



## EXPLORING THE BIG *M*

Those of us affiliated in one way or another with Catherine McAuley and her contemporaries are fortunate to have a number of extant primary sources, which convey across the centuries the genuine voice and the vision of those early inhabitants of 64A Lower Baggot Street Dublin. Amongst these is the correspondence of Catherine herself, which although not written to explicate her understanding of Mercy, does provide incomparable insight into her values and motivations. We also have her unique and defining stamp on the Original Rule and Constitutions, particularly the two sections she is thought to have composed. In pictorial form we have the 1840 series of sketches of the *Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy* by Sr. Clare Agnew. When we think of visual art and Catherine's early companions though, our minds are most likely to turn to the exquisite work of Sr. Clare Augustine Moore that graces the early registers and other documents.

My reflection will focus on a single decorated capital letter in which Clare Augustine Moore's art meets and accommodates Catherine McAuley's words in the context of the Gospel. This makes it a powerful locus of the Spirit. It has further significance since it is also one of the rare instances, perhaps the only instance, where Clare Augustine Moore paints a Gospel story other than a Marian episode or the Crucifixion. So, let us explore Mercy through the Gospel story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) as depicted by Clare Augustine Moore in its context of words penned by Catherine herself, and see how the interplay between the three elements – the Gospel story, Catherine's words, and Clare Augustine Moore's art- might enhance and guide our own understanding of Mercy. The material comes from Clare Augustine Moore's illuminated version of Chapter 3: *Of the Visitation of the Sick*, part of the original *Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy*.

### THE WORDS OF CATHERINE

While most parts of the document known as the original *Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy* were composed around 1835, and were painstakingly adapted by Catherine from the existing Presentation Rule, Catherine is thought to have composed from scratch Chapters 3 & 4 in late 1832 or early 1833. They both deal with ministries that were outside the scope of the Presentation Rule, but that were intrinsic to the identity of the newly formed Sisters of Mercy- visitation of the sick and dying, and care of destitute women. Mary Sullivan rsm remarks "Chapter 3 is apparently, entirely Catherine's own composition." We are here very close to Catherine's vision and voice.

In her book *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, Mary Sullivan outlines the document's various stages of revision and amendment, which culminated in approval of the Rule by Rome in 1841. Clare Augustine Moore's specially illuminated copy, not to be confused with the simple "fair copies" made by her blood sister Mary Clare (Georgiana) Moore, was produced somewhat later.

- Chapter 3 commences with the following salient words: *Mercy, the principal path marked out by Jesus Christ for those who desire to follow Him...* Often quoted as if it ended there the sentence actually continues *has in all ages of the Church excited the faithful in a particular manner to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they regarded 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.* Here we see Catherine making the connection with the Gospel parable of Matthew 25, where Jesus asserts his arena of compassion and care: with the least, the most needy, the most hungry, the most ill. Further, he establishes once and for all an unbreakable dynamic between himself, the needy and the one who seeks to respond. The Christian is never just doing good to or for a neighbour: he or she is drawn into communion with Jesus Himself through such service because of the identification Jesus claims with the one in need.
- The first part of Catherine's statement is crucial for us in terms of motivation and reckoning. It is Jesus who marks out the path, it is Jesus whom we desire to follow. It is here that our desire, so often weak and distracted, finds clear and resolute direction. Jesus is the protagonist, not Catherine herself, nor any Church structure or group. Two hundred years on, we honour Catherine pre-eminently because she honoured Jesus. Mary Sullivan rsm describes Chapter 3 as "remarkably Christological" and as such it expresses Catherine's hard won and lifelong profound relationship with Jesus. The Chapter is framed by references to Jesus Christ: the famous "principal path" at the beginning, and at the end the calling home from Visitation of the Sisters to pray in the chapel before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.
- Catherine's use of the word "excited" is noteworthy, reminiscent of her much loved word "animated" and having much the same meaning. Mercy excites, that is, it stirs to action, rouses to a response, calls forth mercy from the one in whom it is acting. Mercy itself, the attribute of God, rouses mercy in us to respond to the sick and dying, and by extension, to anyone in acute need. It is worth reading the rest of this Chapter 3, printed in full in Mary Sullivan's book, to glean insights into Catherine's own firmly held beliefs about how the sick and dying need to be approached. There is the emphasis on tenderness, the insistence on gentle honesty, with both the spiritual and temporal comfort of the person regarded as crucial to their care. This is the Catherine who did her apprenticeship in these matters for twenty years, sleeping with one eye and ear open close by the bedroom door of the invalid Mrs Callaghan at Coolock House.

