

Descriptions of Catherine by Some Who Knew Her

By Mary Clare (Georgiana) Moore, 1814-1874:

She was in stature rather above the middle height, well proportioned and erect, with a fair complexion and high colour; her eyes were large and penetrating, of a very bright blue, with a most kind expression; her manner dignified and reserved, while tender and compassionate to the poor, and maternally affectionate to the Sisters; her movements quiet, and her words few; her whole demeanour shewing constant recollection of the presence of God.

(*A Life of Catherine McAuley* [The Bermondsey Manuscript], as quoted in Mary C Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, p. 128-129).

By Mary Clare Augustine (Mary Clare) Moore, 1808-1880:

A very few days after [her brother-in-law's] death [in January 1829] I saw our foundress for the first time. My brother took me to introduce me. She was sitting in the little parlour on the right side of the hall as you enter. She was then upwards of forty, but looked at least 10 years younger. She was very fair, with a brilliant colour on her cheeks, still not too red. Her face was a short oval, but the contour was perfect. Her lips were thin and her mouth rather wide, yet there was so much play and expression about it that I remarked it as the most agreeable feature in [her] face. Her eyes were light blue and remarkably round, with the brows and lashes colourless but they spoke. In repose they had a melancholy beseeching look; then it would light up expressive of really hearty fun, or if she disapproved of anything they could tell that too. Sometimes they had that strange expression of reading your thoughts, which made you feel that even your mind was in her power, and that you could not hide anything from her. Her nose was straight but thick. She wore bands made from her own back hair which were so well managed as to be quite free from the disagreeable look bands of the kind usually give. The color was pale golden not in the least sandy, very fine and silky. She was dressed in black British merino which according to the fashion of the time fitted tight to her shape. She was remarkably well made, round but not in the least heavy. She had a good carriage, her hands were remarkably white but very clumsy, very large with broad tips to the fingers and short square nails.

(*A Memoir of the Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland* [The Dublin Manuscript] as quoted in Mary C Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, p. 7).

By Mary Vincent (Ellen) Whitty, 1819-1892:

If you had known her, dearest Reverend Mother, how you would have loved and venerated her, and still, be as familiar with her as with an intimate friends. I have often wished her lovely character could be *photographed* for the admiration and instruction of posterity. It seems to be that words are slow and imperfect in conveying all the lineaments of that gifted soul - she was so humble yet dignified, so playful and witty, yet reserved and charitable, so pious and strict, yet amiable and kind, but to me at least the climax of her attraction was that she *was always the same*, always ready to listen, to consider and to direct whenever applied to.

(letter to MM of Mercy Norris, dated 24 September 1860, as quoted in *The Correspondence of Mother Vincent Whitty*, ed. Anne Hetherington and Pauline Smoothy, p. 117).

By Mary Ann (Anna Maria) Doyle, 1809?-1866:

[Re: 1823, during construction of Baggot St]: ...for tho' no longer young she still wore the appearance of youth, and in person and manners was very engaging. At that time she lived in what is usually called a good style, that is, she kept a carriage, dressed well, went into society and sometimes gave parties at her own house; but employed the greater part of her time in works of piety and charity, especially in the instruction of poor children in the female schools of St. Mary's Parish, Abbey St.

(The Derry Large Manuscript, as quoted in Mary C Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, p. 45).

[Re: 1830-31, during noviciate at Georges Hill]: ...Revd. Mother went through her noviciate in a most edifying manner; her cheerfulness was the admiration of all, tho' she had much care on her mind, still directing Baggot St., and suffered much from a disease of the gums during the time.... She went through every humble duty with pleasure, assisted me in the sacristy, swept, served in the refectory, and every other humble office.

(letter to Mary Clare Augustine Moore, 1844, as quoted in Mary C Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, p. 41).

[Re: first meeting between Catherine and Very Rev Dr O'Rafferty, Vicar General of Meath and Parish Priest of Tullamore]: He had an interview with the Foundress, which so charmed him that he could never forget it. He spoke of it and her wonderful grace of manner, together with the supernatural virtues she manifested, until the day of his death which occurred about 20 years afterwards.

(The Tullamore Annals, as quoted in Mary C Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, p. 65).

