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St Louis Mo. Mercy Convention Centre. 2016 October 23rd

Catherine McAuley – Heroic and Holy

Holiness as we understand it is God’s holiness in us. “Be holy as I am holy, says the Lord”.

Raissa Maritain (1949 in *Les Grandes Amities*) said; “the only tragedy in life is not to be a saint”

I would like to take a quick look at what heroism and holiness is, as understood in the Catholic Church and especially in her decision to canonise one of her members. What do we understand by heroic holiness?¹

Holiness is found in the ordinary round of everyday life. It is essentially trying faithfully to live what we believe God is asking of us (doing His Will). In other words it is the process of assimilating one’s life to Christ and that demands heroic effort (cf Paul Molinari S.J. and Peter Gumpel S.J.). Extraordinary manifestations are not taken into account.

Catherine McAuley herself taught that:

“Since God’s power is not limited to time or place or persons, we have the same means as they (the greatest saints) had. God can effect in us what He accomplished in them. In fact to arrive at their sanctity requires no more than to simply perform our daily actions perseveringly and regularly for this is what constitutes a saint”

The Church has great need of saints; holy people whose lives are dramatic with a humble and unpretentious (homely) heroism. A saint is someone who offers so little resistance to the presence and power of God in her life that God is able to pour Himself freely into the person’s heart and fill it with love. That love flows out through the holy person’s ‘hands’ to all those who have need in the world – the poor, the lonely, the sick, the homeless, the helpless, all who have need of God’s Love – whatever shape or form that need takes (and we do not exclude ourselves from having a need to be loved, to receive the Mercy of God).

This is what makes the saints the real innovators in the Church.

Von Balthasar (*Two Sisters in the Spirit: Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1992, 21*) says that;

“saints stand at the very heart of the world; they set before every generation a new interpretation of Revelation”.

¹ It has come down in the Church through Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (translated by Robert Gatehead into Latin) and standardised through the writings of St Albert the Great and St Thomas Aquinas. Pope Benedict XIV (Prospero Lambertini) declared holiness consists solely in conformity to the will of God which expresses itself in the constant and exact fulfilment of the duties of one’s state in life.

In a sense the life of a saint is theology in practice. One saint is worth a thousand theological concepts. We will always have need of theologians to interpret our experiences of the divine mysteries but we need saints to **help us embrace that mystery**. Minds are formed and hearts are moved not by abstract ideas but by models. It is not books that tell us what holiness is about. It is saints. The saints are **gifts from God**. They become real parables of the inner life of God and erupt into history with spontaneity and novelty.

It is also important for us to keep in mind that **holiness is not for the few. It is for all of us**.

Saints surprise us. Their life stories remind us not only of the excellence of the virtuous life but of the unpredictability of what happens when a person allows herself to be transformed by God's grace. (Catherine McAuley's story is awash with the intervention of the God of surprises)

Von Balthasar has said that "no one is so much herself as the saint who disposes herself to God's plan, for which she is prepared to surrender her whole being, body, soul and spirit". The saints experience the same things as you and I do, but what is different is **their insight into what they experience**. It is this insight that makes the difference between one saint and another and between a saint and you and me.

One final point, it is God who makes the saint; the Church simply ratifies God's handiwork and calls the attention of the faithful for their encouragement and veneration. The task of the "saint-maker" (Congregation for Causes) is to illuminate the specific difference, to carve out what fresh and formative insight God has produced in the person who says; "here I am Lord, I come to do your will" or "not my will but yours be done".

Catherine McAuley's life shines like a beacon because of her insight into a practical expression of the merciful Love of God made tangible to the poor of Dublin of her time and continued today in 40+ countries throughout the world by 7,000 thousand or more Sisters of Mercy and more than a quarter of a million of their collaborators and associates in mission and ministry. It is a charism that continues to have extraordinary significance in the Church and in the world of our time.

When the Church looks at the life of a person in order to discern the person's holiness, she looks to the last ten years of that person's life. The last ten years of Catherine McAuley's life were spent as a religious Sister of Mercy. She made her profession on December 12th 1831 and she died on November 11th 1841, about six weeks after her 63rd birthday and just a month short of her tenth year in religious life.

