

Mercy Day  
September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013

Mercy International Centre, Dublin

#### READINGS:

First Reading - The Commissioning of Moses, **Exodus 3:1-14; 4:10-15**

Second Reading - Catherine McAuley and the Building of the House of Mercy, **Excerpts from the Limerick Manuscript**

Gospel - The Commissioning of Mary, **Luke 1: 26-38**

#### REFLECTIONS:

I invite you to enter deeply into the meaning and call of today's readings – for the persons involved, as well as for us. These readings are about the salvation God has promised all of us - and about the call to collaboration and discipleship God has addressed to each of us.

The Annunciation story in Luke follows the same pattern as the annunciation story in Exodus. Both are events of divine commissioning:

- Moses is asked to accept the task of liberating God's people from the slavery and oppression of the Egyptians, and
- Mary is asked to inaugurate the final liberation of God's people by giving birth to Jesus, the enfleshed Mercy of God.

In both cases frail human beings are asked to freely accept the burden and mystery of what God asks – that is, to freely embrace, learn, and follow the saving word of God.

Events of divine commissioning are not events accomplished in a single day. They unfold in history, over the course of a whole life, and the initial Yes given to the mystery of God's desires must slowly, over time, gain new depth, new understanding, and new affirmation.

The life-long act of continually and willingly saying Yes to the unfolding features of what God once asked is present throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures: in the stories of Gideon, Abraham and Sarah, the prophets, John the Baptist, Mary of Magdala, and the disciples of Jesus.

And in the unfolding life of Catherine McAuley, after the Callaghan inheritance was made known to her.

Neither Moses nor Mary nor Catherine felt equal to the prophetic commissions God asked of them. They each initially reacted with fear, and objected -- on the grounds that what God asked seemed impossible.

And each of them spoke their fear and objection before God:

- *Moses* said: “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now...I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exodus 4:10).
- *Mary* said: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34).
- And *Catherine* said: “The magnitude of the work [of sustaining the House]... the expense it [will] necessarily entail ... apprehensions that [my] charitable projects [can] never be realized” – all these “difficulties” greatly “trouble” me (CMcATM 152).

But then there is the re-assurance of God’s help:

- The Lord God from the burning bush says to *Moses*: “I have come down to deliver... I will be with you ... I AM WHO I AM ... I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt ... I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak” (Exodus 3:8, 12, 14, 17; 4:12).
- The Angel says to *Mary*: “Do not be afraid ... the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you”; “your relative Elizabeth, who was said to be barren, has conceived a son... for nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:35-37).
- And her good friend Edward Armstrong says to *Catherine*: “Do not put your trust in any human being, but place all your confidence in God alone” – “prophesying almost that... God’s help would never be wanting” (CMcATM, 153 and 92).

Neither Moses nor Mary nor Catherine knew in the beginning the fullness of the task they were being asked to assume.

*Moses* did not foresee his rejection by the Pharaoh, the passage through the Red Sea, the forty years in the desert, the grumbling and rebellion of those he led, the quarrel with Aaron, or his death before the Israelites crossed the Jordan.

When *Mary* said to the angel, “let it be with me according to your word,” she did not yet know all what “hearing the word of God and doing it” would entail. She did not foresee Simeon’s words in the Temple: “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many ... and to be a sign that will be opposed... and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (2:34-35). She could not anticipate her twelve-year-old’s distant, even disappointed words to her: “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (2:49).

The prophetic commission she was offered as a young peasant woman – her conceiving and bearing a son named Jesus – would, over time, mean that she was the mother of the misunderstood, rejected, crucified, faithful young man who was the Son of God.

When, in 1824, *Catherine McAuley* received God’s inspiration that she devote her Inheritance to the service of the poor and that she build this House of Mercy in which to serve them, she did not know that this House would become – or that it would lead to her founding the Sisters of Mercy. The alien appearance of the convent-type grate in the building baffled and even amused her. In fact, she said:

- “The idea of founding a religious institute never entered [my] mind” (CMcATM,1512);
- I do “not like the idea of Religious vows” (102);
- I do “not like ceremony, and some of the ceremonies used in Convents ... [are] particularly distasteful” (204).

In the beginning, the mystery of her own future and the mystery of the future of this house were hidden from Catherine. She did not yet know where she would be led, or what the full unfolding of her commissioning and discipleship would ask of her.

All three of these servants of God nonetheless said Yes, and each was then overshadowed by the Holy Spirit.

Biblically, God’s overshadowing is not a one-time event of a day or an hour. When the expressions “overshadowing” and “coming upon” are used of God, in relation to one whom God has commissioned, it always means the continuing presence, protection, and empowerment of God. Once one has freely consented in faith to God’s annunciation or inspiration, the living, gracious accompaniment of God is always present - perhaps symbolized by a pillar of fire or a cloud, or perhaps only by some inner strength and willingness.

So what of us who are here today? Have not we too been commissioned to God’s servants and Jesus’ disciples? We too have been asked to freely say Yes – not just once, long ago, at our baptism or profession of vows, but continually, as the content of our initial calling unfolds in ways we have not expected.

For most of us there was and will be no burning bush, no Angel Gabriel, no surprising inheritance. But still the same basic request has been addressed to each of us:

- Will you, today, lead my people out of their present miseries and bondage?
- Will you, in some way, beget my Son, and the reign of my love and compassion in this world?
- Will you build a House of Mercy? Will you, indeed, *be* a House of Mercy for my suffering people – not necessarily a House of bricks and cement, but a House made of sympathy, consolation, healing, and advocacy?

- Will you continually and freely say Yes – even as the further meaning of my request unfolds?

Do not be afraid. I will come upon you, and I will overshadow you. I will be with you. Have confidence in Me. For I am God, and I am faithful.

May each of us, like Moses and Mary and Catherine, have the courage and the trust to continually say Yes – again and again – as our lives unfold. For this is what being a disciple of Jesus Christ means.

And this is the invitation at the heart of the divine inspiration of Mercy Day.

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