

Catherine McAuley – an Integrated Life

October 23, 2016

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Over the years I have, and I know you have, been engaged in a lot of discussions around a couple of questions. *What is unique or distinctive about the Sisters of Mercy, about the call to Mercy for our associates and companions? And how are we to understand our vow of service? How are we called to minister? Where are we called to minister? When and with whom? Does this particular need fall within the embrace of our charism?* This last question has always been the easiest to answer because Catherine cut a broad path for us. In the document that we call “The Spirit of the Institute” she tells us that the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy are the business of our lives. There are countless ministries that easily fall within the ambit of these works. I remember a retreat director once who said to a group of us that he found our charism hard to define because, as he said, “You Sisters of Mercy do everything.” That’s it, “we responded. “You’ve got it!” When Catherine gave us the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy as our focus, when she defined an approach to ministry that was as broad and wide as human need, she left us a lot of room in which to move about. And truly, these Works seem more a spectrum than a focus.

When we are asked what was Catherine’s unique contribution to the development of religious life we often focus on this call to service, or we respond in terms of the novel and far-seeing governance structure she created for us. But that question has rattled around in me for a long time. What was Catherine’s unique contribution? What was the fresh understanding that she brought to the evolution of religious life? How would we name that portion of her legacy that is her special gift

and challenge to us who have been called to wear the name Mercy and to the whole Church? To answer these questions I'd like to go back to 1836.

Catherine's most succinct description of the life of a Sister of Mercy is found in a letter to Rev. Gerald Doyle, the parish priest at Naas. He was interested in directing young women from his parish to the Sisters of Mercy and wrote to Catherine asking her to name the personal requirements. Catherine responded on May 6, 1836.

“. . . . In compliance with your desire, Reverend Sir, I shall submit what seems generally requisite for a Sister of Mercy. Besides an ardent desire to be united to God and serve the poor, she must feel a particular interest for the sick and dying; otherwise the duty of visiting them would become exceedingly toilsome. She should be healthy, have a feeling, distinct, impressive manner of speaking and reading; a mild countenance expressive of sympathy and patience. And there is so much to be required as to reserve and recollection passing through the public ways: caution and prudence in the visits, that it is desirable they should begin rather young, before habits and manners are so long formed as not likely to alter.

I beg again to remark that this is what seems generally necessary. I am aware exceptions may be met, and when there is a decided preference for the Order, and other essential dispositions, conformity in practice might be accomplished at any period in life.” (Bolster, Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1827-1841, p.22)

This is an interesting and detailed set of requirements. So much so that it would be easy to miss the importance of how it begins. “. . . Besides an ardent desire to be united to God and serve the poor.” BESIDES is a key word. What Catherine conveys to Rev. Doyle, and to us, is that at the heart of the life of Mercy is this ardent desire to be united to God and to serve the poor. This is so central as to be almost taken for granted. These almost go without saying. Here's the core, she says quickly, and then there are all these other things besides. An ardent desire for

union and service. This is what it means to be a Sister of Mercy, a person of Mercy. Ardent is an interesting word for Catherine to use. It means passionate, fiery, and unquenchable. There is nothing tepid in the life to which she calls us.

Catherine elaborates on this simple formula in her Rule in words that are no less dynamic.

“The Sisters . . . shall animate their zeal and fervor by the example of their Divine Master Jesus Christ, who testified on all occasions a tender love for the poor” (Chapter 1, 2nd)

“Let those whom Jesus Christ has graciously permitted to assist Him in the Persons of his suffering poor, have their hearts animated with gratitude and love and placing all their confidence in Him endeavor to imitate Him more perfectly day by day.” (Chapter 3, 3rd)

“Mercy, the principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him, 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.” (Chapter 3, 1st)

Animation, zeal, fervor, excitement - the dynamism of these words calls out to us.

Over the years since the founding of our congregation, Sisters of Mercy all over the world have articulated this central identity in a variety of ways. WE have generated a lot of words – a veritable mountain of words – but living in the heart of them all is Catherine’s simple call to be passionate about God and about persons living in poverty.

