

Like the Compass (Paper 5 of 6)

BY MARY REYNOLDS RSM

ONE of the qualities that people who knew Catherine constantly remarked on was her serenity. Her novices described her as having “a contagious sweetness... that portrayed the love of God within her”¹ and it was said of her that “whatever trials or difficulties she had to contend with, and they were many, she never appeared sad or dejected”.² She herself gives us an insight into this serenity in one of her instructions to her novices. Preparing them for profession in the very first year of her religious life, she said: “Those who arrive at perfect love of God will feel such peace of soul as nothing can disturb”.³

We can never underestimate the influence of Sacred Scripture on Catherine’s faith development and on her understanding of union with God. Through what to many might have appeared misfortune in her life, she found herself in a Quaker household, encountering God and deepening her union with him through a Protestant Bible at a time when none of the Catholic laity, nor any women in religious congregations, were as yet free to read scriptures in the vernacular.

The Bible was a great source of peace to Catherine and through it she became a ‘Gospel woman’ living out of the ‘wisdom of the Gospel’. It later formed the core of her spiritual teaching to her sisters: “The life and teachings of Jesus Christ should be as a book always opened before us... and as a seal whose image we are to impress on our hearts”⁴ and “What Jesus said and did was said and done to give us an example, which our lives should be spent in copying”.⁵

We are familiar with the unending demands that were made on Catherine and her followers in the service of the poor. They could easily have become immersed in responding to these many needs to the exclusion of all else, yet as Catherine would remind herself and the sisters: “What advantage are our works to God? But our working hearts He longs for, and he pleads for them with touching earnestness”.⁶

Yet, Catherine did not wish her sisters to become contemplative in the accepted sense of her day. The trend then was towards cloistered settings for religious women, requiring students and others who sought their services to come to their religious institutes. Catherine’s Sisters of Mercy would go out from that setting to wherever they

were needed. She promoted the idea of ‘contemplation in action’ which was a new concept for the traditionally cloistered religious. She was so fixed on what needed to be done that she refused to be confined by convention or custom. She had learned how to utilise the activities of each hour as the matter of her reflection and she never accepted a dichotomy between contemplation and the apostolate. Rather, she insisted that active works must be done without losing awareness of the presence of God, and she was convinced that the Sister of Mercy must make mission the ambience of her recollection.

In expanding on that conviction in her Retreat Instructions she said: “Prayer, retirement and recollection are not sufficient for those called for the salvation of souls. They should be like angels who while fulfilling the office of guardians, lose not for a moment the presence of God or as a compass that goes round its circle without stirring from its centre. Our centre is God from whom all our actions should spring as from their source and no exterior action should separate us from Him. The functions of Martha should be done for Him as the duties of Mary”.⁷

Catherine understood that Jesus was present in all people, especially in the poor, the sick, the dying, the abandoned, the unprotected. Again and again she quoted the words of Jesus “Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do unto me” (Matthew 25:40). She encouraged her sisters to be recollected as they passed through the streets “going forward as if they expected to meet their Divine Redeemer in each poor habitation, since He has said, ‘Where two etc. etc. are in my name I will be’.”⁸

One important awareness contained in the rule is that the sisters labour with Christ assisting him in his labours on behalf of the poor. “Our hearts then should be replenished with love and gratitude to our Divine Spouse for allowing us graciously to aid Him in the person of the poor.”⁹

Catherine had a way of reminding her sisters that the works of Mercy are not theirs but God’s. It was this belief that gave her the freedom of spirit to move forward with works and move back from them as circumstances dictated. The poor always remained God’s poor and though she was called to serve them, their care was basically God’s affair.

Catherine was one of the first to promote a vision of apostolic spirituality. Just as Christ considered as done to himself whatever was done to others, she was convinced that all Sisters of Mercy should be a sign of Christ's presence among his people. They should expect to encounter Him in the many areas encompassed by their ministry. In this regard, she urged them to be like a lamp kindled with the fire of divine love, shining and giving light to all¹⁰ and she told them: "If the love of God really reigns in your heart, it will quickly show itself in the exterior. You will become sweet and attractive in manner. You will have a tender esteem for everyone, beholding in them the image of God".¹¹

In a very real sense Catherine's 'apostolic spirituality' was part of her search for personal union with God and it was marked by her ability to create and maintain inner spiritual space, to be constantly aware of the mystery of God and to be everywhere in the world of people. Her apostolic spirituality may be said to have effectively translated the Gospel into the idiom of her time and to have conveyed this ideal to others.

