

Catherine the Weary and the Willing, Pray for Us

Saint Catherine McAuley. Though believing the truth of that phase even as we pursue the cause of Catherine's canonization, I find the words somewhat stiff and distancing. To so many of us she is simply and affectionately, Catherine. Yes, we love her accomplishments and admire her centeredness in God. Yet we also remember her struggles, enjoy her humor, and acknowledge her foibles. We connect with her as real, as human, as feminine, as somehow familiar.

Why is that? Recently, as I was looking for a specific detail in Catherine's life, I ran my finger down the subheads of that topic in the index of Mary Sullivan's book, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841*. Here is *some* of what I found:

“bitterness of...broken arm of...builds public laundry...confined to one room...cough of...diagnosed with lung disease...disappointments of...eyesight of...family of...fatigue of...falls down stairs...financial difficulties of...fondness for nonsense...gum disease of...has a ‘surfeit’ of traveling...hides from subpoena...imitates dialects...impatience of...journeys of...marriage proposal to...and music...nieces of...nephews of...nervous or uneasy...as a patient...playfulness of...proposes ‘nonsensical club’...resentment of...respect for local needs and preferences...sense of humor of...sexist attitudes toward...skills and experiences of...stiff fingers of...takes the pledge of temperance...tears of...turns her ankle...weariness of...walking of...”

Such human and mundane glimpses of Catherine's life. How those entries belie the nostalgic “life was simpler then.” The span of 160+ years fades to irrelevance in the face of such shared human experiences.

Does this list hold the secret of Catherine's strong appeal to contemporary women, I wondered? Do we have here, perhaps, a new prayer from and to Catherine McAuley – a litany of sorts: You who knew bitterness, pray for us. You besieged with a cough, pray for us. You worried about nieces and nephews, pray for us. And so on.

Yes, the other entries are there: “affection for her sisters...compassion and love for the poor and suffering...confidence in the providence of God...founds House of Mercy...founds Sisters of Mercy...humility of...leadership of...love for children...prayer of...prudence of...resignation to God's will...self-effacement of...willing to go to Newfoundland...writes the rule...” But somehow, I think, it's the former list that makes Catherine approachable and gives us hope as we aspire to the qualities of the latter list.

Catherine the playful, pray for us. Catherine the prudent, pray for us. Catherine humble and hiding from a subpoena, pray for us.

Joy Clough, RSM Director of University Mission and Heritage at St. Xavier's University, Chicago