

Sister Mary Sullivan, RSM, Sister of Mercy and Scholar

written by Doris Gottemoeller, RSM



Sisters of Mercy and their colleagues and friends around the world owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Sister Mary C. Sullivan, RSM. In her *magnum opus*, *The Path of Mercy: The Life of Catherine McAuley*, she gave us the definitive portrait of our holy foundress. Earlier biographers had told the story of Catherine McAuley, but they were hampered by the lack of technical resources which Sister Mary was able to utilize.

Let me begin this tribute to Sister Mary by giving a little background on the creation of *The Path of Mercy*. Among her numerous publications over the years were a significant number about Catherine. In fact, her dissertation for her master's degree in systematic theology at Heythrop College of the University of London in 1988 was titled, "A Contemporary Critique of the Christology of Catherine McAuley (1778-1841)." For it she was honored with the College's 'Mark of Distinction.' Other publications about Catherine included the books *Catherine of Dublin* in 1965, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* in 1995 and *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841* in 2004, as well as numerous articles. All of this laid

the groundwork for *The Path of Mercy*, published in 2012.

I had the privilege of accompanying Sister Mary in a small way as she created the biography. From time to time she would send me the draft of one or two chapters which I would read and comment on. Sometimes I had a question or two, other times a small suggestion. But most of the time I just enjoyed watching the biography unfold. What made this unique was Mary's access to primary sources, her understanding of the relative value of various sources, and her willingness to pursue the smallest detail.

She created a sense of life in 19th century Ireland and of what the Church and religious life were like, which is an invaluable background in understanding the originality of Catherine's work. For two years or so she availed herself of resources relevant to Catherine's day: newspaper archives, community archives, Church records, municipal records, Catherine's own words (carefully authenticated), and more. This mass of detail was ultimately shaped into the account we have today—Catherine McAuley as a woman of her time and place whose legacy lives on across the world.

This work of dedicated scholarship may be considered Sister Mary's ultimate accomplishment. However, our gratitude to Sister Mary depends on much more than her commitment to scholarship and to theological inquiry. Most of all, we appreciate her dedication to life as a Sister of Mercy. I'll begin with some biographical details and professional and ecclesial accomplishments before highlighting her contributions to the Mercy world.

Mary Catherine, daughter of Walter B. and Ruth Barnes Sullivan, was born in Rochester, NY, on June 15, 1931. Her parents were members of Blessed Sacrament Parish in Rochester. She had four brothers: Walter, Joseph, Thomas, and James. Mary graduated from Blessed Sacrament School and Our Lady of Mercy High School, and entered the Sisters of Mercy in Rochester on September. 8, 1950. At her reception into the novitiate she was named Sister Mary Petrus, a name she later dropped in favor of her baptismal name. She professed temporary vows on August 17, 1953, followed by her final profession on August 17, 1956.

Professional Accomplishments and Honors

In 1954 Sister Mary graduated *magna cum laude* from Nazareth College in Rochester with a BA in English. For five years she taught in parochial elementary schools, everything from kindergarten to grade eight. She then taught English at Our Lady of Mercy High School for two years (1958-1960). From 1960 to 1963 she pursued graduate studies at the University of Notre Dame, earning her PhD in English in June 1964. The title of her doctoral dissertation is *The Descriptive Style of Joseph Conrad*. Other academic experiences included an NEH summer seminar at Yale University in 1974, and two experiences as a visiting scholar at Saint Edmund's College, Cambridge University, Cambridge, England, in 1976-1977 and in the summer of 1986. In 1988 she earned a Master's in Systematic Theology from the University of London.

From 1963 to 1967 Mary taught English at Our Lady of Mercy High School and (the former) Catherine McAuley College; from 1965 to 1967 she served as President of the College. Her next ministry was as assistant professor of English at Marymount College in Tarrytown, NY, for two years (1967-1969). For two summers (1969 and 1971) Mary taught at Malcolm-King Harlem Community Extension College in New York City. Subsequently she served as an educational volunteer at the Monroe County Jail in Rochester, teaching courses in literature and writing once a week (1972-1976).

