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## McAuley

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congeniality exists right at the Rochester Sisters of Mercy motherhouse in Brighton. A small store on the first floor, named after Sister McAuley, is simply known as Kate's Tea and Gift Shop.

Sister Sullivan, a professor of language and literature at Rochester Institute of Technology, is one of the world's leading authorities on Sister McAuley. This past summer, she released a book titled *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*. It is published by the University of Notre Dame Press.

The 420-page text examines the spirit of Sister McAuley as she launched numerous social-justice efforts in Dublin — works that led to the formation of the Sisters of Mercy.

Included in Sister Sullivan's book are excerpts from letters written by Sister McAuley, as well as documents from several Sisters of Mercy who ministered alongside her. Much of Sister Sullivan's data was obtained from four overseas trips taken between 1988 and 1994, during which she closely examined a number of archives in Ireland and England.

Despite the complexity of producing this book, Sister Sullivan said the effort was well worth it.

"We invest ourselves in a serious research project only when we really care about the subject matter. Catherine McAuley is, simply, a very interesting person," Sister Sullivan stated.

Born in 1778, Sister McAuley suffered early in life the loss of her father, who died in 1783, and watched as her mother dissipated the family's wealth before dying in 1798. The children were forced to live with relatives, and through this experience young Catherine encountered poverty firsthand. She was eventually taken into the home of some other distant relatives, with whom she remained for more than 20 years. While living with this family, she began to reach out to the poor.

In 1822, she acquired a sizable sum of money through an inheritance from the family with whom she lived — the equivalent of more than \$1.5 million in today's U.S. currency. This windfall brought her several marriage proposals, but Sister McAuley rejected them all so she could fully immerse herself into working with the poor.

She used her financial resources to open the House of Mercy on Baggot Street in 1828. The facility provided a school for poor girls, and a shelter and training center for homeless girls and women.

Sister McAuley recruited other women to help her serve those in need. Their repeated visits to slums and hospitals actually drew criticism from both the clerical and lay communities, Sister Sullivan noted, since it was highly unusual for women of that era to undertake such extensive efforts.

"(Sister McAuley) was very polite and had great respect for the clergy, but didn't have the kind of laid-back notion that she shouldn't do something until she was told to," Sister Sullivan said.

Her priorities were made clear in the very opening paragraph of the Rules and Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy. Sister McAuley acknowledged her mission as "peculiarly characteristic... that is, a most serious application to the instruction of poor Girls, Visitation of the Sick, and protection of distressed women of good character."

Sister McAuley initially balked at forming a religious order, knowing the women would be expected to cloister and remain on the grounds of a convent.

"She realized that the poor were in the streets," Sister Whitley said.

However, by 1830, Archbishop Daniel Murray of Dublin had instructed Sister McAuley to either form a religious order, or abandon her work entirely. Sister



This portrait of Sister McAuley, the founder of the Sisters of Mercy, hangs in the entrance way to the Chapel of the Mercy Motherhouse, 1437 Blossom Road, Rochester. The artist is Bernice Roberts from Steiner Studios.

McAuley opted to establish an order — but on her terms. The Sisters of Mercy were founded on Dec. 12, 1831, becoming the first non-cloistered order of women in Roman Catholic Church history.

For this congregation, Sister McAuley created a flexible *Rule* free from some of the formalism to which other congregations were subject. "We must not make too many laws," she observed pragmatically. "If we pull the strings too tight, they will break."

Sister McAuley's ministry was also marked by an uncanny ability to serve the underprivileged while also convincing well-to-do community members to support her causes.

"She knew how to mingle with both the rich and the poor," Sister Whitley said.

The Sisters of Mercy continued their ministry in the face of poverty and famine which permeated Ireland in the 1830s and 1840s. In addition, many early Sisters of Mercy died at young ages from cholera and typhoid epidemics.

However, the optimism and energy that Sister McAuley exuded enabled the Sisters of Mercy to push forward.

"They had that Irish spirit of joy, fun and happiness," Sister Whitley stated. "They had a combination of spirituality and practicality. They were alive."

These upbeat qualities were specified by Sister McAuley in the order's Rules and Constitutions.

"(Sisters of Mercy) shall at all times appear with those cheerful yet deserved manners which characterize religious modesty... the countenance shall be ever serene and cheerful," Sister McAuley specified.

Sister McAuley died of tuberculosis, at the age of 63, at the Baggot Street residence in 1841. According to Sister Sullivan's book, the ever-hospitable nature of Sister McAuley was evident even in her final hours. On her deathbed, she in-

structed that her sisters "should get a good cup of tea... when I am gone."

By the time she died, Sister McAuley had established 14 foundations in Ireland and England. Extensive international growth occurred over the next 15 years as the Sisters of Mercy spread to North America, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand, Scotland and South America.

The order first arrived in the United States in 1843. Today, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas include approximately 6,400 sisters performing ministry in the United States as well as 21 other countries in North and South America.

In 1857, the Sisters of Mercy took root in Rochester. This regional community now total 217 members serving in schools, hospitals and other ministries throughout the diocese.

Sister Sullivan noted that attention to Sister McAuley rose sharply among Rochester Sisters of Mercy in the years following the Second Vatican Council.

She explained that Vatican II called for religious bodies to reflect upon their origins.

The regional community's post-Vatican II efforts have also been marked by an increase in outreach programs.

"In the late 1960s and the 1970s, we expanded into many areas. Our ministries are rather extensive," Sister Kathy Milliken, RSM, remarked. She is currently compiling an updated history of the Rochester Sisters of Mercy with assistance from Sister Jane Hasbrouck, RSM.

Some examples of Mercy-supported efforts in Rochester are Melita House, a facility for unwed mothers; the House of Mercy, which provides meals for inner-city residents; and Catherine McAuley Housing Inc., a service for single mothers and their children who are attempting to get off public assistance.

In Elmira, the Sisters of Mercy staff the Mercy Care Center, which provides day care for low-income families in Elmira. They also support rural ministry outreach in Tioga and Livingston counties.

Sister Whitley noted a link between these ministries and Sister McAuley's emphasis on reaching out to the needy.

"Her service was to the sick, the poor and the uneducated," Sister Whitley said. "Today it would be AIDS ministries, helping people with all kinds of addictions, and visits to the elderly."

Sister McAuley's enduring influence is evident in many other forms. In 1990, for instance, Pope John Paul II accorded Sister McAuley the title of venerable. She is the first Irish woman ever to achieve this position, the first major step toward sainthood.

Two years ago, a five-pound banknote bearing Sister McAuley's image was put into circulation by Central Bank of Ireland.

Meanwhile, the original House of Mercy in Dublin is now known as the Mercy International Centre. Rededicated in 1994, it attracts visitors from all over the world who come for spiritual renewal and to learn about the Sisters of Mercy history.

The Mercy tradition extends beyond the Sisters of Mercy, Sisters Milliken and Hasbrouck pointed out. They noted that the regional community's Associates Program — a group of lay men and women — now numbers nearly 100 members. Participants support the Sisters of Mercy through prayer and volunteer time with the various Mercy ministries.

This input from the laity, Sister Milliken said, is a prime example of how Sister McAuley's spirit will be "lived out into the next century."

"You will find many men and women who feel at home with her," Sister Sullivan added. "You feel like you can get to know her — and that she will like you."

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EDITORS' NOTE: Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy is on sale at Kate's Tea and Gift Shop, in the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse at 1437 Blossom Road, Rochester. Call 716/654-5320 for details.

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