Catherine McAuley in the Nineteenth and Twenty-First Centuries

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One might say that Catherine McAuley (1778-1841) lived in a very different world from that of the twenty-first century. She lived intermittently on two islands, on one of which was the seat of the British colonial empire. On the other were the colonized Irish Catholics controlled politically, socially, and economically by the British Parliament and by Anglo-Irish politicians more or less resident in Ireland, but directed by London.

From another perspective, Catherine's smaller world was not all that different from the present world – at least not in deliberately inflicted misery. The rapacious penal laws against Irish Catholics in the years after the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 to roughly 1720 were by 1778, the year of Catherine's birth, in part repealed or somewhat generally unenforced. Other penal laws were repealed in subsequent years, climaxing in the Act of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. But the worst of the dire social, economic, and religious effects of these laws remained for decades: widespread destitution throughout the country with consequent slums in the cities; disease, epidemics, and famines among the poorer classes; widespread begging; widespread lack of education for poor Irish Catholics who would not succumb to Protestant proselytizers; virtually nonexistent health care for poor Catholics (i.e., 75% to 80% of the population); foundling hospitals with abysmal mortality rates; and workhouses such as those Charles Dickens portrays in Oliver Twist.

Edmund Burke said of the penal code: "It was a complete system, full of coherence and consistency, well digested and composed in all its parts. It was a machine of wise and elaborate contrivance, as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment, and

degradation of a people as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man."[1] William Lecky, the British historian, writing in the nineteenth century, says:

> Almost all the great persecutions of history, those of the early Christians, of Catholics and Protestants on the Continent, and, after the Revolution, of Catholics in England, were directed against minorities. It was the distinguishing characteristic of the Irish penal code that its victims constituted at least three-fourths of the nation, and that it was intended to demoralize as well as degrade….
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> …The penal code, as it was actually carried out, was inspired much less by fanaticism than by rapacity, and was directed less against the Catholic religion than against the property and industry of its professors. It was intended to make them poor and to keep them poor, to crush in them every germ of enterprise, to degrade them into a servile caste who could never hope to rise to the level of their oppressors.[2]

Catherine McAuley's World:

Catherine McAuley founded the Sisters of Mercy in 1831, amid the after effects of this savage conquest. Because her Catholic father took advantage of the oath of allegiance to the King of England in 1778, which Catholics who wished to own property were then allowed to sign, and because she lived for over twenty years with Protestants (from at least 1800 or 1801 until the death of William Callaghan in 1822), she was in those early years, personally spared the economic plight of the majority of Irish Catholics. However, when she became independently wealthy in 1823, as a result of the

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[1] Quoted in W.E.H. Lecky, History of Ireland in the 18th Century 1:144.
[2] Lecky, History of Ireland, 1:145, 152.

Callaghan legacy, she began the process of ever deeper solidarity with the poor of Ireland and England, and of gradually more thorough identification with and ministry to their needs and deprivations, their ignorance and sufferings. She did not become like "The Ladies from the Ladies' Betterment League" who "Walk in a gingerly manner up the hall" of the "worthy poor," allowing "their lovely skirts to graze no wall" in the Chicago slums, as in Gwendolyn Brooks' satiric "Lovers of the Poor." Rather, she became in her lifestyle, and for the rest of her life, as far as she could, *one with* their sufferings and "dejected faces," seeing in them "the person of our Divine Master, who has said, 'Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to Me'" (Rule 3.1, in Sullivan, Catherine McAuley 297).

Contemplating Catherine's life and work in the early nineteenth century, and then reflecting on what might be—perhaps ought to be—the life and work of Sisters of Mercy in the early twenty-first century, one could be easily overwhelmed with the magnitude of vocational responsibility, and then resort to silence, inertia or escape. Therefore, one has to try to espouse Catherine's two-fold commitment to trust and urgency: "While we place all our confidence in God – we must act as if all depended on our exertion" (Correspondence 323).