From 1969 to 1976 Mary was an assistant professor of Language and Literature at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). The next year she spent as a visiting scholar at Cambridge University in England. On her return to Rochester in 1977 she became the Dean of the College of General Studies at RIT, which became the College of Liberal Arts, a position she held until 1987.

After her sabbatical at Heythrop College, the University of London (1987-1988), Mary returned to Rochester and to RIT and served as a professor of Language and Literature in the Liberal Arts college until 2002. She then became Professor Emerita and Dean Emerita. Also at RIT she was Chairperson of the Academic Senate from 1996 to 1999.

In addition to her many books and articles about Catherine McAuley, Mary published dozens of books and articles in scholarly journals. Of special interest are her works on

Teresa of Avila and on John Henry Newman.

Among the many honors Mary received are the following:

- Library assistantships and dissertation year fellowship, University of Notre Dame, 1960-1963
- National Endowment for the Humanities Summer stipend, 1974
- Election as a Danforth Associate, Danforth Foundation, 1974-1980
- Outstanding Alumna Award, Nazareth College of Rochester, May 1984
- Named an Exemplary Catholic Women, Women's Scholarship Committee, Saint Bernard's Institute, Rochester, 1991
- An RIT Eisenhart Award for Outstanding Teaching, 1996
- Nominated by RIT for the Athena Award of the Women's Council of the Greater Rochester Metro Chamber of Commerce, 1996-1997
- Mercy Higher Education Colloquium Leadership Award, 1998
- Honorary degree from Georgian Court University, New Jersey, 2009
- Honorary degree from St. Joseph's College, Standish, Maine, 2015

Contributions to the Church

In her application to Heythrop College for the sabbatical year in 1987 Mary described her various theological and ministerial endeavors, indicating that she would like "to read and study theology in some formal way leading to a Master's degree . . . in order to give some formal shape and credential to the theological knowledge I have so far acquired only informally and piece-meal as the need or opportunity arose." She added that she was not interested in studying pastoral theology as such but rather in studying systematic theology, for teaching and pastoral purposes. "I believe that in our geographical area there is a greater dearth of the latter sort of knowledge and understanding."

Over many years Mary served the Diocese of Rochester and its leaders. She worked in a volunteer capacity at the request of two successive Bishops of Rochester, Joseph L. Hogan and Matthew H. Clark. During Bishop Hogan's tenure (1969-1978) she was frequently a ghost writer of drafts for his weekly column in the *Courier-Journal*, the diocesan newspaper. She was also writer and drafter, on a confidential basis, of parts

of his quinquennial report to the Vatican in 1974, working with him and diocesan department heads to assemble the content of the report.

Under Bishop Clark's administration she assisted in several different ways. She was the chair of the Task Force on a Pastoral Letter on Women in the Church, reflecting with the Bishop for several months on the possible content. Then she was the principal drafter, on a confidential basis, of most of the first draft of the document which he subsequently wrote and published in April 1982: *The Fire in the Thornbush: A Pastoral Letter on Women in the Church*. She continued to chair the task force until December 1983 when it issued a final report and recommendations based on discussions of the pastoral letter which the task force had helped organize and facilitate in over sixty parishes of the diocese.

Subsequently (1985 and 1986) Mary served as a member of the Diocesan Task Force on Pastoral Structures and Services convened by Bishop Clark to address the future challenges of ministry in the diocese, particularly in terms of the formation, education, distribution, and financing of various kinds of designated ministers. Mary was also the principal drafter of the Bishop's public document explaining the purpose and work of the Task Force.

Mary also served on the Board of Trustees of Saint Bernard's Seminary Institute for many years, serving as its chair in 1985-87. In that role she was instrumental in the decision to move the seminary's graduate programs in theology and ministry to the site of Colgate Rochester Divinity School and to create there Saint Bernard's Institute of Theology and Ministry. On behalf of the Board she drafted the document: "Saint Bernard's Institute: A Statement of its Origin, Purposes, Plans, and Relationships."