It is a well known fact that in the early history of the Sisters of Mercy, there was the recurring issue of contemplative versus apostolic spirituality. From the beginning Catherine had a vision of a congregation whose members would unite contemplation and action in a harmonious whole. When faced with a decision about becoming a religious, she insisted on only one concession – the new congregation would be free of enclosure and its sisters would be free to go out among the poor, the sick, the forsaken ones in their homes, their hovels, the prisons, the workhouses without relinquishing prayer, silence, meditation and the recitation of the Office. "The streets will be our cloister," she said. She herself embraced the importance of a profound inner life which would enliven and support a generous service of the poor, and this very service would itself be a powerful means of union with God. "No occupation," she said, "should withdraw our minds from God. Our whole life should be a continual act of praise and prayer."¹²

The only model with which the clergy and Catholic laity were familiar was that of enclosed religious living a form of life that placed strong emphasis on contemplation and ascetical practice. This was the understanding of what 'proper religious' should be. Among those who came to join Catherine were some who had been educated by other religious orders and they too had certain preconceptions of how religious should be. While she was away in George's Hill, her eager young companions at Baggot Street had 'a field day' as they veered off in a direction they perceived

to be a way to practise a true form of spirituality. The Dublin Manuscript refers to how 'each mismanaged her spirituality'. They undertook imprudent fasting, long night vigils and the wearing of haircloth while at the same time engaging in long days of apostolic activity. Catherine disapproved of all this, and even while still in George's Hill, asked the Carmelite Fathers to prevail upon the community to discontinue those practices and to recognise that compassionate service of those in need is itself an asceticism.

Constant pressure concerning the status in the Church of the 'walking nuns' eventually led Catherine to petition Archbishop Murray to obtain approval from Rome. While this was granted on March 24, 1835 it did not end the tension. The Carlow Annals speak of the struggle involved in dissuading the young sisters to understand that holiness is not acquired only through prayer and meditation.

The horarium at Baggot Street combined several features with modifications of the one at George's Hill. Its keynote was flexibility and it replaced extreme penitential practices by the discipline of "fraternal charity and fidelity to the common life", this being "the greatest of all mortifications and by far the most meritorious". In the matter of spiritual exercises, Catherine avoided long drawn out prayers and the accumulation of devotions which had facilitated the drift to enclosure of the Presentation Sisters. She therefore cut down on some, she eliminated others and replaced them by litanies and the celebration of special feasts, the whole arrangements bringing into focus her deep appreciation of the liturgy.

The day started with Office, meditation and Eucharist. After breakfast, Catherine read a spiritual lecture to the sisters, a practice she continued until shortly before her death when mouth ulcers and severe coughing obliged her to appoint another reader. The day's assignment began with a short period of preparation at 9:30am and it was specifically stated that those engaged in the visitation of the sick were not expected to attend choir duties during the day.

The practice of 'custody of the eyes', often acclaimed in manuals of religious practice, was not encouraged by her. In her Retreat Instructions she noted that "such an extreme might give some persons a rather disagreeable expression of countenance. The countenance should always be modest and pleasing to behold". In 1841, Catherine wrote to Frances Warde about a young woman who had entered the novitiate at Baggot Street. She had spent six months in a Carmelite convent and Catherine bemoaned the task she saw ahead of "opening the eyes of the little Carmelite". She had acquired, Catherine wrote: "the holy art of keeping custody of eyes, for she seldom opens them".¹³

