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Tender Courage: A Reflection on
The Life and Spirit of

Catherine McAuley: First
Sister of Mercy

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Chapter XII

LEGACY AND CHALLENGE OF CATHERINE MCAULEY

When Catherine McAuley was asked to provide an account of her Institute of Mercy from its inception, she demurred that she "would find it most difficult ... [since] the circumstances which would make it interesting could never be introduced in public discourse."²²² It was only in candid letters to her community that the private details of joy and sorrow, enthusiasm and discouragement, pain, humiliation, and struggle emerged.

However, acknowledging that she was omitting all that might engage attention, she responded with a circumspet account attributing to God's providence and to the guidance of the clergy who advised her whatever progress had occurred.

It commenced with 2, Sister Doyle and I. The plan from the beginning was such as is now in practice. In '27 the House was opened. In a year and a half we were joined so fast that it became a matter of general wonder. Doctor Murray gave his most cordial approbation and visited frequently. All was done under his direction from the time we entered the House, which was erected for the purpose of Charity.

Doctor Blake and Rev. Armstrong were chiefly concerned, received all the ideas I had formed, and consulted for 2 years at least before the House was built. I am sure Doctor Blake had it constantly before him in all his communications with Heaven, for I never can forget his fervent prayers when it was in progress.

Seeing us increase so rapidly, and all going on in the greatest order almost of itself, great anxiety was expressed to give it stability. We who began were prepared to do whatever was recommended and in September 1830, we went with dear Sister Harley to George's Hill to serve a novitiate for the purpose of firmly establishing it. In December '31 we returned and the progress has gone on as you know. 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.²²³

Catherine's evaluation of all that had happened underscored her deep faith as well as her lack of self-congratulation. She had accepted the advice she sought; she had done as she was bidden; she had experienced a providential guidance despite the want of "prudence, vigilance, or judgment."

From her understanding of Jesus' pressing invitation to follow him in living life in the Father through willing acceptance of the mystery of his love, whether manifested in peace and joy, in pain and suffering, or even in death, Catherine McAuley deepened her response to whomever she met, to whatever she experienced, and to the movements of her own heart and soul.

Over and over, her letters sought to knead the spirit of union and charity through the dough of the expanding institute. When she sent word from Birr that they laughed at their hardships—among them oatmeal so frozen it broke one's tooth, butter so hard it was necessary to keep hot turf under it in order to cut it, and she herself, petrified with cold and feeling the frost most acutely in her right side from hip to ankle—and danced every night, she declared indirectly that their mutual sharing of good things and bad was building the bond of perfection, union, and charity, among them.

The spontaneous character of Catherine's letter writing permitted her to dot the letters with bulletins concerning her own health. Sometimes she spoke of her pains and aches to explain why she had to omit or delay some particular action. Other times, she recorded what she felt as she wrote. Her essential incorporation of pain and suf-

fering as the reality of life turned most of her admissions into a trusting acceptance of whatever God permitted.

Almost clinical in describing her ailments, Catherine usually identified her illness, gave progress reports, and included any complications that developed. While she neither hid from herself or others that she had an affliction, she refused to bemoan it. Seeking neither sympathy nor service, she merely accepted her limitations as evident in her message to Frances Warde:

As to my delay in writing, I have been tortured with my unfortunate mouth, only just getting a little better, and in the midst of other matters, the Limerick Foundation was prepared and concluded for the first week in September.²²⁴

In another comment to Frances after the London foundation, she registered the toll that foundation making took on her.

I have been chiefly confined to bed since my return—not down until yesterday. First an affection of my stomach, etc. for which I was obliged to have a physician, and then my old mouth complaint, to a great degree, which has kept me on Infant's diet more than ten days.²²⁵

Arriving at Limerick after a difficult stop at troubled Charleville and happier ones at Tullamore and Cork, she telescoped the personal cost of the constant demands of newness—meeting new persons, new customs, new surroundings, new expectations—in one descriptive word to Teresa White.

There is a most simple, inviting tomb just opposite the cell I occupy. A holy abbess and a lay sister are deposited there.²²⁶

"Inviting" recorded something of the weariness affecting her, and revealed the extent to which her life-long fear of death had evaporated.

In a later letter, she confessed to Elizabeth Moore that she had to be realistic about how much travel she could demand of her failing strength:

... who am journeying fast enough out of this miserable world. Every day I am weak at some time. My stomach has never recovered its last attack—frequent swellings and soreness.²²⁷

That travel tormented her more and more as foundations rapidly succeeded one another hinted at her deteriorating health. Beginning to speak more often of her discomfort in her letters, she exclaimed to Frances Warde upon her return from Galway:

On this last occasion I travelled one hundred miles a day, which is very fatiguing except on railways...²²⁸

Sick, weary, and in physical pain, Catherine felt the burden of long journeys. In letters from Birr, the last foundation she made in Ireland, waiting tasks seemed to cause her to reflect on the absence of those first companions, intensifying her affection for them. Whether the cold of Birr had affected her with new pain or whether she was suffering more severely from chronic illness than she admitted, Catherine was nostalgic about her first companions.

