

International Women's Day and the Global Mercy Family

International Women's Day is celebrated this year on March 8. So what has that to do with the global Mercy family? Plenty!

Promoters of this International Day focused on the progress of women say that it was first celebrated in 1911, but in a sense they are off by about 90 years. In the 1820s, as soon as Catherine McAuley began to live in solidarity with the abandoned and demented Mrs. Harper, with exploited female domestic servants, and with poor girls who had no access to even primary education, a women's "day" began, and has been taken to heart across the Mercy world ever since.

However, this embedded Mercy concern for the just flourishing of women everywhere does not relieve us of advocacy in 2018. On the contrary, our call to speak and act on behalf of women's progress is even more urgent today, given the new signs of our times. Look at the hubris which presumes to tell Muslim women how they should dress; look at the already disproportionate and negative effects of climate change on poor women in Africa, South America, and other regions of the southern hemisphere; look at the high statistics of sex-trafficking of young women, and the low statistics of women in leadership positions in church and society; look at the gender gap in salaries in business corporations. What would Catherine McAuley say and do about all this? Again, I think Plenty!

Let's look back at her pivotal statement about women's "influence" – the capacity for "influence" that she says results from empowering education, the kind of "influence" that promotes social peace and good order for all, women as well as men:

No work of charity can be more productive of good to society or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women, since whatever be the station they are destined to fill, their example and advice will always possess influence, and where ever a religious woman presides peace and good order are generally to be found. (Rule 2.5, in *CMcATM*, 297)

Even as Catherine wrote these words about the influence of any and every woman strengthened by her faith, she was herself experiencing public debasement as a woman. The man in charge of the Catholic parish in which Baggot Street was located claimed, not privately, that "the unlearned sex" could not do "anything but mischief by trying to assist the clergy," and he called

Catherine a “parvenue.” A parvenue indeed! She, a woman who had now arrived at a position having merciful power, still was not accorded the dignity and respect she would have received had she been a man, or even better, a cleric.

But Catherine was not interested in promoting her own prestige and dignity. She was into solidarity with and influence on behalf of all women who were accorded no dignity, no equality, no parity, no justice: women who were used, treated as second-rate, and left nameless.

Though she was not a conscious feminist in the full sense in which we might use that word today, Catherine’s instincts were all anti-androcentric. In her transcriptions of the works of other writers, she nearly always substituted gender neutral or feminine nouns and pronouns for their masculine ones. When she composed the Rule of the Sisters of Mercy, she deliberately did not repeat for her sisters the words of the Presentation Rule which counseled: “When spoken to by men of any state or profession, they shall observe and maintain the most guarded reserve, never fix their eyes on them, nor shew themselves, in conversation or otherwise, in the least degree familiar with them” (*CMcATM*, 313 n 54). Her own advocacy of the educational and sacramental rights of girls and women often required that she herself look men “in the eye.” And while speaking about the spiritual development of Mercy novices and inviting them to get over any “childish and pettish humours” they might have, she did not repeat the Presentation words that located such humours “especially in the female sex.” In these and countless other ways Catherine tried to affirm the truth, equality and progress of women.

Today, as her companions and followers, we must now speak and act with the same forthrightness as Catherine, taking the side of the civil, social, economic, political, and ecclesial recognition and empowerment of women. We must also assist all hearers to set aside the non-compliment implicit in the isolating assertion of “feminine genius,” as well as any theory that claims men and women are created with different but “complementary” aptitudes and therefore roles. Such a theory limits both men and women. Individual women and men may indeed have personal “genius” and outstanding aptitudes, but these are not sexually assigned nor embedded in their maleness or femaleness. Both men and women can learn to be sensitive, nurturing, and administratively skilled; these capabilities are not allotted by gender.

So on March 8, 2018, let us as the Mercy family renew our distinctive commitment to influencing our companions in this world, in ways that will further the empowering of women, and the equal and just treatment of all

women and men. Let us speak and write about these things; let us give good example, and use appropriate language, influencing others by our own actions and words; and let us not lose even one opportunity to defend, lift up, and empower individual women and groups of women – those who are themselves denied justice, and those engaged in just pursuits on behalf of other women.

Such “influencing” will often call for courage, perseverance, long-suffering, and God’s kind of humility. But when did bearing the burden of one’s prophetic vocation on behalf of others require otherwise? Certainly not in the life of Jesus of Nazareth – or Catherine McAuley.

Catherine had a homespun, but biblical way of reminding us to get on with this work. She used to gently point out our human tendency to withdraw from the tasks at hand, and “put our candles under a bushel” (*Correspondence*, 346). She didn’t think that was a good idea, especially when the mission of mercy and justice was at stake. Rather, she urged us to lift up our heads and “be shining lamps giving light to all around us.” Continued worldwide progress in recognizing and respecting the full equality, and promoting the equal flourishing of all women, rich and poor, of color and of white, still needs such influential light, coming as we hope and pray it does from the powerful Light of Christ.

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