## THE WORDS OF JESUS

A few words in general about the Good Samaritan story itself before we consider Clare Augustine Moore's artwork and what she offers in her depiction of it.

- In his commentary on Luke's Gospel, *The Hospitality of God*, Jesuit Scripture scholar Brendan Byrne reminds us that much of the impact of the story that Jesus tells is lost on modern readers,

particularly given that that the expression “good Samaritan” has become axiomatic with helping and kindness. To the original listeners, and the lawyer who prompted the story, the impact was quite different. The notion of a *good* Samaritan was for them an oxymoron, with the same resonance as someone today calling a terrorist well-meaning or a murderer well-intentioned. In some ways the story that Jesus tells is complex and certainly subversive, where subversive means turning the expected norms upside down. This is Jesus at his most provocative, and it begs the question of what kind of righteous subversion we are called to as Christians today. In what ways, in what situations are we called to justifiably turn things upside down?

- In her book *The Blessing of Mercy*, Veronica Lawson rsm provides an important insight into the non-human elements of the story she terms “agents of Mercy.” She asserts, *The Samaritan befriends the wounded traveller and draws on all available resources to care for him: wine and oil to dress the wounds, fabric for binding the wounds, his “own animal” as transport, finance (coins) for accommodation, companionship at the inn, provision for ongoing care. All the Earth elements that contribute to the well-being of the man who fell among the robbers become agents of womb-compassion. (The Blessing of Mercy, p.71)*

Each of these agents is a healing force, bringing comfort. They soothe and revivify. They possess their own intrinsic properties of transformation. One may ask oneself what are the agents of mercy that comfort and revivify you?

Veronica’s claim for our acknowledgement of the non-human elements of the story as “agents of mercy” has profound implications for the way we perceive and deal with our environment, and engage with all creatures and created matter great and small. The nuances of much of this are outside the scope of this article but demand further attention: “The present ecological crisis calls us to new ways of being neighbour...” (*The Blessing of Mercy*, p.72.)

- Another aspect of this idea of “agents of mercy” is that the non-human can be for us a mediator of God. In the Good Samaritan story the horse (if it is indeed a horse, because that is not specified in the story!) is crucial to advancing the healing and restoration of the injured person. Although Jesus does not comment on the disposition of the animal, and while philosophical questions about volition and intent are again, beyond the scope of this reflection, it is true to say that many people experience peace, healing and a sense of God in their dealings with the non-human elements of our planet and beyond. I remember many years ago reading a story in the English Catholic weekly *The Tablet*, about a woman whose childhood had been so horrendous that she could not relate to the metaphor of God as Father, nor God as Mother. When she tried to imagine the utter faithfulness and unconditional love of God she would think rather of her dog. That reality, that metaphor, helped her have some appreciation of the God of love and mercy. This was not a trite, sentimental story, but an account of grace.
- One of the unspoken aspects about the story of the Good Samaritan is the theme of *interruption*. How many of us today, with our disciplined schedules and timetables and carefully and strictly allotted activities, welcome or allow interruptions? How many of us are even attuned to the potential grace of the interruption? Sometimes interruptions overtake us anyway and we have no choice but to respond and deal with serious illness or unforeseen accident for ourselves or others close to us. Certainly, interruptions can range from the bothersome and distracting to the disastrous, but they can also be an invitation to turn aside from the well plotted path, from the modern fixation to control, and respond instead to the surprising, the salutary and the elementally important. At least sometimes, Mercy waits in the incidental and accidental.

