

Take From My Heart **All Painful Anxiety** (Paper 2 of 6)

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SOMETIMES we may pray “The Suscipe” without pausing to reflect on the reality that Catherine was often anxious. In one of her letters to Frances Warde with whom she often shared very personal confidences, she confided: “I have suffered more than usual with my old pain of sorrow and **anxiety**”.¹ And she added a detail about how anxiety affected her: “My stomach has been very ill”.² Let us today accompany Catherine in her anxieties, sharing her pain and perhaps sharing with her our own anxieties and drawing on her wisdom.

Hardly had the foundation stone been laid in Baggot Street in 1824 than there was cause for anxiety. The project attracted not a little ridicule. Some of her relations were disappointed and felt cheated of an inheritance they hoped would fall to them in the event of her not marrying. They dubbed her house ‘Kitty’s Folly’. A number of the residents of the fashionable homes in Merrion and Fitzwilliam Squares were none too pleased either. They complained that the house was a plain, unadorned building and that her venture focussed on the “thankless poor” and was downgrading the locality. Their hostility was shown when Catherine decided to appeal to the Catholics of the neighbourhood for subscriptions for the upkeep of the House of Mercy.

The venom of some of the replies was certainly reason enough to cause Catherine an “ill stomach”. Mary Clare Augustine Moore records: “N... knows nothing of such a person as C. McAuley and considers that C. McAuley has taken a very great liberty in addressing her. She requests that C. McAuley will not trouble her with any more of C. McAuley’s etc. etc.”.³ It was probably on occasions such as this that Catherine learned to pray “whatever God ordains or permits may be acceptable to me”. (“The Suscipe”)

A more offensive letter came her way in 1829 from a priest that addressed her as C. McAuley ESQ and berated her on the impropriety of a woman encroaching on such masculine prerogatives as business, finance, philanthropy and religious foundations. Clerical criticism was something to which Catherine was particularly sensitive. It was at moments like those that the advice given her by another priest, Father Edward Armstrong, must have sustained her: “Do not place your trust in any human being, but place all your confidence in God alone”.⁴ She so valued this advice that she frequently offered it to her sisters.

One of Catherine’s greatest critics was Canon Matthew Kelly of Saint Andrew’s Parish, the parish in which Baggot Street was situated. He and other clerics claimed that she and her companions were looking and acting conventual and trespassing on the apostolic field of Mary Aikenhead’s Irish Sisters of Charity. They took offence that lay women were doing freely and with self direction what the Sisters of Charity and the Presentations were doing within the canonical structures of the Church and they believed that their lifestyle was a sure indication of the emergence of an unauthorised and unorthodox religious order. Catherine was particularly devastated by these criticisms. She had carefully schooled herself to handle opposition with compassionate understanding, but opposition from those whose interests she supposed to be the same as her own left her not knowing where to turn.

So deeply hurt was she by those attacks that on the day the chapel in Baggot Street was blessed and opened as a public oratory, she could not bring herself to attend the opening Mass but stayed alone upstairs. One of her early biographers captures the emotion of the day: “She was much affected on that day and would not be present at the ceremonies but remained in prayer in the convent. At this time and long after, she had much to feel from disapprobation expressed by many priests and others”.⁵ It was in reflecting on experiences like this that Catherine grew in her understanding of God’s continued blessings even through human weakness.

Catherine’s greatest source of anxiety was the sickness and premature deaths of so many young companions. Even before she returned to Baggot Street from George’s Hill, death had claimed the life of 19-year old postulant, Caroline Murphy, and another postulant, Anne O’Grady, was seriously ill. The reception ceremony of the first seven novices on January 3, 1832, just three weeks after the foundation of the congregation on December 12, should have been a very joyful occasion. But the joy was shadowed by the fact that as the ceremony took place in the chapel, Anne O’Grady was terminally ill upstairs. On February 8, she died and was buried alongside Caroline Murphy in the vaults of St Teresa’s Church, Clarendon Street.

