

Address to Mercy International Association Archivists Gathering  
November 8, 2009

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I am framing this presentation around the questions that most often are posed to me as a vice postulator for the Cause of Catherine McAuley. Some of what I will say to you is available in other formats – in the mercyworld web site for instance – but it is repeat here for the sake of a coherent story. The questions are:

- 1) Haven't we done this before?
- 2) How are we proceeding? What is the church's process? Our process?
- 3) How much is this going to cost and who will pay for it?
- 4) How are things going?
- 5) What would Catherine say about all this?
- 6) Why are we doing this?

1) We begin with a little history of the Cause. The Cause for canonization "belongs" to the local church where the person who is being promoted lived. Therefore, any activity around the Cause for Catherine's canonization must originate in Dublin – the local church in which she "lived and moved and had her being".

There have been a number of starts and stops in the process of Catherine's Cause, beginning in 1909 – 66 years after her death. At that time Mother Genevieve, the superior of the Dublin Sisters of Mercy, began a worldwide prayer crusade asking that God would grant the favor of Catherine being declared Venerable. It was at this time that the memorial chapel of Catherine's grave was erected. The local bishops, however, didn't feel that the time was right and in 1911 and 1923 they rejected the community's application to institute a process.

In the early 1930's Mother Carmelita Hartman, superior of the newly formed Sisters of Mercy of the Union in the United States tried to forward the Cause but was told that the impetus had to come from Dublin. Then, in 1937, Archbishop Ryan, who had formerly rejected the petition, agreed to begin an investigation and appointed the rector

of the Irish College in Rome to head it . At that time, however, the data available was deemed to be neither comprehensive nor convincing enough to proceed.

In 1949, Roland Burke Savage published his biography of Catherine based on the data collected in the 30's but, at that time, an inconsistency in the date of Catherine's birth was discovered and that brought the process to a halt again until 1953 when a commission was appointed to study Catherine's writings and to collect additional evidence.

That done, there was another fallow period until 1975 when a diocesan commission was appointed to look into several pending Causes. It was at this point that Angela Bolster was asked to begin promoting Catherine's Cause. Through her efforts, and those of Monsignor Hanley who had been appointed as Catherine's postulator, a decree formally opening the Cause was issued on June 16, 1978.

In 1982, Father Martin Nolan, then Catherine's postulator, nominated Angela Bolster to be vice postulator and she became the first woman to be named to such a position. Angela's primary work at this point was researching and writing the *Positio*. This document was formally presented on Foundation Day, 1984 and was accepted two years later. On April 9, 1990 Catherine was declared Venerable by Pope John Paul II.

Following this declaration another fallow period ensued. Angela continued to work on the promotion of the Cause, publishing a number of books: Catherine McAuley in Her Own Words, Venerable for Mercy, Liminal for Mercy. Eventually, her health began to fail and in 2003 Anne Hannon became vice postulator. It was around this time the Mercy International Association, with impetus from sisters and associates around the world, discussed re-energizing the Cause and the Irish Congregation made the decision to do so. In 2006, Martin Nolan resigned as postulator due to ill health and was replaced by Brenda Dolphin. At the same time, an international advisory board was established whose members represent each of the member congregations of MIA. Three vice postulators were also appointed: Anne Hannon for Europe and Africa, Mary Duffy for Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific and Sheila Carney for the Americas.

2) How are we proceeding? What is the church's process and ours?

The international advisory group met in April, 2007 and took up the current task which is seeking beatification for Catherine through the verification of a miracle performed through her intercession. Three practices or strategies were adopted by this group to guide us through the following 18 – 24 months:

- Increased attention to and celebration of November 11 – the anniversary of Catherine’s death. In Church practice, this date will likely be her feast day though we have had some conversation about requesting either September 24 or December 12<sup>th</sup> as days more focused on ministry. In many areas of the world, prayers services and masses are offered on this day not only to commemorate Catherine but also all the Sisters of Mercy and our co-ministers, family and friends who have died in the past year.

- December 12<sup>th</sup>. On this day we wrap the world in prayer for Catherine’s beatification. All members of the Mercy family are asked to pause, some time between noon and 2:00 pm in their time zone, and pray that a miracle will soon be verified, thus opening the next step in the journey toward canonization.

- Public lectures and seminars to continue to make Catherine known and to increase devotion to her.

At the same time, new prayer resources were created in English, Spanish and Kiswahili for wide distribution as part of our effort to make Catherine known and to spread devotion to her. Fraynetwork designed and produced these leaflets. We are now entering the third cycle of these events and for now we will continue in this pattern.

