

200 years celebrations from Donnybrook

Welcome address Sr Mary Christian RSC

This evening we gather in Donnybrook, Mary Aikenhead's final resting place, to continue the celebration of the Bicentenary of our Congregation on the 157 anniversary of her death. I am happy to welcome those present from all areas of our Congregation.

I welcome especially the group of Pilgrims from the Mary Aikenhead Ministries in Australia who are in Ireland to walk in the footsteps of Mary Aikenhead. Thanks to modern technology, I welcome all those who are watching through the Live Streaming. We greet the sisters and friends of our Sister Congregation in Australia. I hope that families of the Pilgrims will be able to join us. Our sisters and their friends and families in Malawi, Zambia, Nigeria, England, Scotland, Ireland and California are most welcome to join in our celebrations here in Donnybrook.

Mary Aikenhead followed a long line of distinguished Scottish Ancestors. Her family tree can be traced back to the 15th Century. As part of their rich inheritance there was an Aikenhead Coat of Arms. The symbols of the acorns and oak leaves derive from the ancient meaning of the name Aikenhead – Head of Oak. In the Celtic tradition the Oak is considered a cosmic storehouse of wisdom embodied within its towering strength. Mary Aikenhead brought to her new Congregation her wonderful gifts of strong faith and trust in Divine Providence. She was blessed with greatness of mind and spirit, gifted with wisdom, compassion and practical common sense, gifts she used to lead and inspire her young Congregation of Sisters of Charity almost 200 years ago.

The fruit of the oak is the acorn. Great oaks come from tiny acorns. (Story of oak nursery) The tiny seed of our Congregations was sown in Dublin in 1815 and we will soon see in the power point, how that small beginning has spread to so many places and embraced so many people in our world. Following in the footsteps of our foundress, the sisters have for the last two hundred years brought comfort and consolation to people who are poor, marginalized, imprisoned, homeless, in need of education or medical care. Today, no less than in her day, the people of our world still need to be comforted, consoled, supported, encouraged and empowered. Perhaps the needs are different and it is up to each of us to strive to en flesh the love of Christ in this 21st century world of ours.

The Aikenhead family motto, *Rupto robore nati* which freely translated means 'We are born with weakened strength', conjures up for us images of Mary Aikenhead, as, for example, when she came to terms with the request of Archbishop Murray to found a new Congregation, a Congregation which was founded to follow a different way of life from those which already existed in 18th Century Ireland. Up to that time in Ireland, religious had lived a cloistered life, which prevented them being brought into daily contact or communication with the world.

Her strength was also tested when in the first few years of the existence of her new Congregation, many of the sisters succumbed to illness and Mary Aikenhead herself was often found tending to their needs. Or indeed when she fell ill herself and had to leave the young Congregation and spend some time in Rahan in order to regain her strength. Later when her health began to fail, a weakened Mary Aikenhead governed her young Congregation from her wheel chair and continued to work tirelessly and courageously for God's poor. The Aikenhead motto also echoes the words of St. Paul, "When I am weak, then I am strong." And reminds us of Mary Aikenhead's personal motto, 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me' (Phil. 4:14)

Soon we will visit her grave. Scrolls will be carried in the procession listing the names of all the deceased members of both Congregations since the inception of our Congregations.

From the archives we learn: 'On 15 March 1912, the grave of Mary Aikenhead was opened in Donnybrook: the skeleton was practically intact. The old coffin was enclosed in a new oak coffin and replaced in the tomb.' How fitting it is that from her death until today, Mary Aikenhead's body has been encased in oak!

In this year of consecrated life, Our Holy Father, Pope Francis has asked us to look to the past with gratitude. He invites us to reflect on our origins and history, in order to thank God who grants the Church a variety of gifts which embellish her and equip her for every good work. In particular we give thanks for Mary Aikenhead, and her gift to us and to our Church of our wonderful Charism.

Secondly, he asks us to live the present with Passion. Mary Aikenhead's life is a great example of a woman who lived her life with passion, who was inspired by the Gospel. As we continue to follow in her footsteps may we be open to allow ourselves to be challenged by the Gospel. The Gospel, in the words of Pope Francis, 'is demanding: it demands to be lived radically and sincerely\*'. Mary Aikenhead is for us a beacon to show us the way. It is up to us to find the countless new ways in today's society to bring the freshness of the Gospel to every culture and every corner of every area where we minister.

Thirdly, Pope Francis asks us to embrace the future with hope. This is a hope which will not disappoint. It is a hope that will enable us to keep writing our great history well into the future.

Today, as we celebrate the life of Venerable Mary Aikenhead, it is easy for us to feel gratitude. Gratitude for our lives and for being part of the story. Looking at her life, for example, through the use of our new APP, which we have just heard about, will inspire us to live our lives with passion, passion for God, for our Charism, for our sisters in community, our families, friends and those whom we serve, knowing that our God will be with us as we begin our journey into the next century of our Congregation.

What would Mary Aikenhead think about all the technology available to us? Could she have envisioned that something happening in Dublin could be watched simultaneously in all areas of both Congregations or that by the use of a small hand held device we can follow in her footsteps in almost any part of the world. In her day she was a devotee of the only means available to her, letter writing. I would imagine that she would be very happy and would encourage us to use whatever means of communication can be used to spread our Charism near and far.

In conclusion, I wish to thank all who have made this occasion possible. Mr. Dermot O'Connor who has done so much for us in all of our preparations and, who by now, is 'an authority' on Mary Aikenhead. Ms Pat Coyle who is the narrator on the APP, Mr. Jimmy O'Brien and Avtech Solutions who are responsible for the live-streaming, Mr. John Walsh and Galloping Gourmet who will provide our refreshments later.

Many members of our Congregation have involved in preparations for tonight's ceremony. Sisters Eugene and Monica got up at the crack of dawn to ensure that we have beautiful fresh flowers; Sr Una and the Donnybrook Community are always so helpful to us. A special thanks to Sr Marie Smith and her team who year after year facilitate the celebration on 22 July.

Fr Liam Lawton granted us permission to adapt his *Gathering Song* and use it in a creative way and Brother. James Maher MSC gave permission to use his song *Sisters in Faith* from the CD, *Gospel of Love*, to both of them we are very grateful.

Above all I would like to thank the Committee for this event: Sisters Eugene Butler, Mary Roche, Lorraine McCarthy, Marie Therese Porter, Winfridah Chileshe and Patricia Lenihan who have worked tirelessly over a number of months to make sure that everything will run smoothly.

Above all I would like to thank all those who have come to Donnybrook tonight and those who are participating through the 'live streaming'.

May Mary Aikenhead continue to look down on each of us and inspire us by her legacy.

SR MARY CHRISTIAN, RSC

Congregational Leader

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