Throughout her life Catherine resisted any additions to devotional practices arising from the misguided fervour of superiors or novice mistresses. The climatic battle in maintaining a balance between apostolic and contemplative commitments in Bermondsey, through the excesses of the superior, Clare Agnew, is well documented. The extraordinary practices which Clare introduced were in themselves cause for concern. For example, arrangements that in the dining room the sisters should sit facing a bare wall in order to avoid distraction, and the ludicrous practice of having shorter sisters stand on boxes in the chapel so that the line of sisters in the choir would be of uniform height! She had taken over as superior in Bermondsey in June, 1841, but by July 26, Catherine was forced to admit that "Sister Agnew is fond of extremes in piety, that is her greatest error".¹⁴

What was more serious was the possibility that the essential elements of the mercy vocation to minister to the 'poor, sick and ignorant' would be put at risk, when Clare offered the sisters the choice between active and contemplative life and petitioned the bishop to introduce perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Claiming private revelations as her source, she launched a subtle attack on the fundamentals that distinguished Catherine's work, that is, the fusion of contemplation and apostolic work. Her innovation gave the Bermondsey sisters the option of *either* contemplation or action. Those opting for the former should form a nucleus of their own within the community where they would occupy a separate part of the convent. They were to be an association of pious workers rather than a community of religious sisters.¹⁵

Catherine's desire to guide the community through the crisis led her to synthesise her understanding of the spirituality of the apostolic life in the document known as "The Spirit of the Institute". This is based on an essay by Alonso Rodriguez but carefully adapted to suit Catherine's intention and her desires for the Mercy Congregation. She pointed out that apostolic spirituality was at the very heart of Mercy. She wrote:

"When God institutes a religious order, He gives at the same time the Grace that is necessary for such an order, and for all those who are called... that all may attain to the perfection for which it was designed... each society of Religious receives a grace particularly adapted to the duties which they are called to perform".¹⁶

She did not condemn the Bermondsey sisters; she warned them against "a delusion and artifice of the enemy" and she continued:

"We must consider the time and exertion which we employ for the relief and instruction of the poor

and ignorant – as most conducive to our own advancement in perfection, and the time given to prayer and all other pious exercises – we must consider as employed to obtain grace, strength and animation... [without which] all our efforts would be fruitless.¹⁷ ... We ought then have great confidence in God in the discharge of all these offices of mercy, spiritual and corporal – which constitute the business of our lives".¹⁸

Catherine's central point was that the complete giving over to the works of mercy was the way for one to mature in Christ. Thus, stressing prayer as the basis of the active apostolate, she desired her sisters to cultivate an inner solitude of the heart, that they might be a presence in the network of dark, disease-ridden, overcrowded, insanitary slums and alleys of the cities and towns where they served.

Catherine did not, at any time reproach Clare Agnew or her supporters for devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and their love of prayer, but she did express concern about their imprudence. Bishop Thomas Griffiths rejected Clare's application for the establishment of a Perpetual Adoration Chapel in the Bermondsey convent. Shortly after Catherine's death, Clare Agnew was dispensed from vows. Later, she joined the Trappistines in Dorset but did not persevere, following which, she made three unsuccessful efforts to rejoin Mercy. She founded a short-lived community in Rome where she remained until her death in 1883.

The salient characteristic of Catherine's vision and entire life was an expression of love of God through service of people. When asked what were the necessary qualities in a person seeking to become a Sister of Mercy, she gave a very simple reply "an ardent desire to be united to God and serve the poor".¹⁹ Her realism led her to try and alleviate human need of every kind; her idealism convinced her that the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy are a means of closer union with God, and she compared the Sister of Mercy who does not actively serve God's people to a knife that grows rusty or a well that becomes stagnant from want of use. To neglect either prayer or apostolic service for the sake of the other, as had been attempted at Bermondsey, would be to deviate from her founding intention and from the lifestyle that had received the full approval of the Holy See.

Two practices which Catherine encouraged as a support to apostolic spirituality were 'the sacrament of the present moment' – the notion that 'what is now' is where God is for me, and the practice of silence. Today we might call it reflective living. "The practice of the presence of God is

one-half of holiness," she said. "We belong to God, all in us is his... We must endeavour to keep ourselves in his presence, united with him by faith, knowing that he sees and hears us everywhere." One support she used herself in this was the use of frequent aspirations which she considered were her point of conscious, loving contact with God at all times.

