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Catherine McAuley: Timeless Legacy

Spring, 1996

Dear Sisters, Associates and Friends,

When we know we are doing something valuable and meaningful, yet we wonder how long we can keep up our good work because of aging, changed priorities or altered circumstances, the question naturally arises, "Who will continue what we started?" I sometimes express my sense of vocation as a conviction of particular destiny. What is it, that if I did not carry it out, would not be done? Not all of my activities are governed by this principle. The ones which do fall into this category, such as teaching scripture and addressing the intellectual and spiritual needs of women, do not feel like work, though they are driven by a distinct sense of urgency.

I am always touched by the modesty of women's style in serving the Church. Very few women in my experience are power-grabbers or self-promoters, insisting on honorifics or public acclaim. Statistics from a Notre Dame study of parish life suggest that 85% of the infra-structure of the church survives because of women's labor. This, of course, is distinct from women's voice in policy-setting, their participation in ecclesial decision-making, or their formal authorization as preachers and sacramental ministers. Yet the sisterhood of service to the church continues relentlessly, perhaps because women know that if they didn't do 85% of what the people of God need, the work wouldn't get done at all.

Catherine McAuley, impelled to do all kinds of work for the church that no one else was doing, had many occasions to ask,"Who will continue what we started?" This Spring, 1996, issue of *The MAST Journal* is a collection of reflections on the sense of urgency she felt, and a witness to the miracle that thousands of women over a span of five or six generations have taken her question seriously. They responded, "We will continue your work." This instinct was certainly inspiration for the Conference titled "Catherine McAuley: Timeless Legacy," which Avis Clendenen, Ph.D., Director of the Pastoral Ministry Institute, convened at Saint Xavier University, Chicago, Illinois, on November 10-11, 1995. Over thirty presenters contributed to the program which included music, ritual, prayer, entertainment, reflective presentations and academic papers. The project was funded by a grant from the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

In what is a noteworthy collaboration on the part of the conference organizers and participants, hopefully replicated for other events in the future, we publish in *The MAST Journal* the full texts of ten papers delivered in Chicago in November 1995. MAST Editorial Board members, both of them conference presenters, were part of this connection. Julia Upton, R.S.M., was involved in initial discussions with Avis Clendenen. Mary Sullivan, R.S.M., carefully edited some of the collection of papers revised for publication, and for her expertise we remain deeply in debt, *The MAST Journal*'s equivalent of the federal deficit.

Video tapes of the "Catherine McAuley: Timeless Legacy" conference include opening and closing rituals featuring Patricia Joseph Corkery, R.S.M. as Catherine McAuley; included also are the keynote addresses of Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M., Angela Bolster, R.S.M. and Margaret Bogacz, Ph.D. A proceedings book includes photos, abstracts of over thirty program presentations, musical selections and comments by conference participants. Videos and the Proceedings book will be available soon and can by ordered by contacting:

Avis Clendenen, Ph.D., Director, Pastoral Ministry Institute
Saint Xavier University
3700 West 103rd Street
Chicago, Illinois 60655
(312) 298-3441/3440 FAX: (312) 779-9061

Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.
Editor, MAST Journal

THE MAST JOURNAL is published three times a year (November, March and July) by the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology. Members of the Editorial Board are Srs. Janet Ruffing (Burlingame), Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt (Burlingame), Julia Upton (Brooklyn), and Patricia Talone (Merion). Subscription correspondence with Julia Upton, RSM, Department of Religious Studies, St. John's University, Jamaica, New York, 11439. Layout and design by Judy Johns, Omaha, Nebraska and mailing by Mercy High School Monarch Mailing, Omaha, Nebraska.

Catherine McAuley: From the Edges of History to the Center of Meaning

Angela Bolster, R.S.M.

Introduction

This presentation examines the realities of marginalization and liminality in the life of Catherine McAuley. Marginalization is all about injustice, be it religious, cultural, emotional, psychological, sexual, or socio-economic. In each of its expressions it involves exclusion. It is consequently a negative concept. Conversely, liminality is a positive concept deriving from the Latin "limen," meaning threshold, cutting-edge, or the experience of being at a frontier. Sandra Schneiders defined it as "the growing-point...which has everything behind it and nothing except possibility in front of it." Diarmuid O Murchu calls liminality "that indefinable, ambiguous space thrust upon a person or group...which is at once...inviting and frightening." This frontier beckoned Catherine McAuley towards new ways of being merciful, of becoming a trail-blazer for those ongoing, countless initiatives later undertaken by our congregation.

Catherine's outlook was Christological in that what concerned her were the things that concerned Christ . . .

In all of this, Catherine's outlook was Christological in that what concerned her were the things that concerned Christ, what we call the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Her call, her impulse of mercy, was a gesture to Christ himself, described by St. Augustine as "lying there in the doorway, hungry, frozen, poor and helpless." Catherine was similarly in tune with St. Bernard of Clairvaux whose twelfth sermon on the Song of Songs extols the grace of loving-kindness or mercy and lists the elements which go into its making, namely, "the needs of the poor, the anxieties of the oppressed, the worries of those who are sad, the sins of wrongdoers, the manifold misfortunes of all classes who endure affliction, even if they are our enemies."

We learn from scripture that "in every age Wisdom passes into holy souls; she makes them friends of God and prophets" (Wisdom 7:27). Catherine was such a friend of God, and she was a prophet of mercy. I also would like to apply to her some beautiful lines form Patrick Kavanagh's poem, *God in Woman* (1951) where he states:

Surely my God is feminine, for Heaven
is the generous impulse, is contented
with feeding praise to the good; and all
of these that I have known
have come from women.

Here Kavanagh implies women's gift to the world; a gift which may be intepreted in terms of woman's great generosity of spirit, her capacity to affirm, to console, to enable, to empathize, to encourage, and so on. Another fitting memorial to women—this time from Mikhail Gorbachev—is equally applicable to Catherine. "Women," said the Russian leader, "prevent the threads of life from being broken. The finest minds have always understood the peace-making role of women." Catherine McAuley was a peace-maker par excellence.

In Ireland this year, advance preparations for commemorating the Great Famine of the 1840's are well in hand. Avril Doyle, Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) has urged honest research, reminding historians that "history with all its pain and complexity, should, not be repressed." All concerned must guard against "being locked into a tired revisionist debate" and that no attempts should be made "to sanitize the Famine."

Sisters of Mercy must also acknowledge, in reviewing the history of Catherine McAuley, that for a period of forty years, she worked within intersecting circles of sociological and religious discrimination, psychological distress and marginalization. Suggesting these challenges are her many changes of residence after Stormanstown House, following her father's death in 1783: Glasnevin (1784-1787), Queen Street (1787-1798), Conway home, 23 East Arran Street (1798-1799), Armstrong household, 34 Mary Street (1799-1803), Coolock House, Callaghan household (1803-1823), 102 Middle Abbey Street (1823-1828), Baggot Street (1828-1841).

From this review, it can be maintained that for the duration of this period, except for the brief interlude with her Conway relatives through whom she became acquainted with many Dublin priests who counseled her, Catherine was in a psychological ghetto insofar as her Catholicism was concerned. At Coolock, her position was not only anomalous, but also painful and awkward. Nevertheless, she moved in social circles of refinement and elegance as the longed-for daughter of the childless William and Catherine Callaghan. William Callaghan was a non-practicing Anglican; his wife, a non-practicing Quaker. After-dinner raillery against Catholics occurred frequently in their home.

In the early 1890's, Ms. K.M. Barry, an Irish-American who came to Ireland to study the social situation there, opted instead to study Catherine. Her vol-

ume, *Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy* was published in 1894. She sympathized with Catherine's position, maintaining that "William Callaghan, safe in his fortress of science and prejudice, parried words with Catherine and, lacking all religious convictions himself...opposed her Catholicism and prohibited all manifestations of Popery in his house." Given Quaker rejection of ministers, creeds, sacraments, religious emblems and systems of theology, it is likely that his wife supported this position. It seems quite probable that from the age of five until she was forty-five, Catherine McAuley knew what it was to be marginalized and to have ongoing experience of the disadvantages which were a consequence of being Irish and Catholic in an age of intolerance.

Paradoxically, Catherine enjoyed deep support from the Callaghans because of a mutual concern for the poor. Coolock was Catherine's Gethsemane where she encountered "the humbled, abandoned, agonizing Christ...This is my Christ...Him will I have and hold; outside of him, nothing." Coolock was also her Manresa. Here was her place of alignment with the God of the oppressed; her close relatedness to Christ, the one she confidently asserted would be responsive to her. "He knows I would rather be cold and hungry than the poor, in Kingstown or elsewhere, should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford them." At Coolock she was already a Sister of Mercy at heart. With the approval and encouragement of the Callaghans, she was also an educator and social worker whose ears were tuned to the cries of the poor as they yearned for recognition, status and security.

The conversion of Catherine and William Callaghan in 1819 and 1822 respectively, was the "Open, Sesame" for Catherine's great mission of mercy. Given her personal experience of marginalization, she may be regarded as "the woman who stood in the breach," a woman ready to take risks, to carve new paths, to implement her germinating social vision which would provide an alternate solution to contemporary miseries and injustices. What I like to term the "ecumenical legacy" of William Callaghan enabled Catherine to emerge from a long period of reliance on others to one of absolute and extraordinary independence which was firmly rooted in God's providence and in Catherine's own conviction, stated to Sister M. Aloysius Scott on July 28, 1841, "Prayer can do more than all the money in the Bank of Ireland."

Liminality

Modern writers constantly remind us that the call to serve the world in its global embrace is innate to religious life. An integral part of evangelization entails that we look, not inwards or backwards, but outwards, not just to the margins of our society, but to the frontiers of the world. Here we recall Catherine's ambition to go to Nova Scotia. Her unambiguous response to observed need places her in a definitely liminal context. She could be regarded as a "solitary reaper" in those virtually unexplored areas of human need which characterized the Ireland and England of her day. Liminality is all about risk, and may be defined as the product of the creative imagination seeking to respond to pressing contemporary needs, and fueled by a new vision of the future. Negatively, liminality could be seen as akin to marginalization, alienation and exclusion. Positively, it may be perceived as a counter-cultural movement on the frontiers, opening up new horizons and indicating new possibilities. In this context, consider the "possibilities" opened up by Catherine's foundations, none of which was to be a replica of Baggot Street, but was to gear its ministry in response to local needs and circumstances.

We are singularly blessed in the tradition of liminality bequeathed to us by Catherine who, for the greater part of her life lived from one marginal situation to another. We have been enlarging and extending her horizon through our invocation of her charism for well over a century-and-a-half, counting from her profession in 1831.

Catherine addressed life as she saw it and she put herself at the "disposal of God" . . .

It was by placing herself at the cutting edge between the gospel and contemporary cultures and by her practical application of the gospel message that Catherine McAuley became a social reformer of remarkable energy and consistency. Her program of Mercy broke through contemporary barriers of indifference and discrimination to establish a ministry of social care and compassion geared towards the alleviation of need. Hers was the impetus which injected both drive and determination into that special core group which "started with two: Sister Doyle and I."

Catherine addressed life as she saw it and she put herself at the "disposal of God" (Rom. 6:13), as she strove to provide alternative solutions to the accumulated miseries of her day. Catherine does not belong to the group which might be termed "station masters," always checking on the clock. Time was for her "the purchase money of eternity." Instead of watching the clock, she was a prophet discerning the signs of her times. She was, therefore, at once a blessing and a bulwark to the church, as her attention to circumstances literally plummeted her into "boldness in initiatives" as the document *Mutuae Relationes* was to recommend as a blue-print for all religious in our own day. Catherine had a healing, reconciling effect on her times, as she stepped out in a faith-response to the needs of people as she saw them. Her life was, indeed, a constant effort "to act justly, to love tenderly and to

walk humbly with [her] God" (Micah 6:8). One finds a similar parallel in Habakkuk 3:19: "Yahweh, my Lord, is my strength; he will make my feet as light as the doe's, and set my steps in the heights." In all her doings, Catherine triumphed in the power and the presence of the Lord. She was, if I may borrow a delightful phrase from Saint Bernard, "saturated with the dew of Mercy," overflowing with affectionate kindness to all and gifted with many graces. There are several areas which express the liminality of Catherine's charism.

1. Social catalyst

Catherine McAuley placed herself at the "limen" or threshold, the cutting-edge between the gospel and the culture of her day. She proved herself to be transcultural and an agent of change as she discovered the vast reservoir of possibilities and activities implied by the concept of mercy. Her response to the challenges of her times was unequivocal. "The poor need help today, not next week." In all of this, and as an expression of liminality, Catherine endured the occupational hazards of a woman taking up her work within areas which had been traditionally and exclusively male. She resisted both threats and proselytizing.

2. Bravery in the face of penal enactments

Catherine was courageous in her selection of a building site in one of the wealthiest and most exclusive quarters of Dublin. She flaunted an unrevoked penal enactment which prohibited the erection of Catholic buildings on the main thoroughfares of Irish cities and towns. She achieved a breakthrough, succeeding where even Archbishop Daniel Murray had failed in 1823 in his plan to build his new pro-cathedral in Sackville (now O'Connell) Street. His plan had been rejected out of hand, leaving him with no other option but Marlboro Street, which meant distancing his project an entire block backwards. Catherine enjoyed greater success several years later. From her base at 102 Middle Abbey Street, Catherine regularly supervised her developing project on Baggot Street.

