

ViVa! Article

3/26/18

Due: May 1, 2018

Our Shining Lamps and Today's All-Encompassing Eighth Work of Mercy

One of the biblical images Catherine McAuley uses to describe our Mercy mission is a “shining lamp.” In Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells us: “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (5.15-16).

Quoting Matthew, Catherine says that “we should be shining lamps, giving light to all around us” -- lamps “consumed with the fire of divine love, shining and giving light to all” (*Shining Lamp*, 131, 124). The “light” in our “lamp” is Jesus Christ himself, the “true light” that will shine for all people in the human lamps of those who faithfully follow him: “Whoever follows me will . . . have the light of life” (*John*, 8.12).

This “light” is the revelation that in Jesus the full and final reign of God's merciful love has definitively begun. This was the light Catherine hoped would be shining in the human lamps of our lives and works. In the Mercy Rule she composed for us, she outlines our two-fold work: our own following of and resemblance to Jesus Christ, and our fidelity to the works that are “peculiarly characteristic” of our Institute: “Instruction of poor Girls, Visitation of the Sick, and protection of distressed women” (Rule 1.1, in *CMcATM*, 295).

“Protecting” and lifting up the “distressed” is the most comprehensive work of all, embracing all the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. It is the all-encompassing work of mercy that underlies the incarnation of Jesus the Christ. This work of mercy, as Walter Kasper explains, is “the fundamental attribute of God” (*Mercy*, 88).

Vatican II recognized that the Gospel is always in dialogue with human history:

“The church seeks . . . to carry forward the work of Christ Himself under the lead of the befriending Spirit To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of **scrutinizing the signs of the times** and of **interpreting them in the light of the gospel**” (*Gaudium et Spes*, Art. 3-4).

As human history unfolds, the “signs” of the times also emerge and evolve. Distress takes many new and more systemic forms, and our perception of and response to it must also evolve. In Catherine’s day, the prostitution of impoverished young women was a profitable business in Dublin brothels (hence, the House of Mercy), but today’s global industry of sex-trafficking was unknown to her. Moreover, when she scrutinized the signs of *her* times, she saw no nuclear weapons nor any possibility of nuclear war among the existing signs of “distress.”

Today the most massive and widely afflicting distress we can identify is the planet-wide devastation of Earth itself and all its created life, and the disastrous effects of this degradation on Earth’s most vulnerable peoples. This is the all-encompassing distress Pope Francis sees and hears in “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (*Laudato Si’*, art. 49).

Responding to *this* sign of *our* times, calls for a new work of mercy, what Francis calls the eighth work of mercy: spiritual and corporal “Care for Our Common Home.” I call this eighth work of mercy, “Merciful Housekeeping of our Common Home,” with all the personal, social and institutional “housecleaning” and inclusive hospitality such “housekeeping” now demands and implies.

We know the “dirt” and “dust” we are dealing with: the rapid increase of carbon dioxide, methane, and other gases in the atmosphere, potentially leading to a disastrous rise in Earth’s temperature greater than 1.5 degrees Celsius. This global warming is already causing rising sea

levels, melting glaciers, droughts, floods, and extreme weather events that are causing food and water scarcity, famines, epidemic diseases, and the widespread migration of environmental refugees. The merciful “housekeeping” this distress calls for is heavy-duty: No random swipes of a feather duster, no casually sweeping dirt under the rug, no superficial cleaning here and there, but a thorough ecological conversion of our consciousness and human behavior.

The difficulty of strenuously engaging in this eighth work of mercy is unlike that of engaging in any of the other seven spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Merciful spiritual and corporal care for Earth, for our Common Home, is new, born of a brand new “sign of the times.” We have, in general, very little past knowledge and experience to fall back on, and, except for the vigorous efforts of some of our sisters and associates across the world, we have comparatively little Mercy history to show us what to do and where to apply our energies most effectively.