In March, the outbreak of Asiatic cholera struck Dublin and on April 25, little more than four months after her

profession in George's Hill, Sister Elizabeth Harley died. Catherine had great hopes that she would be her principal support in those founding days but the regime at George's Hill, where she worked in a damp basement, had taken its toll on her health and in her weakened state she succumbed to the cholera epidemic. No wonder that Catherine would remark: "The Congregation was founded on Calvary, there to serve a crucified Redeemer".⁶

Tuberculosis, cholera and typhus, as well as exhaustion from overwork and frugal nourishment caused a high level of sickness. Indeed, it was in order to provide a place for recuperation and restful breaks that the convent in the seaside location of Kingstown (today Dun Laoghaire) was opened. Unfortunately this did not work out as intended. Catherine, in the course of the ten years of her life as Mother Superior to her new band, accompanied the funeral cortege of ten more of her young sisters to Clarendon Street. In 1837 alone, five young sisters died. Ellen Corrigan, an orphan who had lived with Catherine since she was a child, died on February 9, having made her profession on January 25. A week later, Mary Rose Lube professed her vows on her death bed and died on March 11. On June 30, Aloysius Thorpe died of typhus. Just imagine the pain that Catherine must have carried in her heart as she presided over four professions and two receptions the following day, and then, four days later started out on a foundation to Cork.

But her anxiety was even more greatly increased when she was called back to her seriously ill niece and god child Catherine Macauley who was in the advanced stages of consumption. It was a tiring journey and on July 27 she wrote: "I am weary of all my travelling and this morning I fell down the second flight of stairs".⁷ Young Catherine

died on August 7 and her aunt's mixture of sadness and relief are captured thus: "Our innocent little Catherine is out of this miserable world. We feel now as if all the house was dead. All are sad to part with our animated sweet companion... Thank God it is over".⁸ On October 27, the fifth sister that year, Sister de Chantal McCann, died two weeks after Catherine's great support and friend, Doctor Nolan, Bishop of Carlow. Earlier that year in April, he had welcomed the new foundation to Carlow.

While this extreme experience of loss was being sustained, the 'chaplains controversy' and the 'Kingston controversy' were causing Catherine unspeakable anxiety. Does it surprise us that in November, as she struggled to cope with it all, she fell down the stairs again, this time in Kingstown, and broke her left wrist? In the following years, as well as five other deaths in Baggot Street, there was the death of Kate Coffey, a postulant in Carlow who had developed a brain haemorrhage after a fall on ice; another postulant in Galway, who died suddenly on the day she was to be received, while the foundation was still in process; a novice in Limerick, Mary Teresa Potter, for whom Catherine had particular affection and with whom she had exchanged several witty poems, and two novices in Bermondsey who had contracted typhus after visiting a family where the parents and seven children were dying of the fever. No wonder she would say: "The tomb seems never closed in my regard" or "my heart is sore", but she adds: "In grief, let us unite ourselves with that Heart, which was sorrowful even unto death".⁹

Catherine was very attached to her family, but love and anxiety in regard to family often go hand in hand. She had adopted Anne Conway-Byrn's four orphaned children, all of whom she brought to Coolock with Mr Callaghan's approval. Mary, Catherine's sister, was stricken with tuberculosis in the early 1820s and Catherine took a very active part in supporting the family during those years, winning the affection of the children and the esteem and respect of her brother in law, William. During May and June of 1827, Mary transferred to Stillorgan for change of air, and here, through Catherine's influence, she was reconciled to the Catholic Church. She died at the end of July having recommended conversion to Catholicism to her eldest daughter, Mary Teresa. News of his wife's conversion and his daughter's leanings towards Catholicism so angered William Macauley that Catherine had to flee once from the house in her night attire and seek refuge with a friendly neighbour. Later however, he realised his children's need for maternal affection and, at his insistence, Catherine agreed to play a 'mother's role' in the lives of her two nieces and three nephews. This became

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even more formal when William Macauley himself died in January 1828 and all five children chose Catherine as their legal guardian.

Catherine was now caring for four Byrne children and five Macauleys while at the same time attending to teaching obligations in Middle Abbey Street and supervising the building in Baggot Street. Mary Teresa, the eldest of Catherine's nieces, was one of the first novices. However, she was not professed with her companions in January 1833, as she was considering a call to the Carmelites. Sadly, ten months later, Catherine received her vows as a Sister of Mercy as she was professed on her death bed. Four and a half years later, her younger sister, called Catherine after her god mother, died in Baggot Street aged 18 years.

Catherine had also many anxious hours in regard to her three nephews, Robert, James, and Willie. Around 1832, she wrote to Archbishop Murray seeking financial support for the education of her second nephew who was now 15 years of age and expressing an interest in becoming a priest. She said: "My Lord he has no property. It pleased God to take away Father, Mother and six hundred a year in seventeen months. He is an orphan child of your Lordship's diocese, and I must earnestly beg the patronage and bounty of Your Grace to enable him to try his vocation".¹⁰ Willie, often referred to as 'wild Willie' went to sea in December of 1838 at the age of 17. Unfortunately he parted on bad terms with Catherine. He did not come to see her at all before his departure because of his anger with her for referring to him as a "spoiled child" in one of her letters to her brother (who was the one responsible for sending him to sea). He also resented her efforts to challenge his wild ways. Catherine never again saw or communicated with Willie and although he later spoke and wrote of his Aunt Catherine with great affection, she went to her grave unreconciled with him and pained by his loss in her life.

