



Catherine McAuley and Earth:

“Ecology” was not a term with which Catherine McAuley (1778-1841) could have been familiar. However, many of her sayings and comments reveal the basic principles underlying her sense of the “world” (as she understood Earth), her attitudes toward it and all life on it, and her commitment to the personal efforts and sacrifices entailed in “ecological conversion and spirituality” (to use Pope Francis’s thoughtful expression).

1. Catherine’s understanding of the “world”:

- Catherine conceived of the world and all life on it as the Creation of a generous, merciful, and provident God.
- She regarded human beings not as the owners of this earth and its resources, but as “strangers and pilgrims” traveling in it, “every day preparing to enter our own country,” a “blissful eternity” in the presence of God (*PS 22-23; Correspondence 365*).
- She was humbly aware that in the universal scheme of things she was “‘but dust, and unto dust will soon return,’ after passing through these few years of pilgrimage” (*Correspondence 365*).
- She felt deep “gratitude of the heart” for God’s “many favours in this life and His great promises for the life to come” (*PS 14*).
- She recognized that God’s gifts in Creation are widely dispersed: “God has never bestowed all His blessings on one person” or one group of people (*PS 3*).

- Among the natural resources of Earth she most cherished fresh air and pure water which she regarded as a “free beverage,” to be available to everyone whenever they wished. She spoke particularly of the “pure sparkling spring water” of Birr (in the Irish midlands) and of its curative effect: “I never liked anything better than I now like a good drink of water” (*PS 28; Correspondence 347, 349*).
- Given her extensive experience in the Dublin cholera epidemic of 1832 and in the various typhus epidemics that assailed Ireland in the following decade, Catherine knew firsthand the widespread death that is, as we now understand, the result of contaminated water, inadequate means of hygiene, and environmental filth.

2. Catherine’s attitudes toward the life and resources of Earth:

In light of her sense of the created world as she knew it, Catherine espoused many attitudes about how human beings should respectfully live in it:

- She believed that we should live in solidarity with one another, especially the poor, the so-called “least”, the most vulnerable, and devote ourselves to seeking the common good, not just the good of the already privileged. Of herself she said:

“I would rather be cold and hungry than the poor in Kingstown or elsewhere should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford” (*Correspondence 164*).
- She believed that “examination of conscience is a duty which no one can perform for you. . . . They cannot take your mind into their possession and say, ‘I will settle this matter for you.’” Were Catherine on Earth today, she would surely extend this personal examination to one’s treatment of Earth, all its life forms and resources (*PS 22*).
- She believed that since “the Lord and Master of our House and Home,” our dwelling in Creation, “is a faithful provider,” we should “never desire more than enough. He will give that and a blessing” (*Correspondence 366*).

- Consequently, “everything purchased for the use of the Sisters was of the poorest and plainest kind, and she would never allow a large provision of anything to be laid in, saying it was not according to poverty to have those kinds of stores” (Bermondsey Annals, in *CMcATM* 114). Thus she opposed greed, excessive consumption, and the accumulation of unnecessary things at the expense of others.
- She felt that lifestyle changes and reductions were inherently called for if one wished to live in a manner favoring Earth’s most vulnerable. Hence she gave up the comforts of her inheritance, her pleasant life in Coolock, and her own conveniences, even her own bed at times, recognizing that such self-denial for the sake of others was often necessary.
- Finally, she believed that decision-making should, whenever possible, occur at the local level, among the people most affected by the decision.

3. Catherine’s efforts and sacrifices:

A key principle of Catherine’s conduct, as she might today apply it to our understanding of the evolving universe, its care, and eco-justice, was the following: “While we place all our confidence in God—we must act as if all depended on our exertion” (*Correspondence* 323). This conviction led her to actions such as the following:

- walking instead of riding in her former Swiss carriage;
- embracing personal poverty and sacrifice for the sake of others’ good;
- prioritizing her own “convenience” well below that of others;
- bestowing *herself* in preference to material gift-giving;
- accepting the “crosses” offered by historical circumstances;
- choosing simple pleasures (music, dancing, poetry) rather than extravagant ones acquired at the expense of others;

- facing her own ignorance and deficiencies, and being willing to learn what she had not previously known;
- shunning “trifles” and being clear about what was truly “requisite.”

Although these “exertions” of Catherine McAuley and the early Sisters of Mercy were not consciously intended to address 21st century concerns about universal care for the life and gifts of Creation, they nonetheless point to conceptions, attitudes, and actions that directly and indirectly relate to a proper, present-day understanding of Earth and one’s required behavior on it. We do not live in a “house of plenty,” as Catherine recognized, and this fact necessitates self-education and self-examination as well as humility, prudence, large-mindedness, and generosity—all virtues that she and her companions valued and strove to embody.

Works Cited

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