I will not expect a letter from you when I return to our old dear habitation, where I shall never again see all my dearly beloved Sisters—all strange faces. They say that the first separation from kindred, etc. was a joyful sorrow, but that the separations in religion are bitter sorrows. What must it be to me who never met an unkind Sister yet.²²⁹

Commenting "This is a gloomy subject," she seemed to underscore her lonesomeness for those first devoted and understanding companions whom she had surrendered to the needs of other towns in Ireland and England. To sustain deep pain of loss, Catherine drew upon her faith in the promises of Jesus: "Will we all meet in heaven? Oh what joy, even to think of it."

Catherine usually spoke even of her illnesses in such playful, disarming language that the sisters were encour-

aged to assume her infirmities were minor complaints. To Teresa White in Galway she sent a health bulletin more to be enjoyed than to admit failing health.

I have a real old man's cough—old woman's is entirely exploded from the new fashionable vocabulary—no such character is to be recognized in the future.²³⁰

Telling Cecilia Marmion from Birr that she was stiff and sore, she made light of what, in retrospect, was an increasing burden.

I feel the frost most acutely in my right side from my hip to my ankle. I have put on a great flannel bandage with camphorated spirit, and trust in God it will, like a dear good old acquaintance, carry me safe back.²³¹

For her own illnesses, she preferred to diagnose and prescribe her remedies. She either was wary of being confined by physicians to a lengthy stay as a bedridden patient or she had enough experience with the sick to judge doctoring herself sufficient.

Recognizing in Birmingham the seriousness of her own physical condition, Catherine wrote to arrange for the care she would need. But while she gave specific details to Teresa Carton for a new bed, she thought too of Teresa's needs. This lay sister, who had charge of household affairs, devoted herself to caring for Catherine.

I am going to give you some cautions {and commissions. Mother de Pazzi tells me the parlours are coloring. I hope you will be careful} not to get a fresh cold. Do not go to sit in the room until it is perfectly dry. I hope the chimneys of both were well swept before the ceilings were whitened.

{Bespeak an iron bedstead wherever you can get it made in one week. The directions are as follows}:²³²

While Teresa no doubt cut off the directions to give the bed maker, the record of how emphatic Catherine was

that no one change her specifications remained. She felt she knew what she needed.

You will try to have it done exactly. Make the person read it well. He will think the bed too near the ground, but it is to be so... Move your bed in where Sr. M. Clare's is and clear out your corner for mine, where I will not hear the noise of the street. I will want a fire... You are not to leave the room, a little coughing will never disturb me. I am much better there. Some days very bad appetite. I do not like the bread or butter. It is quite different. Do not have any hurry about getting the bed done. It will be time enough—the third bed to be taken away. It is strange to me, my dear Sister Teresa, to write so much about myself and to give such trouble.²³³

Catherine left a record both of the practical requirements of illness and her embarrassment to focus so strongly on her own needs. The letter is distracted and fluctuates between her personal wishes and consideration for another.

Even when fatal illness loomed, it failed to rob her of amusement at the doctor's direction that her "servant" apply a liniment to her chest.

Mother de P. has got that appointment. I call every night for my servant... I am sure her Majesty is not attended with half so much care, often ungraciously received by a poor, unfortunate peevish old sinner, who never required any particular care or attention before, and who is more weary of it than of the delicacy that occasions it.²³⁴

Discovering it took much psychic energy to cope well with smothering attentiveness from "kind tormentors,"²³⁵ she nevertheless appreciated the goodness demonstrated. For those who wanted to do more than she could absorb, she had her own defense.

...to the affectionate, often-repeated question: "Rev. Mother, what could you take?" the best

answer is: "My heart you tease me very much."²³⁶

As she communicated her condition, she confused the issue by explaining that it was Father O'Hanlon, not the doctor, who had put her under bedrest restraint.

I should add that it was not the Doctor desired me not to read, etc., it was Father O'Hanlon. The Doctor in a melancholy tone left me to my own wishes. I might take anything I liked. He seemed evidently to regard the case as hopeless.²³⁷

Having acquiesced to the visit from the doctor at her ecclesiastical superior's urging, Catherine persisted in making light of her illness, advancing her own theories about the state of her health:

As we should carefully examine the motive of our action, I here humbly confess that my chief motive, just now is to show that one of the most distinguished amongst our medical profession may be mistaken and that we should not immediately take up their opinions.²³⁸

Early in October, Catherine concluded her last letter to Sister Juliana Hardman in Birmingham with an assurance that she had picked up strength,

I kept for the last what I know you will like to hear, that every person who has seen me since my return thinks I look much better.²³⁹

In a final letter to Birr, Catherine was cryptic regarding her health, following an assertion of strength with a request for prayers for a happy death. She trusted Aloysius' prudence not to sound an alarm throughout the institute as some might have done.