In contrast to 'wild Willie', she was encouraged by the progress of her other two nephews, James and Robert. In one of her letters she wrote: "It will give you great pleasure to hear that James and Robert have been to see me – both respectable and going on remarkably well, living together and studying for the Bar everyday – with real attention".¹¹ However, they too drifted somewhat from her and in another letter she wrote: "My poor James and Robert are gone from me. I have not seen them though they are in Dublin, for seventeen months".¹² Robert, who also had suffered consumption, died suddenly on January 4, 1840. Unfortunately Catherine was in Bermondsey at the time. It seems that relations between him and Catherine were somewhat strained because she had shown disapproval

of his lifestyle. Probably aware of how seriously ill he was, he had written to Catherine requesting her forgiveness, but sadly he died before she received that letter. Very soon after, James too was stricken with consumption. In one of her letters, Catherine wrote: "My poor dear James is in the last stage of decline in Kingstown. I am as much there as possible. Pray and get prayers for him".¹³ James died in May 1841, less than two years after his brother.

With Willie completely absent from Catherine's life, she had in eight years lost her two nieces and three nephews. In grief she remarked: "I have nothing now to draw me for one hour from my religious Sisters where all my joy on earth is centred".¹⁴ Her letter of 1840 to Elizabeth Moore gives us an insight into the faith foundation that supported her in times of grief: "Bless and love the Fatherly hand which has hurt you. He will soon come with both hands filled with favours and blessings"¹⁵ and again "without the Cross, the real crown cannot come".¹⁶

As regards the Byrne children whom she had adopted, the eldest Catherine Byrn, was very close to Catherine. She was one of her early helpers in Baggot Street and was among the first group of postulants received on January 3, 1832. However, she did not proceed to profession but left to join the Dominicans in December 1832. Teresa, a second daughter and god child to Catherine joined the Mercy Sisters and was professed on May 4, 1841 in Baggot Street. Catherine's own phrase "joys and sorrows mingled" could certainly be applied to her experience of family.

Financial matters were an ongoing source of anxiety for Catherine. Though she depended on Providence, she once remarked: "since there is very little good can be accomplished, or evil avoided, without the aid of money, we must look after it in small as well as in great matters".¹⁷ Most of the legacy bequeathed to her by the Callaghans was already used up by 1832. Expenses connected with the Baggot Street house had eaten considerably into her inheritance; novitiate fees at George's Hill were steep; and she had placed the rest of her inheritance in a trust before her Profession (the Baggot Street Trust assigned the House of Mercy to Daniel Murphy should she and her associates cease to fulfil the purposes of the house). One of her first ways of cutting costs was to scale down the expenses associated with the first reception ceremony in Baggot Street just a few weeks after her return from George's Hill. She decided on a private affair without any family or friends present and directed that the postulants' black dresses should be remodelled into habits and that the Presentations' ebony crosses be replaced with cheap brass ones. There was to be no bridal dress as was the custom of the day. These measures proved to be a false

economy. The postulants were dismayed and the sparse arrangements were much resented by the families and friends of the new novices, as well as by benefactors. The mother of one postulant in particular was so upset that she prevailed upon her newly received daughter, Anna Carrol, to leave the Mercy congregation a week later and to join the Presentations!

Scarcity of funds also showed itself in the fare provided at Baggot Street. While Catherine was opposed to rigid austerities, it is probably a mark of just how anxious she was that she insisted on very frugal living. Mary Clare Moore records: "We were even spoken to at table to remember that we were not come to a full and plentiful house, that we should be more sparing etc.", and she goes on with a little hint of hurt: "we had been most sparing during her absence".¹⁸

The chief means of income to support the House of Mercy were bazaars, sales of work and door to door collections in the area. These did not always meet with the approval of neighbours as was evidenced in Easter week, 1832 – the first after the foundation of the congregation. Sister Elizabeth Harley lay dying and during her last moments, Catherine was summoned to the parlour and there berated by an angry caller "on the impropriety, the utter sinfulness of these ways of raising money for the poor".¹⁹ Catherine listened in silence and at the end of a 60 minute harangue so impressed her visitor as to receive from her a £15 donation towards the bazaar. Elizabeth died within hours of this incident.