Speaking of silence to her sisters she said, "Spiritual advancement generally takes place in the hours of silence. In silence God will work on our interior life if we allow him. Recollection, leads to familiarity with God – uniting us with him as one friend with another."²⁰ However, Catherine's directives on silence were neither inflexible nor irreversible as she counselled the sisters to use conversation whenever necessary, particularly in the interests of charity.

The devotional practices which Catherine recommended to her sisters place her firmly within the tradition of the Irish Church. She had a particular devotion to the Sacred Heart. She herself was a woman with great heart for others and she recommended this devotion as a way of experiencing the compassionate love of God. "If we enter into the recess of his Sacred Heart, we will there behold the greatest love, patience, sweetness, recollection, humility and sacrifice." Many who knew her would say that Catherine herself was the living example of these qualities. Catherine's charism was to bring to the world the Mercy of God which flows from the wounded heart of Christ.

Devotion to the Passion was particularly dear to Catherine. The Christ she loved and contemplated was above all the crucified Christ. For her, as for Saint Paul, outside of Christ, there was "nothing". She often proclaimed that "the congregation was founded on Calvary, there to serve a crucified Redeemer" and she would say "Let us fly often to the foot of the cross and repose in the wounds of Jesus. He has written us in His hands. Shall we not write His wounds in our minds and hearts?"²¹

Catherine's oneness with Christ crucified was such that, far from shirking the cross in her life, she actually reached out in faith to embrace it. She would say: "Thus we go on, my Dear Sister Frances, flourishing in the very midst of the Cross – more than a common share of which has latterly fallen to my lot, thanks be to God".²² Catherine encouraged a joyful embrace of the cross: "When you feel weariness in the performance of your daily duties; when anything occurs that is painful to your self love, behold the Cross. Cling to it! From this reflection, you cannot hesitate to cry out with your Saviour Not my will, Heavenly Father, but thine be done". Clearly, the new life that Catherine injected into the Church in Ireland, and elsewhere, was not

realised without suffering. For all that, she viewed trials and disappointments from a faith perspective, as crosses to be carried with and for Jesus.

Catherine prized the Eucharist above all else. Love of the Eucharist brought Catherine and Mary Clare Moore fasting to Limerick on November 29, 1836. They set out from Charleville at 3:00am with the intention of receiving Holy Communion in Limerick before continuing the journey to Dublin. The events of the morning are best described by Vincent Hartnett: "The weather was extremely cold and there was a heavy fall of snow. The delay on the road was even greater than was anticipated; still she did not lose hope of being in time. Immediately on her arrival (at noon) she went with her companion to look for a church... It was one o'clock before they got back to the hotel to breakfast". Sister Clare Moore later quoted Catherine on her love of the Eucharist: "It is by means of the grace bestowed in the Eucharist that we are enabled to persevere in our vocation". Deprivation of Mass was Catherine's greatest trial during the 'chaplaincy crisis'. "How could we ever thank God for his innumerable favours," she asked "if we had not the Mass wherewith to offer gratitude and to return no less than the gifts we have received?"

Similarly, devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament was a recommended practice. She advised that the sisters spend some time in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament before beginning their daily ministry and that they should return there as they completed it. Jesus, present in the Sacrament would be their support for all they encountered in their work as "a fountain of love, joy, peace, consolation and grace". There is a lovely prayer-poem composed by Catherine on October 18, 1840, around the time her health began seriously to decline and when deaths of loved ones were again saddening her heart. It is a beautiful insight into the kind of intimate relationship she had with Jesus. We can imagine her praying in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament:

"And thus, when winds and waves are high, Come, Saviour, to my aid.

Come, when no other help is nigh, and say, 'Be not Afraid'.

Speak, and my fears no more are heard. Speak and my griefs are laid.

Speak, and my heart shall bless that word: 'Tis I, be not afraid.'

Before the judgement seat above, when I shall sink, dismayed;

Sustain me, Lord, and say in love, 'Tis I, be not afraid'."²³

She referred to those visits to the Blessed Sacrament as

“a daily tryst”. One of her very touching maxims was “in order to imitate Jesus, we must often *entertain* ourselves with him”.

