

## Reflection for Foundation Day, 12/12/2011

We know for sure that Catherine was very familiar with the first reading chosen for today's liturgy because she quotes from it in a letter that she wrote on November 13<sup>th</sup> 1840. Less than a year after the Sisters went to Bermondsey in London two young novices died of typhus within a few days of each other. This is what Catherine wrote about that event:

"I have just got a letter from my poor Mother Mary Clare – the third Sister recovering. Their trial has been great indeed. She says – "picture us to yourself going to the vault with one dear Sister on Wednesday, and with another on Saturday following." They caught this malignant fever attending a poor family – all of whom recovered. Such is the mysterious Providence of God. I look forward now to their greater progress – to shew that "His ways are not like our ways – nor His thoughts like our thoughts."

That short paragraph aptly sums up Catherine's theology of the Cross and her utter belief in the mysterious providence of God.

Many times in the course of her life Catherine was reminded over and over that God's ways are not like our ways and God's thoughts are not like our thoughts. We heard in the second reading Mary Ann Doyle telling us of the sorrow and grief she herself felt on the death of her novitiate companion four short months after they knelt here in this place to profess their vows. By the time Elizabeth Harley died two others from the little group in Baggot Street had already died. Can you imagine what that must have been like for Catherine? That same pattern was to be repeated, not only in Baggot Street but in nearly every foundation that Catherine made: In Carlow a postulant slipped in the snow and died; in Galway a postulant died; in Limerick a Sister died three months after professing her vows. Looking at the beginnings of the Order of Mercy from a human perspective, one might be inclined to say that it couldn't possibly continue or flourish. But the mysterious Providence of God was at work – and flourish it did – in the midst of pain, suffering, loss and death, as Catherine herself said "thus we go on flourishing in the very midst of the Cross."

It was in the crucible of those very real and painful experiences that Catherine forged the saying: "This Congregation was founded on Calvary there to serve a crucified Redeemer."

So yes, this Congregation was founded on the Cross, but it was also founded on an extraordinary capacity to trust in the unfailing providence of God. And it was also founded on great faith, on tenacious courage, and on other qualities such as fun, friendship, love, generosity, and a desire to reveal the tender mercy and compassion of God to all and especially to those who were deprived in any way.

In the early part of the first reading Isaiah writes in lyrical fashion of the abundance that will mark messianic times:

All you who are thirsty, come to the water!

You who have no money, come, buy grain and eat;

Come, buy grain without money, wine and milk without cost!

Isn't that same kind of abundant generosity that marks the way Catherine went about meeting the needs of those who had no money in her time?

I'd like to reflect for a moment now on the latter part of that reading:

Yet just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down

And do not return there till they have watered the earth,

making it fertile and fruitful,

Giving seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats,

So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;

It shall not return to me empty, but shall do what pleases me,

Achieving the end for which I sent it.

I like to think of that beautiful image: God speaking his word into the world. It's as if everything in creation is a word of God, and therefore every single one of us is spoken into the world as a word of God. In the Gospel we have just heard the word that Mary was being called forth to accomplish what she was sent to do. Through her the word, that Jesus was, was spoken into the world and the Word was made flesh. The word that Catherine was did not return without accomplishing that which she was sent to do. I wonder sometimes what a difference it would make to us if we were to truly believe that each one of us is indeed a word spoken by God into the world and that, in the ordinariness of our everyday lives we are somehow fulfilling that which we were sent to do.

The call of God happens in very ordinary, yet mysterious ways. Very few of us have a dramatic experience like the angel appearing to Mary or Paul's road to Damascus conversion. For most of us we feel drawn to something, we make a tentative response and the next phase unfolds and so it continues in cycles throughout our lives. And even for the likes of Mary and Paul after their first dramatic listening to the call of God there were many other moments of call. Catherine's journey was also a series of unfolding calls. One time she said: **"I never intended to become a nun, all I wanted was to serve the poor because this is what God seemed to be asking of me."** Do you hear the tentative tone of Catherine's statement?

Today we are celebrating the fact that Catherine did respond with courage and generosity to what God seemed to be asking of her, and because she loved her God she was prepared to do whatever was necessary to make that response. Just as Mary had no idea that her Yes at annunciation would lead to her Yes at Calvary, so the Yes that Catherine uttered this very day 180 years ago was not the last word – it was only a beginning. Her yes to God was total, complete and irrevocable but it was lived out in the ordinary events and encounters of every single day.

The God that Catherine loved was a God rich in mercy, who never stopped pouring out blessings on her – even in the midst of pain, suffering, loss and death. The God that Catherine believed in was the God she loved. God was the love of her life, the joy of her heart. It was Catherine's deepest desire to be faithful to the love of God that she had herself experienced – she desired to offer her whole life to God in return and to make it possible for others to do the same. Her lifelong desire to reach out to the poor and the needy was born of that love that fired her heart. For Catherine her love for God and her love for the poor were one seamless movement of generosity.

The largeness of heart, the generosity of spirit and the wholesomeness of Catherine McAuley's compassion, the warmth and tenderness of her personality were born, I believe, of the tremendous love of God that fired her heart. From that wellspring she reached out in love and compassion to all in her life: the poor and the needy, her family, the Sisters, the young girls she took in to her house, the children. The legacy she has left us who seek to follow in her footsteps is very rich indeed.

Once when I was praying in preparation for speaking about Catherine to a group of Mercy Associates, I had the image of Catherine being filled with God. I saw her life like a mould – the God-shape of the mould became more clearly defined as her life went on until in the end the form of God she embodied was complete. The word that God spoke into the world in Catherine did not return empty without accomplishing that which she was sent to do. On this special day of grace my prayer is that each one of us will be attentive to what God is trying to speak into the world through us and that we will be as faithful and generous in responding in our lives as Catherine McAuley was in hers.

- Áine Barrins, RSM  
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