Proclamation
150th Anniversary of the Sisters of Mercy in Philadelphia

Sisters and Brothers,
150 years ago,
with the seeds of God’s Promise as fire in their hearts,
Mother Mary Francis Xavier Warde, Sister Mary Patricia Joseph Waldron
3 professed choir sisters, 2 professed lay sisters and 4 novices
journeyed from Manchester New Hampshire to Assumption Church, Philadelphia…
The Sisters of Mercy took root in the fertile soil of Philadelphia. And so we sing…

For 150 years,
the sisters have brought their hearts to misery
from Philadelphia and to points both near and as far flung as Peru and India…
casting the fire of mercy in places of poverty, sickness and ignorance.
They have served in prisons and schools, hospitals and parishes, shelters and refugee centers.
They have offered their simplicity, their tenderness, their hard work and their voice for justice.
They have been immeasurably enriched by the gift of those who are poor
Through the providence of God, the presence of Mercy has borne fruit with God’s people.
And so we sing…

For 150 years,
women have come to this community…
animated by the Gospel, and by Catherine McAuley’s passion for the poor.
They have entrusted to one another their thirst for intimacy with God.
They have brought gifts of prayer and spirituality, intellect and music, science and art,
They have poured themselves out in simple delight and patient suffering.
    and cherished the union and charity that is our most prized legacy.
Through the grace of God, the Sisters of Mercy knew the mystery of growth and diminishment,
    and trust in a future full of hope. And so we sing…
For 150 years, our families have inspired and nurtured the precious call to religious life…
Women have walked with us for a while and graced us immeasurably…
Associates, Volunteers, and Companions in mercy have embraced the vision of Mercy, and poured their lives into its service…
and countless women and men have supported this community with the gift of their love and friendship.
Their witness of compassion, generosity and commitment has taught us to be more merciful.
Through the faith of God’s people, the sisters of Mercy have been sustained, and challenged to deeper conversion, And so we sing…

Therefore,
as we stand at the threshold of newness,
we celebrate the faithfulness of God
Who has called us to the wonder and joy of mercy,
the principal path marked out by Jesus for those who wish to follow Him.
We are filled with thanksgiving for this faithfulness,
and for each sister who has listened deeply to this precious call.

Now, once again,
God is speaking to the heart of our community,
calling us to contemplate the presence of the Holy in ourselves, in one another, and in our world…
to discover anew the seeds of God’s promise as fire in our hearts…
to let the fire surge in us with new energy,
and to cast it with more lively abandonment to God’s Providence.

Therefore,
as we begin the 150th anniversary of our foundation,
we proclaim;

Let this be a year of jubilee of joy and thanksgiving!
A jubilee of trust and openness…
A jubilee of justice and forgiveness…
A jubilee of grace and recommitment.

This is the day God has made.
Let us rejoice and be glad! Let us sing!
The echoes of civil strife had for five months been molesting the peace of the City of Brotherly Love when Mother Patricia Waldron and the first Sisters of Mercy set foot on its cobbled streets. It was Thursday; August 22, 1861, and tradition has it that the intense heat which rose from Philadelphia’s highways added much to the discomfort of the eleven pioneers. Nor was their peace enhanced by the lorries and horse-drawn trolleys that lumbered noisily over the cobblestones, shattering the quiet of their none-too-attractive dwelling… No allusion to discomfort found its way into the journals of that early community. Tales of their hardships came from kind neighbors and friends, who observed their suffering and went charitably to its relief.

As they entered the house numbered 1135 Spring Garden Street, there was little to indicate that they were about to hang aloft a shield whose protecting influence was to reach across the America(s) and under whose shield the natives of far-off India would one day know healing. Probably very few noticed the group of dark-clad figures wearing widows’ bonnets and cloaks.

They were arriving from Manchester, New Hampshire, to open the First house of the Sisters of Mercy in the city of William Penn. They had come at the invitation of James Frederick Wood, Bishop of Philadelphia. .. Conducting the group was the intrepid figure, Mother Frances Warde, who had already to her credit a network of schools, hospitals, and orphanages stretching north, east and west from her original convent in Pittsburgh... Within ten days of their arrival they opened a day school, a night school and an academy, which is no small tribute to the zeal and efficiency of Mother Patricia Waldron, first Superior of the Philadelphia Sisters of Mercy.
INTERCESSIONS

Presider

_Animated by the Gospel and Catherine McAuley’s passion for the poor, we hold one another in the light of Mercy’s flame. May the living word we have shared these 150 years dance the joy of God’s wonderful promise to a weeping world._

Reader 1

One thing is remarkable, that no breach of charity ever occurred amongst us. The sun, I believe, never went down on our anger.
_from a letter of Catherine McAuley to Mary Elizabeth Moore, 1839_

Reader 2

_As Mercy pours newness and compassion on earth each faithful dawn, may our legacy of union and charity heal creation’s darkness, borne in our own hearts. In silence, we pray_