In November 2006, Mercy scholars, reflecting on their experience of the present world, identified many serious global trends and problems. Among the trends noted were "greed in all its individual, corporate and national manifestations, especially among the world's 'haves'; and "a fundamental, though often unrecognized, hunger for happiness and for genuine spiritual, even religious, understanding and peace." These Mercy researchers saw the following two problems as flowing from these and other trends:

"extreme poverty and maldistribution of resources among the world's most vulnerable 'have-nots;'" and "inadequate, even debilitating, ignorance of basic human, spiritual, and religious understandings, even…among Catholics."[3]

While many other phenomena characterized the world Catherine McAuley experienced, the realities noted above were central to them. When she had the freedom and means to do so, Catherine's response was to create a House of Mercy to shelter homeless girls and women; and a poor school in which to educate poor girls. She did this not only at Baggot Street in Dublin, but in every town or city in Ireland and England where she made a foundation. In these places she also visited sick and dying poor adults, instructing them in Christian faith, in neighborly love, and in the love and consolation of God. These were her clear priorities. In the first paragraph of the Rule she composed, she declared: "The Sisters admitted into this religious congregation besides the principal and general end of all religious orders," such as attending to their own personal and communal growth in fidelity to the Gospel, "must also have in view what is peculiarly characteristic of the Sisters of Mercy, that is, a most serious application to the Instruction of poor Girls, Visitation of the Sick, and protection of distressed women of good character" (Rule 1.1, in Sullivan, Catherine McAuley 295).

It was in view of the congregation's commitment to these endeavors that Catherine so strongly admired the self-sacrifice of the six English women who came to Baggot Street in early 1840 to serve a novitiate and prepare for a new foundation in Birmingham, England. She wrote of them to Frances Warde:

[3] "Summary Paragraph of Experience" (26 December 2006). Participants in Mercy International Research Conference, November 9-12, 2007.

> They renew my spirit greatly – fine creatures fit to adorn society, coming forward joyfully to consecrate themselves to the service of the poor for Christ's sake. This is some of the fire He cast on the earth – kindling. (Correspondence 282)

She had earlier written in the same way to Elizabeth Moore in Limerick about the first five to arrive:

> It is very animating to see five persons most happily circumstanced, leave their friends and country, to enter on a mission so contrary to our natural inclinations, but the fire Christ cast upon the earth is kindling very fast. (Correspondence 270)

As to the "happy circumstances" of these young English women and their fitness "to adorn society," Catherine remarked of Marianne Beckett:

> Sister Beckett…is quite equal to Sister [Clare Augustine] Moore in all arts and sciences – languages – painting, etc., etc. She brought her finery to Ireland, her under dresses trimmed with lace. (Correspondence 207)

By now, Catherine's own "under clothing," as Clare Moore informs us, "was always of the meanest description" (Bermondsey Annals, in Sullivan, Catherine McAuley 114), and it is doubtful that Marianne Beckett herself had lace underwear in Birr where she eventually became the assistant superior, then the superior, of that very poor community.

Voluntary Poverty:

The voluntary material poverty of Catherine McAuley and the earliest Sisters of Mercy was directly related to their works of mercy, to their "being Mercy in the 1830s." Their vow of poverty was not primarily regarded as a separate requirement of religious

life, disconnected theoretically and practically from their mission. For Catherine and for them, it was a *necessity*, and not because the available money from Catherine's inheritance was almost completely depleted in the early years of the decade – which it was. Voluntary poverty was for them a theological and practical necessity because it was the only means of funding more and more needed works of mercy; it was a necessity if they wished to live in credible solidarity with the impoverished people among whom they served, the "have nots" of their world; it was a necessity if they wished, as Catherine certainly did, to "bear some resemblance" to the earthly example of Jesus Christ; and it was a necessity if they truly believed that all women, men, and children were their sisters and brothers with whom Jesus Christ was identified, the children of a common God.