Another good source of income was the collections made at the Sunday Masses in the chapel at Baggot Street. When Archbishop Murray dedicated the chapel in June, 1829, he gave permission for public Masses to be celebrated there and for the monies collected to be used for the charitable works of the House. However, when Reverend Walter Meyler became Parish Priest of Westland Row, he tried to stop this. His antipathy for Catherine and the sisters was never for one moment concealed. On his instructions, public Masses were discontinued at Baggot Street. He insisted that it was the duty of all parishioners to attend Mass in the new church in Westland Row and not in the convent chapel. The Sunday Mass collection funds were sorely missed at Baggot Street. Meyler also tried to put an end to the annual charity sermon but failed. It continued except for one year when the preacher became ill on the spot before proclaiming a word of the sermon. He recovered, but the funds were adversely affected!

One of Catherine's efforts at raising money was the establishment of a commercial laundry. This proved a near disaster and an extreme source of anxiety. Firstly, there

were problems with the architect and builder. Replying to a letter that Catherine wrote to the architect, complaining about unfulfilled aspects of the contract, he upbraided her for being "graciously offensive". The builder had not put in any laundry equipment, and when it eventually got up and running, the cost was high. Catherine wrote to Frances Warde: "These things take time. The expense of coal is very great – sometimes a ton a week",²⁰ but she adds hopefully: "the fire will not cost more when the work is much increased".²¹ The hope of attracting more business was not entirely helped by some of the customers' clothes getting damaged by the inexperience of the women and the faulty functioning of the machines. So concerned was Catherine that, to an already punishing schedule, she herself included some training time with the worker. It must have paid off because the laundry did become successful and it enabled her to build a large extension to her House of Mercy.

Two further conflictual situations caused Catherine extreme anxiety: one was the so called chaplaincy dispute; the other was the Kingston controversy. The chaplaincy dispute again involved Doctor Meyler. He insisted on abandoning a long-standing arrangement whereby Baggot Street had one special chaplain who was to serve the sisters, the women and the children of the house. Catherine regarded the provision of a special chaplain as essential for the personal direction and consistent spiritual care of all. Doctor Meyler wanted his three curates to serve on a rotational basis. He also insisted on a payment of £50 per annum but all Catherine could offer was £40. The tone of some of his correspondence to her on the matter was unaccommodating and, at times, sarcastic and hurtful. The personal cost to Catherine of this dispute can be glimpsed in her correspondence with the Chancellor of the Diocese, Reverend John Hamilton, which she finishes with the words: "The only apology I can offer for writing is that it comforts and relieves my mind to declare the truth, where I trust I am not suspected of insincerity".²² In one of her letters to Frances Warde, she wrote: "We have just now indeed more than an ordinary portion of the Cross in this one particular".²³ Elsewhere in the letter we get a glimpse of the pain, the hurt and the struggle as she writes: "Pray fervently to God to take all bitterness from me. I can scarcely think of what has been done to me without resentment. May God forgive me and make me humble before he calls me into his presence".²⁴

At the same time that Catherine was so distressed by the chaplaincy dispute, she was engaged in troublesome financial and legal problems over the Kingstown convent which, as she said, constituted a "real portion of the cross" for her. In 1835, she opened a convent in Sussex Place, Kingstown

as a rest house for convalescent sisters. Soon the plight of the poor, especially that of young girls who roamed the street, challenged her to further involvement. The parish priest, Father Sheridan, who was described by a writer of the day as “a shrewd financier”, welcomed Catherine’s proposals for transforming some unused stables and the coach house in Sussex Place into a school, but he made no financial commitments and Catherine walked into a commitment that she had not anticipated. Her letter to her lawyer puts the case plainly:

“Mr [Father] Sheridan seemed quite disposed to promote it [the project for a school] and brought Mr Nugent [Builder] of Kingstown to speak about the plan. When that was fixed on, I most distinctly said in the presence of Mr [Father] Sheridan that we had no means to give towards the expense, but to encourage a beginning, I promised to give all the little valuable things we had for a bazaar that year, and to hand over whatever it produced”.²⁵

She accordingly gave the builder £50 pounds, and in so doing incurred liability for the entire debt which amounted to something in the region of £400.