Why the Church focuses on these latter years is that they are influenced by what has gone before, by how the person has lived her life from the beginning. We arrive at the sunset years of life moulded and formed by the choices we have made in the various circumstances life has offered us.

The **scholars who scrutinised the life and work of Catherine** as she responded to the action of God in her life found that Catherine's **spiritual greatness** lies in:

- Her **strength of spirit and dependence on God** that kept her faithful to the Catholic Faith. Because of family circumstances, she struggled during her adolescent and early adult years but she took practical steps to inform herself about her religion. This is what brought her into contact with Dr Murray (among others) long before he became Archbishop of Dublin or she the founder of a religious congregation
- Her **marvellous docility to the whisper of Divine Providence** which drew her humble and obedient step by step along the path of her specific vocation. Her time in Coolock seems to have been her “desert/novitiate” time during which her relationship with Jesus Christ deepened and matured, focussed on “her poor, humble abandoned Christ”. It gave expression to a personalised response to God’s loving call to Mercy. Catherine’s spirituality was focussed on the suffering Christ. She would say that the new congregation was “founded on Calvary there to serve a crucified redeemer” Her goal was to bring to the world around her that Mercy that flows from the crucified Christ
- The **total sacrifice of all that she was and had for the sake of the poor, sick and uneducated**. This was seen especially when she became the surprise legatee of the not inconsiderable wealth of William Callaghan. She saw the legacy not as something for herself but as given to her in trust for the poor. She spent all her inheritance in building and establishing the House of Mercy on the then fashionable Baggot Street in Dublin – an extraordinary feat for a single Catholic woman of that time and in that place.
- **She not only had great ideas, she also put many of them into practice**. She had her dreams/her vision but she was not a dreamer. Even before there was a question of her inheriting the Callaghan fortune, Catherine told William Callaghan what her dream was – to help poor young women to improve and better themselves. She had thought through what she would do when the Callaghans died and when she would have to fend for herself.
- Her **knowledge of Scripture is electrifying, especially for an Irish Catholic Woman** of her day. Catherine read daily from the Scriptures for Catherine Callaghan who was a Quaker, and so in God’s providence she herself was exposed to the transforming power of God’s word which she read, meditated upon, absorbed and translated into action. In her words “The life and teachings of Jesus Christ should be as a book always open before us, from which we are to learn all that is necessary to know”. Also, “what Jesus said and did was said and done to give us an example which our lives should be spent copying”. (Catechesi Tradendae no. 49: “everything that Jesus said and did teaches us” Pope St John Paul II)
- Her **devotional prayer was centred on Christ and on God’s universal Mercy** (Psalter of Jesus², Thirty Days Prayer). If you read Catherine McAuley’s letters or her Retreat Instructions you will find that there is no sentimentality. Her prayer reflects

² In the Psalter of Jesus, the name of Jesus is mentioned numerous times calling on his Mercy.

her time and place but deeper still it reveals a soul that recognised the importance of a vital prayer life. She would say herself; “how can we teach the Love of God if our own hearts are cold”. She described prayer as: a plant, the seed of which is sown in the heart of every Christian but its growth depends on the care we take to nourish it. If neglected it will die. If nourished by constant practice, it will blossom and produce fruit in abundance”. Catherine reminded those who would share her life and charism to cultivate a contemplative attitude to life because she knew from experience that out of a contemplative heart would flow compassionate service for those in need and the fruits of prayer are seen in our everyday choices/actions in life.

