

The Day of Catherine's Death



This November 11 is the 175th anniversary of the death of Catherine McAuley. Let it not be just an ordinary day during which we briefly recall Catherine's life and the events of her dying. May it be a sacramental time when the grace of her life and death renews and transforms all of us in her Mercy family, enveloped as we each are in the merciful paschal mystery of her living and dying.

This year I cannot think of the events of Catherine's last human hours without seeing the face of little Omran Daqneesh, the five-year-old Syrian child rescued from the rubble of his bombed home in Aleppo on August 18. Omran is silent, stunned, dusty and bloody as he sits in the ambulance staring at his bloody hand and at us.

Catherine McAuley's death was a normal human death, coming at the end of months of tuberculosis. Omran's suffering is not "normal." Catherine knew she was moving toward death, and she quietly prepared herself and her sisters for that hour, simultaneously encouraging them even while making herself more and more what she had always believed herself to be, unneeded and dispensable. The brutality of Omran's suffering, and of war itself, is not "normal," except in a world that has turned to violence and indifference toward the cruel reality of many children's lives.

On Thursday, November 11, 1841, Catherine could not see Omran's shocked and bloody face, but she had spent her whole adult life cradling Ireland's Omrans, its suffering children staring out at her for human mercy. Teresa Byrn whom Catherine had adopted as a baby; the newborn child, of a cholera-stricken mother, whom she wrapped in her shawl and brought home to a make-shift bed in her own room; infants abandoned on the streets; small barefoot girls in the Baggot Street poor school; "little Fanny," a fatherless, grief-stricken child to whom she sent a precious brooch and "six kisses . . . so sweet tho' from a Granny" (*Correspondence*, 324); and orphaned Mary Quinn who always sat next to Catherine at meals on Baggot Street.

All these—and Omran—may have been silently, spiritually, in the second-floor infirmary room on Baggot Street in the late afternoon and evening of November 11, brought there tenderly by Jesus Christ.

Somehow as we commemorate this 175th anniversary of Catherine's death, let us ask her to help us to reach out more generously and selflessly to the Omrans of our world—the severely suffering Syrians, the starving children, the bombed-out victims of other peoples' wars, the millions of refugees, the trafficked girls. The size and shape of our present mercifulness has to be both local and global; it has to affect our own daily lives; it has to cut into our budgets and menus; it has to collaborate with others; it has to be international; it has to give, advocate, protest, and witness; it has to beg for the spirit and generosity of Catherine McAuley; and it has to beg unceasingly for the Mercy of God.



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Catherine's death agony began in the late morning. Mary Elizabeth Moore, who was present, tells us that when Dr. William Stokes came, she said to him: "Well, Doctor, the scene is drawing to a close." As evening came, she was calm and quiet. About 5:00 p.m.

she asked for the candle to be placed in her hand. We commenced the last prayers; when I repeated one or two she herself had taught me, she said with energy: May God bless you. When we thought the senses must be going and that it might be well to rouse attention by praying a little louder, she said: No occasion, my darling, to speak so loud. I hear distinctly. (*CMcATM*, 256).

Any religious family whose founder, with her last breath, calls them "my Darling" cannot be all bad, no matter how severely they sometimes judge themselves.

The prayers for the dying that Elizabeth and the sisters prayed at Catherine's bedside would have been the same prayers that Catherine herself had always prayed at the bedside of a dying sister, simple human prayers asking God to assist her in her last moments, and to strengthen her confidence in God's unfailing help and mercy.

But what of the candle? Was this the lighted candle that each Sister of Mercy had received at her reception as a novice, and that she carried as she professed her vows? And what did it signify as Catherine held it in her dying hand? Was it a sacramental sign, a burning human request that Christ the Light would come to accompany her on the last steps of her human pilgrimage? Was it a recognition of the paschal mystery that she was now entering more fully than ever before, the death and resurrection of Christ? As her hand weakened and her eyesight dimmed, Catherine asked for a smaller candle, but we do not know how long she was able to hold it. Then at "10 minutes before 8 . . . she calmly breathed her last sigh."

Later, in the community room, the sisters comforted one another, as Catherine had wished.



Today as we remember this good woman's death, let us also remember and comfort the Omrans of the world, as Catherine would also wish. Let us take into our own hands the candle of the merciful actions and accompaniments to which she gave her life, and to which she urges us each day—"until we," like her, "take the last step which will bring us into the presence of God" (*Practical Sayings*, 23).

Catherine once said of two homeless servant girls she could not receive into the severely overcrowded House of Mercy, "their dejected faces have been before me ever since" (*Correspondence*, 322). Today as we contemplate Catherine's simple act of dying, let us search for more and more ways to comfort the suffering children of our world, as she would wish. Let us not forget all the little Teresas, and Fannys, and Marys, and Omrans—all the orphaned, barefoot, grief-stricken, starving children of whom Jesus once said: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Matt. 19:14). In this Jubilee Year of Mercy, and always, let us be women and men who carry "dejected faces" in our hearts and who raise the candle of our voice and cry out loudly and increasingly to the whole world, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God" (Isa. 40:1).

Mary C. Sullivan, RSM