Reader 1

Oh! Blessed be God! You are recovering and will be with us soon… I will be good every day that I may welcome you, looking active and joyful.
_Patricia Joseph Waldron to Mother Mary Hildegarde, who was seriously ill…1910_

Reader 2

_As Mercy prizes tenderness in all things, may the affection, compassion and delight we find in one another open our embrace to those in our day judged unacceptable, unwelcome, undesirable …. We sing…_

Reader 1

May the Cross of Christ be about us! O good Cross, that makes us rejoice in the holy Will of God
_From the retreat journal of Frances Warde, 1883_

Reader 2

_As the institute was founded on Calvary, there to serve a crucified redeemer, may the mystery of suffering we share break us open to the wounds of our world. In silence, we pray…_
Reader 1

Yes, Sisters, we are going to open our windows and let in the fresh air and sunshine of God’s grace. We shall go all the way with the church.
Mother Mary Bernard Graham’s address at the Local Superiors’ workshop 1966

Reader 2

As we call ourselves to continual conversion in our lifestyle and ministries… may the Church we love also share the birth cry of new life. We sing…

Reader 1

Without faith and prayer, we may live together, serve together, but we will not be a truly religious community.
Sister Elizabeth Carroll’s words at the Corporate Reflection Gathering, 1977

Reader 2

As the Mystery we contemplate together allures us ever deeper into God’s thirst, may we grow in the integrity of faithful witness to that thirst. In silence, we pray…

Reader 1

All of us remember the call…our own special call to Mercy…We were moved to the depths of our being by the call to identify with this quality of God’s love that is above all God’s works.
Sister Mary Joan’s reflection on the occasion of the Sesquicentennial, 1981

Reader 2

As we revel in our call to Mercy, and in our Associates, Companions, Volunteers and those who walked with us for a while, may the joy of our hearts offer a vibrant invitation to all who seek a home in Mercy. We sing…
Reader 1

If just once, we sense by change of facial expression, by tone of voice, by clasp of hands, that even one person has come to find Christ within us…how great will be our joy.  
Sister Rita Powell’s reflection on ministry to the community, Mercy day, 1988

Reader 2

As we have been so richly graced by those who are poor these 150 years, may our families, friends, colleagues and benefactors be abundantly blessed in our gratitude. In silence, we pray.

Reader 1

At one level, what summons us here… is our desire to “fan into flame the gift of God”…. It is our willingness to wrestle with the unfolding mystery of God in our lives as Jacob did…and to name the place of our struggle as holy.  
Remarks of Sister Christine McCann at the Summer Convocation, 2009

Reader 2

As we reverence the holiness of our places of struggle, questioning and surrender today, may the fire of Mercy blaze more ardently from our midst. We sing…

Presider introduces the Our Father……..
150th Anniversary Reflection
August 22, 2010

“One hundred and fifty years ago, with the seed of God’s promise as fire in their hearts, the Sisters of Mercy took root in the fertile (and I must add) merciful soil of Philadelphia.” (150th Opening Proclamation)

Someone once said that the most powerful image of memory is a tree. A tree’s memory often reaches back to a time long before we were born, sometimes even to prior centuries, each ring inside the tree reverently archiving the years. Recently Sister Marie Noel, who oversees the care of this house and these grounds, mentioned to me that one of the oldest trees on this property, a huge old oak tree, is in trouble and may not live through this next year. The memory of this tree dates back to the 1700s! Long before the Sisters of Mercy took up residence on these grounds in 1884, long before Patricia Waldron and the founding sisters arrived in Philadelphia in 1861, even before Catherine McAuley founded the Sisters of Mercy in 1831, that tree has been standing sentry on these grounds, its great memory archiving the years in the texture of its timber.

One night after work I went to seek out this tree and I spent some time sitting under it feeling a great sense of grief and loss. The next morning I did some research on oak trees only to discover (to my great embarrassment) that I had been sitting under a beech tree in the front of the house! The oak tree is in the back of the house, just on the periphery of our community cemetery. It’s a massive tree, taller than this building, with a trunk so wide it would take three or four people standing with their hands joined to encircle it. As I looked in awe at this incredible tree I thought of all the funerals that have passed under its branches. I thought about all the laughter and tears it has heard coming from what used to be the postulants and novices gardens out back there. I thought about the lovely scents it must have experienced wafting up from Mother Evarista’s precious rose garden.

In my research I discovered that in Celtic mythology the oak tree is believed to be a gateway between worlds. It is thought to represent what the Irish call the “thin space” where there’s no separation between heaven and earth, between time and eternity. It’s that space where past, present and future are all NOW. The oak tree was where the Celtic people went to seek wisdom from their ancestors, to contact the past in order to better understand the present. And so, I thought as a way of reverencing this wonderful tree whose life has been so intertwined with ours through the years we might step within its “thin space” to see what wisdom we can glean from our past.