- She **had a great attention to detail**. On her deathbed she had the signs of her penance destroyed; she asked that refreshments be prepared in the community room rather than in the dining room for the sisters coming to the funeral. This revealed her thoughtfulness and her ability to meet people where they were at. She intuited that the sisters would need relaxed surroundings as they shared their grief. She was faithful in the small things as well as the big ones. (The good is always concrete).
- Her **synthesis of contemplation and action** foreshadows Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio* in that she integrated in her service of the poor both their spiritual and material well-being. In this we see the radiance of the charism with which she was gifted. The corporal and spiritual works of Mercy were always her immediate focus. She understood how useless it is to preach the word of God to someone who is hungry, At the same time when she relieved someone’s hunger she never failed to help the person turn to God, the giver of all that is good.
- What Catherine asked of herself and others was the **fulfilment of ordinary everyday actions, starting from the most menial, fulfilled with perseverance, attention and love**, instead of spectacular efforts abandoned at the first hurdle. It is through her very ordinariness that her strength of spirit and her holiness become visible. She appreciated the value of the ordinary to bring the person into close contact with the Merciful God who is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.
- It is through her letters that Catherine McAuley’s ordinariness and gospel simplicity are revealed clearly and unequivocally. In one letter (Jan 4, 1841, to Cecelia Marmion) Catherine, with great good humour recounts the simple fact that they had “*to keep hot turf under the butter in order to be able to cut it*” because the weather was so cold in Birr in the winter of 1841. Her letters are full of anecdotes of ordinary everyday happenings; concern for somebody who is sick, rejoicing at someone’s success, sharing tidbits of information and advice, commenting on someone’s behavior, delighting over a gift, and being devastated at the news of illness or a death. What makes her letters so attractive and readable is their unaffectedness and the warmth, friendliness, care for others and interest in the detail of the other person’s life that is evident in every line that she wrote. If, as J.H. Newman says, “a person’s life

lives in his/her letters”, then Catherine’s letters portray a life of simplicity, warmth, humour, realism, love of people and an unswerving faith and trust in God.

There are **three elements that qualify action** as heroic

- Actions performed at a level which is **beyond to what is normally expected of a good person.**

This is obvious in Catherine in the way she used all her inheritance for the poor. Or her acceptance of the necessity of becoming a religious sister so that the poor might be more surely served, even though this was a long way from what she had imagined for herself in life. Like Mary of Nazareth before her, she learned that what she understood as giving ALL to God and what God intended required that she surrender and trust the more of God’s will.

- The practice of these acts is **continuous and progressive.**

This is very obvious in Catherine’s life from the time she began to help the tenants on the Callaghan estate in Coolock, through her teaching days in St Mary’s in Middle Abbey Street, to her building of the House of Mercy in Baggot Street, through her founding the Sisters of Mercy.

- This behaviour becomes a **powerful example and encouragement** for those who are in direct or mediated contact with the Servant of God.

In 1827, her first companions who came to help her with her works of Mercy in the house on Baggot Street in Dublin were attracted by the way she lived which one of them described as a “prayerfully quiet way of being”. Her “light on a lamp stand” is no less attractive today than it was in 1827.

Another aspect of Catherine’s **heroism is her humility**

When the life of a Servant of God is being evaluated as virtuous, the aspects looked at are; how the person lived the virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity; how the person lived the virtues of Prudence, Justice, Courage and Temperance; how the person lived the virtues of his/her state in life which for Catherine were the virtues associated with the vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. When the theologians were looking at the life of Catherine McAuley at the time she was declared Venerable on April 9th 1990 by Pope St. John Paul II, **the central virtue** that they discerned in Catherine was **humility**. Catherine has said:

“Humility makes us close imitators of the Blessed Virgin who, at the period of her unequalled exaltation, intoned the Magnificat, so expressive of her deep sense of God’s goodness and her own littleness”

From what we know of Catherine she saw humility as a prerequisite for serving people in need. She herself was a humble woman. Those who knew her attested to it with consistent

regularity. Her humility, it would seem, sprang from her inner awareness of her own need for and absolute dependence on God. From her letters and writings it is clear that she was convinced that she was “God’s instrument”, a strand in the great tapestry of God’s Divine Plan – only a strand but a very necessary one. It was **her grounded self-acceptance** of who she was before God, nothing more and nothing less, that was the secret of her humble hospitality. There was room in her heart and in her house for all who needed hospitality – family, friend or stranger. In opening her heart to God she exemplified living the Gospel imperative “love one another as I have loved you” (John 16:12).

Catherine was conscious of her own limitations and this knowledge saved her from any messianic complex that can be the mark of people who do great things. A novice in Carlow, who met her a number of times, said about her “there was in her, an absence of a manner of telling ‘I am the foundress. She was cheerful and motherly with all of us and looked very devout in her prayers”.

The same humility was inherent in her theory and practice of leadership as we see in the advice she gave to Elizabeth Moore in her letter of December 1838. In this letter Catherine lists other virtues that she associates with humility such as; kindness, acceptance, gentleness, patience, prayer and good example.

