

Catherine's Call

April 25, 2009

Sheila Carney, RSM

In September of 1836, Catherine McAuley received a letter from Rev. Gerald Doyle, the parish priest at Naas. There was a young woman in his parish whom he felt was called to religious life, and, desiring to direct her to the Sisters of Mercy, he wrote to Catherine to inquire about the entrance requirements. When I was pondering the two topics given to me for today's symposium, this letter came to mind because I believe we find in Catherine's response both the heart of her call and the point of integration in her spirituality. Listen to what she tells Fr, Doyle about what is required of someone who feels called to the Mercy way of life. And lets remember that while this letter addresses entrance requirements for the community, we, in our day, understand her words to include all those called to Mercy.

*"In compliance with your desire, Revd. Sir, I shall submit what seems 'generally' requisite for a 'Sister of Mercy.' Besides an ardent desire to be united to God and to serve the poor, she must have a particular interest for the sick and dying; otherwise the duty of visiting them would soon 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 acquired as to reserve and recollection passing through the public ways - caution and prudence in the visits - that it is desirable that they should begin rather young, before habits and manners are so long formed as not likely to alter."*¹

¹ Sullivan, Mary C. ed., The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818 - 1841, The Catholic University of America Press. Baltimore: 2004, p. 77.

This is a long and quaint listing. So much so that it is, perhaps, easy to slide over the beginning and focus on the quaintness of it. But listen again to the first words - "besides an ardent desire to be united to God and to serve the poor". "Besides". It's an interesting way to begin. It's almost as if Catherine is saying: "Well, we know what's at the heart of it all but here are some other things to consider." And "ardent" - another interesting choices of words. Ardent means passionate, fiery, unquenchable. In choosing this word Catherine warns us that life of Mercy is no tepid calling. In this life one must be burning with desire for God and afire in response to the needs of those who are poor.

To catch a glimpse of the ardor, the spirit with which Catherine lived her call, I'd like to read a poem written by Mary Vita Pandolfo - a member of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. The poem is entitled "Catherine's Call".

Catherine's Call

*Catherine, young woman of high esteem,
heiress with pale gold hair, who kept a carriage
and dressed in black merino or rose brocade,
high-waisted and trimmed with Irish lace as the fashion
went, was mistress of Coolock House - a kind one,
common folk said, and Merciful to the poor.*

*She love her flower-strewn gardens, her oak-paneled doors
(among the finest in Dublin, it was said);
her house was often filled with friends and sounds
of the harpsichord, and the clink of claret glasses -*

*and dancing: jig, reel, hornpipe, hopjig,
dancing - swivel and spin, Kitty dancing,
bow and circle (Sir Roger de Coverly), bend
and bob in the See-Saw Dance; now change of pace
with the Duval Trio lately imported from France,*

*Then - Grand Right and Left: winding, right hand, left
hand,
passing, winding, coming to where she'd begun -*

*Now, partnered by One in her heart, all circles closed
in a vortex of love, She whirled to the boundaries of time,
leaped over and danced, and did not stop until
her step resounded Mercy around the world.²*

This poem is teeming with images! There are images of Catherine: a highly esteemed, golden-haired, fashionably dressed, comfortably housed heiress. There are images of what was important to her: her great heart for those who are poor - central to her being from her earliest days until her death. And then wonderful sensuous images of the life she created during her Coolock days, filling the house with friends and music and dancing. This stanza of the poem leaves you almost breathless in its listing and description of the steps: swivel and spin, bend and bob, passing, winding, leaping. Finally, the poem resolves into the wonderful image of Catherine and her God partnered in dance, in a vortex of love, that spun outward until the sound of it resounded around the world. We find again here the central elements of the call Catherine described to Fr. Doyle - her union with God and her love for the persons who are poor.

The scriptures tell us to listen for the voice of God in the sound of a gentle breeze. In naming this lushly descriptive and energetic poem "Catherine's Call", Mary Vita suggests that, in every dimension of Catherine's life, was embedded the call which gradually became louder and more clearly focused.

² Mary Vita Pandolfo, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, West Midwest Community.

Everything: the enjoyment of wearing fashionable clothing, her appreciation for fine architecture, her love of flowers, the sounds of the harpsichord and the clinking of claret glasses and the voices of dear friends and the floor pounding as they danced and always, always, her great heart for those who are poor - in all of this, running through all these sounds and experiences and loves - was God's voice growing more perceptible and more insistent and finally God's hand grasping hers and swinging her and her mercy out across the aching world. The call was in everything.

Catherine McAuley was one who allowed the experiences of her life to teach and to guide her, one who, I like to say, was a recycler - taking what was given to her, wrapping it in the mercy of God she had experienced, and then finding a way to pass it on. Because she had experienced so clearly in her own life the providential care of God, she experienced also the need to reach out to others in the same way. Catherine, who had been homeless, created a place of refuge for women in Dublin; Catherine who had often felt the inadequacy of her own religious education created a school; Catherine who had depended on others to provide her with food and shelter taught skills to women to enable them to be self-directing and self-supporting; Catherine for whom God provided in her every need became daring in what she risked for God's people; Catherine, who had so richly experienced God's providence enabled others to experience it through her ministrations.

