

Healing Garden Fosters A Heart of Love

JIM RICHTER, MA

Stooping down to be on eye level with her patient in the wheelchair, the therapist lightly rested her hand on his knee. The two engaged in conversation and soon both were laughing, enjoying a warm spring morning in the healing garden at Mercy Health - Anderson Hospital in Cincinnati. The physical therapists working in Anderson Hospital's acute rehabilitation unit look forward to bringing some of their patients outside for therapy, or even just some fresh air, when weather permits. On this day, the therapy included exercises working some joints, especially the knee — a replacement knee, I assume.

When Anderson Hospital leadership contemplated a campus expansion in 2015, they recognized an opportunity to incorporate some special features as part of the construction and remodeling. There is a hill behind the hospital, so the only realistic place to expand was in front of the existing structure. In keeping with the then-emerging Mercy Health style for new towers, a five-story, rounded front tower was built, completing a circle of sorts — connecting to the original A and B wings. The design created space in the middle of the circle which was perfect for a courtyard or, better, a healing garden.

As the initial excitement about a healing garden space settled into the reality of budgets and construction limitations, several key people began very intentional work designing the layout and features for the garden, the chapel and the new lobby areas. They also had the task of selecting the sacred art that would be used in each of those areas. The goal was not so much to find beautiful art to display, as it was finding the exact pieces that would “tell our story” and give all who enter a sense of what we are about, how we want to serve and, perhaps most importantly, why we are here.

Sr. Mary Lou Averbeck, a Sister of Mercy and mission liaison to the administration, guided the design team in understanding the significant

components of our history and connection to our roots. In 2014, Sr. Averbeck had an opportunity to visit Ireland and the House of Mercy started by Catherine McAuley in 1827. While there, she toured the Mercy International Centre, located on the House of Mercy campus in downtown Dublin. In addition to crossing that item off her bucket list, she experienced, first-hand, things she had only seen in pictures and heard in stories. She was able to place her hand in Catherine's, as the bronze sculpture outside the House of Mercy invites. She connected to Catherine's spirit, as the sculpture symbolically assures each person that all are welcome there.

Inspired by that visit to Ireland, Sr. Averbeck and I set about finding a sculptor who could create our own version of Catherine for our lobby. Hand carved by Stefan Stuflesser high in the mountains of Northern Italy, a life-size rendering of Catherine, with her left arm on the shoulder of a young mother with a baby, now graces our lobby. It is one of the first things to catch the eye of anyone entering our house. Catherine's right hand is slightly extended with her palm up, echoing her bronze counterpart in Ireland, assuring that, “All are welcome in this healing place.”

Moving through the lobby, a large glass window and door on the left invites you to step into the healing garden. As the door gently closes



behind you, it is immediately obvious that you have entered a holy space. It's quiet out here — and quite different from the hallway you just exited. You may notice the classical sculpture of the Madonna della Strada, inspired by the 1897 painting by Italian artist Roberto Ferruzzi, on your left and the small labyrinth on the ground to your right.

Walking into the middle of the garden you hear the sound of water flowing on your left and are drawn to its source. The first design for the garden included a traditional fountain. While that would have been nice, it would have been merely a water feature. In creating a healing garden, we knew there was potential for much more. Working closely with the lead architects, we were able to create our version of a rill, which is a small stream, that would fit in the space we had available. It was inspired by the original rill in the courtyard of the Mercy International Centre in Ireland.

The rill there was created for the inauguration of the Mercy International Centre in 1994. As part of their dedication events, Sisters of Mercy

from every country in which they serve each were invited to pour water brought from their country into the rill as a way of connecting their ministries of service with the constant outpouring of God's love, compassion and mercy. Upon completion of our rill at Anderson Hospital, we held a special blessing ceremony in 2016 and invited all the local Sisters of Mercy to attend. Together with leaders and staff from the hospital as well as members of the neighborhood community, each person ritually poured holy water into the rill, symbolizing the connection to our mission and our role in extending Jesus' healing ministry.

Issuing from a rock wall, the water flows into a basin that empties into a channel which runs the length of the garden to a collecting pool. You can visually follow the water as it runs under a walking bridge, between two long stone benches and under a second walking bridge until it reaches the collecting pool. There your eyes are drawn to the bronze sculpture of Mary above the pool. She is posed with arms fully extended to the heavens, saying "yes" to her calling to be the bearer



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A healing garden at Mercy Health – Anderson Hospital in Cincinnati includes a rill, or stream, that has been blessed with holy water and a statue of Mary saying “yes” to the call to be the mother of God's son. They symbolize the hospital's Catholic mission and its role as part of Jesus' healing ministry.

of God's son and to bring his presence among us. The sculpture is entitled "Fiat" — May it be done unto me according to your will.

