

Catherine's Story: Gift and Challenge for our Times

I am delighted to be here to share with you something of Catherine's story in the hope that you will have some sense of this warm-hearted, kind and generous woman without whom none of us would be here in this gathering today.

When I was thinking about this time with you I began to think about my own experience of getting to know Catherine McAuley and how she has become both a gift and a challenge to me personally. I find that her humanness, her warmth, her ordinariness, her kindness and generosity are a gift to me every day. Her openness in her relationships – both with her friends and with her God - inspires me. And she also challenges me every day – the lengths to which she was prepared to go to help others calls me out of my smallness of heart; her persistence in following her dream and in being attentive to what God was asking of her challenges me to stay with the struggle and not give up when the going gets tough.

We will start by watching a film of Catherine's life that was made 21 years ago. The film lasts 22 minutes and tells how Catherine, like ourselves, experienced both love and insecurity in her childhood. It recounts how she grew up to become a generous and caring person who couldn't bear to see young girls left at risk on the streets, or children left without education or the poor left in misery. Eventually she had to make the decision to establish the Order of Mercy so that what she began could continue into the future. Even then she met with opposition and many obstacles but she did not falter and the strength that she showed somehow continued to have effect long after she had died – right down to each one of us gathered here in pilgrimage.

So as you watch this film see if you can identify one thing about Catherine McAuley's life that speaks to your heart and that connects with your own life. It might be that her father died when she was very young; it might be that she moved about a lot during her life; it might be that she really followed her dream, even when she met many obstacles. It might be that she wanted to help others and make a real difference. When it is finished I will give you a moment or two to make a note of what you want to remember and we will

have a few minutes to share our reactions to her story. And then as the pilgrimage unfolds you will get to know more about her as you participate in a guided tour of her house on Baggot Street.

So I would like to spend the remainder of the time left to us highlighting some aspects of Catherine's personality that are both gift and challenge for us today. Much of what I will be saying is based on Catherine's own words – those very words she used with her early companions are just as powerful for us who are her companions today.

GENEROSITY

Can you imagine the surprise it must have been for Catherine when she learned that Mr. Callaghan had left her everything? That act of generosity seemed to her to far outweigh her own generous giving to him and his wife for over twenty years. Generosity begets generosity. Because Catherine now had the means to do something on a far grander scale than she could ever have thought possible she made big decisions.

***Slide: Catherine spent all her inheritance on building the house on Baggot Street. She gave everything she had for the good of others – others who could never give her anything in return.**

She could have easily stayed in Coolock House and lived in a generous way with the children she had adopted, and she could have continued to help the servants there and she could have found many other outlets for her loving. Instead, she sold it all and with the proceeds she set about building a big house – four storeys high – **** Slide of Baggot Street** to provide shelter and safe haven for the servant girls who were at risk and to provide a good education for poor Catholic girls.

For a moment just imagine that you have won a vast sum of money in the lottery. Or imagine that you are left a few million euro or dollars by someone who thinks a lot of you. Now, think: “What would you do with that kind of money?” My guess is that many of us would spend it on a great holiday or we'd use it to get something like a fancy car or the latest techi gadget! See how Catherine's spirit of generosity is both gift and challenge for us.

Catherine's same generous spirit shines through in her letters. She couldn't bear to think of poor people being deprived of any help that was in her power to offer and in truth she could say from her heart:

***Slide: For God knows that 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.**

In another letter she wrote of her concern for the way the poor in a certain locality would not be helped if the Sisters were to withdraw from that place. **** Slide: My heart felt sorrowful when I thought of the poor being deprived of the comfort which God seemed to intend for them.** For Catherine, being with the poor was not just a functional thing – she really felt for them from her big, generous heart.

After she had generously spent her fortune, she often found herself struggling to have enough money to make ends meet and yet she was prepared to share from her own meagre resources to help out one of the new communities who were short of money and she wrote to the leader there:

***Slide: Let me know when you are closely pressed, and I will divide with you, be it ever so little.**

KINDNESS:

A key aspect of Catherine's personality, not unlike her spirit of generosity is the kindness she showed and spoke about so often. Here are a few examples:

***slide: There are three things the poor prize more highly than gold, though they cost the donor nothing: the kind word, the gentle compassionate look and the patient hearing of their sorrows.**

It is a gift that Catherine gives us that what is asked of us is so simple: Each and every one of us is capable of speaking kindly, of looking with gentleness at another and of listening with compassion. And I'm sure that each one of us has experienced times when we have been able to reach out to another, just by a kind word or a look of re-assurance. But kindness is also hugely challenging for

us. Sometimes we find it very difficult to be kind – to our families or friends or companions – whether in person or online.

