

CATHERINE'S DREAM

(This talk took about 15/20 mins. and was delivered in the **first person**, with a few 'ad lib' comments not in the script).

Good morning everyone let me introduce myself. My name is Catherine Elizabeth McAuley. I believe you are a group of Associates of the Sisters of Mercy so I am delighted to be here with you today. You didn't expect me to be here did you?

I hope today will be enjoyable, relaxing, reflective & prayerful. I hope we will get to know each other better & become good friends.

Do you ever hear a piece of music which reminds you of a place, a person, an event or period in your life? Recently that happened to me I heard a song which brought back so many memories for me. So let me play it for you now and tell you about it.

Song: I HAVE A DREAM FROM ABBA.

This song reminded me of my Dream, you might even say my Vision. In a nutshell I used to dream of a day when I would have enough money to buy a little house and offer accommodation to a few poor girls. I dreamed of educating them and teaching those skills that would enable them to support themselves and so help them escape from the awful degrading poverty that afflicted the poor of Dublin, in the early 19th Century. I did not want to be a 'Lady Bountiful' giving 'hand-outs' that would not really change anything. No, I wanted to make a difference; I wanted to empower & enable the girls to make a better life both for themselves & their families. As time went on I realised that the only permanent way to do this was through education.

God made me wait for a very long time before my Dream became a reality.

The Abba Song says 'I believe in Angels'. I do too. They are simply God's messengers, the people He sends into our lives to guide us and tell us what he wants us to do. Unfortunately many times we do not recognise them and so we do not hear what God wants to say to us.

I believe the angels in my life were my parents, especially my father; a wonderful couple called William & Catherine Callaghan; some priests, especially my good friend Fr. Armstrong and some wonderful young women who joined me later on & enabled the Dream to become reality.

My father died when I was only five but I remember that every Sunday he gathered the poor children of the area in our garden. He first of all fed them & then taught them about Jesus & taught them their prayers. I believe that this is when the seed of my dream was sown.

My mother died when I was twenty and it was after that I experienced a little of what it was to be homeless, poor and hungry but my suffering was a drop in the ocean compared with that of the poor in the Dublin slums.

It was when I was living with relatives called Armstrong that I met William & Catherine Callaghan. They had returned to Ireland after missionary work in Africa. They were childless & invited me to live with them in Dublin and then in Coolock.

It was in Coolock where I met a lot of young Catholic servant girls from the big houses. They had no education, were untrained and received very low wages and very often harassed by the young gentlemen of the house. If they were unfortunate enough to become pregnant they were dismissed immediately.

I vowed at this time that if ever I had the money & opportunity I would devote my life to educating & training these young girls. I strongly believed then, & still do, that education is the principal way of helping women find and achieve their full potential.

I learned so much during my 20 years in Coolock. All of it I now know was preparing me for the Vocation that God had chosen for me.

Living with Mrs Callaghan, a Quaker, developed & formed my social conscience. Quakers have to share their wealth with the poor and less fortunate. In the village I met Fr. Nugent who introduced me to the poverty there, it was even worse than in Dublin. Mrs Callaghan allowed me, in fact encouraged me, to take food to the poor and I also taught the girls needlework then sold what they made to some of the more affluent ladies in Dublin. Fr. Nugent invited me to teach in the Parochial School for the poor in Middle Abbey St. Dublin, this was good experience for my future work.

It was in Coolock too where I was very blessed in being able to read the Scriptures to Mrs Callaghan every day. It was in the Scriptures that I discovered my God of Mercy, my God of Love & Tenderness; the God who loved me unconditionally and who was calling me to minister to His poor, sick & uneducated.

Can you imagine the shock I got when in 1822 Mr Callaghan died & I was told that he had left his estate & his entire fortune to me? Then I remembered he said to me one day "What would you do Kitty if you had money?" So I told him about my dream of buying a little house for the poor girls I wanted to educate and train. Now he had made it possible for my dream to become a reality.

In 1824, guided by my good friends, my Angels; Fr. Armstrong & Dr. Blake I bought a plot of land on the corner of Lower Baggot Street & set about having a house built with accommodation for a school, a House of Mercy for homeless girls & accommodation for the young women who were interested in helping me in the work I intended to do. Baggot Street was a wealthy area of the city. I wanted those who were wealthy to be aware of the needs of those who were poor & disadvantaged. I met a good deal of opposition & ridicule when I was trying to carry out my dream and this was one of those times when it happened. I thought people would be generous but when I sent letters to ask the well off for some financial support they were indignant. Someone said "Who is this upstart Miss McAuley?"

Even members of my family were not supportive and even called the house in Baggot St. 'Kitty's Folly'.

During the three years that the building was being constructed I studied teaching methods and the management of schools in Ireland and in France. At the same time along with some of my part-time helpers we visited the poor in their homes and helped in whatever way we could.

Many more talented & well educated young women came to Baggot Street anxious to join us in our work for the education of poor children & homeless girls as well as visiting & comforting the sick & the dying in their homes & hospitals.

What we were doing was quite unusual for young ladies of that time I know but it was still a very difficult & anxious time when one day I had a visit from the Archbishop of Dublin who had come specifically to urge me to consider forming a religious order. He felt that this would give permanency to the work we wanted to do.