Twice in the early chapters of her Rule, Catherine cites Matthew 25.40: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." This scriptural verse was the guiding text of Catherine's life and work. Although she never spoke about the "prophetic" quality of religious life or about its "countercultural" character – such vocabulary and analysis were unavailable to her—her life and that of the first sisters *was* fully and voluntarily prophetic, not the least in their mode of relating to material goods. As Sandra Schneiders notes: "the greed and self-centeredness of an approach to material goods as to be acquired for oneself to the greatest extent possible regardless of the need of the neighbor is challenged by the commitment to evangelical poverty."[4]

For the sake of their mission the first Sisters of Mercy intended to be and were in fact voluntarily poor in their lifestyle. They held Charity Sermons, lotteries, and bazaars to raise money for the works of mercy, not to improve their own living conditions; they

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[4] Sandra M. Schneiders, Selling All 109-110.

begged for the needs of the poor from door-to-door (Catherine euphemistically called this "collections"); using a legacy they had just received, they built a commercial laundry to support and train the 60 homeless, unemployed women then in the House of Mercy, and Catherine rejoiced in this prospect: "What a comfort if I am permitted to see some secure means of supporting our poor women & children established, not to be entirely depending on daily collections which are so difficult to keep up" (Correspondence 132).

When Catherine moved permanently into Baggot Street in 1829, at age fifty, she slept in a dormitory with seven others; their cheap mattresses were stuffed not with horse hair, but "cow's or dog's or something so dreadful that," according to Clare Moore, "the smell for several months was most sickening" (13 September 1844, in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley* 94); and for the first reception ceremony on January 23, 1832, the "postulants dresses [of the seven novices] were altered and patched up into habits," and they got the "white veils, only one new one, old guimpes" that had been worn by Mary Ann Doyle, Elizabeth Harley, and Catherine at George's Hill (Ibid. 95). Moreover, the meals at Baggot Street were "wretched," according to the artistically refined and blunt Clare Augustine Moore:

> Even when I entered [in 1837] the diet was most unfit for persons doing our duties. Leg of Beef with onion sauce, beef stakes [*sic*] that seemed as if they had lain in a tanpit, hash of coarse beef, and for a dainty, fried liver and bacon, though boiled and roast mutton came in sometimes.
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> The breakfast table was a trial to one's nerves; sugar of the very blackest and coarsest kind with no sugar spoon, and for that matter the juniors seldom had a little lead spoon apiece, weak tea, very little milk,

> plates of very stale thick bread with a very thin scraping of butter.
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> ("Memoir," in Sullivan, Catherine McAuley 207)

(The purpose of citing Clare Augustine Moore's account is not to endorse malnutrition as a positive value, but to illustrate the poverty of the community, as she experienced it.)

Catherine McAuley and the respective founding parties traveled to make new foundations by "the poorest and cheapest mode of traveling, often to her own great inconvenience, and her bed [in these foundations] was usually on the floor," according to Clare Moore who often accompanied her: "she never waited for a new Convent to be comfortably arranged, being satisfied to have any kind of opening to extend the good effected by the Institute" (Bermondsey Annals, in Sullivan, Catherine McAuley 114-115).

Catherine's letters repeatedly allude to the community's poverty for the sake of mission. She speaks of what one might call "common life" in ways that extend its meaning far beyond those living within Mercy convents to the people they sought to serve. The description in Acts 4 was broadened in Catherine's behavior to solidarity and sharing with those off the streets, in slum hovels, in cholera depots, and on rural roads.