As we open the archives of the memory of this tree, we begin to hear names swirling about us, the names of Bishop Kenrick, Archbishop Wood, Cardinal Dougherty, Archbishop Prendergast, Bishop O’Hara, Archbishop Ryan, Bishop McDevitt and we know them not only as the names of Catholic high schools in the Philadelphia Archdiocese, but as the names of living, breathing contemporaries of Mother Patricia Waldron. These were men of the Church whose passion for the gospel and for the immigrant community invited the Sisters of Mercy to come and share in their ministry. Men without whose support and encouragement Mercy would never have taken root in Philadelphia.

In this “thin space” we hear more names. This time it’s the names of generous benefactors of the community past and present, women and men who helped us keep the vision of mercy alive through the years and whose merciful hearts taught us to be more merciful. We listen as the names of Connelly, Drexel, Trainor and McShane blend with the names of our early benefactors, the names of Miss McGrath and Miss McSorley who saw the suffering of the Sisters and brought them their meager weekly salaries; Mrs. Sweeney who literally kept the sisters alive when they moved from Assumption Convent
to the basement of St. Malachy’s school; and Father Carter who shocked and delighted Patricia Waldron by assuming the $10,000 mortgage on the properties at Broad and Columbia. These truly were “kind neighbors and friends, who observed the suffering of the sisters and went charitably to its relief.” (Kathleen Healy)

And in this “thin space” as the lines between the 19th and the 21st centuries blur we find ourselves in an environment in our country and church that is not all that unfamiliar. We see a country at war, a country deeply polarized by political ideologies; a country where religious bigotry is rampant; a country steeped in racism and violence; a country where those who are poor, especially women and children are left to their own devices; a country where women seek fullness of life and equality both in Church and in society. And in the Church, we see there is tension between the vision of Church officials and the vision of the Institute. Frances Warde had one idea of who should be in charge and the Church officials had another. And yet, it is a time when human limitations (might we even say short-sightedness and power struggles) provide fertile ground for the Spirit of God to bring about growth and new life in amazing and unexpected ways.

And finally, as we grow more comfortable in this “thin space” we see that it was a very uncomfortable time for our early sisters. At times the difficulties they faced seemed insurmountable. We hear them say over and over “the very life of the Institute is threatened to be curtailed”. It truly was a time of “crucified love” (Margaret Farley, RSM). The needs were enormous and requests for new works kept pouring in but their numbers were thin. So in 1868 Patricia Waldron went back to Ireland to seek more postulants. Can you imagine how that ad might have read? Wanted: Women to face insurmountable difficulties with no pay and horrible living conditions! Believe it or not, she returned with eight women. However, only one persevered and in 1875 Sister Mary Madeline, the Mistress of Novices, was relieved of her duties because there were no novices! The future was very uncertain for our early founders but they didn’t flinch! They didn’t complain (at least I couldn’t find one complaint and I searched high and wide). They cast themselves with unlimited confidence into the arms of God’s loving providence and in the arms of one another and trusted that this was God’s work and God would do what was necessary to keep it alive.

As we stand in this “thin space” and gaze at these courageous women seeking their wisdom for our time, I believe they are gazing back at us asking us, begging us not to romanticize or canonize them because when we do that we let ourselves off the hook! I believe they are telling us that “what God does first and most faithfully is to trust each of us with our moment in history” (Walter Bruggemann). That was their moment and this is ours. They were ordinary women who did extraordinary things and all they did was meet the grace God was giving them: the grace of revolutionary faith, outrageous hope, unwavering trust and above all, passionate love for God and for God’s vision of mercy for all.

We gather here tonight, in the shadow of this weary old oak tree, because the seeds of the mighty oak we call MERCY have been planted in our hearts – sisters, associates, companions, former members, Mercy Volunteer Corps members, co-workers, friends, family. We gather here tonight to mark the beginning of a year-long celebration of jubilee. However, we will be seriously remiss if at the end of this year we have only celebrated and reverenced who we were and what has been done and not reverenced who we are and who we are called to be and the grace God is offering each of us at this moment in our history.

We gather here tonight in the “thin space” of this Eucharistic chapel the place which has marked so many transformative moments in our lives: entrance, first profession, final profession, jubilees,
associate covenants, funerals. And while it’s crowded in here tonight, we only see small portion of that crowd. We are surrounded here tonight by a great cloud of witnesses, living and deceased, women and men of Mercy who are cheering us on and begging us to claim the transformative grace of this, our moment, because the time for transformation has never been more urgent, indeed “the stakes are of planetary proportions” (Danielle Witt, SSND).

So let this be a year of jubilee!
Let this be a year of grace and thanksgiving!
Let this be a year when the fire of Mercy surges anew within our hearts!
Let this be year of transformation!
This is the day our God has made let us rejoice and be glad!

Honora Nicholson, RSM