There is another way of naming this heartbeat of who we are. Though these are not Catherine’s words, we have come to call it contemplation and action - the difficult

rhythm, the intricate dance between stillness, focus, absorption in God and the active, practical mediation of God's love to those around us. Catherine lived this challenging rhythm and she embedded it in the life of the Institute she founded. For a while, I was fond of calling it a dance, as if one partners for a while with action and then switches and partners for while with contemplation and so on, back and forth. But this image has become woefully inadequate. Even our ways of articulating this rhythm - action *and* contemplation or action/contemplation suggest a dualism or differentiation that I don't think existed in Catherine. In her, these are not separate realities, separate energies, but one life force flowing through her. One was sometimes more evident than the other but each continually called forth the other, gave birth to the other. And so I struggle for a new image.

What does it mean to move in this rhythm? A long time ago, in a theology class, my professor expressed God's invitation to us with the words, "Give me your heart and I'll give you my eyes." In many years of reflecting on these words, I've come to understand them as descriptions of apostolic spirituality; of contemplation and action.

"Give me your heart," God invites. "Rest your heart in me. Let it beat with my heart. Be one with me. Give way to your ardent desire to be united with me. In return, I'll give you my eyes."

What is it we perceive when we look through God's eyes? We see the beauty and the intricacy, the dynamism and the potential of our world. We also see its poverty, violence, disease, and brokenness. Seeing, we are moved to act and acting we experience our limitations and our need for God's help. And so we return to prayer and the cycle repeats itself and continues to repeat itself. Prayer, insight, action, prayer. Over and over. Deeper and deeper. Spiraling down to a single point of union.

There is balance in this dynamic that our world sorely needs, driven and frenetic as it often is. To be Mercy people today means to nurture that balance in our own lives and to witness it to others. Contemplation and action; prayer and service; mysticism and prophesy, sabbath and justice, ardent love of God and practical love of neighbor, however you name it, this is the rhythm that was and is and will be at the heart of our Mercy lives.

Over the years I have frequently been in a state of wonder at how faithfully the very young women whom Catherine made superiors of foundations were able to convey and nurture her spirit in new environments. So much so that through the years and in every part of the world, the life of Mercy has remained remarkably unchanged. There are, of course, cultural and societal differences but a Sister of Mercy is a Sister of Mercy no matter where and when you find her. I suspect this is in large measure due to the clarity and simplicity of the central message. So while foundation superiors were given great responsibility to plant the seed of Mercy in new places and great flexibility in how they did it, the central focus on God and on persons who are poor was unvarying.

An ardent desire to be united to God and serve the poor - this is the heartbeat of what it means to be a Sisters of Mercy. This is what they packed in their suitcases, wherever they went. When I think of the sisters setting out across the world I am reminded of a book by Annie Dillard entitled Teaching a Stone to Talk. In one of the essays she describes the Franklin Expedition, a force of 138 men who set out in 1845 to find the northwest passage through the Canadian Arctic to the Pacific Ocean. There were two three-masted schooners in the expedition. Each had an auxiliary steam engine with enough coal to last 12 days in a journey projected to last 2 – 3 years. In the place where they might have stowed additional coal, they loaded “stuff” intended to assure the comfort of those 3 aboard. Here is how Annie Dillard

describes the way they packed for the trip.

Each ship made room for a 1200 volume library, a “hand organ that playing fifty tunes,” china place settings...cut glass wine goblets, and sterling silver flatware. The officers’ sterling silver knives, forks and spoons were particularly interesting. The silver was of ornate Victorian design, very heavy at the handles and very richly patterned. Engraved on the handles were the individual officers’ initials and family crests. The expedition carried no special clothing for the Arctic, only the uniforms of Her Majesty’s Navy.”

