18 March

Reflection to mark the Anniversary of Pope Francis declaring Mary Aikenhead Venerable
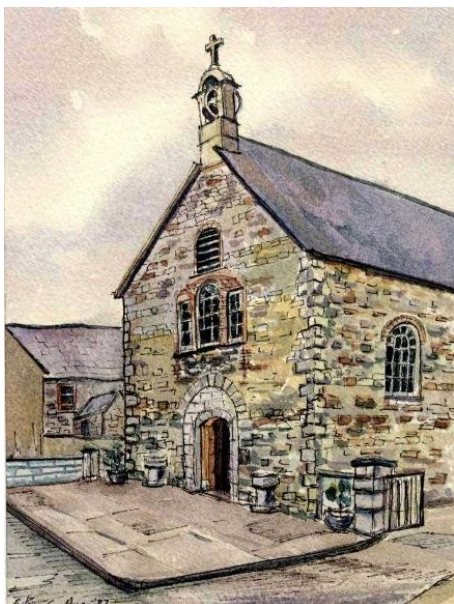
Mary Aikenhead (1787-1858), who founded the Religious Sisters of Charity in 1815 to provide services to "the suffering poor", was declared Venerable by Pope Francis on 18 March 2015.

Being declared Venerable is the second of four steps in the Catholic Church's canonisation process towards sainthood. A person is declared Venerable when it is established by the Church that the person had "practised virtue to a heroic degree".

Since this special recognition of Mary's significance for the Church, we seek to recognise this anniversary and to continue to make Mary Aikenhead's love of Christ and of the poor known throughout the world and to advance her cause to sainthood.

The young Mary Aikenhead

As a young woman Mary Aikenhead heard the story of the poor man Lazarus and the rich man Dives (Luke 16:19-31). This Gospel passage moved her deeply and nurtured in her a desire to serve the poor. Her great trust in and love of God eventually led her to form a group of religious sisters who would work with and for the poor initially in Ireland, then Australia and in due course many nations.
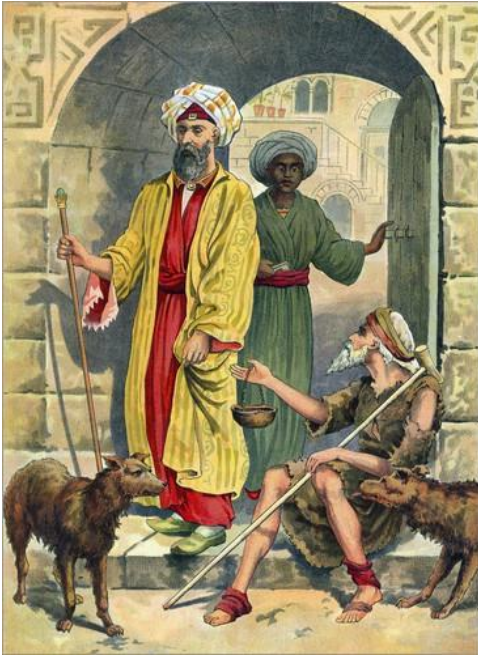
As we celebrate this anniversary of Mary Aikenhead being declared Venerable, let us ponder on the scripture reading that was a source of such inspiration, and influenced her for the rest of her life. This is foundational for the mission and ministries which continue in the spirit of Mary Aikenhead.

Mary first heard the Parable of Dives and Lazarus, and listened intently to the sermon in the South Chapel, Cork in Ireland

The South Chapel, Cork.
Sketch by Sr. Eileen Carroll rsc, August 1987 – Ireland

Dives and Lazarus – Luke 16:19-31

'There was a rich man who used to dress in purple and fine linen and feast magnificently every day. And at his gate there used to lie a poor man called Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to fill himself with what fell from the rich man's table. Even dogs came and licked his sores.

Now it happened that the poor man died and was carried away by the angels into Abraham's embrace. The rich man also died and was buried. 'In his torment in Hades he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off with Lazarus in his embrace.

So he cried out, "Father Abraham, pity me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames." Abraham said, "My son, remember during your life you had your fill of good things, just as Lazarus his fill of bad.

Now he is being comforted here while you are in agony. But that is not all: between us and you a great gulf has been fixed, to prevent those who want to cross from our side to yours or from your side to ours." 'So he said, "Father, I beg you then to send Lazarus to my father's house, since I have five brothers, to give them warning so that they do not come to this place of torment too."

Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets, let them listen to them." The rich man replied, "Ah no, father Abraham, but if someone comes to them from the dead, they will repent." Then Abraham said to him, "If they will not listen either to Moses or to the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead." [*The Jerusalem Bible*, 1985; catholic.org]

Compassionate God, Mary Aikenhead responded whole-heartedly to your call to serve the poor. She is a source of inspiration to us as we seek to continue her tradition of loving service through the Australian ministries named in her honour.

We ask that we too may be impelled by the love of Christ so that we are faithful to her spirit of service.

Through our commitment to ministry, we seek to honour Mary Aikenhead and make her better known in our ministry and the Australian community.

We ask this in the name of Jesus, Your Son. Amen

Venerable Mary Aikenhead

Prepared by Christine Henry RSC