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Mercy Spirituality

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Catherine McAuley and the Grace of Unable

Marianne Heib, RSM

A sculpture, especially an abstract work of art that is three dimensional, has many ways of revealing its nature, mystery and potential to the observer. As the person encountering a particular piece, you may approach it, view it from a distance, walk around it, even touch it. What is especially important to notice is the way it utilizes space, the places of positive and negative presence, the emptiness and the fullness that define its form.

The time of day, the setting, the objects surrounding it, the color of the room or of the garden, the lighting; a myriad of tiny factors would influence what you were seeing when you saw this sculpture. If you had time to study the artist, the times in which it were fashioned, the properties of the material, the intent; all of this would also affect and enrich your seeing. However, if a friend or acquaintance had sent you a postcard, with a picture of one view of this sculpture, you still might be drawn to it even though there would be so many dimensions unavailable to you and therefore to your deepest appreciation of this work of art.

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Perhaps it was something like that with Catherine and me. She was this three dimensional work of art that I had received one dimensional glimpses of from postcards sent from distant places and other people's journeys. I was in possession of a portrait that had become familiar but which generated a sense of uneasiness in me. This sense of unease, complex yet real, rendered me a distanced onlooker when it came to the life of the foundress, and her influence upon me. As an artist, I had yet to quietly walk around this particular work of art on my own, and thus, relying on the portrait handed down, was faced instead with a style that did not yield multiple interpretations.

The literature and stories whose intent was to illumine the character and virtue of this heroic woman effected the opposite in me. The verbiage of superlatives cast shadows rather than light on a person who above all, hoped to enter life at its most human level.

A Sister of Mercy from the Diocese of Oklahoma in a 1922 treatise paints us this portrait. "Her whole demeanor was a reflection of the bright flame of charity that consumed her from childhood; her calm, dignified bearing, her tender blue eyes, her sweet smile, her naive manner were but the outcome of a soul occupied with God; never once do we find her serenity disturbed, even amidst the trials of domestic ties, or the strenuous duties of community life. A multitude of occupations never changed her temper or temperament.

"The cultivated and the ignorant, the rich and the poor, the virtuous and the fallen, the devout and the careless all claimed her for their benefactor.

"No one applied to her in vain for sympathy or relief...everyone who was in distress came to her and for each one she had a different remedy. Often she deprived herself of articles of dress, of food, of comforts to relieve the necessities of her neighbors."

I could find in this and in other similar accounts no negative space, no shading which would allow for fullness. It was an icon that could not draw the viewer in, and could not communicate life into the space around it. That, at least in part, was the portrait that I took with me several years ago to a Mercy Charism Retreat: the image of that first Sister of Mercy, undaunted, tireless, capable of responding selflessly in all situations. Thus, it was with great trepidation that I had become willing to put myself in her presence in a reflective way, to pray about her life and my life in a retreat setting. I might encounter for myself Catherine's three-dimensionality, and risk knowing and being known. And I suspected that, should this meeting indeed happen, I most certainly would be found wanting in the sight of the foundress.

Arriving at retreat, I unpacked, opening my own and our communal mythology and placing them folded into the bottomless drawers and closets of the coming days. The echo of a history of our community documents and of Catherine's words accompanied me. Years of hearing about the relentless giving of the Sister of Mercy followed me, along with words attributed to Catherine like, "In heaven alone the Sister of Mercy should look for rest."²

On the third day of the retreat, which dealt with a variety of events and themes in the charism, Patricia Joseph Corkery, from Merion offered a reflection on Catherine at Baggot Street. She described a time prior to Catherine's novitiate when controversy existed over these women living together, doing good works, gathering for prayer, imitating conventual life and seemingly offering competition to established religious orders. We retreatants heard the story of the day the chapel at Baggot Street was blessed. The director con-

cluded this account with the observation that due to the controversy that raged around her, Catherine was unable to attend the ceremonies, and, the literature says, stayed in the house and prayed instead.

It was so striking to me to hear that in this instance, Catherine was unable to face a situation. That afternoon, in my own quiet prayer, the image of this woman and that scene came back. I found myself imaginatively wandering through the house at Baggot Street, finding Catherine who was alone in a darkened place. I was able to spend the time just sitting with her, being with her. The silence between us was rich with understanding. This "unable" was a place I understood and could share with her. As a younger person, in my reverie, I had tried trotting behind her, as she swooped into the hovels of the poor, tending every need, and I had returned from this imaginative journey crestfallen, inadequate and feeling alienated from her bountifulness. But in this darkness, in this circle of shared awareness of a moment that could not be overcome, here, we were for the first time in my experience, just sisters, and my presence could be full and entire to her reality. The God of Mercy surrounded us in yet another work of mercy.