3. Creativity

Catherine McAuley was endowed with both creativity and the imagination which liminality evokes. Having already suggested that liminality includes an element of risk, I observe that risk was elemental to everything undertaken by our foundress. One must recall that before there was any structured community at Baggot Street, a specific ministry had developed there. It was precisely to protect and conserve this ministry that Catherine risked the establishment of a religious congregation as an effective response to an accumulation of social needs. "I never intended to establish a religious congregation," she said. "All I wanted was to help the poor, because that seemed to be what God was asking of me."

4. Religious life

Catherine's attitude toward the church of her day was subtle. She did not, at any time, confront this institutional church. Rather, she got it to collaborate with what her charism involved. Hers was not to be a congregation of enclosed religious women. The addition of twelve significant words to the Presentation vow formula, according to which she and her two companions were professed at George's Hill on December 12, 1831, made all the difference. The new vow formula included the phrase, "...subject to such alterations as shall hereafter be approved by the Archbishop." In this way, Catherine McAuley may be said to have cut the umbilical cord which till that time had hindered the mobility of religious sisters. She further emancipated her congregation from the formalism of religious life of the past in that she advocated a more participative form of community life.

5. Endurance of opposition

Catherine evoked hostility as well as admiration. Certain authorities in the church felt threatened by her. For instance, Archbishop Murray "had no idea a congregation was going to spring up of itself like this." Dean Walter Meyler caused her much anguish because of the chaplaincy dispute and his opposition to her receiving the collection from Sunday Mass, which the Archbishop had approved. The Archbishop himself did not utter one word in Catherine's defense during this protracted trial. Canon Matthias Kelly denounced her for going beyond her sphere as a woman and for interfering in matters best left to men. Jealousy underlay the antagonism of these two clerics. Each had a niece in the Congregation of Irish Sisters of Charity and both feared that Catherine's work would overshadow that of Mary Aikenhead. Neither foundress was party to this despicable campaign.

6. Compiler of the Rule

Catherine was what I like to term "significantly liminal," as was Angela Merici three centuries earlier, in being the compiler of her own Rule, those of its chapters which pertain to Mercy life. Angela and Catherine are the only two women in the long annals of the church to be so acclaimed. Both compilations were truly feminine. Today, with our expertise in reframing and re-drafting Rules and Constitutions, this may seem a rather weak boast. In point of fact, however, the compilation of our Rule was an outstanding achievement for a woman in nineteenth-century Ireland. At Rome, the Rule was highly approved for its "truly evangelical doctrine...for the solid piety it inculcated and for the spirit of the most perfect charity manifested" in it. According to the New Catholic Encyclopedia, "Papal approbation, which congregations of men enjoyed for almost three hundred years, was granted (to women) for the first time in 1841, when the Sisters of Mercy were approved as a

Religious Congregation." Although hesitant at first, since she thought that a religious cadre might stifle the dynamism and flexibility of what she envisaged, Catherine eventually drew up the Rule which gave scope and structure to the charism of Mercy.

Her mode of government was unique for her time, since it stressed, among other things, the principle of subsidiarity, sensitivity to the needs of the local church, flexibility and adaptability. In all of this, Catherine McAuley showed an acute awareness and concern for the local church, a century before a theology of the local church was developed in the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*. Catherine continued to be a liminal figure, enterprising in her undertakings and collegial in the supervision of her expanding network of convents.

7. Evangelical flexibility

Liminality also attaches to Catherine's evangelical flexibility which, in turn—and more particularly in our own times—has led to a tremendous fissiparity of mission and ministry. At this point, we may conveniently ask ourselves: What is today's liminal challenge? Who and where are the boundary dwellers, those at the cutting-edge of our modern society? The answers are to be found in VITA and *Mercy Detroiter*, two publications which are regularly mailed to me from the United States and for which I am deeply grateful. I also express gratitude for the Australian newsletter, *Tracking Mercy*. Through these publications (and I'm now promised many more!) my evaluation of our contemporary mediation of Catherine's charism is constantly enhanced. I therefore take this opportunity to personally convey to all of you my thanks for, and my sincere appreciation of the manner in which you portray, not just Catherine's charism and spirituality, but also her liminality of vision and perspective. I should like to repeat—with regard to my early visits to Sisters of Mercy worldwide in the initial stages of my work on the Cause of our now Venerable Catherine—that without this experience of friendship, kindness, love, hospitality, ministry and dedication to Mercy and to Catherine, I would not have been able to evaluate her as I have done in my readings and in my Positio presented to the Congregation for Causes in 1985. In Catherine's name, as in my own, may I repeat a very sincere "Thank you and God bless you."

8. Liminal educator

Catherine took a radical approach to the injustice inflicted on the poor by depriving them of educational opportunities. Ignorance was a harsh fact of life in the pre-Emancipation Ireland of Catherine's day. The Penal Code of the late seventeenth century placed an absolute veto on education, a veto aimed at eliminating Irish Catholics from advancement in practically every area of life. This was the ignorance which Catherine McAuley addressed, even making "Service of the Ignorant" a special feature of the vow formula. There is, indeed, a wide gulf separating the "uneducated" and the "ignorant." Catherine tackled the latter, thus proving herself to be fearlessly liminal as an educator. She was not afraid of incurring the anger of the establishment by opening schools during a time when education was prohibited. Catherine began her educational work in Baggot Street in 1827, two years before Daniel O'Connell secured Catholic emancipation in 1829.

She launched into second-level education for children of the middle classes whose parents could not meet expenses of other fee-paying schools. She embarked on technical education, first at Middle Abbey Street and subsequently in her House of Mercy by training young girls for employment. She was the only Irish founder to penetrate the proselytising schools of the Kildare Place Society. She was unique in being the only founder to place her schools under the National Board of Education, established by the government in 1831. She believed her pupils would benefit by undergoing the examinations set by the Board. She saw tremendous evangelical possibilities also in these schools.

Catherine pioneered in Ireland the monitorial system for girls, as she was training as well the salarying monitresses in her Baggot Street School long before the Marlboro Street Training School was opened in 1836. This was a fee-paying institution reserved exclusively for boys. By 1877 Catherine's Baggot Street School was acknowledged as Ireland's first Training School for Girls, named *Sedes Sapientiae* (Seat of Wisdom).

A clarification can be made to the term "monitor." One of the many interpretations of monitor/monitress is that of "a senior pupil who assists in school discipline and who supervises." The monitorial system, as adopted by Catherine in her Baggot Street School was one by which, after the fashion of existing Model Schools, certain pupils were selected, given some pedagogical training and then given supervisory work in classrooms. In an interesting letter to Sister M. Anne Doyle in Tullamore on August 20, 1840, Catherine advised, "Try to get a well-qualified monitress from the Model School until your Sisters know the method...She should be paid a small salary, out of what the Board [of Education] allows." This statement is important in the evidence it affords that Catherine was paying salaries to her monitresses for several years before such payments were officially ratified by the Board in 1845.

9. Defender/Promoter of Justice

Ministry to the sick was a very special and comprehensive ministry for Catherine. She not only sought to promote "the cleanliness, ease and comfort" of the poor, but also to minister to their spiritual needs by reading the Word of God with and for them in a most

gracious and sensitive manner. Take, for instance, her courageous, liminal approach to visitation of Catholic patients in Dublin's Protestant-administered hospitals. These included Sir Patrick Dun's, Mercer's Madame Spencer's, The Coombe, the Hospital for Incurables in Donnybrook. In this area of hospital nursing she was particularly liminal in that she was the only Irish founder to see and appreciate the apostolic possibilities of the Workhouse System.

Irish Sisters of Mercy have come down in history as "the only Irish Congregation to have made its home among the Workhouse poor." As early as 1838 the Cork Sisters, within a year of their coming to the city, were daily visitors at the Workhouse. The system pursued there was based on indoor rather than outdoor relief and served only to assist those who sought temporary relief from indigence. Catherine's approach to poverty, outdoor relief though her ministry of visitation, was far more humane. It was one of the tremendous graces offered to her that on August 13, 1841, shortly before her departure for Birmingham, she had the happiness of securing permission of her Sisters "to attend upon the sick and infirm of their own persuasion in the South Dublin Union." This was the official name of the Dublin Workhouse.

10. Preferential option for the poor

Catherine's foundational enterprise was directly aimed at educating and healing the poor, safeguarding their faith and alleviating their hardships. She perceived, with the intuition of love, that it was not simply money that the poor needed. After all, a superfluous coin could well be the means of dispensing a person, any of us, from an act of genuine love and care. As Catherine herself said, the poor needed, most of all, "the kind word, the gentle, compassionate look and the patient hearing of sorrows." Here we come to liminality in another way. Because of Catherine's preferential option for the poor, in whom she discovered the suffering Christ, and her concern for their integral good, she anticipated in a very real sense the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* of Pope Paul VI. One of the two experts with me on the Historical Commission for the Cause was adamant in maintaining that "...in many important aspects, Catherine has at least as much, and in some case, more meaning for the twentieth century than she had for the mid-nineteenth century."

In all of her educational endeavors, Catherine McAuley was an important instigator of change. Her charism, which was at once original, creative, vibrant and relevant, showed her awareness of her contemporary milieu, as well as her perceptiveness in response. We could say that she pioneered a tremendous pluriformity of involvement, because hers was the type of creativity which liminality involves. The cutting-edge, the frontier always beckoned her towards new ways of being merciful.

11. Spirituality for change

Catherine's spirituality was liminal and a spirituality for change in the sense that she did not withdraw from temporal realities in order to seek God. She found Him in the midst of these realities. "Our hearts," she said, "can always remain in the same place: centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back." There are other equally telling phrases from her letters and her maxims; and even though Catherine may not have heard of William Flete, a 14th century Augustinian mystic, she was certainly on his wavelength. He wrote, "The perfection of contemplation is achieved in works of charity."

I shall not dwell further on Catherine's spirituality, which is something we live with each day and upon which many of us have written. What I have presented on Catherine as a liminal figure is by no means exhaustive. There is still room in this area for worthwhile research which I hope will be undertaken in the not too distant future.

It has been my great pleasure to have shared even this much with you . As Catherine in her life showed "the unique marriage between the everyday and the eternal which marks the Celtic mind," I should like to conclude by praying a special Celtic blessing on you:

May the life you were given by the flowing water
grow stronger each day in you,
until the day when it reaches the fullness of its promise
in the land to which the swallows fly to eternal summer.

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Catherine's Legacy: Kindness and Patience Will Not Suffice

Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M.

One month ago my brother, sister, and I bid farewell to our widowed mother and buried in the soil of a small midwestern cemetery all that was home to us. You will not mind, I presume, if I dedicate my remarks this evening to the memory of Helen Margaret Ryan Burns. Such a dedication, with its implied sense of legacy, seems both personally appropriate and communally meaningful. Shortly after the burial service we joined relatives and friends for the funeral dinner. In the story-telling of that gathering we began to experience the practical Christian belief that those we love, in dying, live. Death provides an opportunity for us to seek their spirit in new ways, in new places, in new generations.

That story—which is the story of each of us eventually—posits the meaning of legacy I see operative in our celebration this weekend. We have not received from Catherine McAuley an object to be enthroned, certificates to be deposited, or pictures to be framed. The timeless legacy of Catherine McAuley rests not in an organization called the Sisters of Mercy; nor in institutions titled Mercy Hospital, Mercy High School, Saint Xavier University, St. Joseph Home for Children; nor in specific individuals named Frances or Agatha or Josetta. The timeless legacy of Catherine McAuley rests in the living memory of spiritual gifts transmitted from the past through the instrumentality of a congregation, an institution, an individual.

Living memory is about incarnation rather than replication.

Living memory is about incarnation rather than replication. Living memory requires continual exchange among dynamic realities: gift and giver and recipient. What Mary Jo Leddy said of charism applies here: "It is an energy, a dynamic, a power which cannot be contained or possessed. It becomes real and actual only when acted on, believed in and shared." [1]

Catherine herself seems to have understood this concept of benefits received in order to be handed on. In a little document entitled "The Spirit of the Institute" she uses writings in the Jesuit tradition to communicate her sense of the gifting at the heart of the merciful life as well as its divine source:

"We ought then to have great confidence in God in the discharge of all these offices of Mercy, spiritual and corporal, which constitute the business of our lives, and assure ourselves that God will particularly concur with us to render them efficacious as by God's infinite mercy we daily experience and this proceeds as we have said before from the grace belonging to the vocation or grace of the order."

An exploration of Catherine's legacy begins then with the "business of our lives" in the present order rather than a look backward to some ancient time and place. The question appropriate in seeking our legacy is not "what would Catherine do today?" The question is rather "what are we doing, what might we do, inspirited by our knowledge of Miss McAuley and what she taught us in her life?" Since it is a different question, it will lead us to different answers.

In developing an initial response to this question I will rely on three sources: Thomas Berry's observations on charism; Walter Brueggemann's insights on prophetic imagination; and the Direction Statement of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Each of these sources suggests a perspective from which to view the world and, thus, a perspective from which to understand the world. Each of these sources assists us in understanding what we are doing inspirited by the knowledge of Catherine McAuley's life.

Thomas Berry and Charism

In 1987 Mercy Health Services of Farmington Hills sought critique of a first draft of their "Vision and Direction Statement." One of those who submitted his observations was Thomas Berry, Passionist priest and earth scientist. In the midst of a valuable set of comments on the document, Thomas Barry offered an observation relevant to our discussion this evening. "The times," he said, "should be a prism through which the meaning of the charism passes rather than the charism a prism through which the meaning of the times passes." In other words, the gifting given in a tradition such as "mercy" precedes and succeeds any specification a particular moment of history may bring to it. Time allows us to break open the elements of such gifting here and now.

