



### THE RELUCTANT NUN

Catherine McAuley (1778-1841)

The order of the Sisters of Mercy, the largest religious community in the English-speaking world, owes its existence to three Dublin houses, Stormanstown House (now demolished) at Ballymun, Coolock House and the house in Baggot Street that became the first Mercy convent. The young lady who became the first Mercy sister did not really want to found an order or become a nun herself but because of the religious politics of the Dublin of her time there was no other way for her to do the work she wished, of educating young girls, of protecting the morals of older

ones and of nursing the sick poor. Catherine McAuley was born in Stormanstown House on 29 September 1778 of moderately rich parents. Her father died when she was five and her mother who was easily influenced by rich friends lost all her money and her religion. When she died Catherine was twenty and was adopted by William and Catherine Callahan of Coolock House, a Quaker couple, who loved and respected her but tried to make her give up "Romish practices." William Callahan had, however, become a Catholic by the time of his death in 1822 and he left Catherine his house and fortune. It was while she lived in Coolock that she began to understand how much work needed to be done to alleviate the misery of the village poor, to say nothing of the conditions in the nearby city. Advised by local priests she built a "house of mercy" in Baggot Street. The women who helped her were to be free to give up the work when they felt inclined to do so but she decided, for reasons of continuity and to counter the clerical opposition she met at every turn, to formalise her community. Her Order of Mercy was established in 1835 but it was difficult for the rich, fifty-year-old woman to undergo the discipline of novitiate training. The order was finally approved by Pope Gregory XVI five months before its founder's death on 10 November 1841. By then there were ten convents in Ireland and two in England (in London and Birmingham). Since then the order has spread worldwide and with 23000 sisters it is the largest congregation of women in the church. The process for the canonisation of its remarkable founder is well advanced.