During the course of the retreat, when the group gathered for reflection, I was able to share some of this prayer, and felt it open us up to the shadow side of ourselves and of the charism. I have used this example with people I work with both in retreats and in spiritual direction and they have in turn found comfort in it. Somehow it is a blessed relief for us to acknowledge and be with this "unable".

After retreat, I went to Catherine's story to read about this incident and see what else might be there for us in this place in her life when Catherine is overcome and experiences for us that place of unable. *"In Letters of Catherine McAuley*, the following brief passage reports. On June 4, 1929, the chapel was dedicated under the title of Our Lady of Mercy. The Archbishop presided, the Rev. Patrick Wood was celebrant and Dr. Michael Blake preached, eulogizing Miss McAuley who was not present, being indisposed because of mounting pressures."³

Mercy unto Thousands, gives us more of an emotional sense of the climate of the day in this account:

"She was not present at the ceremonies to hear herself panegyricized by her unfailing ally, Dr. Blake. Something like consternation attends the reading of this passage from recollections of the day. 'She was much affected and would not be present but remained in prayer in the (House): at this time and long after she had much to feel from disapprobation especially of many priests and others. Much jealousy existed regarding the Sisters of Charity!' So the principal lady was not present at the dedication of her own chapel because the experience was more than she could bear!"⁵

Several shifts happened in me as I read these accounts. I was experiencing Catherine in darkness, and the shading of this person into a three dimensional perspective had begun. I was also experiencing myself in Mercy as I was, a wanderer down darkened corridors of our history, being present to the inability of another. The face of compassion emerged in my inward gaze as opposed to driven service.

After reading these accounts of the chapel blessing ceremonies, the journey, the walking around the sculpture as work of art had begun. I continued paging through the *Letters* to see if I might catch another glimpse of this theme of "unable" in the life of a woman whose spirituality is so apostolic, so outward. Yet as in a sculpture, it is the absences that help us to define the form, the negative space that hollows out in order to define the shape. Catherine's life of art slowly began to yield shape for me.

**It seems that for Catherine,
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at times welcome.**

This place of "unable" felt different from the strong sense of the cross that we have traditionally known in Catherine. The strain of "Cross and Crown" stands on its own both in her words and in other's reflection on her spirituality. It seems that for Catherine, the cross was a familiar reality that she was frequently able to name and even at times welcome. She knew its form, recognized its appearance and often had some clear rules about how she and her sisters might deal with it, accept it, surrender to it, and ultimately even overcome it. "We are flourishing in the very midst at the cross, thanks be to God."⁶ "You are on the secure high road of the Cross."⁷ "My dear sisters, do you want to spoil the cross our divine Lord has asked us to carry today? Let us go to choir and thank Him for His loving forethought in asking us to walk with Him."⁸

According to *Tender Courage*, she identifies and experiences the cross in external events, in dealings with the clergy, in situations with her communities at a distance. We sense some element of trust bordering on control here. She frequently admonishes her sisters to accept, and God will "soon come with blessings".⁹ Not so with this dark place of "unable." It is another creature entirely. As I journeyed through her life and her *Letters* with an eye for this creature I was drawn to one other time that seemed to exhibit this same shadow quality of "unable."

In a letter to Frances Warde dated March 5, 1841, she introduces us to "the cough". "My rather new visitant, a cough, has been with me very constantly since the first Sunday after my return... I do think that a cough has made a resting place with me, and will be no unusual visitor in future."¹⁰ With her years of experience at the bedside of her own sisters and of her own poor, she surely knows what this "new visitant" means for her life. The reality of it, understated as it is here, throws her along a path whose end will be transformed in the offering of a comfortable cup of tea in the midst of her conscious giving over of life.

**“See how quietly the great God
performs all his mighty works:
darkness is spread
over us at night and light
returns in the morning”**

With the very next paragraph of the letter in which the cough is given space in her life, Catherine begins a commentary on Mary Clare (Augustine) Moore, "A character not suited to my taste of my ability to govern."¹¹ She discovers herself "unable" in the face of this woman - why? "She teased and perplexed me so much about the difficulty of copying two pages, that I was really obliged to give up, unwilling to command lest it should produce disedifying consequences. She said it would take the entire Lent. Indeed, you can have no idea how little she does in a week..."¹² Clare Moore was an artist. The only time I had read this account before was when I had come upon it in *Tender Courage*.¹³ I closed the book at that point and never picked it up again. It burned to know in words the harsh judgment of Catherine on the work of an artist. It left me with little hope for a communal vocabulary of a spirituality of art in Mercy, if this were so deep in the charism.

