

Praying for Catherine's Canonization: Why? and to Whom?

Earlier this year, by way of commemorating the tenth anniversary of Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy, I spent some time re-reading the issue of MAST (Vol.8, #3) that was published in conjunction with the completion of our book of prayer. The article that particularly interested me on this reading was "The Communion of Mercy Saints" by Mary Celeste Rouleau, RSM. My imagination was captured by Celeste's discussion of "the exchange of spiritual goods"¹ that we enjoy with those who have gone before us. Quoting Vatican II's *Constitution on the Church*, Celeste writes:

*Our union with those we love [and who have died]is not the least interrupted...but on the contrary, it is strengthened through the exchange of spiritual goods. For those in heaven who are more closely united with Christ, through him and with him and in him do not cease to intercede for us.*²

Exchange implies reciprocity, Celeste points out – a relationship, a genuine communication and a sharing of lives and graces. That Catherine McAuley encouraged such relationship and such sharing is seen in the practice of reading from the lives of the saints each morning in the refectory³ and in urging the sisters to pray to their patron saints for the needs of the Order. One such example is found in a letter to Theresa White concerning the foundation in Limerick. "We are saying the two Thirty Days prayer – one in the morning and one after Vespers. I am sure you will unite with us in obtaining all the intercession you can. Get the sisters to invite their patron saints and implore Saint Teresa who loved foundations to intercede for poor Limerick..."⁴ There is a lovely sense of familiarity implied in the use of the word "invite" rather than "implore" or "beseech" suggesting that recourse to the patron saints was a normal and friendly sort of communication.

It was in the spirit of this devotion that the editorial committee included the patron saints of the Order among the feastdays commemorated in Morning and Evening Prayer. As we made choices about which saints to include, it was clear to us that we should continue the practice of remembering these holy ones chosen for us by Catherine as particular friends and exemplars.

Celeste's image of the exchange of spiritual goods set me to thinking, however. Where is the exchange, the reciprocity called for in genuine relationships? Even as the liturgical cycle repeats itself and we continue to honor these saints, I don't ever remember an occasion on which we have publicly called upon them for assistance. It occurred to me that perhaps now is the time to make a claim on this exchange of spiritual goods by putting the patron saints of the Order to work on Catherine's canonization. So each morning I "convene" this group and pray a litany in which I ask for their intercession as we seek the Church's recognition of Catherine's holiness. In a spirit of

¹ Mary Celeste Rouleau, RSM, "The Communion of the Saints of Mercy." *MAST*, (Summer, 1998) p. 49.

² Vatican II, *Constitution on the Church* (1964), #49 – 50.

³ Mary C. Sullivan, quoted in Rouleau, p. 52.

⁴ Mary C. Sullivan, ed. The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818 – 1841, (Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2004) p. 156.

friendliness I invite them to be faithful to their part of the relationship into which Catherine introduced us and to gather her soon into the company of those we honor as saints. And I'm waiting.....

Though I have a new answer about the "to whom?" part of praying for Catherine's canonization, the "why?" is another question – one often posed to me as I go about the work of being a vice-postulator. "Why are we doing this?" "Why are we investing so much time and energy in these drawn out and sometimes seemingly arcane processes when we believe that Catherine *is* a saint; when we have experienced her intercession in our regard over and over again?" "What difference will official Church recognition make?" These are the kind of questions that often come my way.

Some of my responses are drawn from the work of others. Mary Ann Stevens, RSM, in a 1989 article weighing the pros and cons of canonization, makes this argument on the pro side. "We need people who are mysteries –whose lives wouldn't make sense unless God exists...those who will give us hope and strength for resistance against all that does not breathe and breed life."⁵

Anne Hannon, RSM, in 2003, says it another way. "Catherine's steadfast faith, her single-minded purposes and her persevering dedication could not but edify our society which longs for spiritual heroes and heroines. The acknowledgement of her heroic virtue would be a strong example for good women everywhere"⁶ This position, that Catherine's life provides a strong and graced model for people today, especially women, has always made sense to me – and more so now that I am ministering in a woman-centered institution.