Catherine McAuley was not the inventor of "mercy." She was, as we are, the recipient of a rich tradition of religious experience, a rich tradition of Christian experience, to which she contributed her invention. She brought to that tradition a heart open to receive and a spirit willing to be instrumental in its expression in her day and her time. That's the spirit with which she gifts us—and hopefully the spirit in which we celebrate her legacy.

We must be careful, especially those of us who are Sisters of Mercy, to avoid both revisionist and minimalist tendencies as we approach Catherine and the

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gious congregations and those who associate with their energy source, prophetic imagination calls always for living creatively and communally the application of Gospel values to the analysis and critique of one's own experience and the experience of the world in which one finds oneself. In addition, this application, analysis and critique happen in relation to the memory which sustains our life together. In this dynamic set of relationships, we understand the need to receive anew the story and its timely revelation and to proclaim the same in creative symbols and/or dramatic actions for the sake of the kingdom-which-is-and-is-to-come.

Such activity requires an imaginative spiritual consciousness: a consciousness open to revelation in new and unexpected places, in new and unexpected ways. Kathleen Fischer in her book *The Inner Rainbow: The Imagination in Christian Life* observes that "imagination provides access to the deepest levels of truth and allows us to live in the 'real world.'"[4] Perhaps the most difficult challenge of our day is the challenge to live in that real world. The maintenance of an imaginative spiritual consciousness in the midst of a certain weariness of heart, feebleness of hope, and darkness of soul demands courage and strength. Voices that herald matter for such imaginative consciousness can be heard if we listen carefully.

A decade ago Hazel Henderson reminded us that "today the planetization process is visibly accelerating and three distinct zones of...transition can be mapped...the Breakdown Zone, the Fibrillation Zone, and the Breakthrough Zone....In this context...we should expect increasing turbulence and new instabilities...more irreversible changes...the ambivalence of events, with more confusion and conflicting interpretations."[5]

Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza speaks in her latest book of a discipleship of equals as an image for the church: "The theological self-understanding of [the] early Christian movement is best expressed in the baptismal confession in Galatians 3:27-29. In reciting this formula the newly initiated Christians proclaimed their vision of an inclusive community."[6]

John Paul II in his recent visit to the United States questioned the weakening of spiritual imagination in our country: "Is present-day America becoming less sensitive, less caring toward the poor, the weak, the

heart of our spiritual legacy lies in ordinary persons consumed with a desire to inhabit more and more faithfully in their daily lives the Gospel values made flesh in Jesus the Christ. From the center of that imaginative spiritual consciousness they learned to join the energy of their vowed communal life with that of their colleagues in church and world toward the creation of relationships in which the fullness of life became more possible. We are called to do no less and no more.

Direction Statement of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

As the life of many a religious visionary indicates, the problem with an imaginative spiritual consciousness is its impracticality, imprecision and improbability. Catherine's family appreciated her competencies, but could not appreciate the utility of the Baggot Street project. In the face of peer-questioning, Archbishop Daniel Murray began to second-guess his own judgments as to the exact nature of the works undertaken by Miss McAuley and her associates. The foundress herself marveled that the project went on despite poor judgement, lack of vigilance, and disasters of every sort.

. . . we, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, are impelled to commit our lives and resources to act in solidarity with the economically poor of the world.

Some hint of such impracticality, imprecision and improbability hovers in the sentences of a Direction Statement recently approved by delegates to the second Institute Chapter of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas:

"Animated by the Gospel and Catherine McAuley's passion for the poor, we, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, are impelled to commit our lives and resources to act in solidarity with the economically poor of the world...women seeking fullness of life and equality...to embrace our multicultural and international reality...to speak with a corporate voice; work for systemic change; act in harmony with all creation; call ourselves to continual conversion..."

Hardly the phrases of practicality, precision, and probability! Rather, this is the language of an imaginative spiritual consciousness and calls for a response that is equally imaginative and spiritual and conscious (that is, deliberate). In that last phrase "conscious, that is, deliberate" we have the link between imagination and practicality, precision, and probablility.

Angela Bolster concludes that Catherine McAuley was "a realist with a practical turn of mind and a shrewd observer who responded to the challenges of her time in a manner at once novel [that is, imaginative] and relevant."[8] A marvelous little quote folded into a study of Catherine's teaching methods exemplifies this spiritual legacy of the foundress. Those she instructed in the art of teaching remembered her admonition: "To teach well, kindness and patience, though indispensable, will not suffice without a solid foundation of a good education and a judicious method of imparting knowledge."[9] Perhaps today we could say to live mercy well strong rhetoric and passionate statements, though indispensable, will not suffice without a solid foundation of a good education and a judicious method of actualizing the rhetoric and the statements.

Walter Brueggemann, in *Prophetic Imagination*, writes that the compassion of Jesus is to be understood not simply as a personal emotional reaction but as a public criticism in which Jesus dares to act upon his concern, dares to address the cause of the pain as well as the locus of the pain. Catherine McAuley likewise offers impetus and model for such an understanding of Gospel compassion. Her spiritual legacy calls one to dare to respond to one's own time in one's own manner, always realizing that "kindness and patience will not suffice...without knowledge and judicious method."

In the time that remains to me this evening, I would like to share some thoughts I have had relative to the corporal and spiritual works of Mercy, the business of our lives, as we approach a new millennium. Certainly kindness and patience will remain indispensable, but these will not suffice without knowledge and judicious method. I return to the question: What are we doing, what might we do, inspirited by our knowledge of who Catherine was and what Catherine taught us by her life?

In light of Berry's comments on charism, Brueggemann's idea of prophetic imagination, and the elements of the Institute Direction Statement, the beginning of an answer seems to lie somewhere along a path of common vision, global perspective on the works of mercy, and a systems understanding of the same.

Common Vision

What we are doing and what we might do seem well-articulated in the direction statement I mentioned earlier. We speak here of Catherine's passion for the poor, of women, of women and children, of multicultural and international reality. We speak also of systemic change, interdependence with all creation, a corporate voice and continual conversion. When we speak of action we speak of qualified action: "to act in solidarity ...to act in harmony." In my imagination—as a former English teacher—I muse on the ambiguity of

syntax. Is the "acting in solidarity" and "in harmony" in relation to the subject—that is, those of us united in a common tradition of Mercy—or the object—that is, persons who are economically poor/all creation/ women and children. Or might it be a matter of both/and. Elizabeth McMillan in an article in a recent issue of *The MAST Journal* offers a definition of "solidarity" which seems to imply the both/and scenario:

"The term 'solidarity' specifically refers to a relationship of mutual assistance and support that fosters individual growth and creativity, while at the same time consolidating communitarian bonds."[10]

For the early women of Mercy, the deepest personal relationships, the most distinct skills and talents, the strongest personal preferences were recognized and valued in a clear context of mission and common life.

My sense is that the discovery of this common project in which we all know ourselves connected requires of us deeper analysis and more careful reading of our past and our present. Understanding that context of mission and common life, for example, allows us to read the correspondence of Frances and Catherine from a new perspective. Catherine's words about Frances on the occasion of the sudden loss of her mentor and friend, Dr. Edward Nolan, convey courage and restraint shaped by the fundamental purpose to which each of them has committed her life energy:

"When I promised to go to my dear Sister Frances in time of need, you may be sure...I did not mean the trial which death occasions, with which I am so familiarized....I alluded to...the bitter-sweets incident to our state and most of all requiring support and counsel."[11]

Likewise, Catherine's astounding generosity in showing a willingness to turn over the works of Mercy at Baggot Street to the Sisters of Charity around 1830 becomes reasonable in a mind and heart centered in mission rather than ministry. Her response to a supposed request of Archbishop Murray is recorded simply and directly:

"When [Canon Kelly] hinted that Catherine was encroaching on the apostolic field of the Sisters of Charity...Catherine laid her case 'simply and humbly' before [Archbishop Murray] and, as quoted in the Limerick MS, 'offered to resign into his hands the House she had...completed.'[12]"

Reconstituting a readiness to be formed as a community-in-service (that is, discovering our common project) may be the single most important task of those of us associated today in the tradition of the Sisters of Mercy. We have a beginning in the Direction Statement of the 1995 Institute Chapter, but "kindness and patience will not suffice." Rhetoric and passionate statements will not suffice. By what sound knowledge and with what judicious method will we approach a common effort to develop the patterns of response which will make practical and effective the words we have affirmed?

A Global Perspective of the Works of Mercy

Ignorance—that is, not-knowing—afflicts the world in wider and wider circles as we move into the twenty-first century. Such ignorance rests often in the most educated of persons. The "unknowing" which most threatens the future of planet earth rests in deliberate limitations of one's horizon of knowing: a tendency to isolate ourselves from the knowledge of those who are too different from ourselves, who are too distant from our lifestyle and/or cultural milieu, who are too fragile and frail and vulnerable. Many of us prefer not-to-know because knowledge brings demands for response and reaction. A global perspective on the works of mercy suggests that we view all our endeavors in the broadest possible context, with a view to the world and the cosmos in which these works take place.

What does it mean to clothe the naked in a society in which persons are killed for a brand-name jacket or tennis shoes or sunglasses? in a world in which fashion designers determine what is old and useless, rather than wear and tear? Minimally it means we cannot clothe ourselves unaware of these aberrations? Maximally, it may provide motivation and substance for choices toward a simple lifestyle among Christian persons.

What does it mean to ransom the captive in a world in which persons subsist in prisons of addiction, in cycles of poverty and disease, in chains of domestic abuse? Many of these prisoners are women and children. Minimally, it means we must be willing to walk in the circumstances and the possibilities of these imprisonments. Maximally, it may suggest to us new avenues of service and new approaches to institutional presence.

Catherine McAuley herself was a woman whose world view constantly expanded to embrace a greater and greater circle of need. She was not intent upon addressing all that need, but she was intent upon awareness and response where possible:

"While we serve the poor according to our ability, we are not to expect to be able to relieve all their wants...[Yet] God knows that I would rather be cold and hungry than that God's poor would be deprived of any consolation in my power to afford them.[13]"

The charism of Mercy presented in the lives of Catherine McAuley and the early women of Mercy exhibits a spiraling outward movement in the spiritual and corporal works of Mercy. Sheltering led to education. Education led to sheltering. Both occasioned development of social services. Only need seems to have defined what was appropriate activity for a Sister of Mercy. In fact, an early version of a Custom and Guide for Sisters of Mercy says quite sharply: "Mercy can operate only in proportion as destitution, suffer-

ing, ignorance, and other miseries call it forth." Today we must understand that injunction in wider and wider circles of global relationships.

A Systemic Understanding of the Works of Mercy

In addition to a global perspective of the works of mercy, contemporary experience suggests that we will also need to discover a systems understanding of these same works—or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the inter-relatedness of all creation requires that systems as well as persons be recipients of the works of mercy. Quantum theorists remind us in this current age that "relationships are not just interesting [in the cosmos], they are all there is to reality...nothing exists independent of its relationship with something else."[14] These same theorists would say that "a system now appears as a set of coherent, evolving, interactive processes which temporarily manifest in globally stable structures...."[15] Process rather than product marks the journey toward the fullness of creation; dynamic relationship rather than mechanical interconnectedness.

Admonishing the sinner may well be a matter of pointing out the relationships between, for example, the abuse of the earth and the abuse of women. Ecologists and environmentalists have been telling us for decades that the violence we allow relative to "the earth" increases and multiplies the violence we tolerate toward all living beings. In addition, sociologists and psychologists have been telling us that that violence falls heaviest on women and children. A whole academic area of study—ecofeminism—strives to make clear this connection as well as to develop positive insights which will free feminine principles in human experience and cosmic experience. Bearing wrongs patiently and forgiving offenses does not preclude naming evil (that is, those forces which prevent the fullness of life promised by Jesus the Christ: "I have come to bring life and to bring it more abundantly"). Neither does it preclude urging to repentance and/or conversion. Indeed, divine mercy and human mercy consist in offering and accepting conversion and repentance.

When we address ourselves in the tradition of Mercy to sheltering the homeless, we need also address ourselves to political powers and racist mindsets. Some resources need to counter patterns of sin embedded in social structures while other resources counsel doubtful legislators and educators whose choices do not reflect a care for life. Sheltering the homeless in this last decade of the twentieth century connects us with refugees throughout the universe...species of plants, animals, and humans who have been dislocated from their natural habitats to wander in environments hostile to their well-being.

When we speak of burying the dead, we must understand the importance of rescuing natural processes of dying from unnatural processes which effectively result in denial and obstruction of life-giving death. The offenses we forgive and for which we seek forgiveness must include the generations who will go without because we have used so much...the persons who cannot work because our convenience has usurped their livelihood.

Conclusion

We come this weekend to celebrate. We come this weekend to remember. And well we should. We have much to celebrate and much to remember. Hopefully we come also to imagine and to plan and to act. The legacy which is ours is a living memory of spiritual gifting. We create its meaning even as we seek its meaning. What was true for Catherine is true for us. Kindness and patience, though indispensable, will not suffice. We need also sound knowledge and judicious methods.

Endnotes

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11. Mary Ignatia Neumann, ed., *Letters of Catherine McAuley* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), 100.
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Catherine McAuley and the Care of the Sick

Mary Sullivan, R.S.M.