As footlights come on at dusk, Mary, in her Fiat pose, casts a larger-than-life shadow 15 feet up the stone wall behind her. It is stunning in both its simplicity and its power. She reminds us that we, too, must say "yes" in answer to the call to serve — to continue to bring and be the extension of Jesus' compassionate, healing ministry in our day and in our time.

Another significant design element is a large glass wall between the healing garden and the Chapel of Divine Mercy. While the wall serves the functional purpose of keeping the elements outside, the glass allows the visual merging of the interior and the exterior. As a metaphor for a spiritual journey, the glass wall serves to connect the external demands of our daily lives with the inner strength and resources of our spirit.

Once inside, you may notice twinkling lights as you return through the door into the main hallway and turn left toward the chapel. As you round the corner to enter, you are invited, "All are welcome to rest and pray in this holy place." Entering through the stained-glass doors, preserved from the 1989 expansion at Anderson Hospital, you discover the source of the lights that caught your eye earlier. Across the ceiling, arched from low (by the door) to high (where it joins the glass wall), is a field of twinkling lights, a star-filled night sky, with a bolder solid light emanating from a cross in sunken relief across the span. Indirect lighting around the chapel invites quiet and reflection.

There is a place for private prayer and solitude set apart by a short wall of colored glass. If you choose to pray there, you will see in front of you the newly refurbished tabernacle, the special place where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. The altar was blessed by Cincinnati Archbishop Dennis Schnurr during the chapel dedication ceremony on September 29, 2016. On the back wall are statues of Mary and Joseph, brought over to Anderson Hospital when Our Lady of Mercy Hos-

pital in Mariemont, Ohio, closed in 1989. All the artwork and special features connect us to our Catholic identity and to our mission to be a source of healing and compassion. Like other hospitals that have retained features from shuttered or remodeled buildings, we have found that employees, patients and their families appreciate these ties to our heritage and communities.

Outside the chapel is a commissioned artwork entitled, "Love One Another," which offers the wording of that universal invitation according to 13 major religious traditions worldwide. Created by Sister of St. Joseph Mary Southard, the acrylic on canvas invites us to ponder: What in life can the love of God not penetrate?

Beyond the simple "tour" I have led you on, there is another dimension that really brings to life the reasons why the sacred art and sacred places of Mercy Health – Anderson Hospital are so important to us. What we could not have known ahead of time is how the spaces would actually be used. We had wondered if the saying, "If you build it, they will come!" would be true of the healing garden? If we placed the statue of Catherine in the front lobby, would people stop by and put their hand in hers? Would they linger to

appreciate the message of the Love One Another painting?

Sr. Averbeck has shared stories of seeing young children coming up to the Catherine statue to see the baby the mother is holding. They get right up there to touch the baby and sometimes give the child a kiss. Whoever is privileged to witness one of those moments almost invariably stops to watch and enjoy that touching scene. In the hallway outside the chapel, I have observed people from various faith traditions studying the Love One Another painting. Conversations with some of them reveal how much they truly appreciate the openness and inclusion of many faith traditions. A plaque on the opposite wall reiterates the Mercy message: All Are Welcome.

Sometimes you can hear people praying in front of the tabernacle, crying softly, or see them



A sculpture by Stefan Stuflesser shows the founder of the Sisters of Mercy Catherine McAuley with a mother and baby. McAuley's hand is extended with her palm up, echoing a sculpture in Ireland.

Mercy Health



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The chapel at Mercy Health – Anderson Hospital was blessed by Cincinnati Archbishop Dennis Schnurr in 2016.

kneeling in earnest prayer for God's help with whatever is weighing on their hearts. Because the book of intentions and prayer requests fills quickly, it needs to be replaced often. Somehow people know that they are not alone when they are in our sacred places. They know there are others who share a belief in a God who loves us and cares about our needs and well-being. They believe that the prayers they enter in the book will be lifted by others who will pray with them for those intentions. It is an unspoken connection, and yet a powerful one.

Back in the garden, on a different day, a manager sat with one of her employees – the two of them having what appeared to be a difficult conversation. I asked myself, why would a manager choose the healing garden to have such a discussion with someone? Knowing the manager fairly well, I chose to believe that she knew that both she and her staff member would benefit from the

healing nature of the garden space. That somehow things are safer there – that it's OK to be vulnerable and honest, even when the topic is unpleasant.

Later two nurses walked into the garden and sat together for a few minutes, just long enough to get a breath of fresh air and decompress from the stress of a hectic day. They told me on the way back in that it's the place on campus where they can find a moment of peace and remember why they are here in the first place.

The Chapel of Divine Mercy and the healing garden form the center of our Anderson Hospital campus and symbolize the heart of who we are. They help us remember why we chose health care and to work at Mercy. Those sacred spaces help all who enter to hear Catherine's reminder that they are indeed welcome in our house!

JIM RICHTER is director of mission integration, East Market, Mercy Health – Cincinnati.

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