This is the process we are currently following and alongside these activities we continue to seek the miracle which will lead to Catherine’s beatification. Many Sisters of Mercy and our friends can tick off on their fingers events and interventions and healings which they believe are attributable to Catherine. But, from the Church’s perspective, the miracle must be a physical cure and it must be a spontaneous, inexplicable cure which is medically and theologically verified. Let’s take a moment to look at the Church process around studying an alleged miracle to appreciate the seriousness and complexity of it.

Imagine that, after this talk, one of you presents to me the story of a healing of which you are aware. Here are the steps that would follow.

- a. The person in question and anyone with any knowledge of the alleged cure would be interviewed and would be asked for

written accounts to accompany the verbal ones. These accounts would need to include evidence of prayer through Catherine's intercession.

- b. The physician who had treated the person would be asked for a letter affirming that the cure could not be explained from the perspective of medical science.
- c. The person involved would be asked to release their medical records and these would be studied by two independent physicians. If at least one agrees that the cure is inexplicable, the case moves forward.
- d. A diocesan tribunal is convened where testimony is taken from all concerned. If the officers of the tribunal agree that the case may, indeed, present a miracle, the evidence is sent to the Congregation for Causes in Rome.
- e. There the investigation includes more medical scrutiny and a panel of theologians also examines the case.
- f. If all these steps have positive outcomes, the case is placed before the Holy Father who makes the final decision.

3) It is a long, and detailed and careful process and one might assume that it's also an expensive one. So that brings us to the third question – How much does all this cost and who is paying for it? When the MIA members decided to re-invigorate the Cause, they also agreed to bear the cost of what is done for the Cause within their respective Congregations. The Irish Congregation pays for Brenda Dolphin's expenses in Rome, for conference calls, publications, mailings and vice postulator's expenses where necessary. The Irish Congregation also supports face to face meetings of the canonization committee while travel expenses are paid for on an equalization basis as is the practice in MIA. In addition, it turns out that Catherine's Cause has a bank account. This account was initially funded by the Irish Congregation and supplemented over the years by the royalties from Angela Bolster's books and by direct donations to the Cause. This money is designated specifically for expenses related to the Cause such as payment for the time of medical experts who examine the evidence. The work of the Congregation for Causes is without cost. Brenda believes that there is enough money in the account to pay for the process toward and the celebration of Catherine's beatification and then some. And some of these costs are within

our control as we make decisions about how the beatification will be celebrated. Since this ceremony will occur in Dublin, we will have some influence in shaping it.

4) “How are things going?” There are a number of ways in which people ask me about the progress of Catherine’s Cause. They might say, “How are things going?” as I suggested above or “Do we have a miracle yet?” or “What’s wrong with them that they can’t see Catherine is a saint?” But a couple of months ago the question was posed as “Is the Cause moving?” The inquirer was asking the same question as the others but I heard it in a completely different way and I responded, “Oh yes! It’s very moving.”

To be a vice postulator is to every day open up [canonization@verizon.net](mailto:canonization@verizon.net) and find waiting for me there stories of hope and courage and devotion and, sometimes, of resignation. These expressions come in messages from people who want a name added to the prayer list on the mercyworld web site but it’s rarely just a name they send. The sender doesn’t want us just to know that John Smith has a brain tumor but the he is also a young husband and father with great hopes for the future of his family – a family who loves him and depends upon him. And these messages are wrapped round with a love of Catherine and a profound trust that she will help. Even when the help isn’t what was hoped for, Catherine’s care is acknowledged as in the case of a husband whose young wife had died but who wrote to say that she had died so peacefully and he knew that this was Catherine’s gift.

(Here I told a number of stories which I’m not going to include in this written form)

We’ve been collecting stories like these and publishing them on the canonization section of mercyworld.org. I encourage you to visit the site and read them and to send us others as you become aware of them. Then you will have an experience of what I mean when I say that being a vice postulator puts me every day in the pathway of this great surge of hope and trust and yearning. Is the Cause moving? Oh my, yes it is!

5) What would Catherine say about all this? This question is the interrogatory version of an oft repeated statement – “Catherine

wouldn't want to be canonized" or even "Catherine *said* she didn't want to be canonized." As far as I know – and I have read everything she wrote – Catherine never commented on the possibility of her canonization. And it seems so unlike her to think that her potential sainthood would ever be on her mind let alone the topic of conversation. I think that the idea that "Catherine never wanted to be canonized" comes from one of Austin Carroll's books. I know I have read it but haven't been able to find it again. However, while looking for it, I found some other interesting things in Carroll's *Life of Catherine*. She says (p 438) that, after Catherine's death, Sister dePazzi sent mementos to the various houses with these words: "Miracles are said to have been wrought through some of these and, Mother M. Vincent Hartnett...has left it on record that she 'never asked God to grant her any favor, through the merits of His servant Catherine,' without obtaining her request." So it seems that, from the earliest days those who knew her considered Catherine a woman of extraordinary holiness who would one day be canonized.