- There is a quality about the care evinced by the Samaritan that goes beyond the normal, which must have made the story even more infuriating to its first hearers. As Brendan Byrne expresses it “the Samaritan sets about fulfilling in a most extravagant way the duties of mercy and hospitality the other two had ignored.” (p.101) One of the nuances of the Hebrew word for mercy, *Hesed*, is the doing of more than can be reasonably expected, going beyond what duty would demand. Jesus invests the despised Samaritan with that quality. The example of such largesse is of course expressed by Jesus not only in his words but in his own deeds- in the washing of the feet at the Last Supper, the miracle of the loaves and fishes, and in the ultimate sacrifice of His life on the cross.
- The Samaritan’s hospitality may be extravagant in the best sense of *Hesed*, but it is not a meretricious or short lived kind of gesture. He follows through, he makes provision for the recovery of the injured man, he comes back to see how things are going. It reminds me of the disposition of St. Exupery’s Little Prince- “you are responsible forever for what you have tamed...” Once you have entered into a truly mutually salvific act with someone, it cannot be discounted or rendered unimportant. Even if the Samaritan, his horse, the inn keeper and the injured man never meet again, they are bonded in the spirit.

## THE ART

We come finally to examine Clare Augustine Moore’s depiction of the Good Samaritan story. (*See Figure 1. p.7*)

Our attention is first seized by the large decorated initial M which leads into the calligraphy of that pivotal phrase “*Mercy, the principal path*”:

- It is to the Good Samaritan story that Clare Augustine Moore turned for inspiration in decorating the large M of the word Mercy, and as already stated this was a unique choice. In her customary work we see myriad flowers, and those excruciatingly slowly executed leaves that Catherine bemoaned. (See Catherine’s letter dated March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1841, for one such example.) In Clare Augustine Moore’s canon of work we find numerous depictions of the Madonna and Child, and Crucifixions, a panoply of saints and martyrs, and a brilliant touch of feminist theology which has three Sisters of Mercy appearing as the Magi at the crib. But as far as I can ascertain this is the only instance of a Gospel story, a story told by Jesus, that she chose to render into art and on those grounds it begs for serious consideration both as art and as theology, particularly as it is giving visual accompaniment to words penned by Catherine McAuley. Whether or how Catherine and her early companions influenced the choice is unclear and seems impossible to prove one way or the other.
- At a fundamental level we can acknowledge that the story provided strong, immediately recognisable elements for Clare Augustine Moore to engage with- there’s blood and injury, a “visit” of sorts and responses that can be easily rendered into images. If you look carefully you can see the bottle of wine and the oil in the foreground. But the Good Samaritan story was not the only possible choice, and it has some provocative elements that go beyond helping and healing, as we have already commented, and which pose very confronting questions to those of us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

- Consider the letter M itself firstly. (*Figure 2.*) It is overarching, organic lettering, vivid in blue, red and green and highlighted in the white filigree effect that forms the double arch and lends a certain life and movement to the frame, reminiscent of the rubrication method employed by the Celtic manuscript artists of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The touch of gold lends depth and preciousness befitting the subject. The large M functions as a traditional diptych, the two parts embraced within the arches of the M. We need to examine the work closely to appreciate the detail and meaning Clare Augustine Moore infers and let our own imagination engage with her work.
- The most obvious aspect of the work is that the two parts of the story, the two possible responses to the situation, are clearly separated, which strongly depicts the disparity between the Samaritan helper and the priest and Levite who choose not to help. There is a wall between them, a great divide formed by the central column of the letter M. They operate in different landscapes and value systems. The priest and the Levite have justifiable religious reasons for not stopping. As Brendan Byrne points out, contact with the dead or imminently dead would prevent them performing their anticipated religious duties because of defilement under the Law. And yet if we listen to the definition of neighbour provided by Anna Burke rsm, in her book of short reflections on Mercy, we are compelled to call into question their lack of response and to examine our own status as neighbour. Neighbours... *are the people who put personal danger, reputation and cultural habits on hold. Neighbours jump in for us; they reach through the danger and search through the fumes. (The Quality of Mercy, p.22)* Reaching through the danger, searching through the fumes, whether metaphorical or literal, is a very risky and demanding undertaking. Most of us would surely be tempted to run from danger and to avoid the potential toxicity of fumes.
- Despite the disjunction between the responses of the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan, they are all nevertheless held within the embrace of the M, which suggests that no-one, no action, no lack of action, is outside the remedial grace of Mercy. It is never too late for Mercy, even for the priest and Levite who missed the opportunity to assist. They themselves are still held within the frame of Mercy, within the arch of Mercy, even if they do not yet know their need of it. As Pope Francis said in his announcement of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, “no one can be excluded from the mercy of God.”
- The way the artwork functions has the Samaritan, and indeed the horse, looking solicitously at the injured man. The Priest and Levite have their backs to him and do not meet his gaze. They saw him but they chose to avert their gaze rather like those who could not bear to look upon the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. This whole notion of looking, of seeing, is intrinsic to the story. All three travellers “see”; two of them respond by walking on. The third, the Samaritan *truly* sees and responds. To see truly is to respond truly. To be seen truly is to experience Mercy. Both the injured person and the Samaritan are seen for who they are by the other, and this enables the dynamic of Mercy to ensue.
- The right hand side of the diptych shows space and distance in a negative sense despite the apparent felicity of the landscape and the finely towered city the two are heading towards. There is distance even between the two figures. (*See Figure 4.*) They are solitary in their choices, their hands by their sides. By contrast, the Samaritan and his horse are gathered into a very intimate scene with the injured man, both of them reaching down and out to him. The three of them are bound together in this special episode of need and compassion. They are in close physical proximity, contiguous. (*See Figure 3.*) The two who walked on are small and isolated in the landscape. By definition the word *compassion* leads to connection, since etymologically it derives

