The Two Catherines



Catherine McAuley evidently thought the Sisters of Mercy and their companions in merciful action could learn something centrally important from St. Catherine of Siena. In the 1830s, when she composed the original Rule of the Sisters of Mercy, using the Rule of the Presentation Sisters as her guide, she inserted references to Catherine of Siena in two places.

In listing the saints to whom the sisters were to "have particular devotion," she added Catherine of Siena. In composing the chapter on the "Visitation of the Sick," a main ministerial work of the Sisters of Mercy, she named Catherine of Siena as one of "the most eminent saints [who] devoted their lives to this work of mercy." Catherine of Dublin saw the saint of Siena as an inspiring exemplar of Jesus Christ's "great tenderness for the sick," and of care for Christ's own human body "in the persons of the suffering poor" (Rule 3.2).

Although Catherine McAuley said nothing in the Rule about honoring the feast day of the mother superior of a community (a title she never used of herself), those at Baggot Street regarded her feast day—that of Catherine of Siena (now on April 29, then on April 30)—as a day of celebration.

In a poem on that day in 1835, the novices told Catherine that they needed money to buy ingredients to bake a festive tea cake in her honor. Realizing their loving intentions and their probably minimal baking skills, Catherine told them, also in a poem, that she had anticipated their desire and had already ordered a "very nice" store-bought cake, a rarity at Baggot Street. She realized the pleasure a cake could occasion for the whole community (*CCMcA*, 68).

Yet in 1841, in a letter thanking Frances Warde for "the nice Saint Catherine" (a small commemorative card), Catherine wrote: "We had no folly here on her day— so many in retreat. Indeed, I was very glad" (*CCMcA*, 396).

Paintings and portraits of the saints attempt to picture their goodness. Rarely do these images illustrate the saint's deepest spirit and central Christian action. Sometimes they are even misleading. For example, many images of Catherine McAuley show her sedately sitting with her hands folded on her lap—a far cry from her seven months of day-long kneeling beside and consoling terrified and dying cholera victims; her days teaching homeless young women and barefoot girls life-sustaining skills; her visiting the sick and dying poor lying on straw mats in slum tenements; her walking through snow or riding bumpy stage coaches to minister to distant human needs; or her persistently urging reluctant clergy to provide adequate chaplaincy services for poor domestic servants and to finance a school for neglected, loitering girls.

Some portraits of Catherine of Siena show her leaning against a church wall profoundly absorbed in one of the God-given ecstasies that shaped her life. They do not show her giving away her black Dominican cloak to a person who was cold and poor: "I would rather go without a cloak than without charity." They do not show her daily nursing an isolated old woman with leprosy and a bitter tongue. They do not show her, during the plague that struck Siena in 1374, going at night, a lantern in her hand, to local tenements and hospitals to console the dying victims and then bury them with her own hands. They do not show her traveling to Avignon, Florence and Rome and vigorously telling popes and civic leaders to do their God-given duty of uniting God's people and fostering peace.

The visual image of Catherine of Siena's life that most reveals her following of the crucified Christ, whom she so loved and sought to serve, is given in her own Letter 9, dictated probably in June 1375, five years before her death. Then 28 years old, she

describes her merciful outreach to Niccolo di Toldo, a condemned young man: her visiting him and then kneeling with him at the chopping block when he is beheaded. She writes:

> *"He made me promise, for the love of God, to be with him at the end. I gave my word, and kept it. . .. I said to him: 'Courage, dearest brother. We shall soon be at the wedding. You will be going to it bathed in the sweet blood of God's Son and with the sweet name of Jesus on your lips. I shall be waiting for you. …'*
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> *"So, I waited for him at the place of execution. All the time I waited I was praying [for] the grace. … that I might give him light and peace of heart at the moment of death, and then see him going to God.*
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> *"At last, he arrived, as meek as a lamb. When he saw me, he began to laugh and wanted me to make the sign of the Cross over him. I did so and then said: 'Down with you to the wedding, brother! You will soon be in the life that never ends.' He laid himself down with great meekness; then I stretched out his neck and bent over him, speaking to him of the blood of the Lamb. His lips murmured only 'Jesus' and 'Catherine,' and he was still murmuring when I received his head into my hands, while my eyes were fixed on the divine Goodness as I said: 'I will.'*
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> *"Then I saw the God-Man as one sees the light of the sun. His side was open to receive into his own the blood that had just been shed: a fire of holy desire, which his grace had poured into and concealed in that soul, was now received into the fire of his own divine Charity." (Kenelm Foster and Mary John Ronayne, eds. I, Catherine, London: Collins, 1980, 72–74).*

We are the family of the two Catherines, in a true communion of saints. Grateful for their example, inspiration and encouragement, we too try to minister to the bodily sufferings and spiritual needs of our own day—in the sick and suffering people next door, at the southern border, on the streets, in prisons, in hospitals filled with COVID-19 patients and others.

May the memory of Catherine of Siena's merciful life and of her transforming embrace of Jesus Christ's crucified love transfigure our own lives, as it did Catherine McAuley's. May we too kneel beside and cradle the heads, bodies and spirits of our neighbors in this world. And may God grant each of us something of their confident

reliance on Christ’s constant presence and help.

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