The "visitation" of the sick poor was one of the three central elements in Catherine McAuley's vision of the merciful work to which she and, later, her companions in the Sisters of Mercy were called.[1] She conceived of this "visitation" as affording to the desperately ill and dying both material comfort and religious consolation. What is especially striking about her service and advocacy of the sick poor is not only her willingness to care for people with extremely dangerous infectious diseases (cholera and typhus, for example), with the consequent risk to her own life, but her overwhelming desire to offer these neglected and shunned people the dignity and Christian solace that she felt was rightly theirs, as human beings with whom Jesus Christ himself was intimately identified.

The "visitation" of the sick poor was one of the three central elements in Catherine McAuley's vision of the merciful work to which she and, later, her companions in the Sisters of Mercy were called . . .

In the essay that follows I wish to develop this general theme by focusing on four sub-topics: Catherine's own ground-breaking and courageous service of the sick and dying poor of her day; the continuation of her vision and practice in her earliest companions; the character of the Christian visitation of the sick which Catherine envisioned and described, especially in chapter 3 of her Rule; and, finally, the implications of Catherine's practice for care of the sick today.

But, first, what do we know about the state of medical knowledge in the early nineteenth century, when Catherine McAuley took to the streets of Dublin to care for the sick and dying poor? Recalling a few historical facts may help us to appreciate what she faced.

In 1837 William Gerhard, a physician in Philadelphia, published an article in which he demonstrated, for the first time in medical history, that typhoid fever and typhus were two distinct diseases, with different symptoms and causes, despite the prevailing tendency to classify them both as simply "fever." In 1839 William Budd, a British country physician, began his landmark study of the origin and transmission of typhoid fever, and in 1856 concluded, for the first time in medical history, that typhoid fever is spread by infected human fecal matter, though he could not then identify its specific organic cause. In 1854 John Snow, another British physician, demonstrated during an outbreak in London that cholera is a water-borne disease, spread in a population through contaminated drinking water, but he was unable at that time to pinpoint the responsible agent.

In 1864 Louis Pasteur, aided by further developments in the microscope invented almost 200 years earlier by Anton van Leeuwenhoek (1632–1723), convinced scientists to accept the existence and general character of germs—living microorganisms which cause infectious diseases. In 1865 Joseph Lister inaugurated antiseptic surgery, using carbolic acid to prevent surgical infection. In 1880 the typhoid fever bacillus (salmonella typhosa) was finally identified by the American pathologist, Daniel Elmer Salmon. In 1882 Robert Koch first identified the bacillus which causes tuberculosis, thus accounting for the so-called "consumption" which had brought death to so many, and in 1883 he identified the microorganism responsible for cholera. In 1909 the mode of transmission of epidemic typhus—by infected body lice—was finally demonstrated by Charles Nicolle.[2]

Thus, by the end of the 19th century, developments in microbiology and epidemiology, made possible in part by advances in optical science, finally enabled medical practitioners to know the particular microorganisms responsible for and the respective modes of transmission of a wide array of infectious diseases that had ravaged human life for centuries: anthrax, cholera, dysentery, diphtheria, smallpox, tuberculosis, typhoid fever, and typhus, to name but a few of the most dreaded, and until then often fatal, infectious diseases. It was not, in fact, until 1935 and the two decades following, when the sulfa drugs, penicillin, and other antibiotic agents were first created, that physicians had, at last, effective means of treating outbreaks of these mass diseases. And it was not until 1977–1980 that the World Health Organization was at last able to declare smallpox eradicated as a human disease, the discovery of the virus which causes it having been previously achieved with the aid of the electron microscope (first constructed in 1931).

But Catherine McAuley died in 1841, when Louis Pasteur was just nineteen years old. She thus lived and worked in a world that had not yet benefited from the discoveries that would come later in the century: a world still fraught with dangerous but as yet unidentified causes of severe sickness and death; a world in which the poor were especially vulnerable because of

the overcrowded and decaying condition of their dwellings, their poor sewage disposal, and their unprotected water supplies.

Cognizance of these historical facts is essential for a full understanding of Catherine McAuley's intimate care of the sick poor and of the deliberate risks involved in her visitations of the sick in the slums of Dublin. Indeed, on at least one occasion in 1832 Sir Philip Crampton, an eminent Dublin physician, strongly advised Catherine to give up the visitation of the sick. It was not that she was unaware of the dangers involved; on the contrary, Clare Moore, one of her earliest associates, records that she had "a natural dread of contagion" ("Bermondsey Annals," Sullivan 112). But, as Clare also notes, Catherine "overcame that feeling" for the sake of the comfort and consolation she might bring to those who suffered not only the physical pains of illness and dying, but even more, the spiritual pains of abandonment and hopelessness.

Catherine McAuley manifested comparable apostolic boldness in her speech, but even more so in her actions.

I. Catherine McAuley's Care of the Sick Poor

Karl Rahner speaks of the apostolic "boldness" (parresia) which impelled the public speech of the first followers of Jesus. He notes their daring in publicly proclaiming the Gospel in a world that was hostile to their mission. Believing that they had indeed been "sent" by Jesus into that very world, and for its sake, they overcame their fears, and their preference for silence, and witnessed in words to the revelation they had received, accepting the danger involved (*Theological Investigations* 7: 260–67). Catherine McAuley manifested comparable apostolic boldness in her speech, but even more so in her actions. Her personal presence among the desperately sick poor and her intimate care of them, under all sorts of dirty, unsavory, and exhausting conditions, was an emphatic proclamation of the merciful solidarity with those in need which she believed was at the heart of the Gospel. Thus her visitation of the sick poor emulated the boldness of the one she followed: Jesus, who touched the sores of lepers (Mark 1.41).

Catherine began to visit the sick poor in their own dwellings while she lived with the Callaghans at Coolock House (1803–1822), where she served as a companion to Mrs. Callaghan, but she was obviously able to devote more time to this work after Catherine Callaghan and her husband William had died. However, her first recorded nursing experiences involved, not the sick poor, but the illnesses and deaths of her own relatives and close friends. Her mother Elinor McAuley died in 1798, when Catherine was about twenty; Catherine Callaghan died in 1819, after a "lingering and tedious" illness which kept her bedridden for three years ("Limerick Manuscript," Sullivan 145); Catherine's cousin, Ann Conway Byrn, died in August 1822, leaving four children, two of whom Catherine adopted; William Callaghan died in November of the same year; Catherine's close priest friend, Joseph Nugent, died of typhus in May 1825; her sister Mary died of cancer in August 1827; Edward Armstrong, her confessor, died in May 1828; and in January 1829 her brother-in-law William Macauley died of "ulcerated sore throat attended with fever," leaving five children all of whom Catherine adopted ("Limerick Manuscript," Sullivan 161). During all these last illnesses Catherine nursed day and night, sometimes for months, sometimes for only a few days or weeks. It was undoubtedly these experiences of nursing her relatives and friends that taught her how to care for the sick and dying, and that years later, after she had experienced many more deaths of those she loved, led her to write: "the tomb seems never closed in my regard" (Neumann, ed. 100).

Upon the death of William Callaghan in 1822, Catherine inherited most of the Callaghan estate. She continued to live in the village of Coolock just north of Dublin while she planned her future work and built the large house she had designed for this purpose on Baggot Street, Dublin. The Bermondsey Annals says that both before and during this period, "It was her custom to visit the sick poor assiduously, as well in the wretched streets and lanes of St. Mary's Parish [Liffey Street], Dublin, as in the village near her residence" (Sullivan 101). During one of these visits Catherine met Mrs. Harper.

The Limerick Manuscript records her response:

> *On one occasion she discovered a poor maniac who had once enjoyed the comforts of life, being of a good family, but was then deserted by all and suffering from extreme poverty. She immediately took charge of this poor creature, and instead of getting her into an asylum, brought her to her own house where she kept her till her death. Miss McAuley had much to suffer from this woman, as she, with the perversity sometimes attending madness, conceived an absolute hatred of her benefactress, and ordinarily used most virulent and contemptuous language towards her. Besides she was of very dirty habits, and had an inveterate custom of stealing everything she could lay hands on, hiding such things as she could not use, which caused great inconvenience in the family. Yet the patience of her protectress never seemed disturbed by these continual annoyances, nor would she permit the servants to teaze [sic] the poor creature on the subject. ("Limerick Manuscript," Sullivan 151–52)*

Although its rooms were not yet fully completed, the House of Mercy on Baggot Street was opened on September 24, 1827, and Catherine's first two associates—her adopted cousin, Catherine Byrn, and Anna Maria Doyle—moved in that day to begin the works of mercy Catherine had planned. By June 1828 Catherine herself resided fairly regularly at Baggot Street, when she was not caring for her deceased sister's young children at her brother-in-law's home. Coolock House was sold the following September, and in November of that year Catherine asked Archbishop Daniel Murray for permission to visit the sick poor, not only in their own homes, but also in the hospitals of Dublin. Thus began, in late November 1828, three years before the founding of the Sisters of Mercy, the daily visitation of the sick poor which was to characterize the life of nearly all Sisters of Mercy until well into the twentieth century.

The early nineteenth century — both before and after the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 — was not the best of ecumenical times in Dublin, and a mutual fear of proselytism, on the part of both Catholics and Protestants, had led to the exclusion of ministers of all religious denominations from visiting patients in hospitals. Moreover, except for Saint Vincent Hospital opened by the Irish Sisters of Charity in 1834 (Scanlan 8), all of the hospitals in Dublin in Catherine's day were under Protestant management.[3] This fact explains Catherine's care—some would say, cleverness—in gaining entry to the poor wards of the hospitals on the south side of Dublin. (According to Mary Vincent Harnett, she left the hospitals on the north side of the city to the ministry of the Irish Sisters of Charity who resided there [Life 57].) The Limerick Manuscript is particularly detailed about Catherine's method:

> *It was not permitted at this time for the members of any religious body in Dublin to visit the public hospitals. Miss McAuley wished to remedy this evil, and knowing that the greater number of the patients received into these hospitals were Roman Catholics, she resolved to make an effort to gain access to them for the purpose of communicating instruction and consolation. As she knew that persons would more willingly accede to the request of those who occupied a good position in society, rather than to that made by individuals of humble rank, she resolved for the furtherance of the object she had in view to make her first visits in her own carriage. This she did, not from any motive of ostentation or display, but from a wish to remove the obstacles the world might raise to the fulfillment of her charitable designs; she wished to vanquish the world's prejudices with its own weapons, and having happily succeeded, she disposed of her carriage in the course of a few months and never resumed it again. Her first visit in this way was to Sr. Patrick Dunne's [sic] hospital where one of her Protestant friends was head physician. She was accompanied by three of her associates,[4] and while one or two of the governors brought her through the establishment, and showed her several objects of curiosity as the means which modern science has employed for the mitigation of human pain, her young friends were dispersed through the wards ministering comfort to the patients. In the course of conversation she took an opportunity of asking whether there would be any objection on the part of the managers to her visiting from time to time, for the purpose of imparting religious consolation to the poor suffering inmates; the reply was that not the smallest objection should be thrown in her way, and that she was perfectly welcome to visit the patients as often as she wished to do so. She paid a similar visit to Mercer's Hospital and met with the same success. ("Limerick Manuscript," Sullivan 159–60)*

Besides Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital and Mercer's Hospital, Catherine and her associates also visited the sick poor in the Coombe Lying-In Hospital and the Hospital for Incurables in Donnybrook. They walked considerable distances to these hospitals, as well as to the hovels of the sick poor, and thus in time were dubbed "the walking nuns."

In her book, *The Irish Nurse,* Pauline Scanlan provides some historical data about the hospitals of Catherine's day. For example, she notes that Mercer's Hospital, located in a stone house originally used as a home for poor girls, was founded in 1734 "for the reception and accommodation of such poor sick and diseased persons who might happen to labour under diseases of a tedious and hazardous cure, such as falling sickness [epilepsy], lunacy, leprosy and the like" (2). The operating theatre of Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital, which was opened on Lower Grand Canal Street in 1809, was still, in Catherine's day, a single room, "heated by a stove" and having "neither hot nor cold water laid on." The new operating theatre built in 1898 was "said to have been the first modern antiseptic theatre" in Ireland (Scanlan 19). The Coombe Lying-In Hospital, "founded in 1826 for poor expectant mothers living in the Coombe area of Dublin," south of the River Liffey, had thirty-one beds (Scanlan 7). The Hospital for Incurables founded, with one nurse, on Fleet Street in 1744 was moved later in the eighteenth century to Donnybrook Road where it then housed about one hundred patients (Scanlan 2).

As Scanlan notes, "During the eighteenth and for the first half of the nineteenth century, the majority of nurses were classified as domestics, and nursing was considered a function for menials" (55). In a report on conditions in the hospitals in Ireland, published in 1835, the physician-author refers to "problems caused by the ignorance and lack of training of nursetenders and midwives," for whom cleanliness, proper patient diets, and ventilation were often not priorities (Scanlan

64). Other commentators have noted that intoxication while on duty was frequent in the nursing staffs of some hospitals in Ireland and England during the first half of the nineteenth century. The nurse-patient ratios were generally high; the water supplies, low; the wards, overcrowded; the laundry services, cumbersome; and the nurses' duties, wide-ranging. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that untrained and illiterate nurses were exhausted and neglectful, and that non-paying patients, the sick poor, were the least served. According to Scanlan, a report on the Dublin House of Industry written in 1807 states that "forty-eight lunatics, as well as other patients, were being accommodated two to a bed, at the time" (56). It was to such an asylum that Catherine McAuley would not, some years later, consign Mrs. Harper.

But two years later Catherine's solicitude for the sick met an even more severe test.