Catherine was at her lyrical best when she advised sisters: “By frequent visits every day you shall pay assiduous court to your heavenly spouse on the throne of His love. In all your sufferings and anxieties; in all your fears and temptations, you shall seek comfort and consolation at the foot of the altar”.²⁴

Catherine also recommended devotion to Mary although her own devotion in this regard is somewhat of a mystery. For the greatest part of her life – before moving to Baggot Street – she lived in a household where Catholic devotion was not tolerated. We do not have evidence of devotion to Mary in Catherine’s early life. Her growth in love of Mary may have been influenced by her early companions and her formation in George’s Hill.

At the time of her profession, Catherine resisted the customary change of names for herself and her companions, and instead, she marked the change in their state of life by adding ‘Mary’ before the first of their baptismal names. Ultimately, Catherine’s increasing love for Mary led her to place the new congregation under her patronage: the Institute of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, and the house on Baggot Street was later to become Saint Mary’s. Her own comprehensive teaching on Mary is encapsulated in the following: “Let us become faithful copies of Mary; then we shall have acquired the virtue of modesty in all its perfection”. In another of her maxims she says: “It [humility] makes us close imitators... of the Blessed Virgin who, at the period of unequalled exaltation, intoned the magnificat, so expressive of her deep sense of God’s goodness and her own lowliness”.²⁵

In summary, we can say that Catherine’s spirituality was original in at least three ways: it was rooted in the Scriptures and in the traditions of the Church; it introduced something new, that is, a novel and attractive synthesis of contemplation and action and a preferential option for the poor in which she found Christ; it brought a woman’s way to the living of the Gospel insofar as Catherine pointed out how women could play an important and integral part in Church and in society.

The testimony of Father Martin Nolan OSA, Postulator for the Cause of Catherine, is a fitting summary of Catherine’s spirituality:

“Catherine McAuley’s was a sanctity both great and attractive, for she met the great challenges of her day with an unflagging faith and found its expression in an immense peace and a playful light heartedness. In all the travel and turmoil of her life as a Foundress,

she was at home within herself with the indwelling Lord. She radiated the tranquillity of inner intimacy; while the unseen realities to which her faith gave her that access allowed her to treat lightly and good humouredly the surface happenings that could have daunted another... She showed how every experience and event can be shot through with grace and be shaped so as to shine bright with the gladness of Redemption”.²⁶

Some would say that Catherine’s greatest contribution to the Church is not the congregation itself as much as the spirituality that enlivened it – a fresh and fertile blending of the contemplative spirit and the compassionate heart. It is a spirituality that alerts us to how God is with us in all the most ordinary activities and moments of our lives.

A modern day theologian defines Incarnation thus: “God comes within the chaos, within the discord, within the failures, and he sits with us at table in all the lumpy, wrinkly, pimply, sweaty bodies that we feast with and fight with.”²⁷

Catherine would certainly agree.

What is the gift to the world and to the Church today of our Mercy spirituality? It is the blending of the contemplative spirit and the compassionate heart. The call of Vatican II to religious is eminently applicable to those who live out of this Mercy spirituality with its gifts of contemplation by which they cling to God in mind and heart, and apostolic love which empowers them to share Christ’s redemptive work and to spread God’s kingdom.

To achieve a proper balance or rhythm between contemplation and action, to have the disposition of Mary to receive and ponder the Word of God and to act upon it, is a crucial challenge for us today, just as it was for Catherine and her first companions. It calls for a great deal of honesty and openness, humility and courage to explore our own stance in this regard. We are challenged to ask if our own commitment to merciful action is enlivened by faith-filled awareness of Christ present in others, and by contemplation that flows from a desire to be one with the God of Mercy.