During the cholera epidemic of 1832, after the death of a woman who had just given birth, she brought the infant home in her shawl and put it to sleep in a little bed, probably a small cabinet drawer, in her own room. In 1835, in order to create "a school for the poor girls whom we every day saw loitering about the roads [in Kingstown] in a most neglected state," Catherine gave "the coach house, stable, and part of our garden, with some gates, doors, and other materials for the purpose," as well as the total proceeds of that year's bazaar (£50), even though they were "six pounds in debt for things got at

Nowlan's on the Bachelor's Walk" (Correspondence 86). In December of that year the community had to borrow £20 from Charles Cavanagh, their volunteer solicitor, because "We have so often cautioned all those who supply us – not to give any credit on our account – I doubt would they now, if we were to ask them" (Correspondence 70). In 1836 when she discovered on arrival how extremely damp the Charleville house was, with little chance of postulants joining them, she considered abandoning the foundation, but "yielded to…her own compassion for the suffering members of Christ (being greatly touched by hearing a poor woman exclaim, 'Ah! it was the Lord drove you in amongst us!')" (Bermondsey Annals, in Sullivan, Catherine McAuley 120). In 1838, when she could not pay the court's judgment (£375) in the unjust lawsuit brought against her by the builder of the poor school in Kingstown (the lawsuit apparently brought with the parish priest's acquiescence), and the sisters in Kingstown had to leave suddenly, before an eviction notice was levied, Catherine said, not just of this circumstance: "God knows I would rather be cold and hungry than the poor in Kingstown or elsewhere should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford" (Correspondence 164).

In 1868 Clare Moore who had lived with Catherine in Dublin for eight years, and after that for brief periods in Cork and Bermondsey, compiled and published the Practical Sayings of Catherine McAuley, the first and most authentic source of her sayings. Clare's draft was, she says, reviewed and verified by other eyewitness Sisters of Mercy, including those still living at Baggot Street and elsewhere. Ursula Frayne then in Melbourne wrote to Clare: "How exactly dear Reverend Mother's words are noted down, I could almost fancy myself listening to her once more" (Bermondsey Annals (1868)

2:[125]). The Practical Sayings notes that on the topic of voluntary poverty Catherine frequently said:

> In the use of temporal things a Religious should always remember that she has not come to a house of plenty, but to a state of strict poverty.
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> The truest poverty consists in seeing that our wants are scantily supplied and rejoicing in the scarcity….
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> The fruits of poverty are: 1st. Great peace of mind under all circumstances….2nd. Great joy in the Holy Ghost which the want [lack] of temporal comforts will never lessen….
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> We find those who can enumerate very particularly all that Jesus Christ said and did, but what does He care for that? He said and did so, not that we should recount it in words, but show Him in our lives, in our daily practice. (Practical Sayings 6-8, 25)

Catherine's most formal description of the voluntary poverty she advocated is presented in Chapter 17 of the Rule she composed in the mid 1830s. Here she focuses on the example of Jesus Christ and on self-restraint in the use and accumulation of material goods. Her placement of this chapter (and those on Chastity and Obedience) at the *end* of Part I of the Rule and Constitutions (i.e., at the end of the Rule proper), whereas she places the chapters on the works of mercy (chapters 1-4) at the very *beginning* of this Part (contrary to the arrangement in the Presentation Rule) reinforces the belief that for her the vows were at the service of the works of mercy and ordered toward them. They were not ends in themselves but a necessary means of following Jesus Christ and furthering the mission of the Sisters of Mercy in the world. In the Rule Catherine writes:

> As the Sisters in order to become more conformable to…Christ Jesus have…renounced all property in earthly things, they should frequently revolve in mind how tenderly He cherished Holy Poverty. Born in a stable, laid in a manger, suffering hunger, cold and thirst in the course of this mortal life, not having a place to lay His head, naked on a cross, He consecrated this virtue in His sacred Person and bequeathed it as a most valuable patrimony to His followers. (Rule 17.1)

Catherine's language is, understandably, dated, but beneath her vocabulary she is conceptually very close to the thinking of, for example, Sandra Schneiders: "The vow of poverty is a global declaration of embracing the kind of detachment, insecurity, vulnerability, dependence – in short, the homelessness – that Jesus [embraced and] asked of his itinerant disciples."[5] Where Jesus asked his disciples to "carry no purse, no bag, no sandals" (Luke 10.4), Catherine McAuley says simply:

> The Sisters shall therefore keep their hearts perfectly disengaged from all affection to the things of this world, content with the food and raiment allowed them and willing at all times to give up whatever has been allotted to them. (Rule 17.2)
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> Nothing shall appear in their dress, but what is modest and grave, nor can they keep in their cells anything superfluous, costly or rich, in furniture or decorations…. (Rule 17.3)

The woman who wrote those words voluntarily laid aside Coolock House, its land and carriages, its comfortable way of life, her inheritance, her future security. Her life became a powerful witness against greed and the wanton consumption of resources it

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[5] Schneiders, Selling All 260.

entails and fosters, as well as a credible witness of genuine solidarity with those who had nothing and whom others considered "the least," and so, expendable and castaway. For her the economic plight of the poor became her plight. What she chose to forgo was for their sakes, so as to share with them. In this she chose to resemble Christ who "though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2. Cor. 8.9).

The Spiritual Works of Mercy:

Today Mercy scholars throughout the world see in those among whom they work, and discern in those about whom they read, a "hunger for happiness and for genuine spiritual, even religious, understanding and peace" which is often related to their "ignorance of basic human, spiritual, and religious understandings, even…among Catholics."[6] This present-day hunger and ignorance – whether in the rich or the poor – is not unlike the lack of religious understanding Catherine McAuley perceived in women, men, and children of her world, nor unlike the poverty of religious awareness to which she ministered through the spiritual works of mercy which were always her stated goal, in and through the corporal works.

In creating schools for poor girls in every foundation except Carlow (where the Presentation Sisters already had such a school); in urging the opening of a House of Mercy in each foundation, with a program of religious education and employment training in each House; in visiting the sick and dying poor; in going out to and welcoming adults for religious instructions, especially in Tullamore, Cork, Bermondsey, Birr, and Birmingham – the ministry of Catherine McAuley was always directed to enhancing people's knowledge of and faith in God, with its obligations and consolations. The

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[6] "Summary Paragraph."

central message of her teaching was the Mercy of God, the mercifulness with which God regards and relates to all human beings.

Using the theological language of her day, she wished to "inspire" children "with a sincere Devotion," to teach them how "to implore [God's] grace to know and love Him and to fulfil His Commandments" (Rule 2. 2-3). In visiting the sick and dying she believed that "The Sisters shall always have spiritual good most in view" – for example, awareness of God's pardon and mercy, the need for repentance, the peace and joy of resignation to God's will, the principal mysteries of faith, God's divine care (Rule 3. 9-10). Where death was "not immediately expected," she believed it was "well to relieve the distress first and to endeavor by every practicable means to promote the cleanliness, ease and comfort of the Patient, since we are ever most disposed to receive advice and instruction from those who evince compassion for us" (Rule 3. 8).

She felt that the distressed women admitted to the House of Mercy ought "if necessary be instructed in the principal mysteries of Religion" and "their religious obligations." They should also be instructed in the habits necessary for "suitable employment" so as to develop the grounds for a positive recommendation from the House and the skills "on which they can depend for their future support." Catherine sadly realized that "Many leave their situations not so much for want of merit as incapacity to fulfil the duties they unwisely engaged in" (Rule 4. 1, 2). In general, she was convinced that

> no work of charity can be more productive of good to society or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women, since whatever be the station they are destined to fill, their

> example and advice will always possess influence, and where ever a religious woman presides, peace and good order are generally to be found. (Rule 2. 5)

This is why – at such enormous future financial trouble to herself – Catherine asked to have a poor school built in Kingstown for the poor girls she saw "loitering about the roads in a most neglected state" (Correspondence 86). This is why she defended the sacramental needs of the 60 women in the Baggot Street House of Mercy against the parish priest who refused to appoint a regular chaplain and at a salary she could manage. This is why she trudged through mud and melted snow to visit poor deluded families in Birr who were deeply wounded by the longstanding parish schism. This is why she resisted Protestant proselytizing in Dublin, Kingstown, Birr and London. This is why she founded a convent in "poor Limerick," a barracks town where women were exploited, and why she visited there "a respectable person who is in a desponding state of mind" (Correspondence 156-157). This is why she urged that poor children and adults be well instructed in the meaning of the sacrament of Confirmation and "the gifts and graces it imparts" (Correspondence 92-93).