Climate change and the degradation of Earth is, for most of us – especially those of us who are not scientists -- a new and intricate phenomenon calling for new and concrete merciful actions. It is multi-faceted, scientifically-described, and in a sense “remote.” It is not easily addressed with the skills we have accumulated since 1831. Most of us realize that we are beginners before the wide range of merciful actions that relieving this distress and addressing its causes now require of us.

So where do we start?

First, we must read, study, listen, learn. We need to grow in our knowledge and understanding of Creation itself, and learn the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of all its created realities: its water, soil, sun, wind, bees, human lives, plants, carbon dioxide, flowers,

oxygen, oceans, trees, rain, ice, high temperatures, methane, low temperatures, eco-systems—all the material, organic, and sometimes invisible elements of this created Earth.

We also need to grow in our knowledge of the effects of human activities related to the natural resources of Creation: agriculture, transportation, the manufacture and consumption of products, deforestation and reforestation, waste management, energy selection and storage, to name a few. And if all this were not enough “homework,” we also have to learn something of the history of Earth, especially since the beginning of the industrial revolution, in order to understand why we are now confronted with this new “sign of the times”—a distress that neither Jesus of Nazareth nor Catherine McAuley directly perceived or felt obliged to address.

All this need for new knowledge and new commitment is one reason why the eighth work of mercy: hearing and responding to “the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor” -- this most urgent need of the twenty-first century -- is so difficult for us that, like the priest and the Levite, we are tempted to walk away from the wounded Earth, passing by “on the other side” of the road (Luke 10:31-32). The only problem here is that there is no “other side” of the road.

The other difficulty with this eighth work of mercy is the magnitude of the “ecological conversion” it requires. At the micro level, we will need to reform many of our own personal habits, alter many of our daily activities, sacrifice or change many things we have taken for granted and never worried about (paper napkins, the shampoo we use, plastic bottles, light switches, even how we brush our teeth!).

Then there are the “big” things we need to understand and address: the disastrous chemistry of burning fossil fuels, the dangerous “economy” of producing and consuming more than “enough,” the political forces arrayed against Earth’s well-being, misunderstandings about what constitutes true human “progress,” the unfair corporate intrusions into the natural resources

of poor nations and their peoples, our own shortsighted wastefulness, and much more.

Perhaps our personal and institutional ecological problem is that we mentally live in too small a world. Today, the “neighbors” Jesus wishes us to love and care for—as God has loved and cared for us—are often far away. For example:

Indigenous peoples living in Brazil and Peru—who have been struggling for decades, even dying, to protect their rainforests from logging and mining profiteers. They know that the Amazon rainforests, the largest in the world, are crucial to the health of the whole Earth, because they store carbon dioxide, and restore oxygen to the atmosphere.

Ethiopians and Somalis—whose small streams and agricultural plots, their only sources of water and food for themselves and their animals, are being slowly destroyed by recurring droughts.

Small Islanders and the people of Bangladesh—whose coastal homes and small family fisheries are sinking into the Pacific and Indian Oceans due to melting polar ice caps, rising seas, and increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

So the Merciful Housekeeping of our Common Home to which we are now called requires determined study, firm personal and institutional reforms, and credible action and advocacy. When are we going to switch to using only renewable sources of energy (wind and solar)? When are we going to put solar panels on the convent buildings we own? And solar farms and wind turbines on our large fields? When are we going to install motion sensors inside all our buildings and over our parking lots? When are we going to spend the necessary money to inaugurate these needed efforts to mitigate the distress of Earth and its most vulnerable peoples? If we don't think we have the money now, what are we going to sacrifice and forgo in order to

have the money to do these merciful works as soon as possible? After all, robbed and wounded children and adults are *even now* lying on the side of the road.

Catherine McAuley left us an inspiring but demanding saying: **“While we place all our confidence in God, we must act as if all depended on our exertion”** (*CCMcA*, 323). Relying fully on God’s help, let us now act **as if all depended on our exertion**—for the sake of Earth and all its vulnerable peoples.

In gratitude for God’s gift of this beautiful planet, and in neighborly love for all humanity, let us not risk causing our dear Catherine McAuley to be disappointed in us by putting the light we carry under a bushel basket!

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