I had never considered the idea of joining or forming a religious Order, in fact it was quite abhorrent to me so for a time I agonised about what to do. After much prayer I decided to go ahead with the Archbishop's suggestion believing that if this was God's Work it would survive but if it was all down to me it would fail. I realised finally that this was what God was asking me to do.

I discussed the whole matter with my Associates & after much prayer three of us decided we would become religious. However, we all agreed that as religious we did not want to be enclosed but remain free, as we were at present, to visit the poor & sick in homes, schools and hospitals.

On Sept. 8th 1830, Anna Marie Doyle, Elizabeth Harley and I went to the Presentation Convent, George's Hill to make a noviciate in preparation for founding our unenclosed Religious Order. I was 52 years of age & the noviciate was very difficult! I think the Novice mistress wanted to test my commitment so she was very hard on me.

On December 12th 1831 we professed our vows and returned to Baggot Street without waiting for breakfast! There was great rejoicing in Baggot Street that Day, our Foundation Day, and now we were to be known as the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, but the good people of Dublin who saw us out & about called us the WALKING NUNS.

Not only did poor children flock to our School in Baggot Street & young girls to our House of Mercy but we also welcomed many young ladies who came to join us and help with our work for the poor. I heard that some called me the 'Pied Piper of Dublin'!

For the next ten years I was inundated with requests from many bishops in Ireland, England and even further afield (Newfoundland) for me to send Sisters to minister to the needs of the poor, sick & uneducated. I was reluctant to refuse any request but there were times

when I had to send Sisters who were only just professed, along with novices & even postulants!

I could entertain you for hours about our journeys on coaches, canal barges and ships. I once said 'Hurrah for Foundations they make the old young & the young merry' but although it was a blessing to be able to respond to the needs of the poor it was also very challenging and extremely tiring at times. Remember I was an old lady almost 60 by then!!

In that time we responded to requests to minister to the poor, sick & uneducated in Tullamore, Charleville, Carlow, Cork, Limerick and more.

I made two visits to England, the only country outside Ireland where I established Foundations; Bermondsey, London in 1839 & Handsworth, Birmingham in 1841. I always went with the Sisters to make a new Foundation & stayed for one month.

That dream of having a little house had indeed come true but now there were many little houses, and some not so little, in 12 towns in Ireland & 2 in England. In most Foundations conditions were difficult, both materially & financially. But as soon as was possible the Sisters set about establishing schools for the children of the poor; paying schools, vocational schools and in most areas a House of Mercy, where young girls were taught the skills that would equip them for gainful employment, usually in the big houses of the rich.

I was richly blessed & thank God for the many dedicated, talented, courageous & self-sacrificing young women who helped that dream of mine to become reality; not only when I was with them but when they were left on their own to struggle with the many problems of a new Foundation.

PART 2

At the end of this talk Catherine said she could not tell us anymore about her dream. She handed over to an Associate, Eileen Malone, who described how Catherine's dream lives on with Sisters, Associates & co-workers ministering to the needs of the young, & not so young, in 46 Countries of the World. This talk was illustrated by slides created in Powerpoint.

Slides 6 to 10 recalled a few facts of interest about Catherine's two foundations in Bermondsey & Handsworth. Because the talk was delivered in Newcastle upon Tyne/North Shields the speaker thought it appropriate to give a few facts about the Foundation in 1855 in Newcastle by Sr. Ligouri Gibson,(Fanny Gibson), a Sister who had made her Noviciate & Profession in Baggot Street just before Catherine's death.

After the details of these 3 Foundations a few minutes were spent in

Reflection, Prayer & Thanksgiving.

Recalling that most Convents of Mercy in England & Wales originate from Catherine's two Foundations let us pause & give thanks:

- Let us thank God for Catherine McAuley and her dedication to the Poor, sick & uneducated.
- Let us thank Catherine for founding the Sisters of Mercy and coming to England in person to make two Foundations; in Bermondsey & Birmingham.
- Let us thank God now for all those Sisters of Mercy who have touched our lives.
- Let us thank God for those Sisters, Associates & Co-workers who continue to touch lives and minister to the needs of the 21st Century.
- Make your own prayer of thanksgiving

The talk continued with the words of Sr. Francis Warde; "Her Vision is driving me on."

Slide 13 shows a World Map of the 46 Countries where Sisters & Associates are ministering.

Three (3) areas in AFRICA were used to illustrate Mercy at work ministering to the needs of children and young women, with Sisters using modern methods & technology.

The areas chosen were:

- **SOUTHERN SUDAN**
- **KENYA – KIPTERE**
- **SOUTH AFRICA – ADDO (Video clip with sound in Ppt)**

Reference was then made to the Pope's message to the Young during his visit in 2010

'HEART SPEAKS TO HEART'

God spoke to Catherine's Heart & she responded.

In turn she has spoken to the heart of the young calling some to commit themselves as Youth Mercy Associates (YMA)

Details and slides about our YMA groups both here & abroad.

THE TALK CONCLUDED WITH;

THE DVD: THE CIRCLE OF MERCY IN THANKSGIVING FOR 180 YEARS OF MERCY.

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