from the Latin “to suffer with”. The Samaritan is not just a helper, a rescuer, a provider. Those aspects of the story are important, but they are not the heart of the story. By stopping and getting involved, by allowing compassion to rise in him, he shares in a genuine way in the suffering of the injured man.

- Clare Augustine Moore renders the scene behind the Samaritan and the injured man dense with trees and overhanging rocks, and there is no discernible path. The path the priest and Levite are treading is, conversely, very clearly defined and well worn. It is the path of piety and respectability, valid in its way but inadequate to the need presented in the story.

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached about the Good Samaritan story the day before he was assassinated. He pointed out that in the time of Jesus, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notorious for its danger and difficulty, and was known as the "Way of Blood".

*And you know, it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking, and he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure. And so the first question that the priest asked, the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?"*

However, King continues:

*But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"*

So, the Samaritan takes a serious risk in responding as he does, by focusing on the needs of the injured person rather than protecting his own safety. He could be placing himself in danger; he might be falling into a trap. But he takes the risk. The other two play it very safe, and part of us can appreciate their prudence, their caution. For the Samaritan the call to mercy overrides all other considerations. What was it Catherine McAuley is reputed to have said? *It is better to relieve a hundred imposters, if there be such, than to suffer one really distressed person to be sent away empty. (Familiar Instructions)*

The great prophet Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche Communities, writes often about the vulnerability that ensues when one engages with the vulnerable. The story of the Good Samaritan exemplifies this starkly in terms of the risks the Samaritan takes. It is a delicate and complex matter, risking hurt and misunderstanding, risking exploitation and abuse:

*An encounter is not an exercise in power. Nor is it a demonstration of generosity through which we seek to “do good to” the other. It demands real humility and deep vulnerability. To be present to the other, to listen to and regard him or her with respect and attention, allows us to receive in our turn. This is a communion of hearts, a reciprocal gift, freely given. (Jean Vanier, Signs)*

## **Conclusion**

My aim in this reflection has been to explore what is revealed to us about mercy in the context of the Gospel story of the Good Samaritan, and to explore the dynamic between the Gospel story, the words of Catherine McAuley, and the artwork of Clare Augustine Moore.

Where has it taken us? Hopefully, to insist that we are called to give the benefit of the doubt, over and over. We are called to take the inadvisable risk, at least sometimes. And we are called, over and over, to use Martin Luther King Jr's expression, to reverse the question.

When we look at Clare Augustine Moore's decorated letter of Catherine McAuley's word, we are invited to affirm that all is held within the grace and space of that Big M for Mercy. All of us, the

injured, the helper and healer, the creatures great and small, the indifferent and the stony hearted, the robbers and the inn-keeper, the risk-taker and the risk-averter, are included in the extravagant largesse of Mercy. Along with the oil, the wine, and Jesus himself, who first told the story.

