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INTERVIEW WITH SISTER KATHLEEN DUNNE, RSM Superior General of the Mercy Sisters of Auburn, California

The *Catholic Herald* staff interviewed Sister Kathleen Dunne, RSM, in December 1981
About the ministry of the Mercy Sisters in today's Church and the relevance of
Catherine McAuley's life for the modern church. The interview follows below.



Sister Kathleen Dunne, RSM

Where do you envision the mission of the Sisters of Mercy leading you in the future?

Your question is a challenging one, and I will attempt to answer it. Looking into the future I envision the mission of the Sisters of Mercy being shaped by the needs of people calling out to us for mercy – the aged, lonely, alienated, the poor, homeless, the dying. The voiceless who have ceased to cry because no one hears them. The young who are desperately searching for meaningful relationships, and the single parents, struggling to keep their homes and care for their children.

These pressing needs of the human heart disturb us today as Sisters of Mercy. We are struggling to find ways to respond to these crying needs.

Our own attitudes are being tested, our own security, our own powerlessness. We find ourselves uneasy and confused by the bewildering changes in society, yet we want to bring our hearts and our resources to relieve human misery.



Photo by John E Boll

Statue of Mercy Sister Mary Baptist Russell, Mercy Convent, Auburn

We envision a future where we will embrace others at centers of wealth, power, and influence to share in our efforts; as Sister Joanna Regan has put Catherine McAuley's vision:

*To connect the rich to the poor,
the healthy to the sick,
the educated and skilled to the uneducated,
the influential to those of no consequence,
the powerful to the weak to do the work of God on earth. (Tender Courage)*

Our foundress had a courageous contagious concern for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the poor, sick and uneducated. She broke through the impossibilities of her time and animated many to walk with her.

As we face our future, I believe we must be women of great courage, radical love, steeped and rooted in a faith community – nourished by a life of prayer expressed in loving service, yet on the move as vigilant pilgrims.

Do you envision the Sisters of Mercy moving out of traditional ministries, i.e., teaching and nursing?

This question is often asked of us today. In fact, we have asked ourselves the same question and we will continue to do so.



Photo from the Sacramento Diocesan Archives

Mater Misericordiae Hospital, Sacramento 1909



Photo by John E Boll

Mercy Hospital, 40th and J Streets, as it is in 2017

I do not envision the Sisters of Mercy moving out of traditional ministries. I do see us restructuring the shape, broadening the base of our present ministries, and discovering new ways to meet community needs.

This opportunity provides a way for me to share a major area of restructuring. Since the call of Vatican II for renewal and adaptation, the Sisters of Mercy have been involved in personal and congregational renewal efforts.

This renewal process and a number of other factors have led to the organizational renewal of our institutions. Our hospitals have become highly sophisticated enterprises. They are heavily regulated, yet inadequately reimbursed by the government – and this is a definite trend for the future.

We have concern over the possible erosion of the religious mission of the hospitals, as well as a conviction that the church has an important continuing role in health care. These are some factors which led to a study last fall by Colarelli and Associates, Inc., of St Louis, Missouri, which assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the Mercy Hospitals and indicated how we could be structured more effectively for the 1980s.



Photo by John E Boll

Mercy Sisters Convent, Auburn

From this study evolved a system in which Mercy Health Care Organization (MHCO) is a holding company for the four hospital corporations. It provides “system service” for all its hospitals in seven areas: mission and philosophy, professional and health care services, finances, planning, human relations, and management information services.

The role of the system will be to reinforce the mission of the Sisters of Mercy of Auburn, to develop strategic planning, to set standards and to monitor performance in key areas.

We recognized that there was need to reconcile the sometimes conflicting demands of our religious mission and those of our complex hospital operations. Moreover, we need to use the sisters more effectively to influence the system and to plan for the future.

The vast field of education, a traditional ministry of the Sisters of Mercy, we are studying with a view to new ways of maximizing our own personnel and financial resources to meet present and future needs of this important ministry. Traditional structures may have to give way to new ones, but the need for Catholic education will always remain with us.

Why is Catherine McAuley relevant for today?

I'm glad you asked this important question! Our foundress was a woman moved by human misery. She gave no less than her life to relieve it. She never intended to found a religious order, and I quote her own words: "All I wanted was to serve the poor since that seemed to be what God expected of me."



Photo by John E Boll

Mercy McMahan Terrace Senior Center, Sacramento

The secret of her success lay in the spiritual orientation of her work and in the fact that she was open to new ideas, ready to adapt and assimilate, willing to learn from the experience of older contemporaries and anxious to share that experience with others.

Her educational ideal was comprehensive, unrestricted by time or place or style, and while she had not all the answers to the still-festering needs of the inner city, she pointed out a new way – a way that led to Mercy Schools and colleges in each of the world's continents.

I see Catherine McAuley as a woman for all times, as relevant today as she was 150 years ago. She was open and receptive to all; she valued the primacy of human relations, had a lively and mischievous sense of humor and was an instrument of peace, reconciliation and ecumenism in a bigoted and intolerant age.



Photo by John E Boll

Fall Colors, Mercy Convent Grounds, Auburn

Charity, she would conclude, “must be something cordial – straight from the heart, something that refreshes, enlivens, invigorates.” A person like Catherine McAuley will be relevant in every age for as Ruskin points out, “Ever noble life leaves the fiber of it in the work of the world.” The fiber of Catherine McAuley’s life was a congregation which touches every colony and every continent across the globe. And in that congregation, there lingers the memory of this woman who did not live to be aged, whose span of religious life was enclosed in a single decade, yet whose vision proved perennial. I quote Catherine: “The most effectual means of rendering ourselves useful to our neighbors is to give an example of holiness of life.”

What about vocations today?

This is a hard question and one which concerns us deeply today, for, as you know, the harvest is plenty and the laborers are few.

Is this the age of the laity in which we are challenged to open up our hearts, our ministries to lay ministers? Vatican II called all of us people of God to an open stance to the world. Have we discovered what this call means? I feel it means greater collaboration with all people, and we are painfully learning how to do it.

Secondly, I see an ever increasing growth in vocations in some Third World countries, the places where the persecution of the Church is experienced.

We are in a culture of consumerism. I feel strongly about our lifestyle in such a society. I think we are being called to live more radical lives of faith, simplicity, and poverty. One of our challenges is to create a spirit in our communities so that people can approach the essential. Peace and joy are two of the essential aspects which the young will look for in any congregation, home, or community. They want to know if people really love one another, if they are really disciples of Jesus.

Is there a consistent thread in the works of mercy since Catherine McAuley started the order 150 years ago?

I must answer with a resounding yes! For me the consistent thread is the Latin word **Misericordiae** – mercy, loving kindness and fidelity. Wherever the Sisters of Mercy are called, this common thread of mercy continues to be expressed in service of the poor, the sick and the uneducated.

Sister Kathleen Dunne, RSM, Superior General of the Mercy Sisters of Auburn, was born on August 30, 1936 in Mountrath, County Laois, Ireland. She died on July 27, 2005 at the Auburn Mercy Convent. After her Funeral Mass, her body was interred at Calvary Cemetery, Sacramento, in the Mercy Sisters' section.

May Sister Kathleen abide in God's Love and Mercy