Another time Catherine said:

***Slide: Be ever ready to praise, to encourage, to stimulate, but slow to censure and still more slow to condemn.**

Wouldn't our world be a very different place if we were to live by that invitation from Catherine? The kindness that she calls forth from us is so extensive that all people are included and is an attitude of heart that governs how we speak of others.

***Slide: Never speak with contempt of any nation, profession or class of people.**

...great tenderness of all things.

Once when Catherine was looking for the help of another Sister in the care of a young Sister who was very ill, she made very practical suggestions as to how that Sister might be cared for and finished by saying “great tenderness of all things.” Whatever else she would do, showing tenderness to that sick Sister was the most important of all.

The gift of Catherine's kindness is a very simple one. She invites to be respectful of others in what we say and in what we do. She wants us to be tender and caring in our dealings with them, to have the kindness that comes from a kind heart. Sometimes that is very difficult for us, especially when we want to lash out at those in our families or school communities who annoy us – so we say the unkind word or write the unkind text or post the unkind message on Facebook or Twitter. Kindness is one of the gifts that Catherine offers us and one that we really need in our world today.

SENSITIVITY

Another gift that Catherine offers us is the beautiful gift of sensitivity: she showed this sensitivity to her friends, to the Sisters, to people in need – it was just the way she was with people. One time she had made an arrangement with a young priest to play a prank on her friend, Frances Warde but she changed her mind in case it would upset Frances in any way:

**** Slide: Though I had all ready – artfully done so as not to tell an untruth, etc, - I found I could not send it lest it would give you even passing uneasiness.**

Have you ever been involved in playing a prank on someone where you felt unsure if it would cause hurt to the person? Have you been able to pull out of it or have you gone ahead and carried it through? The sensitivity that Catherine displayed is both gift and challenge to us to ensure that we do not cause others even a little passing uneasiness.

When the early Sisters of Mercy were invited to set up a new community, Catherine herself went to that place and stayed there for about two months to help get it established. When she went to Birr, a small town in the middle of Ireland, she had intended returning to Baggot Street on a certain day but then found the young woman who was the leader there in floods of tears at the prospect of being left on her own without the support and guidance that Catherine so generously offered. Catherine wrote of this: ***Slide: I leave this on Monday... (and later on in the letter she wrote:) Since I wrote this & mentioned it to Sr. Aloysius, I have found her crying, and must try to remain a little longer.**

She was sensitive to how much this young Sister still needed the support and security her presence conveyed and so she stayed on to help out this “Young Mercy Leader”! Sometimes the challenge of having a sensitive heart is that we have to change our own plans to reach out to another.

Another example of Catherine’s sensitivity concerns two young girls who came to the door in Baggot Street one cold November day. This is what she wrote about them:

****I am sure I spoke with two yesterday who were hungry, tho’ of nice appearance. Their dejected faces have been before me ever since. I was afraid of hurting their feelings by offering them food & had no money.**

Notice the delicacy, the sensitivity that Catherine displays towards those two girls. She found herself caught in a situation where she was unable to help them in a practical way – she desperately wanted to help them but wanted to leave them their dignity and so found herself unable to relieve them in their moment of great need. Her heart must have been breaking, both for the plight of those two girls and for her own inability to reach out to them. I am sure that many of us will find ourselves in a similar situation throughout our lives, and maybe

even as we walk the streets of Dublin during these days. Sometimes, when faced with another's need and our own incapacity to respond, we just don't know what is the right thing to do. Do we try helping and thereby take away that person's dignity and pride? By not helping do we leave them hungry or in need? Catherine's sensitivity is both gift and challenge for us.

Another example of that gentle sensitivity is her concern and care for those whose position in society has changed. She said:

*** Slide: We should have compassion for those who have seen better days, and are ashamed to make known their indigence. We should assist them privately.**

I am convinced that this saying was born out of her own experience – during her early life she moved from having plenty to having very little. She herself was one who had seen better days. She knew that it was hard for people to make do with less when they had been accustomed to having plenty. She asks us to be sensitive to the needs of those who have fallen on hard times – to help them in a private and sensitive manner. That is a huge challenge for us in today's world where there are so many who are displaced, people who have had to move from their homes because of war, unemployment, addiction or the other countless circumstances that make up our experience.