There are works of art that challenge me, yet I am formed by their unrelenting beauty and truth. Some of Van Gogh's works can be like that. The German artist, Kathe Kowlewitz, folk art from Peru, some surprising examples from modern art, ancient icons whose beauty grows to bursting point, Daumier, Picasso in his social commentary, Rembrandt's etchings, Giacometti's sculptures, nature's own landscape presentations: all of these speak, and I stay with them, until they begin to reveal their secrets. Why not give this letter, this woman that same opportunity?

So, a sentence away from her casual discourse on a cough that has taken up residence in her life, bringing with it the dark shadow of physical diminishment, Catherine's energy bursts forth in seemingly unrelated

and strongly negative comments about Clare (Augustine) Moore. Clare's lack of productivity as judged by Catherine renders the foundress exasperated and unable to govern... I began to suspect that her response to Moore was merely a deflection of her reaction to "the cough", an embodied symbol of this dark visitor, a visitor that would alter Catherine's way of being and doing from then on.

Her life of work and service was shaken. What a terrible threat it must have been to the self image and self-worth of one who in 1838 put before her Sisters of Mercy the following ideal: "We have a striking example before us every day of the power we possess of exercising unwearied efforts of body and mind in the perpetual movement of the steam train carriages which do not cease from morning till night"¹⁴ This letter, then, seems to link us to a greater unable that plunged Catherine into the shadowed reality of dying. Her exasperation had little to do with the tedious artwork of one of her own, and everything to do with her acknowledging a cough that would plunge her toward the edge of life and beyond.

An early story tells us Catherine had a great fear of death. This description of her mother, Elinor comes from Neumann's introductory sketch: "Enjoying life and all the pleasures the world had to offer, Elinor departed from it so reluctantly that Catherine never forgot the agonizing experience of watching her mother die. It instilled in her an excessive dread of dying which continued until a few hours before her own death, when she exclaimed, "If I thought death could be so sweet, I never should have feared it."¹⁵

In young adulthood, Catherine waited faithfully with Mrs. Callahan through those final years of the woman's life: "The last two years of her (Mrs. Callahan) life she spent a confirmed invalid in a darkened room where the blinds were seldom raised and even a lamp had to be carefully shaded".¹⁶ At a much later time, Catherine employed an image that perhaps was the transformation of this dark, "unable" time. The poetic language gives us a rare glimpse and access to Catherine's interiority. "See how quietly the great God performs all his mighty works: darkness is spread over us at night and light returns in the morning and there is no noise of closing shutters or drawing curtains."¹⁷ Does she encounter this same quiet darkness in her time of "unable" as she waits in the shadow of the chapel blessing ceremonies? Does she encounter it again and in a deeper way in her body, as it yields to the first symptoms of a fatal disease?

I continued the slow contemplative walk around the sculpture. From this shifting view, this three-dimensional exploration, another aspect came into focus. As a child, transplanted from a Catholic atmosphere and bereft of religious symbols, we are told that Catherine prayed with the image of the cross which she found in the panels and beams of the door. "Branches of the trees and bushes also formed them-

selves in her gaze.”¹⁸ “When nothing but a child, she painstakingly copied the Psalter of Jesus, and for a long time, it and the Universal Prayer were the only prayers Catherine knew.¹⁹ Her body holds the memory of these times, the child’s clear seeing, the earnest efforts at making the Word tangible.

Despite herself, she still possesses these seeds of intuitive seeing, and perhaps reacts in drivenness against them in the face of impending loss, declaring herself instead unable to govern someone who in adulthood “painstakingly copies” the holy words. What has she done with the seeing that found the cross in trees and bushes of her youthful devotion and determination? The texture of the cough plunges her into the darkness of unable, shrouding her from the comfort she might receive from another. Instead she creates a gruff distance from beauty and seeing, and hides behind a role: her ability to govern, her tendency to judge, to sum up.

Did Claire Augustine Moore walk along the dark corridors of Baggot street until she found Catherine in the darkness of unable? And did she sit with her in the truest silence of that moment? We her sisters would hope that it happened that way.

Can we, with Catherine, trust this transforming place of inability, this grace that is unbidden, uninvited and so beyond our desire or control?