And so we finally arrive at question #6 – "Why are we doing this?" Why are we investing so much time and energy in these drawn out and sometimes seemingly arcane processes when we believe that Catherine is a saint; when we have experienced her intercession in our regard over and over again?

Many among us have articulated reasons. Mary Ann Stevens in a 1989 article weighing the pros and cons of canonization makes this argument on the pro side. "We need people who are mysteries – whose lives wouldn't make sense unless God exists...those who will give us hope and strength for resistance against all that does not breathe and breed life."

Anne Hannon, in 2003, says it another way. "Catherine's steadfast faith, her single-minded purposes and her persevering dedication could not but edify our society which longs for spiritual heroes and heroines. The acknowledgement of her heroic virtue would be a strong example for good women everywhere.

This position, that Catherine's life provides a strong and graced model for people today, especially women, has always made sense to me – and more so now that I am ministering in a woman-centered institution.

Recently, I opened an email from a student which provided a link to an article entitled "Adventure in Feministory: Catherine

McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy.” The article appeared in Bitch Magazine – the subtitle for which is “Feminist Response to Pop Culture”. Oh no! I was thinking though, in the subject line of the email, the student had written “This is bad, really!”

The author begins by describing herself as a radical feminist with no sense that anything of value could come from the Catholic – until she became acquainted with Catherine McAuley. She goes on to tell Catherine’s story and how the Sisters of Mercy carry on her legacy today and refers to the witness of a particular Sister of Mercy. Reading it, I was brought up short because I had made a judgment about the article based on the periodical in which it appeared. What amazed me was that the story of Catherine was so compelling to this writer whose beliefs and sensibilities are so different from my own. And I thought to myself that if Catherine’s life has the ability to inspire such a spectrum that includes mainstream Catholic women as well as contributors to and readers of Bitch Magazine, perhaps this is a miracle in itself!

As I said a minute ago, the certainty that Catherine’s life has much to say to us, has the ability to inspire, encourage and challenge us, is reason enough to seek her canonization. This formal acknowledgement by the church won’t, I dare say, or I hope, change how we who know her and love her will regard or relate to her. She who shied away from being called Mother Superior and from being deferred to as foundress would certainly not want her proclaimed sainthood to alter our relationship to her. But being raised to sainthood would give her a higher profile, we might say, would make her known and available universally in a way that she is not now. And so, when I was asked to accept the appointment as vice postulator, I did so because I believed that the work of seeking Catherine’s canonization was worthwhile work taken up to benefit the members of the Church universal.

Then I went to the first meeting of the international committee and Brenda Dolphin said something that deepened my understanding of what we were about and opened the question of the value of Catherine’s canonization in a whole new way. Brenda was telling us about the program for new postulants that she had attended in Rome and about some of her learnings. One thing she said was that canonization is the way that the Church knows itself to be holy; that the Church is holy because its members are holy. Each person who is canonized, then, is an exemplar of that holiness, a demonstration,

if you will, of some facet of that holiness.

This perspective takes care of the objection that Catherine wouldn't want to be canonized because, in a very real way, this isn't just about Catherine. It's about the good of the Church and we know that she made many difficult choices for that end in her lifetime. And if we have a niggling fear that we are pursuing this because it will cast the Sisters of Mercy in a positive light we can give that up also, because this isn't about the Sisters of Mercy. It's about how the Church reflects its holiness.

So why do I, personally, pray that Catherine McAuley will be canonized? I pray that Catherine will be canonized because I want my Church, when it pictures itself as holy, so see this woman, bent, with merciful intent, to human need and suffering. I want my Church, when it reflects on its holiness to see this woman – a gentle, humble, honest, respectful, and challenging leader. I want my Church, when it looks at its holiness, to see this faith filled woman who clung to her belief in it when it supported her and when it didn't, who drew sustenance from it, who trusted its representatives, who chose to find the meaning of her life in it and who passionately passed on this belief, this fidelity.

I pray for this Cause because I want my Church, in seeking an image for its holiness, to see the face of Catherine McAuley. I pray for her canonization, not because Catherine needs the authorization of the Church to prove her sanctity but because the Church needs her witness.