Several months of legal wrangling followed. The only way that seemed open was to sell or lease Sussex Place and, with eviction facing the sisters, they had to withdraw from Kingstown. Catherine herself was branded a “cheat and a liar” by Mr Nolan but this caused her less grief than the pain caused to her and the sisters in having to abandon the poor of Kingstown. An insight into that pain is evident in the letter that she wrote to Sister Teresa White, the Superior of Kingstown:

“Be a good soldier in the hour of trial. Do not be afflicted for your poor. Their Heavenly Father will provide for them and you will have the same opportunities of fulfilling your obligations during your life. I charge you my dear child, not to be sorrowful, but rather to rejoice if we are to suffer this humiliating trial God will not be angry. Be assured of that and is not that enough?... He will not be displeased with me, for He 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. But in the present case, we have done all that belonged to us to do, and even more than the circumstances justified”.²⁶

Catherine’s prayer: “Take from my heart all painful anxiety” sprang from a heart that was often heavily burdened, but when life presented her with its inevitable losses, struggles, conflicts and disappointments, she embraced the cross with faith and with an understanding

that she was being called to share the suffering of Christ. She knew well the limitations and vulnerabilities that suffering uncovers in human beings but she maintained a wisdom that accepted the cross. Based on her own experience she could proclaim “without the Cross, the real crown cannot come”.²⁷

Each of us carries our own anxieties as we live daily with the frustrations of our plans and hopes, with losses of all kinds, with hurt and misunderstanding even, at times, from those we love. We can feel helpless and overwhelmed, as we are confronted with the sufferings of those whose lives we touch. In the present climate of religious life marked by diminishment, loss of status, and wounded by scandals, our spirits can be crushed. The challenge for us, as it was for Catherine, is to allow our anxieties and sufferings to be a means of becoming conformed to Christ, and in coming to know our own need for the compassionate love of Christ to become wounded healers. ❏

¹ Letter 51 from MCS2.

² Letter 51 from MCS2.

³ MCS 1, p. 203.

⁴ MCS1, p. 158.

⁵ MCS1, p. 42.

⁶ Reference in MCS1, p. 130.

⁷ Letter 49 in MCS2.

⁸ Letter 50 in MCS2.

⁹ Letter 55 in MCS2.

¹⁰ Letter 14 in MCS2.

¹¹ Letter 60 in MCS2.

¹² Letter 118 in MCS2.

¹³ Letter 197 in MCS2.

¹⁴ Letter 265 in MCS2.

¹⁵ Letter 168 in MCS2.

¹⁶ Letter 168 in MCS2.

¹⁷ Letter 69 in MCS2.

¹⁸ MCS1, p. 95.

¹⁹ MCS1, p. 64.

²⁰ Letter 182 in MCS2.

²¹ Letter 182 in MCS2.

²² Letter 66 in MCS2.

²³ Letter 71 in MCS2.

²⁴ Letter 90 in MCS2.

²⁵ Letter 46 in MCS2.

²⁶ Letter 100 in MCS2.

²⁷ Letter 168 in MCS2.

To Assist in Your Reflection and Prayer (Take From My Heart All Painful Anxiety)

TAKE some time to be in touch with your own sources of anxiety. You may like to imagine that Catherine sits by your side and invites you into conversation with her.

- She tells you about the pain she felt from the misunderstandings and criticisms of family and others in her new venture.
- She shares with you the sense of loss and grief she experienced through the deaths of so many close ones.
- She confides to you the agony she suffered in the controversies in which she became embroiled.
- She mentions the struggle to raise the funds to make her dream of helping the poor a reality.
- She talks about the way anxiety affected her physically – mouth ulcers and stomach pains.

She invites you

- To get in touch with your own feelings of anxiety and stress and how these manifest in your physical being.
- To share with her any incidences of misunderstanding or criticism that left you hurting.
- To visit the places of loss in your life and to acknowledge and grieve them.
- To recall any controversies or difficult situations, events, happenings and to own where you are now in their regard.

Reflection and Integration

- Has your relationship with God influenced how you meet suffering in yourself and others? If so, how?
- A contemporary writer, reflecting on the insecurity, confusion and hopelessness in society today expresses it thus: “a dread of what is happening to our future stays on the fringes of awareness, too deep to name and too fearsome to face”. What does this evoke in you? Dialogue with Catherine about it.
- Pray for
 - the grace of forgiveness of those who have hurt or scarred you;
 - comfort in the losses and grieving you carry;
 - the wellbeing of those about whom you are worried or anxious;
 - a discerning heart to know how God is leading you in the painful events of life.
- From the standpoint of your own anxieties, pray Catherine’s “Suscipe” or compose your own.

