of women who, in turn, would supervise the education and training of their children.

# Legacy

- Catherine McAuley died on November 11, 1841. Her last words conveyed her great concern for and sensitivity to others. She said, “The sisters are tired; be sure they have a comfortable cup of tea when I am gone.”
- Her spirit of devotion to God and the poor of our world lives on in the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, the Merion Regional Community, and the sponsored ministries of the Sisters of Mercy which include Gwynedd-Mercy College.

# The Spiritual Works of Mercy

- Instruct the ignorant.
- Counsel the doubtful.
- Admonish the sinner.
- Bear wrongs patiently.
- Forgive all injuries.
- Comfort the sorrowful.
- Pray for the living and the dead.



# The Corporal Works of Mercy

- Feed the hungry.
- Give drink to the thirsty.
- Clothe the naked.
- Shelter the homeless.
- Visit the imprisoned.
- Visit the sick.
- Bury the dead.



Demonstrating a Spirit of  
Hospitality is a Gwynedd-Mercy  
College Core Value.

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# Tender Courage

- Sister Isabelle Keiss, RSM, third President of Gwynedd-Mercy College, and Sister Joanna Regan, RSM, co-authored a biography of Catherine McAuley entitled *Tender Courage*.
- They summarized her mission as follows: “*She connected the rich to the poor, the healthy to the sick, the educated and unskilled to the uninstructed, the influential to those of no consequence, and the powerful to the weak to do the work of God on earth.*”

*Compassion, Service, Social Responsibility  
and Community and Collaboration are  
Gwynedd-Mercy College Core Values.*



# A Brief Chronology of the Religious Sisters of Mercy

- September 29, 1778- Catherine McAuley born at Stormanstown House, Dublin
- November 10, 1822- William Callaghan dies, leaving his estate to Catherine.
- September 24, 1827- House of Mercy opens, Baggot Street, Dublin.

# A Brief Chronology of the Religious Sisters of Mercy

- September 8, 1830- Catherine McAuley, Mary Ann Doyle, and Elizabeth Harnet enter the convent of the Presentation Sisters in Dublin for their novitiate.
- December 12, 1831- Foundation Day, the first Sisters of Mercy are professed.
- July 5, 1841- The Rule of the Sisters of Mercy is approved by Rome.

# Sisters of Mercy Chronology

- November 11, 1841- Mother Catherine McAuley dies at Baggot Street, Dublin
- 1843- First US Foundation, led by Frances Warde, Pittsburg, PA
- August 22, 1861- Philadelphia Foundation led by Frances Warde and Patricia Waldron
- July, 1991- Foundation of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

# Direction Statement- Institute of Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

Animated by the Gospel and Catherine McAuley's passion for the poor, the Sisters are impelled to commit their lives and resources to act in solidarity with:

- the economically poor of the world, especially women and children;
- women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society;
- one another as we embrace our multicultural and international reality.

# Direction Statement

This commitment of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas impels them to:

- develop and act from a multicultural, international perspective;
- speak with a corporate voice;
- work for systematic change;
- act in harmony and interdependence with all creation; and
- call themselves to continual conversion in their lifestyle and ministries.

# A Brief History of Gwynedd- Mercy College

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A Sponsored Ministry of the Sisters  
of Mercy of the Americas,  
Merion Regional Community

# Beginnings

- The land on which the College is situated was originally known as Willowbrook Farm and was owned by Frances Bond, an investment banker. The Bond family's Georgian Revival style mansion, now Assumption Hall, was built in 1906-7. The mansion was designed by Horace Trumbauer who later designed the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
- Two years after his wife's death in 1912, Bond remarried and sold the house to Roland and Anita Taylor, who renamed it Treweryn after the creek which flows through the grounds of the estate.

# Acquisition of the College's Grounds

- Mr. Taylor was an enthusiastic landscaper. He planted many ornamental trees and shrubs including 53 varieties of Rhododendron.
- After the death of the Taylors, their daughters sold the mansion, outbuildings, and additional land to the Sisters of Mercy in 1947.
- The Sisters of Mercy then moved their academy from Broad Street in Philadelphia to the grounds of the estate. In the Fall of 1948, Gwynedd-Mercy Junior College opened on the same grounds. There were 28 students.

# The College's Early Days

- Classes were held in converted stables, now Byrne Hall. The Sisters of Mercy resided in Assumption Hall.
- Over the years, Assumption Hall has served as a student dormitory, a classroom building, and a convent before its most recent incarnation as the seat of college administration.



# A Growing Community of Scholars

- Increased enrollment, expanded instructional facilities, and improved programs of study led the College's Administration to seek accreditation through the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. This accreditation was granted in 1958.
- In May 1963, the Pennsylvania State Council of Education approved the amending of the College's Charter to permit the granting of baccalaureate degrees.
- The College's first graduate program was established in 1982.

# Linkages- Learning More about the Mercy Charism and Mission

For more information about the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and the Merion Regional Community of the Sisters of Mercy:

- Please explore their websites which can be accessed through the [Lourdes Library Homepage](#) on the [Gwynedd-Mercy College website](#).
- Contact a member of the Mission and Values Committee who will be glad to meet with you.
- Copies of *Tender Courage* are available in Lourdes Library as well as in the College Bookstore.