

Positio super Virtutibus

Ven. Mother Catherine McAuley, RSM
Cholera, 1832

In the spring of 1832 an outbreak of Asiatic Cholera, which for some time had been sweeping across Europe, reached Ireland. The first four cases were confirmed in Belfast on 18 March. Eleven days later the Dublin Evening Post reported that the plague had reached Dublin, claiming four fatalities from the first five victims. Existing social conditions enhanced the spread of the disease, medical services were inadequate and medical officers enjoyed little if any credibility. They were imputed with killing rather than curing their patients; even with burying them before they were actually dead. Within three weeks of the outbreak, cholera had already claimed 161 deaths. Panic was widespread, and in order to meet the emergency, the Board of Health, following recommendations from Dublin Castle on 12 April, urged that small hospitals be set up in every parish. Accordingly the Grangegorman Penitentiary in north Dublin was converted into a general hospital and was entrusted to Mother Mary Aikenhead and her Sisters of Charity. A depot in Townsend Street was similarly converted for south Dublin and was presented to Mother Catherine on 25 April. The request for Sisters came as Sister M. Elizabeth Harley, one of the three newly Professed, lay dying. 'Putting aside her own personal sorrow, Catherine immediately wrote to the archbishop for permission to take up the work.'

It should be remembered that Sister M. Elizabeth Harley's constitution was undermined during her novitiate the year before. Shortly after her return to Baggot Street symptoms of rapid consumption became apparent; she died on Wednesday of Easter Week. With cholera stalking the streets and preparations for a Charity Bazaar in their final stages, Mother Catherine was summoned from the death bed to be lectured by a very angry lady 'on the impropriety, the utter sinfulness of this way of raising money for the poor.' The diatribe lasted for about an hour, during which Mother Catherine listened courteously, giving no impression that there was any matter of moment then claiming her presence. Her patience was rewarded by a donation of £15 for the poor from the now mollified caller.

Mother Catherine returned to Sister M. Elizabeth and found her still reciting the aspiration, 'Jesus, Mary, Joseph, assist me in my last agony', which Mother Catherine had recommended to her. She died in a matter of hours. Mother Catherine's anguish was unfathomable; because she had anchored great hopes for the future of this twenty-four-year-old Sister. Yet, by example, she taught her grief-stricken community that this death was by God's appointment. Instead of the usual grace before meals at suppers, she intoned the verse of the triumphant Easter antiphon, This is the day the Lord hath made: let us rejoice and be glad therein. Sister M. Elizabeth Harley, the first professed member of the congregation, joined her two former companions in the vaults of St. Teresa's Church, Clarendon Street.

On 26 April Archbishop Murray approved of the involvement of the Sisters of Mercy in the cholera depot in Townsend Street. He advised the Sisters to take all possible precaution and over and above their nursing activities to endeavour to win the confidence of the sufferers and prepare them to face death calmly. His caveat on not arousing Protestant prejudices indicates a lingering intolerance of Catholicism notwithstanding the Emancipation Act of 1829. His Grace's recommendation on necessary precaution was, according to Georgina Moore, 'literally obeyed for a week or two when it was found to be too troublesome. We also first changed our habits and washed them in vinegar. We then got accustomed.'

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At the time of its opening the Townsend Street Depot was equipped for fifty patients but it had to be almost immediately enlarged. Mother Catherine streamlined her Mercy staff in order to provide a rota of Sisters for the depot. She arranged that relays of four Sisters would be relieved every three or four hours from eight in the morning till nine in the evening. She herself remained at the depot all day, 'praying with the dying, inspiring them to sentiments of contrition for their sins, suggesting acts of resignation, faith, hope and confidence, and elevating their hearts to God by charity. Her dedication to the plague-stricken victims of the cholera so transcended human frailty that no fear of contagion deterred or detained her from their bedsides -- even in face of an innate fear of death which she suffered since her mother had died in an agony of fear and remorse. In 1832 Mother Catherine moved through the fetid wards of the cholera depot with the equilibrium of one conscious of a mission to fulfil and with an energy commensurate with that equilibrium. She forbade burials until she had satisfied herself by personal investigation that life in each case was really extinct. This psychological service was an integral factor in helping to eliminate prevailing fears and misconceptions for which the state services had no remedy. Thanks to the concern of Mother Catherine and her companions, a docility came upon the sufferers which made treatment easier for the medical authorities, for the patients themselves and for the Walking Nuns, as the Sisters of Charity and Mercy were now affectionately termed.

Doctor Hart, chief physician in Townsend Street Depot, attributed the low death rate there (30%) as compared with the high percentage elsewhere to the ministrations of Mother Catherine and her Sisters. Praying Nuns they were. Kneeling Nuns they became since often too busy to rise, they moved from cot to cot for long intervals on their knees. Unfortunately, because of the many converts from among the 3,700 patients treated over a period of almost seven months, complaints of proselytism were lodged at Dublin Castle against them. All such reports were quashed on the testimony of Doctor Hart that the Sisters proved invaluable in the hospital where, among other services, 'they kept eight nurses in constant presence—a thing not easy to do.'

One evening Mother Catherine brought home to Baggot Street a new-born infant whose mother had died in Townsend Street. She had a cot for this infant placed in her own cell, but by morning she decided that the child needed permanent care, so she placed her with a foster-mother. Mother Catherine's act of Mercy in this instance reflects **her spontaneous response in love to a perceived need**.

By June the fever was under control. The Grangegorman Hospital was closed on the 15th, but by request of the authorities, the Sisters of Mercy remained in the Townsend Street Depot until shortly before Christmas. A watchful Providence seemed to guard the Sisters in their charity. None of them contracted cholera in spite of fatigue which was described as 'terrible' and the fact that Archbishop Murray's recommendations on guarding against infection were not heeded after the first two weeks. In later years Mother Catherine often re-lived the cholera scene by recalling memories of 'Sisters returning shortly after nine o'clock, loosening their cinctures on the stairs, and stopping, overcome with sleep.'

Sister M. Clare Moore who was one of the most efficient helpers in the cholera depot, was later to use her experience in the military hospitals of the Crimea; and while Mother

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Catherine's wish to have a hospital administered by her own Sisters was not realised during her lifetime, the nursing reputation of her Sisters was early established. Ireland's first Mercy Hospital was opened in Cork on 17 March 1857. Ten years earlier, M Francis X. Warde had opened the world's first Mercy Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Sister M. Anne Doyle was the only Sister to be classed as a casualty of the cholera epidemic. She developed a severe swelling in her knees from which she was with considerable difficulty eventually cured. Mother Catherine celebrated Sister M. Anne's convalescence in a poem which reveals something of the light-hearted spirit, the joie de vivre which she shared with Saint Augustine and Saint Philip Neri, and which frequently broke through her earnest and determined manner. (v.doc. 6, inf).

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