Even as early as her years at Coolock she was, "indefatigable in her exertions to relieve the wants and sufferings of the poor." Her charity "did not confine itself to relief of their temporal wants only; she took pity on their spiritual ignorance and destitution….She collected the poor children of the neighbourhood in the lodge, which was placed at her disposal, and devoted a great portion of her time to their instruction." Apparently the religious instruction Catherine offered to poor children soon called forth another audience, for Mary Vincent Harnett continues:

> Her solicitude for the interests of the poor soon drew around her many who hoped to derive from her advice, relief and consolation. Everyone who had distress to be relieved, or affliction to be mitigated, or troubles to be encountered came to seek consolation at her hands, and she gave it to the utmost of her ability; her zeal made her a kind of missionary in the small district around her. (Limerick Manuscript, in Sullivan, Catherine McAuley 144)

Concern is often raised today about use of the word "ignorant" in the Act of Profession of Sisters of Mercy, on the assumption that the word is intended to indicate materially poor people, and so demeans them. This is a limiting assumption. Though Catherine's primary efforts were focused on those who were poor in material ways, for her "ignorance," even debilitating ignorance, was not equivalent to "uneducated" or "undereducated." Highly educated people were often, in Catherine's day as they may be today, spiritually ignorant of a mature theology of God, of the full meaning of the Gospel, of the obligations of universal charity, of the common humanity and dignity of all people before God, and of the ungodly greed, violence and selfishness on the part of some that often lie at the root of the extreme poverty of others. Wherever there was spiritual ignorance Catherine sought to relieve it because she believed in the universal mercy and consolation God initiates and bestows, and hence in the dignity of all human beings.

Conclusion:

If Catherine McAuley lived in the flesh today, she would exert herself and her sisters 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 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 others to renew their, vowed commitment to voluntary material poverty –not primarily as a canonical requirement, but 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 mount new works of mercy among them.

2. She would use her own and the sisters' long accumulated educational expertise, in fidelity to one of the primary reasons why they were founded, to create for women and children new Mercy schools of all types in destitute areas of the world where they are most needed.

3. She would dedicate herself and the sisters more extensively and explicitly to the specific work of spiritual/religious instruction of children and adults, in all its formal and informal modes – 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 know and experience the merciful consolation of God and their common humanity before God.

When Catherine quoted Luke 12.49 – without any biblical training on her part, though she had read widely – she was amazingly close to present-day interpretations of this difficult text. In applying Jesus' words, on the eve of his journey to Jerusalem—"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" (RSV)—to the self-sacrificing readiness of the Birmingham postulants for the mission to be entrusted to them, Catherine was interpreting these words much as Daniel J. Harrington has recently interpreted them:

> The fire that Jesus came to light was the Kingdom of God. Jesus was convinced that in his own person and mission a new phase in God's plan for the world was beginning. Through his teachings and miracles, and especially in his passion, death and resurrection, Jesus was igniting a fire that will culminate in the fullness of God's Kingdom.[7]

When Catherine McAuley founded the Sisters of Mercy on December 12, 1831, there were only thirteen sisters; two of these died, two left, and two more entered within the next year. From the life, example, and effort of these eleven have come, through the providence of God, the 9710 Sisters of Mercy in the world today. Surely these 9710 are enough to be powerfully "Mercy in the Twenty-First Century." If they generously welcome into their lives the Spirit's kindling of the "fire Christ cast on the earth," they could be this even if they were only eleven.

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[7] "Fire, Baptism and Division," America, 13-20 August 2007, 38.

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