Contributions to the World of Mercy

As noted above, Mary entered the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester in 1950. With the completion of her education she became deeply involved in theological and ministerial reflection and writing on behalf of the congregation. [These activities refer to the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester, prior to the formation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas in 1991.] She served on the elected Advisory Board to the Superior General and Council almost every year beginning in 1967, and was a

delegate to every General Chapter beginning in 1971. She was editor of their *Interim Constitutions* in 1975, and wrote numerous congregational theological documents, including ones on Person and Community (1969), Mercifulness (1975), and Simplicity of Life (1979). She gave many presentations, retreat days, workshops, and homilies in and beyond the congregation on many topics.

With the formation of the new Institute in 1991, Mary's influence continued to grow. She was elected as a delegate to the First General Chapter of the new Institute and to each subsequent Chapter except the Fourth. On the international front she was appointed a member of the Mercy International Association Archives Committee (2001-2009) and of the Mercy International Research Commission (2004-2009).

Mary's gifts were on demand all over the world. She directed twenty-seven retreats on Mercy spirituality in New Zealand, Australia, Newfoundland, England, Guyana, Panama, and the United States. She presented seminars/lectures on Catherine McAuley and Mercy Spirituality in New Zealand, Australia, Newfoundland, England, Guyana, Panama, and the United States some sixteen times. She was a member of Mercy Focus on Haiti from 2011 until her death, traveling there four times student service or immersion trips. She also served on the Development Committee writing grant applications and appeals to donors, as well as countless thank you notes.

One initiative that brought together representatives from around the world was the International Mercy Research Conference which she helped organize in November 2007. Held in Burlingame, CA, it included thirty Sisters of Mercy from twelve countries who presented papers and engaged in dialogue about key questions raised. The resulting publication, *"Fire Cast on the Earth—Kindling": Being Mercy in the Twenty-First Century* captures the riches that were shared.

Another Mercy project that Mary helped facilitate was the preparation of *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*. A small editorial committee assembled the text, using contributions of original intersessions and prayers from Sisters throughout the Institute. The Liturgy Training Publications in Chicago laid out the pages, creating the first draft. As they were ready, I sent each section to Mary who read it meticulously and sent me her questions. For the most part she noted awkward constructions and unclear idioms, always offering a suggested change which we gladly adopted.

One more Mercy project took place in Mary's final years. It had to do with the

preparation for publication of a manuscript which another Sister of Mercy had left unfinished at her death. Sister Mary Aquin O'Neill died in Baltimore in December 2016. Sometime later a colleague of hers, Wendy Hefter, notified the Sisters of Mercy of the existence of the manuscript of *Original Grace: The Mystery of Mary*. Recognizing the value of the work, a small group of Sisters of Mercy, headed by Mary, plus John R. Donahue, SJ, began preparing the work for publication. After a year or more of back and forth among the committee members, deciding what to include and what to omit, and editing where needed, it was deemed ready for publication. This is where Mary drew on her immense experience with publishing. She prepared the offering letter to a potential publisher and sent it off. When, after some months the manuscript was declined, she offered another publisher the opportunity. Over a period of a couple of years she sent it to four or five publishers. Generally, while recognizing the value of the text, they were afraid there wouldn't be a large enough sale to make money. But Mary persevered, and the fourth or fifth publisher agreed to take the manuscript. Boxes of the published books arrived at Mary's convent a few days before she died.

We can end this brief survey of Mary's life with her own words. In a short personal bio which she wrote in 2010, Mary concluded:

"All of these experiences have made me profoundly grateful to be a Sister of Mercy. They have taught me the ministerial creativity, mercifulness, selflessness, and faith-filled joyfulness of the Sisters I've met; and all of them have constantly called me to much deeper personal conversion of my own life and ministry. I wake up each morning remembering, and inspired by, the good example of their lives. Sure, Catherine sees our human failings, but she must also be so proud of the goodness she sees Christ creating throughout the Mercy world."



image: Mary C. Sullivan, RSM, with Rochester Institute of Technology student Anna Leah Bowman, a second-year electrical engineering major from Hudson, Wisconsin, who received the Mary C. Sullivan, Women's and Gender Studies Writing Award for "Communication Dynamics and the Patient Experience" (photo courtesy of The Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program at RIT)