Catherine rarely drew attention to herself except when absolutely necessary as we see when she was very ill. While in her health, she served at table, helped in the laundry, looked after her own room, and never exempted herself from the ordinary work of the house.

Her humility, seen in many and varied ways in her life, is epitomized in her submission at 52 years of age to the rigours of an intensive novitiate. In the time when it took place, this act of humble submission was in itself nothing short of heroic. It is rendered even more significant by the fact that at one stage of her time in Georges Hill there was a question of the validity of her novitiate which threatened to prolong her absence from Baggot Street. We can only imagine the inner experience of anguish and the trust and surrender to God she needed to contain this anguish at a time when she was anxious to return to Baggot Street as soon as was humanly possible because she had learned that in her absence misplaced zeal and excessive penances had undermined health among her small band of very young companions. (At the outset of the Baggot Street project Catherine was more than twice the age of the majority of her companions).

Her ability to surrender humbly to God will always shine as a lamp for those of us who follow her especially as we get older and surrender back to God all the capacities and abilities that we once took for granted like sight and hearing, mobility and memory.

Underpinning Catherine’s humility is her unwavering trust in and devotion to her “humbled abandoned agonizing Christ”.

“The humbled, abandoned, agonizing Christ, this is my Christ, him will I have and hold. Outside of him, nothing”

Her humility also lay at the source of her gratitude and prayer. We hear her pray; “May God bless the poor Sisters of Mercy and make them very humble that they may not be unworthy of the distinguished blessing that God has bestowed on them”.

In her relationships with others, acceptance and acknowledgement of her own shortcomings allowed Catherine the ability to apologise with courtesy to others and endowed her with peace, serenity, calmness and gentleness.

‘May God forgive me and make me humble before he calls me into his presence’.

For Catherine, humility was one of the prerequisites for ministering to those in need. It was only through her awareness of her utter powerlessness, weakness and absolute dependence on God that she could be used effectively for that for which he intended her:

“Humility must emanate from the heart and arise from a deep conviction of our own nothingness and dependence on God, from our knowing well that if he withdraws his supporting hand we will surely fall.”

Given her humble trust in God, Catherine knew real joy in responding to her call. It is real joy that gives us courage to venture the “exodus” of love, out of ourselves and into the burning holiness of God. It is true joy that pain does not destroy and which first brings maturity. Only joy that stands the test of pain and is stronger than affliction is authentic. Catherine embraced the mission in life entrusted to her, and she lived it joyfully knowing that through this she would bring others to God and would grow into wholeness and holiness and into being the loving mercy-bearing person she was called to be.

Catherine’s failures

Frances Warde wrote about Catherine McAuley, in a letter to Mother Gonzaga O’Brien in 1879 as follows;

“You never knew her, I knew her better than I have known anyone in my life. She was a woman of God and God made her a woman of vision”

This does not mean that the holy person is untouched by ordinary everyday struggles to become more truly open and obedient to what God is asking of her. Catherine McAuley was not born a saint. She grew in holiness through learning from her life’s experiences, searching for God’s will in her regard and responding to the best of her ability. This did not mean that she did not fail at times.

She **publicly rebuked Sr Mary Clare Moore** and promptly asked forgiveness on her knees from those sisters who had witnessed it. She admitted that she had difficulty with the pace at which Sr Mary Clare worked and obviously this difficulty spilled over into a public rebuke at some time.

It also seems that Catherine had difficulty understanding what we might call “difficult” temperaments that lacked gentility and refinement.

She **read three sentences of an aggressive letter from Dr Meyler**, the PP of Westland Row Church, before burning it. The chaplaincy difficulty really sent her into a state of great agitation. However, it is to her credit that she was on good terms with Dr Meyler at the end of her life and he was one of the people who came to see her on the day she died. (Positio p 691).

Like all of us she had her blind spots, for example;

She warned Sr Cecelia Marmion, the novice mistress, about having favourites among the novices. At the same time Catherine herself was inclined to get attached to people she liked. Sometimes her expressions of affection seemed excessive. About a Sr Margaret Dwyer she said; "I am almost infatuated with the darling heavenly little Sr Margaret D. I never met in this great world a sweeter little dove, all animation, candour and real good sense. I declared she should be queen of the order in general". This comment was taken up quite seriously in the community, people reacted to it strongly.

