



Every Grace Abundant – Sheila Carney rsm

“God is able to make every grace abundant for you, so that in all things, always having all you need, you may have an abundance for every good work.” 2 Cor. 9:8

This passage from the Second Letter to the Corinthians reminds us that the loving care of our God is not simply assured us so that our personal needs will be provided for but so that, having experienced God’s loving care, we become conduits of that same care to those in need. It aptly summarizes both Catherine McAuley’s trust in the providence of God and her readiness to rely on that providence for the benefit of others.

Catherine experienced in her own life the unfailing and steadfast love of God which supplied her every need. Though her father, at his death, had left the family well provided for, those resources were soon expended and McAuley family found itself dependent on the kindness of friends and family for food and shelter. Through the welcome she received in the Conway, Armstrong and Callaghan households and, eventually, through the benefaction she received from the Callaghans, Catherine experienced God’s provident care. She responded by engendering that same reliance in her companions. “I will confide in the generous bounty and never-ceasing kindness of our beloved Saviour,” she was wont to say. (To Mary Theresa White, October 17, 1837) Her trust in God’s care for her was so great and so apparent, that she was nicknamed the Sister of Divine Providence by Dr. Murphy, the Bishop of Cork. Her trust that God would care for her in times of personal difficulty is witnessed in such sayings as “Bless and love the Fatherly hand that has wounded you. He will soon come, both hands filled with favors and blessings.” (To Frances Warde, May 15, 1838) And “This is your life joys and sorrows mingled, one succeeding the other.” (To Frances Warde, May 28, 1841) It was not that Catherine expected never to be in pain or tribulation but that she knew that God would not leave her long in suffering before coming, “both hands filled with favors and blessings.”

This belief that was her strength in times of personal distress extended to her ministries as well. “God will never see you want necessities for yourselves or for the children,” she told the sisters, (To Angela Dunne, December 20, 1937) and she encouraged them to rely “with unhesitating confidence on the Providence of God.” (To Mary Ann Doyle, July 24, 1841) It was this confidence in God’s care that allowed her to take the many risks that marked her life as a founder, agreeing to establish foundations where there were no resources to support the community, no convent to welcome them, where no religious community had succeeded

before. She often began foundations on shaky financial ground trusting that God would provide. She gladly sent the brightest and the best on foundations, leaving “poor Baggot Street” with “no heads left”, trusting that God would provide. She took in women with no dowry, sometimes against the advice of bishops, trusting that God would provide. This confidence is illustrated in a letter to Sisters Theresa Purcell in 1841: “I congratulate you on your happy increase, which you and I love so much that we will never frighten a candidate away for not having a bag of money. We will sooner give half our share than not multiply. The Lord and Master of our House and Home is a faithful provider. Let us never desire more than enough - He will give us that and a blessing.” (Early 1841))

The necessity for reliance on God’s providence as a requisite for a Sister of Mercy is powerfully expressed in a letter to Mary Ann Doyle at Tullamore:

“I could not think any person with very cautious wordly views worthy to be admitted to holy profession. It is not a disposition to bestow gifts, like benevolent persons in the world, but bespeaks generosity of mind for the religious state. It is bestowing ourselves most freely and relying with unhesitating confidence on the Providence of God.

When our innocent, yet very sensible Sister Chantal (McCann) was about to hand over all she possessed, making it impossible to ever command one shilling, her Mother told her she ought to have some security as many persons were of the opinion this house would not be established and said to her: ‘What would you do then?’ She answered: ‘Won’t I have my sweet Lord?’ And sweet He was to her to the very last moment. Tho’ we may not often have the consolation to meet such noble universal disengagement as hers, yet, a spirit, directly opposite, I humbly hope will never makes its abode amongst us.” (To Mary Ann Doyle, July 24, 1841)

Perhaps the most striking statement of Catherine’s trust in Providence is in her letter to Elizabeth Moore of January, 1839.

“We have now gone beyond 100 in number, and the desire to join seems rather to increase, though it was thought the foundations would retard it, it seems quite otherwise. There has been a most marked Providential Guidance which the want of prudence, vigilance, or judgment has not impeded, and it is here that we can most clearly see the designs of God. I could mark circumstances calculated to defeat it at once, but nothing however injurious in itself has done any injury. This is all I could say.

The loss of property has been supplied, the Death of the most valuable Sisters passed away as of no consequence. The alarm that was spread by such repeated deaths did not prevent others crowding in, in short, it evidently was to go on, and surmount all obstacles, many of which were great indeed, proceeding from causes within and without.” (To Elizabeth Moore, January 13, 1839)b

It was upon this kind of reliance on the providence of God that Catherine staked the future of her community and her ministries and this letter is one indication that her hopes were never disappointed. The “rightness” of her hope is expanded upon in “The Spirit of the Institute.” Here, Catherine reflects on the graces God pours down on those who perform the Corporal Works of Mercy and then, adding that the Spiritual Works are even more important,

asks of those who engage in these works, “What may we not justly hope?” (“The Spirit of the Institute” in Neumann, Letters of Catherine McAuley, 1827-1841 p. 388. Catherine knew that her hopes would not be confounded because they were focused not on her needs or even on the needs of her young community but on the needs of the poor given into her care. She trusted that the necessities of everyday life would be provided, that she need not be distracted by them, and that freedom allowed her to pour herself into ministry.

In this Year of Consecrated Life, we might also ask, “What may we not justly hope?” Catherine was faced with the complexities of a young and growing community. We confront and aging and diminishing communities. But the suffering of the world are the same and our hopes are the same – that, through us, through our associates and partners in ministry, God’s mercy may flow across our aching world. Our hopes are expansive and confident because Catherine has taught us to trust in the provident love of our God who “is able to make every grace abundant for you, so that in all things, always having all you need, you may have an abundance for every good work.”
2 Cor. 9:8

Questions for Reflection on Trusting in Providence

- The year of Consecrated Life calls on us to wake up the world. What must we do to stir our confidence in the loving providence of our God and allow that confidence to ignite the world?
- Our Mercy history is replete with examples of God’s provident care. Where do we see that same providence operative in our recent history? What do these signs of providence rouse us to do or be?
- Catherine’s trust in a benevolent, provident God enable her to risk in order to further the ministry. What risky behavior might we be called to in our day?
- Catherine was called the Sister of Divine Providence. What nickname might an observer give to us today? What is our clearest characteristic?

Resources for your Further Reflection on the theme of Trusting in Providence

Catherine’s Letters to –

Angela Dunne December 20, 1837
Elizabeth Moore January 13, 1839
Teresa Purcell Early 1841
Mary Ann Doyle July 24, 1841

Frances Warde February 17, 1838
Elizabeth Moore March 21, 1840
Frances Warde May 28, 1841
Mary Ann Doyle September 24, 1841

[The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1818-1841](#). Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004, ed. Mary C Sullivan.

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