The state of nursing care in the Dublin hospitals in the early nineteenth century may be further inferred from the story of Mary Ann Redmond, a wealthy young woman from the south of Ireland who had "white swelling on her knee." Michael Blake, vicar general of the diocese of Dublin, was a very close friend of Catherine McAuley. He also knew Mary Ann Redmond and in July 1830 asked Catherine to visit her in her lodgings in Dublin. When Mary Ann's physicians decided to amputate her leg, Michael Blake begged Catherine to allow the surgery to take place at Baggot Street, rather than in hospital. In a letter written fourteen years later, Clare Moore, who was present at Baggot Street at the time, says that "Revd. Mother's charity readily consented. She was accommodated with the large room which is now divided into Noviceship and Infirmary. Mother Mary Ann [Doyle] and Mother Angela [Dunne] were present while the operation went on, tho' her screams were frightful. We attended her night and day for more than a month, at the end of which time she was removed a little way into the country where she suffered for two or three months and died in great agony" (Sullivan 89–90). The Bermondsey Annals notes that "During the month that this young person was in the Convent, [Catherine] watched over her night and day with the solicitude of a parent" (Sullivan 104).[5]

But two years later Catherine's solicitude for the sick met an even more severe test. Three months after the founding of the Sisters of Mercy on December 12, 1831, a violent epidemic of Asiatic cholera struck England and Ireland, reaching Dublin in late March 1832. Meanwhile at Baggot Street, Anne O'Grady had just died of consumption the month before, and Mary Elizabeth Harley, one of the two young women who had gone to George's Hill with Catherine, was now also dying of consumption, her death hastened by the dampness of the basement kitchen where she had been assigned to work at George's Hill. Several others at Baggot Street were also sick, three with virulent scurvy, and thus the very future of the Sisters of Mercy was threatened by illness and death ("Dublin Manuscript," Sullivan 206). In the midst of this severe communal suffering came a public call for help.

In late April, as the number of cholera cases and fatalities grew, and contamination spread in the existing hospital facilities, the Dublin Board of Health decided to open some temporary cholera hospitals: in the western part of the city, Grangegorman Penitentiary was converted into a hospital, and placed under the care of the Irish Sisters of Charity; to the east, the Townsend Street Depot was converted, and the Sisters of Mercy were asked to take charge of nursing there. Thus a few days after Elizabeth Harley's death on April 25, Archbishop Murray came to Baggot Street, at Catherine's request, to give the community permission to undertake this dangerous work. He had himself, the day before, published a pastoral letter on the epidemic (Meagher 154–56). Though the Grangegorman hospital was closed after three months, the Townsend Street hospital remained open for the rest of the year, and the Sisters of Mercy nursed cholera victims there for over seven months, from early May until December 1832. At the height of the epidemic over 600 people died in Dublin each day. The Townsend Street hospital, initially intended to accommodate fifty patients, was soon expanded, though, in the course of a day, the same bed was often occupied by several patients in succession. Mary Austin Carroll claims that 3,700 cases of cholera were treated in the Townsend Street hospital (Leaves 2: 295).

All the early biographical manuscripts about Catherine McAuley reflect on this extraordinary experience. In her "Memoir of the Foundress" ("Dublin Manuscript"), Clare Augustine Moore says:

> *The deaths were so many, so sudden, and so mysterious that the ignorant poor fancied the doctors poisoned the patients, and as immediate burial was necessary it was reported that many were buried alive. Some no doubt were, but there is reason to believe very few indeed. It was under these circumstances that Revd. Mother offered her services to the cholera hospital, Townsend Street, which were thankfully accepted. The Archbishop having approved of this step the sisters entered on their duties to the great comfort of the patients and doctors; but the fatigue they underwent was terrible. Revd. Mother described to some of us the sisters returning at past 9 [p.m.], loosening their cinctures on the stairs and stopping, overcome*

with sleep. (Sullivan 207)

In her letter of August 26, 1845, Clare Moore says that Catherine was at the hospital "very much....and once a poor woman being lately or at the time confined, and died just after of Cholera, dear Revd. Mother had such compassion on the infant that she brought it home under her shawl and put it to sleep in a little bed in her own cell, but as you may guess the little thing cried all night, Revd. Mother could get no rest, so the next day it was given to some one to take care of" (Sullivan 97–8).

Catherine herself remained at the hospital all day, supervising the care of the patients and the work of the hired nurses.

According to Mary Ann Doyle and Clare Moore,[6] the sisters went to Townsend Street in four-hour shifts, starting at eight or nine o'clock in the morning. Four sisters served at a time—even though there were then only eleven in the Baggot Street community, and the school for poor girls and the shelter for homeless women were now in full operation. Catherine herself remained at the hospital all day, supervising the care of the patients and the work of the hired nurses. Clare Moore claims that Catherine "scarcely left the hospital. There she might be seen among the dead and dying, praying by the bedside of the agonised Christian...and elevating his heart to God by charity" ("Bermondsey Annals," Sullivan 112). Because the cholera deaths were so numerous and rapid, fear spread among the poor that patients were being buried alive. Consequently, Catherine herself assumed personal responsibility for the dead and dying. As Mary Austin Carroll notes:

> *She would allow no one to be buried till she had assured herself by personal inspection that life was really extinct, nor would she allow the nurses to cover the faces of those supposed to be dead, till a stated time elapsed. These were necessary precautions, which probably saved thousands from a fate more dreadful than even death by cholera.... She was very severe with nurses who neglected the sick, or seemed in too great a hurry to get rid of the dead; nor did she spare some physicians, who, undismayed by the horrors of the dreadful crisis, thought only of the honor of discovering a specific [a remedy] against the pestilence, and who, in their ardor for experimenting, seemed to forget that their patients were human beings. (Life 226)*

Besides the fear of burial alive, the poor—especially those who had had no previous experience of the violence of cholera or the discoloration of its victims—feared letting the cholera carts take their stricken relatives to the hospitals because they believed the doctors were poisoning the patients. Even Archbishop Murray's pastoral letter could not fully persuade them that this was not the case. At the Townsend Street hospital apparently only the constant presence of Catherine McAuley, the Sisters of Mercy, and some Catholic clergy—including Catherine's friends, Michael Blake and Thomas O'Carroll—could adequately reassure the patients and their families. According to Mary Vincent Harnett, the people "became more reconciled when they saw the sisters accepting and administering the prescriptions from the doctors" (Life 88).

Cholera is a violent diarrheal disease "characterized by devastating intestinal loss of fluid and electrolytes, the replacement of which constitutes the vital element in treatment." Without this, "death may result from dehydration or salt imbalance" (*Oxford Companion to Medicine* 1: 213, 596). In Catherine's day patients were treated by bloodletting, applications of heat, doses of calomel, and such palliatives as opium, laudanum, and brandy. The sisters moved from bed to bed all day long, administering these remedies and wiping the icy cold perspiration from the patients' bodies. It is no wonder then that Mary Ann Doyle, having repeatedly crawled from low bed to low bed, injured her knees in the process. Catherine's famous doggerel poem, "Cholera and Cholerene," was written at this time, as a humorous tribute to Mary Ann's two sore joints.

Years later, Dr. Andrew Furlong, a physician who had worked side by side with Catherine for seven months in the Townsend Street hospital, stated that Dr. Hart, the head physician in the hospital, said of the Sisters of Mercy, "'They were of the greatest use, and...the hospital could not be carried on without them. They kept the eighty nurses in order, which was hard to do.'" Dr. Hart apparently gave Catherine "the fullest control" and, according to Mary Austin Carroll, "used to attribute the fewness of the deaths (about thirty percent), in comparison with [the] high percentage elsewhere, to her wise administration" (*Leaves* 2: 295).

In the nine years which remained of Catherine's life, she continued to make the care of the sick and dying poor a very high priority, even when visiting them took a heavy toll on her own health. When she founded the branch house in Kingstown (Dún Laoghaire) in 1835, the Bermondsey Annals notes that though she immediately started a school for the poor, neglected girls she saw there (Neumann, ed. 86–7), "they also visited the sick, going often to a very great distance, and our good Foundress, notwithstanding the difficulty she experienced in walking, never spared herself in those labours of charity and mercy" (Sullivan 114).

In the first decade of the Sisters of Mercy, twenty

of the congregation died—of typhoid fever, typhus, consumption, and erysipelas (a severe streptococcal infection of the skin and subcutaneous tissues). Catherine herself died on November 11, 1841, of pulmonary tuberculosis complicated by empyema. Since it is well-known that she frequently suffered bouts of sore gums, so severe that she could barely eat an infant's diet (Neumann, ed. 195), it is also possible that she had scurvy, a condition resulting from a deficiency of vitamin C. It is doubtful that many fresh fruits and vegetables were available at Baggot Street.

II. The Continuation of Catherine's Vision and Practice

In the years after Catherine's death, her companions and followers in the Sisters of Mercy continued her unstinting care of the sick and dying poor and repeatedly entered into dangerous ministries among the sick poor that would have both worried and pleased her. It is not possible here to recount all the visitations of the sick that occurred in the nine foundations of the Sisters of Mercy which Catherine established outside of Dublin, but three events may serve to illustrate her companions' devotion to the desperately ill: the cholera epidemic of 1848–1849, the Crimean War, and the cases of endemic smallpox in London in 1862.

The Irish Famine—often called the Great Starvation or the Great Hunger—began in 1845 with the blight of the potato crop, then the sole food of a third of the Irish people (Ô' Tuathaigh 203). It lasted for five years, during which about 800,000 to 1,000,000 people are estimated to have died—from starvation, from the diseases which normally accompany famine (typhus, typhoid or relapsing fever, dysentery, dropsy and scurvy), and from a devastating invasion of cholera. Every city and town in Ireland where Sisters of Mercy then lived was assailed in one way or another by this multi-faceted human disaster. With the reticence that often marked references to the Famine on the part of ordinary Irish people, the comments on the Famine in the existing annals of the early Mercy communities are brief. More detailed are their accounts of nursing the victims of the accompanying diseases.

The Limerick Annals, for example, records that in the severe cholera epidemic that struck the whole of Ireland from December 1848 through 1849 the Sisters of Mercy of Limerick, led by Mary Elizabeth Moore, worked at two cholera hospitals. Elizabeth had entered the Baggot Street community in June 1832 and had nursed with Catherine McAuley at the Townsend Street Depot during the 1832 epidemic. She was thus well aware that cholera can be conveyed by the feces of infected victims, even though its origin is contaminated water. Therefore when the outbreak reached Limerick in the spring of 1849, Elizabeth asked the community only for volunteers, to accompany her in serving cholera victims at two hospitals in Limerick: Barrington's and St. John's. Their nursing began on March 6, the sisters staying at these hospitals day and night.

Marie-Therese Courtney, drawing on the Limerick Annals, reports that:

> *The constant active attendance [at these hospitals] continued for over a month, fresh detachments of four relieving the other[s] in each hospital. On their first night in St. John's nineteen people died. Mother Elizabeth made her daily rounds to all the wards and patients in both hospitals....*
> *On Holy Saturday, April 7 [as the cholera epidemic began to decline], the night watching ceased and all returned to the convent, but for three weeks afterwards they continued daily to attend the sick in the hospitals. (Courtney 38, 39)*

In Dublin in 1832 no Sister of Mercy had contracted cholera, but in Limerick in 1849 two sisters became infected. Although one recovered, the other, Mary Philomena Potter, died on April 19 of the disease, "caught in her service of the sick at Barrington's—and [from] sheer exhaustion" (Courtney 39). Similarly, in Galway, in the same year, where the Sisters of Mercy nursed cholera victims day and night in the Fever Hospital a short distance from the convent, two sisters died of the disease: Mary Joseph Joyce and Mary Agnes Smyth.

Perhaps the most dramatic and well-known of the nursing experiences of the early Sisters of Mercy is their service from late 1854 to mid 1856 in the British military hospitals in Turkey and the Crimea during the Crimean War. Twenty-three Sisters of Mercy volunteered to nurse in these hospitals at the request of the British government: eight from Bermondsey, London, under the leadership of Mary Clare Moore; and a second group of fifteen (twelve from Ireland, two from Liverpool, and one from Chelsea, London), under the leadership of Mary Francis Bridgeman of Kinsale. Mary Angela Bolster's book, *The Sisters of Mercy in the Crimean War,* draws on diaries and letters which focus chiefly on the experiences of the Irish contingent, while correspondence and annals in the Bermondsey archives focus primarily on the experiences of the Bermondsey contingent. Both of these sources document this extraordinarily difficult nursing service, undertaken just thirteen years after Catherine McAuley's death.

The two sisters from Liverpool died in the Crimea: Mary Winifred Sprey, of cholera, on October 20, 1855; and Mary Elizabeth Butler, of typhus, on February 23, 1856. Both contracted their fatal diseases in the wards where they served, and their deaths were the most severe of the physical afflictions the sisters endured in the War. But there were other daily sufferings and hardships that also took a heavy toll: the filthy wards and quarters where they worked and lived; the constant rats and lice; the scanty food, cloth-

ing, and water; the long hours of heart-breaking work; the freezing cold, alternating with the humid heat; the bureaucratic delays in the Purveyor's function; the lack of linen and other medical supplies; the many medical officers who resented the presence of female nurses (the first such nurses in British military history); and, more than all the rest, the constant arrival from the front of severely wounded, emaciated, disease-afflicted soldiers, and the horrendous mortality rates. About 250,000 Allied soldiers (English, Irish, Scottish, French, and Sardinian) died in the Crimea, most of them from infections, diseases, especially cholera, and other non-combat ailments. Only 70,000 suffered battle deaths.[7] In February 1855, during the first winter in the Crimea, the deaths at the Koulali Barracks Hospital in Turkey, where the Irish sisters then served, averaged fifty-two percent; at the Scutari Barracks Hospital, where the Bermondsey sisters served, the mortality rate was forty-two percent (Bolster 134). Later that year some of both groups moved across the Black Sea to hospitals nearer the front. When the surviving twenty-one sisters returned to Ireland and England in the Spring and Summer of 1856, they left behind the graves of the two who had died in the Crimea, but carried home memories and experience that would strengthen all their future visitations of the sick and dying poor and would inform all the future Mercy hospitals where these women would ever serve.