Pray, who gave you such a false account of me. I am just as you saw me. Pray fervently that God may grant me the grace of a holy, penitential preparation, and the grace of a happy death.²⁴⁰

Gifts of nature and grace had permitted Catherine McAuley, in only ten years as a Sister of Mercy, to be many things: an evangelist in Charleville where one ancient cooed, "Sure it was the Lord who drove you in amongst us"; a pioneer in Carlow, where no one had thought to provide furniture for the convent and where a pension (tuition) school was introduced for the new middle class; a diplomat in Cork, where the bishop kept close watch on admissions; an incorporator in Limerick, where she received two Poor Clare nuns whose convent had failed; an apologist in Birr, where a schism had depleted the parish; and an ambassador in the English foundations at Bermondsey and Birmingham; as well as home visitor in Tullamore and Galway—all works which had their roots in the house on Baggot Street.

The extant letters begin with a request for the collection of interest due on a bond and end with a request to collect a small legacy. Thus the good steward closed her earthly accounts to begin the process of yielding an open heart and a detached spirit to her God.

Saving the doctor who attended her final illness from any sense of discomfiture, Catherine forestalled his prognosis with the quiet comment that "the scene is drawing to a close."²⁴¹ But before the end, the fond affection in which she had held her community bade her speak to each of those at Baggot Street individually. In the midst of special messages to each, "her first and last injunction to all was to preserve union and peace amongst [them],"²⁴² her dying exhortation to her community that they love one another.

Attentive to the fatigue experienced by those surrounding her deathbed, she who had urged her sisters to vie with one another with "tender concern and regard," died as she had lived, modeling such behavior with the thoughtful whisper to one of the sisters to "be sure to have a comfortable cup of tea for them when I am gone."²⁴³

Catherine knew Jesus as Christ the Lord but she also knew him as Jesus of Nazareth, the Son who had truly put on human life who was able to be imitated, who called the human family to live his way of Mercy, of courageous service in truth and justice, and of forgiveness gentled by love and open to the gift of those served.

If Catherine had lived at the end of the twentieth century, instead of the cry of the poor children of Dublin haunting her dreams, the cries of a suffering world would have troubled her sleep. She would no doubt have turned her energy to global interrelationships of rich and poor, knowing that as long as in any country the poor, the sick, the uneducated are oppressed or marginalized, the light of the Gospels is dimmed and peace and justice in the world remain elusive ideals.

In the contemporary world, in spite of energetic measures to alleviate the ills of society—poverty, sickness, ignorance—the poor, the sick, the ignorant abound; the alienated, the lonely, the deserted, and the abused abound.

In a world of indifference concerning belief, the erosion of faith in God and in transcendent reality has spawned self-destructive greed, selfishness, and life styles of out-maneuvering one another. Out of the consequent erosion of integrity in word and work, dishonesty, brutality, and destructiveness abound.

When were spiritual and temporal works of mercy—performed with tender courage—more needed? In her day, Catherine found her response—misericordia. She brought her heart to misery and in the self-gift released a call still heard. By courageous, contagious concern for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the poor, the sick, and the ignorant, she broke through the impossibilities of her time. She animated many to walk with her. She animated others at centers of wealth, power, and influence to share in her heroic efforts. She connected the rich to the poor, the healthy to the sick, the educated and skilled to the uneducated, the influential to those of no consequence, the powerful to the weak to do the work of God on earth.

223. *Ibid.*, pp.154-55.
224. *Letters*, p.132, August 23, 1838.
225. *Letters*, p.195, January 30, 1840.
226. *Letters*, p.137, October 12, 1838.
227. *Letters*, p.202, March 14, 1840.
228. *Letters*, p.238, October 12, 1840.
229. *Letters*, p.304, February 3, 1841.
230. *Letters*, p.222, July 27, 1840.
231. *Letters*, p.305, February 5, 1841.
232. Directions are cut off in original letter. Bracketed segments indicate unpublished sections of letter of September 8, 1841, published in *Letters*, p.373. Original is located in Carysfort archives.
233. *Letters*, p.373, September 8, 1841.
234. *Letters*, p.375, September 20, 1841.
235. *Letters*, p.311, March 5, 1841.
236. *Letters*, p.374, September 20, 1841.
237. *Ibid.*
238. *Ibid.*
239. *Letters*, p.380, October 2, 1841.
240. *Letters*, p.381, October 4, 1841.
241. Letter of Elizabeth Moore to Mary Anne Doyle, November 21, 1841.
242. *Ibid.*
243. Carroll, *Life of Catherine McAuley*, op.cit., p.401.

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