Reflection:

Can you think of a time when it was a challenge for you to be kind or sensitive?
Can you recall a time when you offered the gift of kindness or sensitivity or when they were offered to you as a gift?

FRIENDSHIP

We all know how important it is for us to have friends in our lives. Many times Catherine spoke of the gift that friendship is. She treasured her friends and depended on their love and support over and over, just like we do.

One time she was very busy and was prevented from visiting her friend, Elizabeth, in Limerick for a long time and this is what she wrote:

***Slide: When I think rest is coming – business only seems to commence. The prospect of my visit to Limerick will animate me. I need scarcely tell you that it**

will be a source of great happiness – for which I thank God – a pure heartfelt friendship which renews the powers of mind and body.

Catherine McAuley was a warm-hearted woman and was truly grateful for the gift of friendship. Another time she was writing a long letter to her friend Frances which would probably be read by all in the community and then she included a little private note for her:

**Slide: All private: As if you and I, like old Darby and Joan, were sitting together at the community table....*

And when that friend, Frances, was having a hard time she was advising her and said:

**Slide: This advice is quite unnecessary, for I know you do not want counsel – or comfort – yet I cannot entirely give up my poor old child.*

Another time she wrote back to the person who was in charge when she herself was away establishing a new community:

**Slide: How anxiously I long to be with you in the community room – alone – telling you all the queer things I met since we parted.*

**Slide: I look forward with delight to the day I shall see you once more.*

***slide: I sit down to talk to my own dear old companion and affectionate child. Your packet was most joyfully received and your letter read again and again as a solace and comfort which God sent me.*

When we have good friends we are blessed. We have the best riches and wealth anyone could wish for. Catherine knew that firsthand. She wanted to spend time with her friends and sometimes circumstances prevented her from doing so – the demands of her busy life, the difficulty of travelling in those days. But that never stopped her from finding a way to spend time with them through a letter or a note and we are indeed blessed that we still have so much of what she wrote to those people who were her friends. Her example challenges us to hold our friends dear, to treasure them, to be good friends ourselves.

RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Catherine's relationship with God underpinned everything she said and did. I believe we cannot get to know or understand her unless we try to engage with that most important part of her life. I have just been speaking about her need for friendship. Well she saw God as her friend – one on whom she could rely totally:

***Slide: We may address God as we would a dear friend to whom we owed a great deal...**

Her most frequent advice was: ***Slide: Put your whole confidence in God. He will never let you down.**

One of my favourite of Catherine's sayings is:

God is looking after your concerns which are all his own.

That means that she believed that whatever occupies our minds and hearts, the concerns we hold for ourselves, our families and our loved ones, for our world, those very concerns are in fact the concerns of God's own heart. God is concerned about the very same things that we are concerned about. Surely that should give us great confidence in praying.

But Catherine was also very human in her approach to God and sometimes her prayer was a very simple plea from her heart:

Take from my heart all painful anxiety.

What could be more simple or more profound? When you find yourself anxious let Catherine's simple prayer, "Take from my heart all painful anxiety," be on your lips.

She found herself being impatient at times and so she prayed:

I come this day to ask of thee, my God, the virtue and divine gift of patience... there consists my great neediness in this point...

One time she was going through a very tough time and she wrote to her friend, Frances Warde:

Pray fervently to God to take all bitterness from me. I can scarcely think of what has been done to me without resentment.

Catherine was so human, so like us. She felt anxious, impatient, bitter and resentful at times and she brought all of that into her relationship with God. We can see how real God was for her and how she could truly say with sincerity:

***Slide: We may address God as we would a dear friend to whom we owed a great deal...**

The gift of her relationship with God is that it was so central, so important to her that everything else in her life flowed from that. The challenge of it is that it requires tremendous faith and courage and love for us to live in our day from that same place of being in constant, close relationship with God.

DESCRIPTION OF CATHERINE

I would like to end with a wonderful description of Catherine given by one of her early companions, Teresa White. Catherine relied on Teresa and trusted her and this is what Teresa had to say about her many years later:

“I never met anyone like her. She was a perfect nun and a perfect lady, **one to whom you could open your whole heart**, she was so kind, and so spiritual. She made the interests of every convent her own and **she gave each Sister a place in her heart**. She was so generous and full of humility. Her appearance was very remarkable. **There was something in her so kind, yet so discerning that you would fancy she read your heart. If you tried to speak to her on the most trifling matter, though she was occupied with something, she would instantly lay all aside and give you any satisfaction in her power.** She was rather tall, 5’5” and had a queenly air. I feel sad to have outlived her.”