Because of an early winter, the Franklin Expedition become stalled in the ice when they reached the Arctic. In order to try to find their way across the ice, they divided into small parties and set out on foot. None survived. Over the next twenty years or so, groups of them were found frozen on the ice. Each group had been dragging a sledge on which they had packed what they thought was essential and among these items were the sterling tea services.

When the Sisters of Mercy set out for England and America and Australia, they packed more carefully and with more respect for the lands to which they were traveling. We don’t know much about what they were carrying, but we do know that each sister had carefully included in her bundle of possessions an ardent desire to be united to God and to serve the poor. Because they knew that, wherever it was that God was taking them, these would be the only essentials as they planted the seeds of Mercy in a new environment.

While in every age and in each place we strive to interpret this call in terms of the times and circumstances in which we find ourselves, this names who we are. In deceptively simple language it calls us to the difficult dynamic of contemplation and action; it calls us to hold in graceful balance our lives of prayer and our lives of service.

How does this union manifest itself in Catherine? By her living what is

undoubtedly her best known and most oft repeated maxim - We have one solid source of comfort amidst this little tripping about, our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back. (Neuman, Letters, p. 273) This quote comes from a letter to de Sales White - the letter in which Catherine compares her life to the dance, Grand Right and Left. It was written in December, 1840 when she had already made numerous foundations, with three still in her future. She was exhausting herself with constant travel, not only to make new beginnings but to encourage those that were already underway. In the midst of these unrelenting demands and the considerable discomfort of travel in her day, she is able to say that her heart is always comfortable, always at rest, because it never leaves the presence of God. In the Retreat Instruction, she uses two other images to convey the same idea. We should be like angels, she says, “who while fulfilling the office of guardians, lose not for a moment the presence of God, or as the compass goes round its circle without ever stirring from its center.”(p.154) God, in this image, is a magnetic force holding us always to our true center. Catherine’s truth is that, when one is truly immerses oneself in God, one’s being becomes centered and focused *and* ready to do God’s work.

Because it must be noted that, in lifting these images from their context, which we usually do, we fail to hear the entire message. In the letter to de Sales White, Catherine follows the image of the heart centered in God by saying, “Oh may He look on us with love and pity and then we shall be able to do anything He wishes us to do, no matter how difficult to accomplish or painful to our feelings.”(Neuman, p. 273) Catherine feels herself ready to do whatever it is that God asks because her heart is comforted by God’s continual and consoling presence. The quotation from the Retreat Instructions in which she talks about the compass never stirring from its center is followed by, “Now our center is God from Whom all our actions should

spring as from their source, and no exterior actions should separate us from Him. The functions of Mary should be done for Him as well as the choir duties of Martha. It is the want of attention to this important point that causes exterior work to be so distracting to us.” (p. 154). It is not the work which takes us from God, but our inability to remain centered in God regardless of our activity. But when we are able to hold our center then, as Catherine quotes someone to whom she refers as “a devout author,” each action is all full of God, breathes God, shines with God, is fragrant of God.” (Familiar Instructions, p. 88).

We would expect to find reflections such as these in Catherine’s teachings on prayer, and we do of course find them there - exhortations about the importance of the regular reception of the sacraments, of frequent recourse to devotional practices, of the power of frequent, fervent aspirations to keep us united to God throughout the day. But they are in other places as well. The letter to de Sales White is about the demands of travel. The images of the angel and the compass are found in the section of the Retreat Instructions on charity. The letter to Rev. Gerald Doyle quoted earlier is about entrance requirements. In Catherine’s life, contemplation and action are never separated, regardless of what is the topic at hand.