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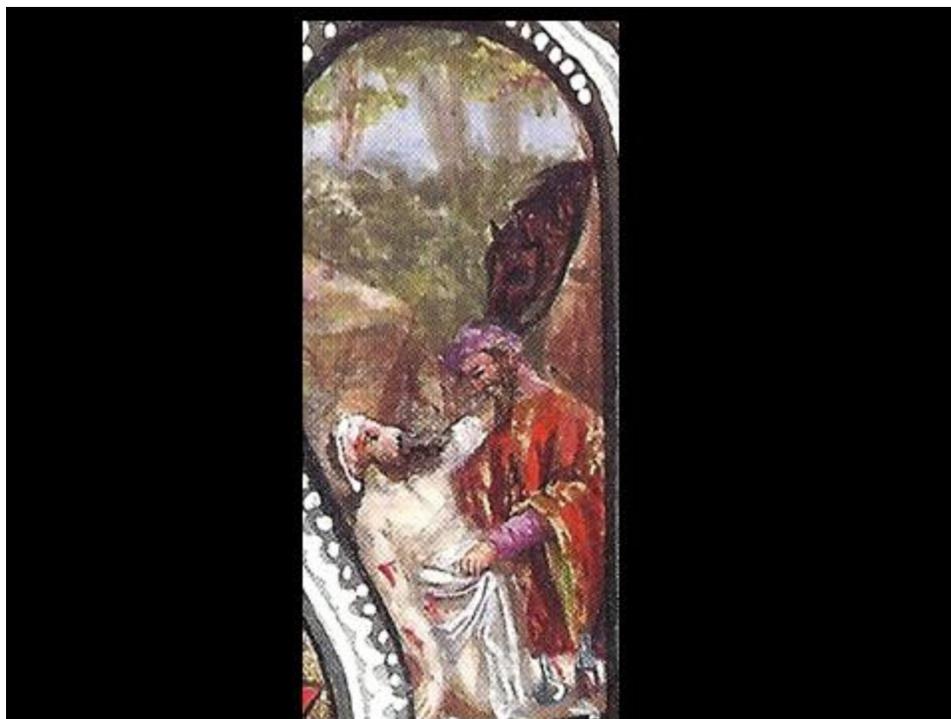
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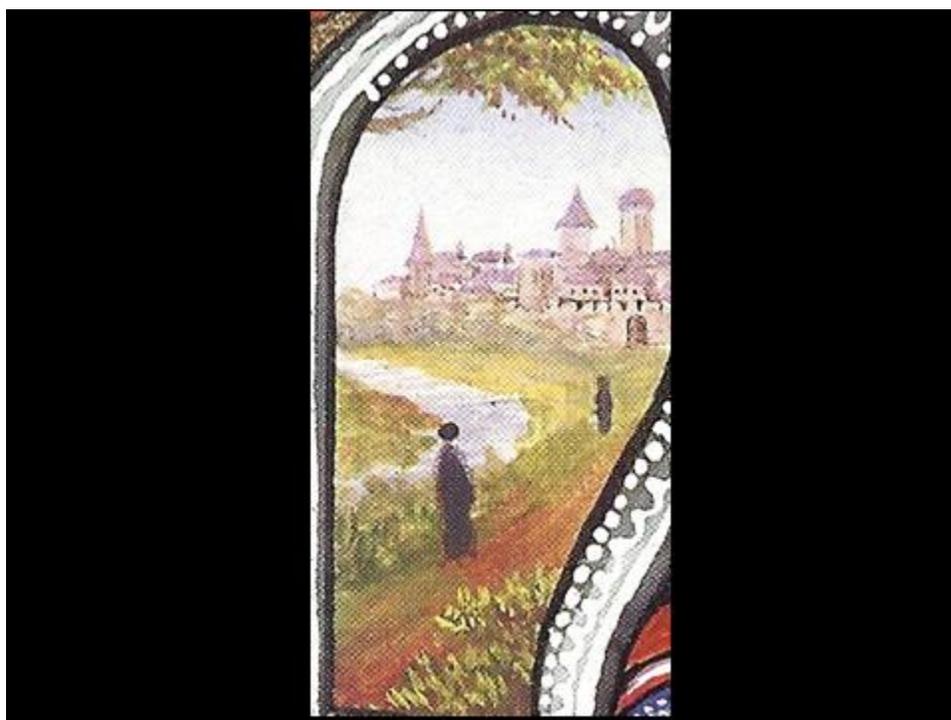
(Figure 1.)



(Figure 2)



(Figure 3.)



(Figure4.)

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