In speaking of the visitation of the sick, Catherine McAuley had urged the sisters to "prepare quickly" for this crucial work of mercy . . .

The only striking difference between the two groups of Sisters of Mercy who served in the Crimean War is the character of their relationship with Florence Nightingale, the General Superintendent of the Female Nursing in the British Military Hospitals in Turkey and later in the Crimea. The relationship between Miss Nightingale and Mary Francis Bridgeman and the Irish sisters was generally negative, to the point where Florence Nightingale eventually, but privately, called Francis Bridgeman "Revd. Mother Brickbat," and for their part, Francis Bridgeman and the Irish sisters, acting on their understanding of the conditions under which they had come to the Crimea in the first place, resigned their posts at Balaclava Hospital in February 1856 and went home, rather than accept her authority. The relationship between Florence Nightingale and the Bermondsey sisters was, from beginning to end, mutually positive, to the point where she became a lifelong friend of several of them.[8]

But what is most important in the Crimean War experience of all these sisters is the sheer fact that the experience occurred at all: namely, that twenty-three Sisters of Mercy with no previous travel outside of Ireland or England, and with no formal training in nursing, let alone in nursing in a war zone, freely volunteered on extremely short notice (the Bermondsey sisters had two and a half days to decide and pack) to go on a month's hazardous journey to the Near East to succor desperately sick and dying soldiers, just because they and their advisors had heard, through the reports of the London Times correspondent in Constantinople (in mid October 1854) that there was a shortage not only of surgeons and medical officers, but of wound-dressers and nurses, and that the wounds, diseases, and deaths of hundreds upon hundreds of soldiers were unattended and unrelieved. In speaking of the visitation of the sick, Catherine McAuley had urged the sisters to "prepare quickly" for this crucial work of mercy (Rule 3.4, Sullivan 298). What is most moving about the Crimean War experience of these Sisters of Mercy is not their widely praised service in the military hospitals, but the self-forgetful spontaneity and whole-heartedness with which they immediately went to the war zone when they realized the desperate need.

The final event that may illustrate the bold fidelity of the first Sisters of Mercy to the sick and dying poor is a much simpler one: Mary Clare Moore's visit to two poor, smallpox-stricken families in London, on her way home from other work. This event is recorded in Clare's letter to Florence Nightingale, written on October 13, 1862, when Clare was forty-eight years old. In the letter Clare, who frequently suffered from pleurisy aggravated by her experiences in the Crimean War, apologizes to Florence for not writing sooner to thank her for the fruits and vegetables Florence regularly sent to the Bermondsey convent: "our good Bishop [Thomas Grant of Southwark] sent so many papers to be copied that I could not get a moment." But then she adds:

> *I went to St. George's Church this morning to bring home my writing to the Bishop as I wanted his advice about some of our Convent business—on my way back I felt I must go out of my way to see a poor family. The children have been obliged to stay from School on account of small pox—five had it—one died—a dear little child of six. Her younger sister greeted me by pulling out from a dreadful piece of rag a halfpenny for the poor—"for Katie's soul!" I could not well describe their own wretchedness for the father has been in a dying state for months. We had five shillings to give them—a small fortune—but I could not help feeling it was the dear child's selfdenial &* faith *which drew me there, for I hesitated to add to my*

walk—already very long for me.
We then went on to a poor young man in the last stage of consumption, his only child of two years old lying at the foot of his bed in small pox of the worst kind, his poor wife making sacks, or rather unable to make them on account of the child's illness. Poor man, he was very ignorant & inattentive to Religion—now full of joy having received all the Sacraments. It is a great pleasure though a sad one to be devoted to the Service of the Poor.[9]

These two sad scenes, in which the wretched illnesses and deaths of the London poor are embraced so naturally and sympathetically, in the course of an ordinary day, were repeated thousands of times in the two decades following Catherine McAuley's death. In the wicker baskets which the first Sisters of Mercy carried to the sick poor there were no cures, no miraculous restorations of health—only a few shillings, or some bread, or some coals for the hearth. Yet these women sought to bring to the poor much more than small practical helps, and much more than the nursing skills which they had acquired. They wished to bring the only gifts they really had to give: hope and trust in the consolation of a merciful God.

. . . the primary purpose of the visitation of the sick poor, as Catherine envisioned and described it, was to bring to the poor the comfort and consolation of God . . .

III. Catherine McAuley's Understanding of Christian Visitation of the Sick

It was Catherine's deep conviction that the greatest suffering of the poor, especially in their dire sicknesses and deaths, was their lack of religious knowledge, their lack of awareness of God's tender love and mercy. Of all the poverties induced in Ireland by the long Penal Era, religious ignorance of the merciful fidelity of God was not the least—a longstanding by-product of proscribed schooling, of forbidden Masses, of at least a century of outlawed priests, and, later, of tiny, over-crowded chapels in back alleys and farm fields. These privations had their long-term negative effects, not so much on the broad outlines of the religious faith of the poor as on their personal belief that they were indeed beloved of God. As they lay on their piles of straw in their wretched hovels it was all too easy to think that God was too distant to notice their plight or to care for their suffering families.

Therefore the primary purpose of the visitation of the sick poor, as Catherine envisioned and described it, was to bring to the poor the comfort and consolation of God: to make known to them—by one's words, presence, prayer, and tenderness—that God in Christ was indeed present to them and in them, and that, though they suffered grievously, God was indeed at work in them, bringing lasting joy out of their affliction. Catherine's primary goal as she knelt or sat by the bedside of the sick and dying poor was to encourage, by every human means in her power, their hope and trust in these Christian realities.

It was not that she saw herself as a privileged emissary of God. Rather she saw the suffering poor themselves as the living presence of her afflicted God. Three times in her Rule for the Sisters of Mercy she quotes Matthew 25.40: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." In the first paragraph of the chapter, "Of the Visitation of the Sick," she writes:

Mercy, the principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him, has in all ages of the Church excited the faithful in a particular manner to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they regarded the person of our Divine Master who has said, "Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to Me." (Rule 3.1, emphasis added)

Later in this chapter, she writes:

Let those whom Jesus Christ has graciously permitted to assist Him in the Persons of his suffering Poor have their hearts animated with gratitude and love and placing all their confidence in Him ever keep His unwearied patience and humility present to their minds, endeavouring to imitate Him more perfectly every day in self-denial, [composure] patience and entire resignation. Thus shall they gain a crown of glory and the great title of Children of the Most High which is assuredly promised to the merciful. (Rule 3.3, emphasis added)

And in paragraph six she writes:

Two Sisters shall always go out together. The greatest caution and gravity must be observed passing through the streets, walking neither in slow or hurried pace, keeping close, without leaning, preserving recollection of mind and going forward as if they expected to meet their Divine Redeemer in each poor habitation, since He has said, "Where two or three are in my name I will be." (Rule 3.6)[10]

Besides the discreet way in which Catherine is here introducing beyond-the-cloister activity into the Rule and daily life of women religious—a practice not all that common in the church of her day—the solemnity of paragraph six is chiefly explained by her view of the awesome end of journey: the meeting of her Redeemer "in each poor habitation." For Catherine, the visitation of the sick was an intense and reverent

prayers to read at the bedside of the sick and dying poor certainly began under her leadership. The Bermondsey Annals claims that even when Catherine lived at Coolock, "It was her chief recreation to copy prayers and pious books" (Sullivan 100).

In the Dublin archives of the Sisters of Mercy, there are at least two collections of prayers to be prayed while visiting the sick.[11] One of these, simply labeled "Prayers, Etc.," may have been intended for use at the bedside of sick and dying sisters; the other, labeled "Visitation of the Sick Devotions," was clearly intended for use at the bedside of the sick and dying poor. In both collections there are prayers "when recovery is still hoped," acts of resignation, prayers "when recovery is not expected," and prayers "for a happy death." These prayers were probably not composed from scratch, but were transcribed from published prayerbooks. Numerous prayers for the sick appear in the prayerbooks Catherine and the Baggot Street community are known to have used: for example, William A. Gahan's *A Complete Guide to Catholic Piety* and Joseph Joy Dean's *Devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus*. Although the collections of prayers in the Dublin archives do not appear to have come from either of these published books, they may have come from comparable prayerbooks available in Catherine's day. The spirit of all the prayers in the extant collections is one of realistic appraisal of human life and humble confidence in the compassion of a merciful God. For example, the "Prayer, when recovery is still Hoped" is addressed to Jesus Christ, and begins as follows:

> *To thy infinite goodness, O Jesus, we recommend this thy servant whom thou hast been pleased to visit with this illness, and beseech thee to take her under thy care, be thyself her physician, and bless the remedies which shall be used, that so they may be conducive to the restoration of her health. The compassion thou didst ever manifest towards the sick encourages us to hope that thou wilt strengthen and comfort her under her sufferings. Enable her, we beseech thee, to bear whatever portion of the Cross thou hast appointed for her with a Christian spirit in all humility and patience. Sanctify her sickness and if it be pleasing to thy holy will and beneficial to her eternal interests restore her again to health. Help her, direct her,*

easy, soothing, impressive manner so as not to embarrass or fatigue the poor patient" (Rule 3.7).

Catherine realized that the physical needs of the sick and dying have a natural priority, at least chronologically. She therefore advised that:

> *Great tenderness must be employed and when death is not immediately expected it will be well to relieve the distress first and to endeavour by every practicable means to promote the cleanliness, ease and comfort of the Patient, since we are ever most disposed to receive advice and instruction from those who evince compassion for us. (Rule 3.8)*

But she also believed that "The Sisters [who visit the sick poor] shall always have spiritual good most in the view" (Rule 3.9). In keeping with the theology of her day, paragraph nine of the chapter on the Visitation of the Sick speaks of "the dreadful judgments of God towards impenitent sinners" and claims that "if we do not seek His pardon and mercy in the way He has appointed, we must be miserable for all Eternity" (Rule 3.9). In the rather harsh language of contemporary sacramental theology, Catherine is here simply affirming that the primary goal of the visitation is to help the patient realize his or her only secure joy: a right relationship with God; she therefore urges the sisters who visit the sick to "pray in an audible voice and most earnest emphatic manner, that God may look with pity on His poor creatures and bring them to repentance," for as she says, "if our hearts are not affected in vain should we hope to affect theirs." Moreover, the sisters should not hesitate to "question [the patients] on the principal mysteries of our Holy Faith, and if necessary instruct them" (Rule 3.9).

Catherine was, evidently, deeply guided by the example of the saints.

In the next to last paragraph of this chapter of the Rule Catherine deals with the death of the sick poor. She says:

> *When recovery is hopeless it must be made known with great caution and if time permit done by degrees, assuring them of the peace and joy they will feel when entirely resigned to the will of God, inducing them to pray, that He may take all that concerns them into His Divine care and dispose of them as He pleases. Let the Sisters, if possible, promise attention to whatever object engages their painful, anxious solicitude that the mind may be kept composed to think of God alone. (Rule 3.10)*

Among the several alterations made in Catherine's text of the Rule when it was approved in Rome, the last sentence of this paragraph was omitted and two long, cautious sentences were substituted, to the effect that when the sisters visit the dying they are no longer free, in Catherine's simple language, to "promise attention to whatever object engages [the patient's] anxious solicitude," but, now, even in dire circumstances: "Should the conversation turn on disposal of property by will, let the Sisters dexterously avoid taking part in it.... When again the subject turns on procuring relief for the indigence of the sick person's family, let them promise, as far as depends on them, to attend to it, in the manner their state permits...." (Sullivan 279). One can hardly imagine a Vincent de Paul, or a Catherine of Genoa, or a Catherine McAuley writing such sentences to cover the dying moments of a poor man or woman lying on straw in a hovel, with his or her family weeping in the shadows.

Catherine was, evidently, deeply guided by the example of the saints. According to Clare Moore's letter of September 1, 1844, at least from June 1829 on, the community on Baggot Street listened to a reading from the lives of the saints each day: "Breakfast 8 or 8 1/4, and immediately after in the Refectory, Revd. Mother read the saint for the day" (Sullivan 90). It is reasonable to assume that these readings were from Alban Butler's *Lives of the Saints*, the widely available compilation first published in 1756–59. Among the many significant changes Catherine made to the Rule of the Presentation Sisters when she revised it for the Sisters of Mercy was the addition of three names to the list of "Saints to whom the sisters of this Religious Institute are recommended to have particular devotion": Catherine of Genoa, Catherine of Siena, and John of God (16.4). These particular additions demonstrate the critical importance Catherine attached to merciful care of the sick.[12] The other saints whom she mentions in the Rule were equally inspiring to her. In the chapter on the "Visitation of the Sick," she lists nine saints who "devoted their lives to this work of Mercy": Vincent de Paul, Camillus de Lellis, Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, Aloysius Gonzaga, and Angela Merici, as well as John of God, Catherine of Siena, and Catherine of Genoa.

