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“Getting Up Again”

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It was on October 12, 1840—after long canal and coach journeys from Dublin to Galway, then on to Limerick, then back to Dublin in a hurry to put two sisters bound for Bermondsey, England on the boat at Kingstown—that Catherine McAuley wrote from Baggot Street:

On this late occasion I traveled one hundred miles a day, which is very fatiguing except on Railways.

Thank God I am at rest again, and now I think the name of another foundation would make me sick—but they say I would get up again.¹

“Get up again.” Yes, the persistent Gospel call to “get up again.” The persistent ministerial/missionary call to Sisters of Mercy to “get up again.” As I read the inspiring papers for this Research Conference, and as I hear its short presentations, I keep hearing, above and beneath all our language, Christ’s and Catherine’s persistent call to join him and her in “getting up again”: to pour out anew our healing nard of womb-compassion, *rahamim* (Elaine Wainwright’s beautiful biblical image); to “found” anew in our present world the perennial actions of mercifulness to which the Gospel and our Constitutions have called us from the very beginning.

Each Sister of Mercy, now and in all the decades past, bears and has borne her own personal responsibility of fidelity to the founding inspiration and intentions of Catherine McAuley (Canons 574.2, 577, 578, 662). In addition, I sense a particular obligation, directly related to my research work, to be personally very faithful to articulating her central, priority intentions as I have come to know them. I feel the obligation to express these priorities as accurately and as purely as I can discover them in Catherine’s words, her actions, and her overall example. In that spirit I framed my research paper, as plainly and directly as I could.

Two images are in my mind: the story of Catherine's conversation about Nova Scotia; and two contrasting maps. Accompanying these images, I hear Catherine saying she "would get up again."

Now, to the images. First, to Catherine's conversation about Nova Scotia. In the Introduction to Mary Vincent Harnett's published biography of Catherine McAuley (1864), the editor, Richard Baptist O'Brien, a priest of Limerick, recalls his conversation with Catherine in late 1838 or early 1839. He was then delayed in Dublin on his way to Nova Scotia to found St. Mary's College (a seminary) in Halifax. He visited Baggot Street, and heard firsthand, as he reports, Catherine's wish to "join him in a mission of charity to Nova Scotia." Claiming that he is repeating the dialogue "almost word for word as far as memory permits it," O'Brien says he asked Catherine:

"But, Reverend Mother, how could you think of leaving your great institute and burying yourself in a poor province?"

"We have sisters plenty," she replied, "more than able to supply my place; and I may be fit for the rough work to be encountered in a new region."

"But [he said] we have no money."

"Yes [she replied]; but you do not know upon how little a nun can live. Try me..."

"Time must be taken, Reverend Mother. The soil must be prepared, or no growth can be expected. Were you to go now, yourself and the sister who might accompany you should, in all likelihood, be the first and last nuns in Halifax"

O'Brien then comments:

It would be difficult to picture the smile of incredulity and the gentle movement of her head as she replied:

"Ah, Father, you mistake Try the experiment."²

In his obituary on Catherine McAuley published in the *Halifax Register* over twenty years before the biography, O'Brien also discusses this conversation. Casting himself in the third person, he writes:

she declared to Mr. O'Brien her intention of devoting herself, if permitted, for her remaining years to Nova Scotia. To every representation of the loss which would accrue to her native country she calmly replied, "The Institution requires me not at home. It has young, intelligent and devoted children. We ought to provide for the instruction of the poor, and relief of the sick in the Colonies." When spoken to regarding the funds necessarily required . . . she smiled and answered "None! we shall teach a day school in addition to the poor school. You know not, Sir, upon how little a Nun can live."³

In the Introduction O'Brien says he refused Catherine's offer, and admits:

How the present editor of her life had the courage to refuse, it is very hard indeed to explain [he] had the weakness to fear the experiment⁴

Catherine herself, in the remaining three years before her death, went on to found communities and works of mercy in Bermondsey, Galway, Birr, and Birmingham, and to prepare the foundations for Newfoundland and Liverpool.

The second image I offer is the two contrasting global maps. They somewhat speak for themselves. The map locating the world's extreme poverty represents the globe as it is today.⁵ The second map, locating the predominant current presence of Sisters of Mercy,⁶ represents not the effects of present-day responses to the first map, but of historical responses, in general, to a map that is now over one hundred and sixty years out of date in its representation of concentrations of extreme and even moderate poverty.

It is the Fire in these images—the story and the maps—as well as my knowledge of Catherine McAuley, and my attempt to articulate faithfully her guiding perspectives, as the continually re-founding Founder of the Sisters of Mercy, that led me to conclude my research paper as I did, and as I now reiterate.

Today Catherine McAuley would exert herself and her sisters to “get up again” in countless ways, but perhaps especially and globally she would advise us to do three very specific works of mercy, works that would seem to her to be the greatest present obligations of Sisters of Mercy, make the strongest use of their collective talents and expertise, and have the most potential to enable them to be effectively “Mercy in the Twenty-First Century”:

1. She would renew her own, and ask us to renew our vowed commitment to voluntary material poverty—as a credible following of the self-emptying example of Jesus Christ, as an act of solidarity with the world’s poorest people, as a witness against the widespread greed in all its manifestations that leaves them in extreme poverty, and as a necessary means to fund new foundations of merciful action among them.
2. She would use her own and our long accumulated educational expertise, in fidelity to one of the primary reasons why we were founded, to create for women and children new Mercy “schools,” of all types and content, in destitute, oppressive areas and components of the present world where they are most needed.
3. She would dedicate herself and us more extensively and explicitly to the specific work of spiritual/theological instruction of all ages, in all its formal and informal modes, including advocacy, preaching, writing, and wisdom-sharing in every human way—the spiritual works of mercy which have always underlain the mission of Sisters of Mercy as she envisioned it—so that all in the human community may develop a mature theology of God, experience the merciful presence of God and know and promote their common humanity and equal dignity before God.

May the enabling fire of the Spirit of Christ and its kindling in Catherine McAuley beckon us to “get up again,” and to embrace, globally and together, the “rough work” of founding anew and of new foundings.

¹ Mary Sullivan, ed. *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 300.

² Richard Baptist O’Brien, “Introduction” in [Mary Vincent Harnett], *The Life of Rev. Mother Catherine McAuley* (Dublin: John F. Fowler, 1864), xxviii-xxx.

³ Handwritten transcript of the obituary in the *Halifax Register*. The volumes of the *Register* have been searched, but the original obituary has not so far been discovered. It is referred to in Harnett’s *Life*, xxviii and 203-205; in Austin Carroll’s *Life* (1866), 445-447; and in her *Leaves from the Annals* 1:111-113. The handwritten

transcript is in the Archives of the Northern Province (Ireland) of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, Bessbrook, Newry, Co. Down, Ireland.

⁴ O'Brien, *op. cit.*, xxx.

⁵ This map appears in Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty* (New York: Penguin, 2005) between pages 174 and 175.

⁶ This map was created by Ethel Bignell, RSM. See also Deirdre Mullan, “*Where in the world are my Sisters?*” (New York: Mercy Global Concern, 2007).