

# Sustaining Mercy With Herbs, Candles & Soaps In The Philippines

By Catherine Walsh



*(Women help each other in the spirit of Catherine McAuley at the clinic. Sister Hilda Jimenez, clinic founder, is on the left (in green). Divina Rosalejos, clinic coordinator, is second from right (in patterned pants))*

If Jesus wanted to empower 12 female apostles in the Philippines, he wouldn't have to look any further than a dozen women who work at McAuley Herbal Clinic in Lala, Mindanao—located in one of the country's poorest regions.

By making and selling herbal medicines, soaps and candles in partnership with the Sisters of Mercy, the women are contributing to the wellbeing of their communities as well as earning money to educate their children and improve the lives of their families.

And all of this is possible, they say, because of Sister Hilda Jimenez, an energetic woman who founded the clinic 35 years ago.

“I am so grateful to Sister Hilda,” says Divina Rosalejos, who left school after the sixth grade. “I used to be ashamed because I was so poor. But she has changed my life.”

Now a grandmother, Divina was shocked when the nun asked her to oversee the clinic during the pandemic. “I said to her, ‘Sister, how can I lead the clinic? I have only six grades of school,’” recalls Divina.

Women help each other in the spirit of Catherine McAuley at the clinic. Sister Hilda Jimenez, clinic founder, is on the left (in green). Divina Rosalejos, clinic coordinator, is second from right (in patterned pants). But Sister Hilda assured her that the Sisters of Mercy developed leaders according to their skills not their schooling. And besides, she could not leave the convent.

Sister Hilda recalls with a chuckle, “Although Divina was shy at first, she slowly took charge of the McAuley Herbal Clinic out of her goodness and her capacities as a leader.”

Divina continues to serve as clinic coordinator, ensuring that patients receive the care they need. “Her patient reports are very detailed,” Sister Hilda says approvingly.

Sister Hilda entered religious life more than 60 years ago, not long after some Sisters of Mercy from Buffalo, New York, opened a convent in Mindanao in 1957. As a young sister she lived and taught in Buffalo. Upon returning to the Philippines, she continued to serve as an educator, becoming director of Mercy Junior College, a pre-K-12 school in Mindanao, a position she has held for more than 30 years. After the tragic death of a sister she was close to, Sister Hilda sought an additional ministry—one that would put her in contact with people in profound need.

People in the area mostly work as rice farmers tilling lands they do not own, or as fisherfolk foraging for crab and other sea life. Violence and substance abuse are common. “I wanted to be with the poor, so I went from one barrio to another organizing a family feeding program that taught mothers about good nutrition and parenting and how to deal with a husband who battered them or was a drunkard,” Sister Hilda says.

She worked with Sister Rose Palacio (d. 2022), a U.S.-trained anesthesiologist who founded Mercy Community Hospital in Iligan City and a Mercy Mobile Clinic, to start McAuley Herbal Clinic in 1989. Their goal was to help people meet their own medical needs when Western medicine was not available or was too expensive. Sister Josefina de Guzman now serves as the staff physician of the hospital and the mobile clinic.



*(Speaking from the heart, Magdalena Maasin shares how the clinic has enabled her and her daughter Judith (seated) to build hopeful lives)*

Naming the herbal clinic for the Sisters of Mercy founder Catherine McAuley made sense, says Sister Hilda, as did appointing 12 women to the clinic to represent each of the surrounding barrios. “I tell the women that Mother McAuley was all about women helping each other in the slums of 19th century Dublin, Ireland.”

The goal of the clinic is to help people “to be self-sufficient, to uplift themselves through herbal medicine, which is cheaper than Western medicine and more preventative,” she says.

A vibrant presence, Linda Bascar makes candles and gives healing massages to patients.

Patients also have access to Western medicine when the Mercy Mobile Clinic comes to the Herbal Clinic site once a month. The women staffing the clinic cook meals for over 160 patients, including many children, who come to the mobile clinic, and they help Sisters Hilda and Josefina take blood pressure and care for the patients’ other needs.

The women at the herbal clinic make other popular products too, like soap that is used by Mercy Community Hospital to wash its laundry. And students and staff at Mercy Junior College buy the soap in bulk each holiday season to give to 400 inmates at a men’s prison. Candles made at the clinic are especially popular each May, when people in the barrios use them to celebrate the Flores de Mayo festival in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary.



*(Healing remedies for coughs, fevers, rashes and other ailments are found in local herbs)*

Sister Hilda says the women who work at the clinic “bless my life and keep me simple and humble. They teach me to be poor.” They have become like the early Sisters of Mercy who first spread Catherine McAuley’s teachings beyond Ireland.

“I tell them, ‘You are Sisters of Mercy in action. You should introduce yourselves that way to everyone you meet.’”

*Editor’s note: The author visited McAuley Herbal Clinic in June 2023 with a delegation of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas: Sister Virgencita “JenJen” Alegado, an Institute Minister for the Philippines; Sister Eileen Campbell, director of Institute New Membership; Sister Julie Matthews, an Institute Minister for the Caribbean, Central America, South America; and Sister Anne Marie Miller, then a member of the Institute Leadership Team.*

*This article was first published in Mercy Now – the newsletter of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. For more information on the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, please visit their website <https://sistersofmercy.org/>*