IV. Some Implications of Catherine's Practice for Care of the Sick Today

In his essay on "The Church of the Saints," Karl Rahner says:

> *The nature of Christian holiness appears from the life of Christ and of his Saints; and what appears there cannot be translated absolutely into a general theory but must be experienced in the encounter with the historical which takes place from one individual case to the other. The history of Christian holiness (of what, in other words, is the business of every Christian...) is in its totality a unique history and not the eternal return of the same. Hence this history has its always new,*

unique phases; hence it must always be discovered anew (even though always in the imitation of Christ who remains the inexhaustible model), and this by all Christians. Herein lies the special task which the canonized Saints have to fulfil for the Church. They are the initiators and the creative models of the holiness which happens to be right for, and is the task of, their particular age. They create a new style; they show experimentally that one can be a Christian even in "this" way; they make such a type of person believable as a Christian type. Their significance begins therefore not merely after they are dead. Their death is rather the seal put on their task of being creative models, a task which they had in the Church during their lifetime, and their living-on means that the example they have given remains in the Church as a permanent form.... For the history of the spiritual means precisely that something becomes real in order to remain, not in order to disappear again. (Theological Investigations 3:91–104)

How shall the "permanent form" of Catherine McAuley's courageous care of the sick and dying remain vividly alive in the present historical moment, especially among Sisters of Mercy, their associates, and those who admire her? What are the implications of Catherine's practice for our care of the sick today? I conclude this essay with some brief reflections on this question.

In her "Memoir of the Foundress," Clare Augustine Moore, whose sister Mary Clare Moore was one of Catherine's earliest associates, recalls the Spring of 1832 at Baggot Street:

Three were attacked with virulent scurvy, all the others ill. This took place soon after Sr. M. Elizabeth's death on Easter Monday.[13] Revd. Mother who notwithstanding her love of austerities was always and most kind to the sick did her best to restore them. The Surgeon General, the late Sir P[hilip] Crampton, was called in, I forget to which of them; [and] he, having always less faith in medicine than management, inquired into their food and occupations, and at once declared that an amellioration [sic] of the diet would be the best cure, and especially he ordered beer. He tried to convince her of the real unwholesomeness of the visitation, but she never could understand, and always maintained that fresh air must be good, forgetting that it must be taken by us mostly in Townsend Street and Bull Alley.[14] (Sullivan 206–7)

The question for Catherine McAuley and for those who follow her really comes down to this: To what extent do we plan to avoid virulent scurvy and typhus, or their modern equivalents? If our answer to this question is not a complete and unqualified rejection of all harm and inconvenience to ourselves, then where are the Townsend Streets, the Bull Alleys, the Depots, the hovels, the fever hospitals of our day? Who suffer and die there, and how and why shall we walk to their bedsides as Catherine did? And what attitudes toward our own personal and corporate lives and what accretions to our life-styles will we have to forsake on the way? How far will we wish to distance ourselves from the desperately ill and dying? With what theories will we justify leaving the care of the sick poor to those among us who happen to serve in hospitals? As Sisters of Mercy, in particular, how neatly will we divide our common vow of service to "the poor, the sick, and the ignorant" into three separate lists of ministers? And how will we then exempt ourselves from personal commitment to the whole vow, and settle for just a part of it?

These are very, very hard personal and corporate questions, especially for Sisters of Mercy, but they are, I believe, questions Catherine might ask, especially in view of the poverty, sicknesses, deaths, and epidemics that now unmistakably stare us in the face—in the United States, and in the world at large. They would not be such hard questions if we had not become to some extent domesticated—by the church, by our own mode of functioning, by our jobs and salaries, by our perceived financial needs; and bureaucratized—by our civic governments, by our culture, by our own internal management, and by our working concepts of ministry and vocation. Is it possible that we have lost some of our agility, our freedom, our readiness to respond to desperate needs? Is it possible that we who are committed to relieving misery and addressing its causes (Constitutions 3) have become so focused on systemic change which addresses the causes of suffering that we have become somewhat distracted from relieving miseries one by one? Have we in part lost our belief that it is also worth our time to relieve the misery of just one desperately sick poor person, of just one poor ailing family?

If a cholera epidemic breaks out tomorrow, who will go to the Depot? Yes, modern hospitals will take care of it, but what about the epidemic drug addiction and drug-related violence in our cities? Who will go there on short notice? Who will stay there overnight? Who can? How many Sisters of Mercy in the United States will visit the poor wards of county hospitals this week, or the AIDS wards? If the family of a poor dying woman calls one of our convents tonight, who will go to her? Will the family even know they can send for us? And what will we do when we visit the sick? Will we talk of God's merciful love, or will we have grown timid about God-talk? Will we speak of confidence in God's presence and of the resurrection that arises from human death, or will we shy away from this desperate spiritual need of the seriously ill and dying? When will we lose sleep or weight because we have been consoling the desperately ill? When will the next Sister of Mercy die from caring for the sick?

I raise these questions, humbly and with compassion, not because I think my own life responds to them even minimally, and not because I think they admit of easy answers, but because they are the questions that haunt me whenever I reflect deeply on these aspects of Catherine McAuley's life. I do not think our lives can be a mirror image of hers, any more than the ailments and desperations of the twenty-first century are a mirror image of the ailments and desperations of the nineteenth century in Ireland. But there is something permanent in Catherine's tender personal care of the sick and dying: some true Gospel instinct and virtue that is a permanently valid call to us; a call of God to us, precisely as Sisters of Mercy; a call that is not rendered obsolete by the use of late twentieth-century language about self-protection or self-fulfillment.

Endnotes

1. The other two works of mercy, mentioned in all the early Mercy sources, were the instruction of poor girls and the sheltering and training of homeless young girls and servant women.
2. In noting these medical advances and in discussing diseases elsewhere in this essay, I am dependent on information in the following sources: Frederick F. Cartwright, *Disease and History* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972); *The Encyclopedia Americana; The Encyclopedia Britannica; The Oxford Companion to Medicine*, 2 vols., ed. John Walton, Paul B. Beeson, and Ronald Bodley Scott (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and John H. Talbott, *A Biographical History of Medicine* (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1970).
3. The first hospitals owned and operated by the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland were Mercy Hospital in Cork, opened in 1857, and Mater Misericordiae Hospital, opened in Dublin in 1861. In 1854 the Sisters of Mercy on Baggot Street took over management of the Charitable Infirmary on Jervis Street, Dublin.
4. Anna Maria Doyle, Catherine Byrn, and Frances Warde.
5. Presumably Mary Ann Redmond left Baggot Street before September 8, 1830, the day Catherine went to the Presentation Convent on George's Hill to begin her required novitiate prior to founding the Sisters of Mercy.
6. Mary Clare Moore was the sister of Mary Clare Augustine Moore. Mary Clare entered the Baggot Street community in 1830; Mary Clare Augustine, in 1837. They were unrelated to Mary Elizabeth Moore who entered the community in 1832, and to whom reference is made later in this essay.
7. R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 907.
8. In her volume on the Crimean War, Mary Angela Bolster, RSM, has well documented, through their letters and diaries, the perspective of the Irish sisters; the correspondence and annals in the Bermondsey archives of the Sisters of Mercy document the perspective of the Bermondsey sisters; and Florence Nightingale's own papers and correspondence document her perspective on each group. It is not possible here to address this issue further, to discuss other clerical and governmental documentation related to it, or to analyze the causes of these contrasting experiences.
9. Mary Clare Moore to Florence Nightingale, October 13, 1862 (Greater London Record Office HI/ ST/NC2–V26/62). I have modernized some of the punctuation.
10. The complete text of Catherine McAuley's manuscript of the Rule is contained in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, 294–328. I have here presented Catherine's original wording, without Daniel Murray's insertion (after "pace"): "not stopping to converse, nor saluting those whom they meet." I have also substituted "or three" for Catherine's "etc. etc." in her quotation of Matthew 18.20.
11. These archives and manuscripts are located in Mercy International Centre, Baggot Street, Dublin.
12. I have briefly discussed the significance of the practice of these three saints to Catherine's own spiritual formation in "Catherine McAuley's Spiritual Reading and Prayers," *Irish Theological Quarterly 57* (1991) 2: 124–146.
13. Mary Elizabeth Harley actually died on Easter Wednesday, April 25, 1832.
14. Bull Alley, encompassing several streets, was one of the worst slums in early nineteenth-century Dublin, as was the area around Townsend Street.

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The Prayer of Mercy: Rhythm of Contemplation and Action

Mary Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M.

The prayer of Catherine McAuley has implications for us today. Expressing her spirituality through her own personality and through the piety common to her times, it impelled her to merciful action, and was permeated by concern for those in need. Our own prayer takes very different forms, yet we can also respond to seeing Jesus in the suffering poor of our own world, empowering us to action and simultaneously shaping our contemplative stance before God.

The contemplation and study of the prayer of mercy begins with our belief in the communion of saints.

Introduction

Catherine is not just a very significant historical personage, but a real influencing personal presence to us now. The second Vatican Council teaches this wondrous reality:

> *The union of the wayfarers [us on earth] with those who sleep in the peace of Christ is in no way interrupted, but is reinforced by an exchange of spiritual goods. They do not cease to intercede for us. In a vivid way, God shows to us the divine presence and the divine face, in those companions of ours who are more perfectly transformed into the image of Christ. God speaks to us in them.*[1]

And when the Council speaks of tradition, the handing on of the content of faith through generations of Christians, we can by analogy legitimately apply this to our Mercy heritage:

> *Tradition makes progress, develops, in the church with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and the words that are being passed on. This comes about in various ways. It comes through the contemplation and study by believers who treasure these things in their hearts. It comes from the intimate [from within] understanding of the spiritual realities they experience.*[2]

What spiritual realities? Perhaps the needs of our own time, as perceived in their overwhelming global dimension; perhaps our individual call to be merciful within our communal charism as an ongoing, lifegiving presence of the Holy Spirit in us, for the work of the church, with possibilities for our future. We are inheritors of a tradition that grows, makes progress, as we live it and pass it on.

The contemplation and study of the prayer of mercy begins with our belief in the communion of saints. The spiritual reality which we treasure in our hearts brings us into contact with Catherine and those saints of Mercy, some of whom we have personally known. We ask them to show us something of the presence and face of God in their imaging of Christ, to reveal what God is speaking to us in them.

There are obvious problems in trying to reflect on another person's prayer. First, words can never adequately express experience. Then, it is difficult to discern the relationship between individual spirituality and that communal spirit which becomes part of an ongoing tradition. And it doesn't help in this case that Catherine was very reticent about her own inner life with God.

However, thanks to the diligent and very competent work of Mary Ignatia Neumann[3] and Mary Angela Bolster,[4] we have a collection of Catherine's letters—informal, never meant to be read by others, so all the more revealing of her spirit. And now, thanks to Mary Sullivan for the superb new presentation and study of original unpublished documents,[5] we now have accessible sources of our tradition—annotated biographical manuscripts and correspondence about Catherine between sisters who knew her personally, and also the first critical edition of the Original Rule—this book is a Mercy researcher's dream treasure. We also have recordings of Catherine's retreat instructions to novices,[6] and a brief commentary on the Rule, "Familiar Instructions,"[7] both of which remain to be studied. So we do have some knowledge of the external forms of Catherine's prayer.

Sources of Catherine's Spirituality

It is helpful to look at some of the sources of Catherine's spirituality, because it is through the historical that we can have access to the trans-historical, to what pertains to us beyond the limits of her time and culture. On the one hand she was thoroughly a woman of her own era: Irish, Catholic, early 19th - century, upper middle class; and at the same time she adapted creatively to the new direction in which she discerned the Spirit moving her. We too are very much women of our own day, but we too are called to be counter-cultural, to discern where the Spirit is leading us to conversion in our lifestyles and ministries.

Catherine's spirituality, her life in God, was shaped by the ordinary graced influences which converge on anyone's life. First, her personality, which is well known to Sisters of Mercy and their associates and friends. Then of course, the Irish piety of her day, an amalgam of two distinct strains of devotion, both of

which are evident in what we know of her prayer.

The ancient Celtic heritage proudly boasted centuries of fidelity to the faith. Its primary attitudes were a great reverence for sacred scripture; a deep sense of communion with the body of Christ at prayer—most folk prayers are in the first person plural; and a sense of tradition, of continuity with their own graced past.[8] The second strain of Irish piety arose after two centuries of persecution by the penal laws—the last of which were only wiped off the books in Catherine's own lifetime, although their dire effects remained far longer. These later devotions of the Irish church in common with Europe stressed the passion of Christ, the Eucharist, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and Mary, mother of God.

In one generation, the Irish became practicing Catholics. The Sisters of Mercy in mid-19th century were on the cutting edge of what Ernest Larkin calls the "great devotional revolution."[9] As more and more people learned English, the new prayer-books became the staple devotional diet of Irish homes.

. . . the story of her (Catherine's) life is one of reliance on God's merciful care.

Catherine's readings were from strong spiritual sources: the Imitation of Christ, Francis de Sales on the love of God, selections from certain Fathers of the church, classical writers like John of the Cross and Teresa, Alphonsus Liguori, lives of the saints, the French Jesuit school of spirituality—these were her daily spiritual diet.