As we journey more deeply with Catherine into this place, we go to the life of Jesus, Catherine’s great model for mercy, and there find the gospel moments of “unable.” In visiting them, we know with assurance that this place is one to which we are all called and invited, periodically and eventually. We catch glimpses of times when Jesus stood in that place of unable, under the powerful scrutiny of others, feeling what we feel when we are inadequate to people’s expectations, when we are judged because of insufficient action, when we are just who we are in the face of our inability.

As a young man, at the home of his friends, Martha and Mary, Jesus is stung by Mary’s cry of anguish, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (Jn. 11:32) Jesus wept, overcome both by the loss, and his own moment of mysterious “unable.” More devastating yet is the deep pain of not being understood but rather being accused by a friend in the face of that very inability. And in the crowd he hears, “He opened the eyes of the blind man; could he not have prevented this man’s death?” (Jn. 11:37) Jesus

weeps again when he is unable to gather Jerusalem to himself: “How often have I longed to gather your children as a hen gathers her chicks. (Lk. 13:34) At the scene of his dying, he is invited again to make things clear: “If you are the Christ, bring yourself down from the cross.” (Mt. 27:40, 42) In this moment of chosen “unable,” the darkness becomes as dense as it can be. There will be no proof, no rescue - just the transforming point of “unable.”

We hear Jesus say that we are, all of us, “unable.” And does he hear, as God desires each of us to hear, the words of the Creator: “My grace is sufficient to you; my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9)

As Jesus is Catherine’s model, so is he here, in that undefined place we have been probing. In that context and perspective, can we know and acknowledge this place of “unable” as gift and grace within our charism? And what are the implications of this grace for us, as women of Mercy, as a community of Mercy, as daughters of Catherine, and as the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy?

- That God awaits each of us in a unique way in that vast place of “unable.”

- That I am called to name my drivenness and at times to move away from it, entering into a darker place of waiting and listening....

- That the charism invites me to moments of reverencing the unable in another - and to resisting the sinfulness of misnaming or judging the meaning of that place in another’s life.

- That as we feel overwhelmed by sinful structures, by ministry demands, by our own diminishing numbers, we might turn instead away from doing and the unrelenting search for answers, to learn a deeper response from Catherine and from Christ.

- That, rather than seeking to destroy its reflection outside of us by criticizing others who are caught in their inability, we enter into this place of paralysis and fear, in order to allow the experience of it to be truly our own.

Can we, with Catherine, trust this transforming place of inability, this grace that is unbidden, uninvited and so beyond our desire or control? Can we mine its wealth and wisdom for our larger Mercy world as we search out the tools inherent in the charism that will bring us to the edges of our most authentic form? What is this work of art, its ancient expression, its modern face, its future shape that teaches us by its form and content, by its space and solidity, by the shadows that it casts, by its beauty, mystery and challenge? Where are we in our willingness to walk slowly around this sculpture, allowing our sight to expand, our knowing to deepen? Can we trust the dark empty space that yields us form? Will we eventually give this piece of creation to each other and to our world? Will we be graced by “unable?”

Footnotes

1. A Sister of Mercy, *The Spirit of Catherine McAuley*, (Oklahoma City: Mt. St. Mary's Academy Press, 1922.), 7-8.
2. *Ibid.*, 74.
3. Sister Mary Ignatia Newmann, R.S.M., ed, *Letters of Catherine McAuley 1827-1841*, (Baltimore: Helicon Press, Inc., 1969), 20.
4. Letter from Mother Mary Anne Doyle to Sister M. Clare Augustine Moore.
5. Sister M. Bertrand Degnan, R.S.M., *Mercy Unto Thousands*, (Maryland: The Neuman Press, 1957), 96. A slightly different version is described by S.M. Angela Bolster, *Catherine McAuley: In Her Own Words* (Wesford: John English and Co., 1978), 31. "Canon Kelley delivered his first tirade on 4 June 1829 on the occasion of the dedication of the chapel in Baggot Street, at which he had been one of the two priests assisting Dr. Murray. His outburst

was so vehement that Catherine absented herself from the reception given after the ceremony."

6. *Letters*, 125.
7. *Ibid.*, 352.
8. *The Spirit of Catherine McAuley*, 45.
9. *Letters*, 204.
10. *Ibid.*, 311.
11. *Ibid.*, 311.
12. *Ibid.*, 311.
13. M. Joanna Regan, R.S.M., Isabelle Keiss, R.S.M., *Tender Courage*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988), 125.
14. *Letters*, 131.
15. *Letters*, 4.
16. *Letters*, 8.
17. *Letters*
18. *The Spirit of Catherine McAuley*, 47.
19. *Ibid.*, 47.

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