Devotion to the sufferings of Jesus translated in Catherine's life into service for those who bore the sufferings of Jesus in her day. The ardency of her outreach

to those whom she called "the afflicted poor", the sick whom she and her co-workers visited and cared for in their homes, the cholera victims nursed by the early congregation, the orphans for whom she provided home and security, the endangered servant girls to whom she offered safety - all bore for her the face of Jesus and represented for her his suffering body. Her hours praying before her paneled door or before the crucifix when that became possible, translated into energy for healing and teaching, soothing and comforting, nourishing and empowering others. Mary Wickham, Australian Sister of Mercy, wrote in her poem about the crucifix in Catherine's room at Mercy International Centre:

*Kneel here and what do you look at,
but the cross that she not only looked at
but truly saw;
upon which she gazed with unveiled eyes
and a mind which made of it
not a devotional icon merely
but the heart, the nub, the drive
the sense:
of all the world's pained and deprived ingathered
into'
the solidarity of the suffering God...³*

This image was, as Mary Wickham wrote, no mere devotional icon, as dear to her as that may have been after so many years of being deprived sacred images. It was a window a portal, through which she saw the suffering world; an

³ Wickham, Mary, RSM. Souvenirs of the Spirit, Poems and Prayers. Spectrum Publications Pty. Ltd. Richmond, Victoria: 2006. p. 48.

opening through which she heard her name being called by all those reaching out for God's mercy. Do you remember the song from the 70's

"Look beyond the bread you eat, see you savior and your Lord. Look beyond the cup you drink. See his love poured out as blood"? Catherine couldn't look into the face of Jesus without seeing beyond to those whom Jesus loved and for whom she felt called to pour out her life as well.

I said earlier that, for Catherine, the call was in everything. By reflecting on her own life experiences, she heard the voice of God leading her. It is also true that the call came from many different places and people. I have come to appreciate in Catherine a great spirit of dispossession by which I mean that she surrendered to God or to the bishop or to the community or to the town where a new foundation was being established many decisions she had every right to make herself.

The call to identify with Mercy, for instance, came in the voice of Mary Ann Doyle. She recognized September 24th, the day she and Catherine's niece, Catherine Byrn, moved into the newly completed house on Baggot Street, as the feast of Our Lady of Mercy and suggested that building be called House of Mercy. A year later, Catherine wrote to Archbishop Murray to ask permission to name to her work the Institute of Our Lady of Mercy.

The call to found a religious congregation was heard in the voice of Archbishop Murray who was concerned not only that some clerics who disapproved of Catherine and her work suggested that she had founded a convent behind his back but, more importantly and, one hopes, more genuinely, sought to convince her to give an enduring structure to her efforts so that they might perdure beyond her lifetime.

The call to distinguish her congregation with a vow of service came in the voice of the Bishop of Cork who, at a profession in 1837 suggested this addition to the Mercy vow formula.

The call to accede to Archbishop Murray's suggestion to become a religious community, the call to accept the Presentation Rule as the model for their own, the call to accept some foundation invitations and not others and to choose the superiors and other members of each foundation party, Catherine heard in the voices of the women who had cast their lot with her and her ministry. Decisions were made in the circle of those women gathered around her to discuss the direction their lives, now joined, would take. Gathered around her, where, Clare Augustine Moore tells us, they were with her exactly as they were at home, only less formal.

Just as a humorous aside here, while the circle of sisters usually arrived easily together at a conclusion, Catherine recounts in her poem about the Galway foundation, one instance in which the discussion didn't go so smoothly. After describing the considerable adventures and misadventures of the journey she writes:

*Next morning all our cares began:
Each proposing her own plan,
All different tastes.
What some approved, some deemed bad,
But all agreed that now we had
No time to waste.⁴*

The summons to take up certain ministries in the places to which they went was sometimes heard in the voice

⁴ Sullivan, *op. cit.* p. 267.

of the townspeople. In writing, "Each place has its own peculiarities ideas and feelings which must be yielded to when possible,"⁵ Catherine points to the practice of attending to the needs of each place in determining the ministries the sisters will undertake. For while Catherine found similar circumstances of need in each of the foundations she never assumed a standard course of action. Her reflection on the needs of each location, her respect for the reality of each person, led to personalized and particularized responses.

For instance, though a poor school was begun in almost every foundation, the sisters found, on arriving in Carlow, that the Presentation sisters were already involved in that ministry and what was really needed was a school for the middle class. Catherine and Frances Warde, who was appointed superior in Carlow, considered this need carefully and decided to meet it by establishing a pension school - a decision that had repercussions for years on both sides of the Atlantic.

In all these times, in all these places, in all these circumstances, Catherine heard God's call. It suggested "no great plan", as she was wont to say, but engendered a conviction that God wanted her to make "some lasting effort for the poor." There was not a single call, and a single voice. Rather, there was a woman who was attentive to her life and to the ways God acted in her life. So no matter how the voice might seem to be disguised in this accent or that; no matter which direction it came from, or what circumstances called it forth, she heard it, not with her ears but with a heart that beat with God's heart. And

⁵ Sullivan, op.cit. p. 168.

regardless of what the practicalities of the call were, it was always rooted in the ardency of her desire to be united with God and to serve those who are poor. When she heard it, she responded with the ardor that intimacy with her God called forth. Caught in the vortex of love described by Mary Vita Pandolfo she was always attuned, always poised to act. The asceticism that enabled her reflective readiness is what we will ponder this afternoon.