These simple examples take nothing from Catherine, instead they show her humanity and that she had to handle herself in her relationships with others as everybody has. However, her closeness to God rendered her very sensitive to her failures, she saw faults in herself that lesser mortals would never notice nor ask pardon for.

Catherine's death.

Catherine died the death **that any Christian might hope and pray for** and which every Christian must admire. Without any fuss, without any fear she gave herself back to God as she had given herself to Him in life, which was amazing given that she had such a fear of death at the time of her mother's death in 1898 when she was twenty years of age.

Sr Mary Vincent Whitty who was present when Catherine died wrote to Sr Cecelia Marmion on the 12th November 1841:

"Yesterday, she said to me, "if you give yourself entirely to God – all you have to serve him – every power of your mind and heart – you will have a consolation you will not know where it comes from". Indeed she looked the picture of entire abandonment of herself and all that belonged to her into the hands of God. We know that Catherine feared death especially at the time of her mother's death. Here indeed was a journey into Mercy from fear and apprehension to serenity, trust and peace.

Dr Michael Blake Bishop of Dromore, writing to Sr Mary Elizabeth Moore, November 13th 1841, two days after Catherine's death, expressed his deep sense of personal loss and went on to say:

"but God's holy will be done at all times. To him we are indebted for all she did. From him she received the spirit that animated her pure soul".

It is the people who knew the holy person who claim him/her to be holy. It is the role of the Church to discern that claim and search its authenticity. (Pope John Paul II – Santo subito -

the call of the people gathered in St Peter's Square at the time of his death). The same with Catherine McAuley, those who knew her, not only her companions, the Sisters of Mercy, but also priests, bishops and the poor whom she served unstintingly declared that she was a truly holy person. Contrary to her own estimate of herself, Catherine was known for her holiness at the time of her death.

Fr Myles Gaffney, a friend and also the Dean of Maynooth (he was the one appointed by Archbishop Murray to help Catherine formulate her rule on the day after the foundation of the Congregation, 13th December 1831) wrote of her at the time of her death:

“Few people left the world in 1841 that can, with more confidence expect to hear the following words on the lips of our Divine Redeemer, “Come you blessed of my father for I was thirsty and you gave to me to drink, I was a stranger and you took me in, naked and you covered me, sick and you visited me. As much as you did it to one of these the least of my brothers and sisters you did it to me” (Bermondsey Annals), He summarised very succinctly what was the core of Catherine's expression of Mercy – the spiritual and corporal works of Mercy. Catherine recognised very clearly from Scripture that we will have to answer more for omission than for sin when we come face to face with our Redeemer, for our tendency to look the other way in the face of our neighbour's need.

Conclusion

What Catherine McAuley accomplished through her work in life is just one ray of light from the prism of light which is the life of this great woman. Like the apostles with the five loaves and two fish, she did what she could with what was at her disposal. Like the apostles with Jesus, God blessed her work with an increase that went far beyond anything she could have ever asked or imagined.

From what we know of her we can see that Catherine was consumed by her mission – to be the practical expression of the Mercy of God in her world. The mission was far greater than herself as history has and will prove. In imitation of Mary of Nazareth who followed her mission wherever it led, even to the heights of Calvary, so too with Catherine, she did not hold back on any level of her being, physical, emotional, spiritual, material, everything was given in response to the call that she experienced within.

She did not focus on herself; she focussed all her energies on the mission entrusted to her.

As we have already noted, God gives each of us a specific mission, to which each of us is called and challenged to be faithful. Catherine was entrusted with the charism of Mercy. As she understood and lived it and as we have received it, it is a call to be a conduit of the merciful Love of God in clear and practical ways as they unfold in what we discern as God's plan for our life personally and communally.

Catherine stands before each one of us here and through the challenge of her life asks each of us how we are living our call to be living embodiments of the Merciful love of God in our time and place.

Her Cause for Beatification has a meaning that transcends her persona and her institute and which has implications for the whole Church today.

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Published with permission in Mercy eNews Issue #698, 16 November 2016