Even a teaching like the Chapter on the Perfection of the Ordinary Action from the original Rule, is suffused with the call to contemplation and action. Here Catherine says, “The perfection of the religious soul depends, not so much on doing extraordinary actions, as on doing extraordinarily well the ordinary actions of each day.” When we are united to God in everything we do, then, the Rule tells us, “Nothing is lost, every word and action fructifies, and the religious soul enriches herself every moment. (Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p. 301)

This is a particularly challenging teaching for us in the hectic world in which we

live and move and have our being as it calls for us to do each thing slowly and perfectly; by performing each action as if it were the only thing we had to do. That Catherine preached what she lived in this regard is supported by a description offered by Vincent Harnett, one of the early members of the congregation. “In the midst of all the pressing occupations our venerated foundress was never seen in a hurry. She seemed to have nothing to attend to but the one in which at any moment she was seen to be occupied, and she performed that with the utmost quietness of manner, without the least impulsiveness or hastiness. When any unlooked-for interruption interfered, she took that as tranquilly as the rest.” In the poem that we have come to know as “Attend to one thing at a time, you’ve fifteen hours from six to nine.” It occurs to me that this attitude of Catherine’s may be an early precursor of mindfulness - the careful reverencing of each act and each moment which flows from a centered heart.

Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, in her book, In Quiet Light, Poems on Vermeer’s Women, offers us a lovely image to illustrate this point. In the poem which accompanies the painting “Woman Holding a Balance” she describes all the things in her surroundings which may distract the woman from the work at hand – weighing some jewels on a balance. The poem ends this way:

*Trained on the object, undistracted,
Patient while the instrument swings
To its center and is still,
She turns this little task to prayer – if mindfulness is prayer
To an exercise of love
If it is love to be attentive to the things at hand. (McIntyre, p 65)*

In these words we are challenged, as Catherine challenges us in her teachings on the Perfection of the Ordinary Action, to render reverent focus to each task at hand, thereby turning it into an act of prayer.

The simple and graceful beauty of the integration which Catherine embodied and to which she calls us is glimpsed in a passage in the Familiar Instructions. Catherine writes: “St. Teresa tells us: ‘We must leave God for God’, that is, we must be ready to quit even prayer in order to find God in our neighbor.” (p. 111). These are the words of a woman in whom the integration of contemplation and action is completely harmonious.

I’d like to go back, at this point, to the question with which we started: *What is it that is unique about the Sisters of Mercy? What special gift did Catherine contribute to the ongoing development of religious life?* In these reflections, I have been making a case for the fact that Catherine’s unique contribution was the call to contemplation and action. But, in fact, I believe the call is much more profound. It is the integration of contemplation and action, so evident in the life of Catherine, that is, I believe, our deeper calling. Deeper than the Works of Mercy, deeper than the demands of our vow of service is our call to unity of being. Catherine’s unique contribution, our special contribution to the phenomenon of religious life is the refusal to see contemplation and action, these expressions of the God life within us, as competing demands or even competing dance partners. It is in knowing that the depth of our prayer is a resource for our service and that our service enriches our prayer. It is in bringing the centeredness of our heart to the demands of our day.

We used to talk about religious life as being counter-cultural. Perhaps the way we could be counter-cultural today would be to stand against the frenzy and workaholicism we see around us, and sometimes contribute to; to be, in our hectic and clamorous world, persons and places of deep peace, of generous, merciful service.

All of these thoughts are, for me, captured in a quotation from William Butler Yeats. “We can make our minds so like still water that beings may gather around us

that they may see, it may be, their own image, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life because of our quiet.” We can be so still that we, and others, are drawn to that stillness, find in it our true selves and, consequently live a more passionate life. Our contemplation manifesting itself in action - in a clearer and fiercer life. Fierce for the Gospel, fierce for justice, fierce for Mercy. This is no tepid calling to which Catherine encourages us.

What was Catherine’s unique contribution? What is the particular gift that the Sisters of Mercy and all Mercy people can offer our world? I come, more and more, to believe that it is the integration of our ardent desire to live in union with God while expending our lives in practical love for God’s people – especially those who live in poverty. Integration for the sake of focus, for the sake of clarity and fierceness, for the sake of holiness. This, I believe, is the life to which we are called. This is our deeper ministry.

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Talk given by Sheila Carney, RSM at Mercy Center, St Louis, October 23, 2016. First published in Mercy eNews, Issue #698, 16 November 2016

