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Our Venerable Catherine McAuley

On April 9, 1990, John Paul II ordered the following Decree to be published and entered into the records of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints:

It is established that the Servant of God Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, practiced to a heroic degree the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity toward God and neighbor, and along with them the cardinal virtues of Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude.

With the publication of this Decree, which uses language that goes back to Benedict XIV (1675-1758), Catherine was given the title Venerable. In 2020 we will celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of this papal announcement.

Yet a touching irony nestles alongside the wording of the Decree. For Catherine never said, and apparently never thought, that she practiced *any* Christian virtue to a “heroic” degree. She was always keenly aware of her “blunders,” her “weaknesses,” her own and the community’s “deficiencies,” and her total daily dependence on the mercy, love, and providence of God.

In his *Law of Christ*, moral theologian Bernard Häring argues convincingly that humility is in fact the fundamental “cardinal” virtue—the basic attitude that flows from the enabling God-given capacities of Faith in God’s gracious, creative accompaniment, Hope in God’s continual mercy, and Love for God and for one’s neighbors. Humility also grounds and motivates the other “cardinal” virtues as proper human responses to God’s generous graces. However, the real “hinge” virtues (the *cardines*) “are not the four cardinal virtues, but the theological virtues,” even though “from early patristic times, the . . . scheme of four basic moral virtues” has been enunciated (III, 5).

Christian thought and practice have always looked upon humility as “a fundamental virtue serving as the foundation for the whole edifice of Christian virtue.” Quoting John XXIII, Haring says that “The principal center of the divine instruction and the command, which includes all else and draws all else to it, is the passage of the Gospel: ‘Learn from Me, for I am meek and humble of heart’ (Mt. 11:29).” Thus, humility is the basic “filial response to the love of our Creator and Savior,” and in this sense, it “is a truly primordial attitude, a cardinal virtue” (Haring, III, 57).

Catherine McAuley understood well the need for this bed-rock response of the human person to the mystery of God and God’s gifts. Though she spoke occasionally and earnestly about our need to be prudent, just, temperate, and courageous in our discernments and actions, she was most aware of our totally dependent creatureliness. As she used to tell the early Sisters of Mercy, humility “consists in having a thorough knowledge of ourselves as we are in the sight of God, and of our inability to do the smallest thing without His assistance or that of others left to ourselves we can do nothing” (*Shining Lamp*, 91).

For Catherine “humility does not consist in words,” or in exterior poses or postures, but “must emanate from the heart and arise from a deep conviction of our own nothingness and dependence on God, well knowing that if He withdraws His supporting hand we will immediately fall” (*Shining Lamp*, 77). She, of course, never spoke directly of her own humility, let alone of anything “heroic” about it, but she frequently used to say, no doubt including herself:

We can never be happy nor feel as we ought until we bring ourselves to the conviction that we are treated by everybody better than we deserve.

(*Practical Sayings*, 1)

Even by Popes and Congregations for the Causes of Saints!

Catherine found great peace of heart in this truthful acknowledgment of what she was in the sight of God. She knew her weaknesses and lack of virtue, but she believed that “Jesus Christ did not say ‘Come to Me you that are free from faults,’ but ‘Come to Me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will refresh you’” (*Shining Lamp*, 81). This is undoubtedly why she hand-copied onto a blank page of her own prayerbook words that I have called her “Prayer for Patience.” In these prayerful words, taken from a book by John Gother, she begs God’s help in overcoming what she took to be her lack of patience in many circumstances of her life:

I come this day to ask of thee, my God, the virtue and divine gift of patience, which is so necessary to carry me through the difficulties of my charge and to satisfy the many duties which are enjoined me by thy command. I here confess my great weakness in this point—there not being any day which does not convince me how much I want [i.e., lack] what I now ask, and therefore I earnestly beg of thee that grace—and according to my necessity, may my prayer so proceed from my heart as to induce Thee, my God, to grant my petition. May the spirit of the Cross carry me on and support me under all my trials, and in this same spirit may I surrender my soul into thy hands. Oh, Blessed Jesus, stand then by me, shew mercy to thy servant, and powerfully help me.

The labors, “duties,” and “trials” of Catherine’s life all flowed from her efforts to extend the Mercy of God to her neighbors in this world through the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. This merciful outreach was her God-enabled human response to God’s theological gifts to her: Faith in God’s saving, merciful accompaniment of her human journey; confident Hope in God’s ever merciful Providence and guidance; and empowering Love of God and of her neighbor.

Catherine found these fundamental graces revealed in and beckoning to her in the life and example of Jesus Christ. That is why she longed to resemble (follow) him, and why she urged us to do so:

Be always striving to make yourselves like our blessed Lord; endeavor to resemble Him in some one thing at least, so that any person who sees you or speaks with you may be reminded of His sacred life on earth.

We find those who can enumerate very particularly all that Jesus Christ said and did, but what does He care for that? He said and did so, not that we should recount it in words, but show Him in our lives, in our daily practice. (*Practical Sayings*, 16, 25)

If such daily surrender and practice is virtue to a “heroic degree,” then Catherine was indeed “heroic,” and the author of the early Tullamore Annals was insightful in often referring to her as “our Venerated Foundress.”

Today, Christian people, and indeed all humanity, have need for the tender, humble, unself-regarding example of Catherine McAuley’s life, not so much to “revere” her, “venerate” her, or admire her as a “hero,” but to find human encouragement and support in their own daily efforts to be merciful and loving.

When we share Catherine’s story, it strengthens and comforts all those in the human family who, in their heart of hearts, wish to be helped by God and to be good and loving human beings. As she herself used to say of merciful love of our neighbors:

Our mutual respect and charity is to be cordial. Now cordial signifies something that revives, invigorates, and warms: such should be the effects of our love for each other. (*Practical Sayings*, 5)

If the cordial love and mercy Catherine offered, and asks us to offer, to the poor, sick, and debilitatingly ignorant of our world -- in whom she always saw her dear Christ -- can revive,

invigorate, and warm the human family of God, then indeed Catherine's life as a Servant of God is Venerable.

So let all of us in the worldwide Mercy family not keep Catherine McAuley's exemplary, encouraging, merciful Christian life a private, in-house secret, but share it widely.

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