As Sisters of Mercy, we are looking afresh at the prayer and spirituality of Catherine and finding in it a relevance to our own situations. A latter-day mystic, Teilhard de Chardin, echoes Catherine’s vision. He saw Christianity as the illumination of the existing world, forging bonds between inner faith and faithful work:

“By virtue of the Creation and, still more, of the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see. On the contrary everything is sacred to the one who can distinguish that portion

of chosen being which is subject to Christ's drawing power in the process of consummation. Try, with God's help to perceive the connection – even physical and natural – which binds your labour with the building of the kingdom of heaven... For what is sanctity in a creature if not to adhere to God with the maximum of one's strength? And what does the maximum adherence to God mean if not fulfilment – in a world organised around Christ".²⁸

The challenge for us, as it was for Catherine, could be summarised in the beautiful words of the Irish poet, Paul Murray OP: "I am that still centre within you, that needle's eye through which all the threads of the universe are drawn".²⁹

¹ Hartnett, p. 138.

² Degnan, p. 227

³ Sister M. Teresa Purcell RSM (ed), *The Retreat Instructions of Mother Mary Catherine McAuley*, The Newman Press, Westminster: 1952, p. 27 (herein referred to as Retreat Instructions).

⁴ Retreat Instructions, p. 87.

⁵ Retreat Instructions, p.15.

⁶ Retreat Instructions p. 73.

⁷ Retreat Instructions, p. 154.

⁸ MCS1, p. 298.

⁹ Familiar Instructions, p. 17.

¹⁰ Reference to Retreat Instructions, p. 155.

¹¹ Retreat Instructions, p. 145.

¹² Retreat Instructions, p. 43.

¹³ Letter 243 in MCS2.

¹⁴ Letter 284 in MCS2

¹⁵ See MCS1, p. 102.

¹⁶ MCS2, p. 462.

¹⁷ MCS2, p. 459.

¹⁸ MCS2, p. 462.

¹⁹ Letter 38 in MCS2.

²⁰ Reference in Familiar Instructions, pp. 99-105.

²¹ Familiar Instructions, pp. 72-3.

²² Letter 88 in MCS2.

²³ Cited in a reflection prepared by Kathleen M. Murphy RSM http://www.mercyworld.org/reflections/sacred/pdfs/mercyday_2006_A4.pdf (date cited November 16, 2009).

²⁴ Reference in Familiar Instructions, Chapter 11.

²⁵ Familiar Instructions, p. 115.

²⁶ M. Angela Bolster RSM, *Catherine McAuley, Venerable for Mercy*, Dominican Publications, Dublin, 1990, p. 111.

²⁷ Tina Beattie, "The Incarnation – What does it mean?" in *The Pastoral Review*, December, 1997.

²⁸ Pierre Teilhard De Chardin SJ, *The Divine Milieu*, William Collins Sons & Co., Ltd. London and Harper & Brothers, New York, 1960, p. 66.

²⁹ Paul Murray OP, "Canticle of the Void", in Diana Culbertson (ed), *Invisible Light: Poems About God*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000.

To Assist in Your Reflection and Prayer (Like the Compass)

Take some time to be in touch with the spirituality that animates your life. Ponder the following:

The balance between contemplation and action was expressed in the UISG declaration thus:

"Our passion for Jesus Christ and for humanity and creation impels us to become weavers of hope and of life".

Touch into the passion for Jesus Christ and for humanity that stirs in your own heart. Rest in the remarkable faithfulness of God, holding you in tender love. Centred in that place of stillness within, where God dwells, hear again your call to go out to touch all of life with hope and with tenderness.

What would your life be like, what would change for you, if you could be more aware of the still point within you, and if you were more in tune with and open to the divine energy that flows from the centre to hold in harmony every aspect of your life?

What do you need to let go of in your life right now to move into this place within? Pray about this.

Consider how Catherine, in response to the needs of her day, initiated a new spirituality – the 'walking nuns' who made the streets their cloister. Dialogue with her about the following: "Our time needs a new spirituality because we live at a turning point in history when the vision of reality that has sustained us for centuries has radically changed, requiring us to reshape and rethink our relationship to the Divine and to all life". (Breege O'Neill RSM, Ireland)

Ask Catherine to fill you with 'tender courage' with steadfast love, with a passion for the poor, with a deep sense of the call to bring the merciful love of Jesus to the needy of our time, just as Catherine did to hers. Write your own concluding prayer to express your commitment.