Recently, I opened an email from a student which provided a link to an article entitled "Adventure in Feministory: Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy." The article appeared in Bitch Magazine – the subtitle for which is "Feminist Response to Pop Culture". Oh no! I was thinking though, in the subject line of the email, the student had written "This is good, really!"

The author began by describing herself as a radical feminist with no sense that anything of value could come from the Catholic Church– until she became acquainted with Catherine McAuley. She went on to tell Catherine's story and how the Sisters of Mercy carry on her legacy today and she refers to the witness of a particular Sister of Mercy. Reading it, I was brought up short because I had pre- judged about the article based on the periodical in which it appeared. What amazed me was that the story of Catherine was so compelling to this writer whose beliefs and sensibilities are so different from my own. And I thought to myself that if Catherine's life has the ability to inspire such a spectrum that includes Sisters of Mercy, our Associates, Companions and co-workers and mainstream Catholic women as well as contributors to and readers of Bitch Magazine, perhaps this is a miracle in itself!

The formal acknowledgement by the church of Catherine's holiness won't, I dare say, or I hope, change how we who know her and love her will regard or relate to her. She who shied away from being called Mother Superior and from being deferred to as foundress would certainly not want her proclaimed sainthood to alter our relationship to her. But being raised to sainthood would give her a higher profile, we might say, would

⁵ "Catherine "Patron: or Prophetic Disciple?" Published by the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 1989.

⁶ "Catherine's Canonization Cause" Mercyworld web site.

make her known and available universally in a way that she is not now. And so, when I was asked to accept the appointment as vice postulator, I did so because I believed that the work of seeking Catherine's canonization is worthwhile work taken up to benefit the members of the Church universal.

Then I went to the first meeting of the international canonization committee and Brenda Dolphin, RSM, postulator for Catherine's cause, said something that deepened my understanding of what we were about and opened the question of the value of Catherine's canonization in a whole new way. In telling us about the program for new postulators that she had attended in Rome and about some of her learnings, Brenda spoke about one of the purposes of canonization. Canonization, she said, quoting one of the program presenters, is the way that the Church knows itself to be holy; that the Church is holy because its members are holy. Each person who is canonized, then, is an exemplar of that holiness, a demonstration, if you will, of some facet of that holiness. This insight cast the possibility of Catherine's canonization in a new light and gave a different focus to my energy around the process in which we are engaged.

Why do I now, personally, pray that Catherine McAuley will be canonized? I pray for this grace because I want our Church, when it pictures itself as holy, to see this woman, bent, with merciful intent, to human need and suffering. I want our Church, when it reflects on its holiness to see this woman – a gentle, humble, honest, respectful, and challenging leader. I want our Church, when it looks at its holiness, to see this faith filled woman who clung to her belief in it when it supported her and when it didn't, who drew sustenance from it, who trusted its representatives, who chose to find the meaning of her life in it and who passionately passed on this belief, this fidelity.

I pray for this Cause because I want our Church, in seeking an image for its holiness, to see the face of Catherine McAuley. I pray for her canonization, not because Catherine needs the official recognition to prove her sanctity but because our Church sorely needs her witness.

Patron Saints of the Sisters of Mercy
Familiar Instructions, page 182.

Our Lady of Mercy
Saint Joseph
Saint Anne
Saint Joachim
the Holy Apostles Saints Peter and Paul
Saint John the Evangelist
Saint Patrick
Saint Bridget
Saint Augustine
Saint Monica
Saint Peter Nolasco
Saint Vincent de Paul

Saint John of God
Saint Camillus de Lellis
Saint Joseph Calasanctius
Saint Ignatius of Loyola
Saint Francis Xavier
Saint Aloysius Gonzaga
Saint Angela Merici
Saint Catherine of Sienna
Saint Catherine of Genoa