[Re: Catherine's preparation of novices for profession]: The eloquence that flowed from her lips when instructing the sisters, especially for making their Vows, went straight to their hearts and irresistibly inclined them to practise the perfection of their holy State. Her language was simple and unstudied but sweet and forcible, it was the fruit of prayer, and the sisters seemed impressed with the idea that whatever she inculcated was the holy will of God for them to do.

(The Tullamore Annals, as quoted in Mary C Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, p. 67).

By Teresa Mary (Catherine) White, 1809-1888:

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.

(written 40 years after Catherine's death)

By Mary Vincent (Anna Maria) Harnett, 1811-1865:

...a little over the middle height, well proportioned and erect; her eyes grayish-blue and large, with a penetrating, but very benign expression; her deportment dignified and reserved, yet the most kind. (*Life of Rev. Mother Catherine McAuley, 1864, p. 206*).

Her exhortations were most animating and impressive, especially on the virtues of humility and charity. These were her characteristic virtues.... She loved all, and sought to do good to all, but the poor and little children were her special favorites; these she labored to instruct, relieve, and console in every possible way.... Her lessons on charity and humility being supported by her own unvarying example necessarily made a deep impression on the minds of her spiritual children.... She singularly loved simplicity in all and practised it herself, telling the Sisters to adopt a simple style of speaking and writing, and when translating any work she would tell them always to use simple, easy words, and never to affect worldly manners or expressions, nor those which are too decided.

(The Limerick Manuscript, as quoted in Mary C Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, p. 173).

Being of a remarkably cheerful disposition she loved to see all under her charge cheerful and happy. She tried to make them so not only by removing whatever could disturb their peace, but also by contributing to the general cheerfulness of the community especially at recreation. Although burdened with many cares she was at that duty as lively and merry as the youngest Sisters, who used to delight in being near her, listening to her amusing remarks and anecdotes; she had a natural talent for composing verses in a playful style, and would often sing them to some cheerful tune with admirable simplicity.

(The Limerick Manuscript, as quoted in Mary C Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, p. 179).

By Mary Frances Xavier (Frances) Warde, 1810-1884:

You never knew her [Catherine McAuley]. I knew her better than I have known anybody in my life. She was a woman of God and God made her a woman of vision. She showed me what it meant to be a Sister of Mercy, to see the world and its people in terms of God's love; to love everyone who needed love, to care for everyone who needed care. Now her vision is driving me on. It is a glorious thing to be a Sister of Mercy.

(from Frances Warde's *Letter to Sr. Mary Gonzaga O'Brien, 1879.*)

By Rev Dr Michael Blake, Bishop of Dromore, upon hearing of Catherine's death, 1841:

A more zealous, a more prudent, a more useful, a more disinterested, or a more successful benefactress of human nature, I believe, never existed in Ireland since the days of St Bridget. She has been taken from us after bestowing incalculable services and benefits upon her fellow creatures here below. What she accomplished would have been sufficient to attach celebrity to many individuals. Her course was long enough to render her name immortal in the remembrance of the virtuous and truly religious.

(quoted in Mary Vincent Harnett's *Memoirs of the Life of Revd. Mother Mary Catherine McAuley, Foundress of the Order of Our Lady of Mercy*, as quoted in Mary C Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, p.190).

by Mary Teresa (Bridget) Purcell, d. 1853:

Her uncle's home supplied Catholic atmosphere, it is true, but one so unlike that of her early memories as to complicate rather than solve her problem. Dr. Conway was a practicing Catholic. He observed abstinence days and attended Masses of obligation. Otherwise, he was like her mother, though unlike her too. He loved his slender, golden-haired niece with the wistful expression and mature dignity. He loved to see the strangely penetrating blue eyes turn on him, then fill suddenly with mirth that flowed down over her face as he teased her out of the seriousness natural to her reposeful manner. One who knew her later said that the play of expression about her mouth made it her most agreeable feature.

Her calm, steady, beseeching look in her eyes, the whiteness of her skin, her grace of movement, the peculiar timbre of her voice that provoked a thoughtful mood in those who heard it – all have been commented on by those who knew Catherine McAuley personally.

(Retreat Instructions of Mother Mary Catherine McAuley, Compiled by Teresa Purcell; edited and published by Mary Bertand Degnan, p. 196)