We are told that she had learned the Psalter of Jesus and the Universal Prayer by heart. One of her favorite prayer books was *Devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, published in very many English editions. In addition to prayer for the Mass and other occasions, this manual includes many quotations from saints devoted to the Sacred Heart. In her own well-worn copy (now in the Limerick archives)[10] Catherine has underlined some passages and copied out a few, witnessing to the strength and tenderness of her personal love for Jesus Christ. These are some of the sources: this is real quality intake.

The Prayer of Catherine

In looking in detail at the external forms of Catherine's prayer, we must be patient with the language. Just because it is English, it is not ours. In order to understand the heart of it, we have to translate the foreign tongue of her day; we have to go through the external forms to understand the underlying sense.

The purpose of looking at some of these expressions of her prayer is not to copy them—that would not be in her spirit—but to understand something of the depth of her faith and love, of that spirit of mercy which transcends her time and ours, to perceive the harmonious balance of contemplation, affection and action.

The Providence of God

First and most obvious is her deep sense of God's loving providence. We are all familiar with the simple and beautiful prayer (also in the Presentation tradition) which sums up her attitude: "My God, I am thine for time and eternity. Teach me to cast myself entirely into the arms of thy loving providence, with the most lively, unlimited confidence in thy compassionate, tender pity." Writing to Mary Angela Dunne, superior of Charleville where the benefactress had withdrawn her endowment, she says, "Are not the poor of Charleville as dear to [God] as elsewhere? And while one pound of Miss Clanchy's five hundred lasts, ought we not to persevere and confide in his providence? ... Put your whole confidence in God. He will never let you want necessities for yourself or your children."[11]

And in foundation after foundation, troubles and deaths and opposition, the story of her life is one of reliance on God's merciful care. That is why the bishop of Cork somewhat ironically called her "Sister of Divine Providence."

Jesus Christ

Jesus as the mercy of God revealed to us is the focal point of Catherine's spirituality. When she and the first community were shaping the Original Rule, praying over every word, they used the chapter on devotion to Jesus Christ almost verbatim from the Presentation Rule. The three particular aspects of the redemptive mystery which she drew from the devotional practices of her day were the Passion, the Blessed Sacrament, and the Sacred Heart. All spoke to her of the boundless compassion of God.

The Passion of Jesus

In the Rule we read: "The sisters of this congregation should have the most tender devotion to the Passion of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. They shall often recall to mind and meditate on the different circumstances of it..."[12] And in the section on the mistress of novices, Catherine wrote that she should teach the women aspiring to be Sisters of Mercy that "this congregation is founded on Calvary, there to serve a crucified Redeemer."[13]

Roland Burke Savage, S.J., reflected:

In her choice of the Psalter of Jesus as her favorite prayer throughout her life, she reveals the central place Christ our Lord occupied in her

prayer. Even had we lacked this evidence, we could have deduced as much, for she could never have spoken so easily and so beautifully of the changing scenes of our Lord's earthly life, especially of the hidden life and of the Passion, without constant contemplation of them.[14]

And to the novices, Catherine urged, "Let us often fly to the foot of the Cross and repose in the wounds of Jesus. He has written us in his hands—shall we not write his wounds on our minds and hearts?"[15]

In Janet Ruffing's thought-provoking study of Catherine's spirituality of the cross she comments on how this challenges us in our own following of Jesus today. "This constant contemplation of Christ suffering was the wellspring of compassion for Catherine. Entering into the mystery of the redeeming Jesus was an experience of the depths of God's own compassion. She received in this way love which filled her and impelled her to be love and compassion for others."[16] Ruffing goes on to comment that confrontation with suffering and pain remains a difficult aspect of Christ life for women today—to discern that suffering which we ought to resist, overcome, and avoid, and the suffering which invites us more deeply into the Paschal mystery. We too are called, through the mutual interaction of prayer and the works of mercy, to participate like Catherine in the passion of Christ.

Jesus is to Catherine "the fount of every grace, and object of our most tender love."

Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and the Mass

Her strong sense of the centrality of the Eucharist was the source of Catherine's conviction that our union with Christ is the core of our union with one another. The Mass was the high point of her day, and we know what inconvenience and hardship she endured when there was no chaplain in Baggot Street. She insisted that a chapel should be the center of each religious house, and that before and after the works of mercy, the Sisters should visit Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament: "What priceless riches does not a spirit of prayer find in these loving visits: there being an unction and a power in the very presence of the most holy sacrament which is beyond all words."[17]

In the Rule, she wrote,

Jesus Christ really present in the most Holy Eucharist shall be the constant object of their affection and devotion. They shall often reflect on the infinite charity displayed for them in that ever adorable sacrament,...In all their sufferings and anxieties, in all their fears, afflictions, and temptations, they shall seek comfort and consolation at the foot of the altar where He lovingly invites them in these words, "Come to me all you that labor and are burthened, and I will refresh you."[18]

This contemplative stance was for Catherine the "unction and power" that fueled her compassion for those she served.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart

Jesus is to Catherine "the fount of every grace, and object of our most tender love." He is a refuge from the dangers and temptations of human imperfection within our own hearts. Her practical instinct, very much like that of Teresa of Avila, comes to the fore again in this devotion: "the concrete outcome of such love, if it is real, the mark of genuineness, is to learn those virtues which are particularly characteristic of the Heart of Jesus: meekness and humility."[19] This devotion was counterbalance to the frigid heresy of Jansenism. It seems most providential that Catherine's advisors among the clergy were not tainted by this, although many Irish priests then and later certainly were.

Mary, Mother of Mercy

Catherine's choice of Mary, Mother of Mercy, as patroness of the new institute was significant and certainly was integral to her spirituality. In the original rule, devotion to the mother of God has a prominent place.

The sisters shall always have the warmest and most affectionate devotion to her, regarding her in a special manner as their mother and the great model they are obliged to imitate, that by her intercession and under her powerful protection they may be enabled to fulfill the obligations of this holy congregation, and [notice the integration here] to implant Jesus Christ in the hearts of the poor whom they are charged to instruct.[20]

Prayer and Ministry

After looking at the sources of Catherine's prayer and the historical expression of her devotions, we now turn to the relationship of prayer and ministry: how her prayer both impelled her to merciful action, and in turn was permeated by her concern for those in need.

Mother Austin Carroll, a later biographer of Catherine, wrote:

Prayer seemed to be her life. If her duties required her to be nearly always in action, every action of hers was, as one of her sisters sweetly said [M.M.de Pazzi Delany, in a private letter] "embalmed with prayer." If they left her little time to kneel in choir, they were animated with that purity of intention which is in itself a perfect prayer.[21]

Within twenty years after Catherine's death some of

the superiors of foundations met to write a commentary on the rule which they called a Guide. In it they state: "Our constitutions propose such a perfect combination of the duties of Martha and Mary that the one will help, not hinder the other. That they are quite compatible with each other is clearly proved by the example of Our Lord...and his apostles."[22] Catherine's vision inspired by the Spirit of God moved her to serve others. In turn, her concrete service of women, children, families, the sick and troubled, the uninstructed, led her to turn to God.

The Sisters used to do folk dancing in the evenings, and in one of the many charming letters she wrote in the midst of her frequent traveling to and fro to establish and support new foundations, she used the image of the dance, then concluded: "We have one solid comfort amidst this little tripping about: our hearts can always be in the same place centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back."[23] Explaining the spirit of the order to a priest friend who was interested, she wrote, "What seems generally requisite for a Sister of Mercy...an ardent desire to be united to God and serve the poor;...and feel a particular interest for the sick and dying."[24]

Catherine frequently requested the sisters to pray for the many needs both of the community and of the people they ministered to.

The English Jesuit James Walsh, former editor of *The Way,* said that the apostolic spirituality proper to any institute depended on the particular blend of contemplation and action. "Catherine McAuley was able to distill the essential and stable quality of an approach to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy: wholehearted entry into the apostolic situation itself communicates the spiritual qualities needed for growth in Christ. This is almost the reverse of the monastic approach."[25]

Joanna Regan comments: "Catherine's conviction that the works of mercy were the very 'business of our lives' had shaped the community from its inception in an apostolic spirituality."[26] She is referring to the document known as "The Spirit of the Institute" in which Catherine reveals her profound understanding of how the unity of prayer and service are embodied in our lives as Sisters of Mercy. In it, Catherine insists on the need for a profound spiritual life yet shows that the works of mercy are ways to union with God. Prayer and work flow together reciprocally: to neglect either for the sake of the other is to separate them and lose our reason for being.

> *We must consider the time and exertion we employ for the relief and instruction of the poor and ignorant as most conducive to our advancement in perfection, and the time given to prayer...consider as employed to obtain the grace, strength and animation which alone could enable us to persevere in the meritorious obligations of our state. Though the spirit of prayer and retreat should be most dear to us, yet such a spirit as would never withdraw us from these works of mercy;...We ought to give ourselves to prayer in the true spirit of our vocation to obtain new vigour, zeal, and fervour in the exercise of our state. Each society of religious receives a grace [charism] particularly adapted to the duties which they are called to perform. We ought then to have great confidence in God in the discharge of all these offices of mercy, spiritual and corporal, which constitute the business of our lives.*[27]

In her article on the theology of mercy, Mary Ann Scofield speaks of the fourfold movement of the ministry of mercy, first in Jesus, then in Catherine, then in us: "In the doing of mercy, God invites us to see contemplatively, to feel with deep affection, to act concretely and spontaneously, and to sustain faithfully but with a readiness to relinquish the work to others."[28]

Intercessory prayer as a work of mercy

One significant aspect of the spirit of mercy in which the integration of contemplation and action is clearly manifest is intercessory prayer as a spiritual work of mercy. An active conviction of the reality of the communion of saints is the context for such prayer. Catherine frequently requested the sisters to pray for the many needs both of the community and of the people they ministered to. The affectionate tone of her frequent letters to the sisters reveals how deeply she rejoiced in their joys and suffered with them in their sorrows.

She counseled the sisters to pray daily for those whom they served. In the original rule, she wrote: "Before the sisters enter the school they shall raise their hearts to God and to the Queen of Heaven recommending themselves and the children to their care and protection."[29] "Let us also sometimes speak to their holy angels, and ask through their intercession for all graces for our pupils as well as for ourselves."[30]

Before the visitation of the sick, "the sisters shall visit the Blessed Sacrament to offer to their divine master the action they are about to perform and ask from him the graces necessary to promote his glory and the salvation of souls."[31] She herself compiled a manual of prayers for the visitation of the sick, showing a profound sensitivity to the many situations in which sufferers found themselves.[32]

Transcendence:
To the Heart of the Prayer of Mercy

The Imitation of Christ

When we would look into Catherine's experience of Jesus Christ beyond what we would call devotion, we find the locus of her integration of prayer and action which speaks to contemporary persons of Mercy now. What captures the heart of the matter beyond the historically limited expression is a universally relevant reality: the classical meaning of the imitation of Christ. "Imitation" in the modern sense means the copied, fake, not quite real; but in the mystical tradition of the church the meaning is based on a view of reality in which creation mirrors its Creator, the human person is image of God.

Catherine instructed novices preparing for profession: "[Jesus Christ] will so manifest himself to you that your heart will be inflamed with love for him alone."

Listen to St. Paul's magnificent proclamation to the Corinthians (who had not been very exemplary images, to say the least) when he speaks of Moses veiling his face after being with God on the mountain: "We with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect. This is the work of the Lord who is Spirit."[33] Catherine instructed novices preparing for profession: "[Jesus Christ] will so manifest himself to you that your heart will be inflamed with love for him alone; Let your constant study be to form now more than ever this resemblance in yourself."[34]

Sister Teresa Purcell, one of the privileged novices whom Catherine herself prepared for profession, writes in the preface to the *Retreat Instructions*:

> *To the imitation of the man-God she continually directs our attention and with a maternal ingeniousness recommends ways which none but a faithful imitator could describe. Reduced to practice, they show that our Mother Foundress must have been inspired in her directions on following the footsteps of the man-God without going out of the ordinary path of our daily duties. Meditation on the sacred humanity of Our Lord must have been the daily practice of her life; otherwise, she could not have spoken so often, so beautifully and so practically on the imitation of Christ.*[35]

The depth of her understanding could only have come from the spiritual realities she experienced. She didn't have a Karl Rahner or a Teilhard de Chardin to tell her what Paul meant in Colossians and Ephesians by the pleroma, the fullness of Christ, "that Christ may live in your hearts through faith until you are filled with the utter fullness of God."[36] She knew this intuitively, connaturally, because she lived that vision, and her response was always the deepest gratitude for this privilege.

When she meditated on the gospel of John, she heard, "On that day you will understand that I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you. If anyone loves me he will keep my word and my Father will love him and we shall come to him and make our home in him. Make your home in me, as I make mine in you."[37]

Jesus in his suffering poor

What flows out of Catherine's deep faith in the living presence of Christ in herself is the recognition of Jesus in other people, most especially in the poor and the suffering. St. Paul's conversion had taken place on the road when the risen Lord stunned him with these words,"I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."[38] Catherine's experience of this reality came more gradually, but just as surely, echoed in Matthew's gospel "Whatever you did to the least of mine you did to me."[39]

In the original Rule she writes: "Jesus Christ has testified on all occasions a tender love for the poor, and has declared that he would consider as done to himself whatever would be done to them."[40] In the chapter on the visitation of the sick, we read: "Mercy has excited the faithful to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they regarded the person of our divine Master... Let those whom Jesus Christ has graciously permitted to assist him in the persons of his suffering poor have their hearts animated with gratitude and love."[41] And in her conferences she exclaimed: "Oh! what an ineffable consolation to serve Christ Himself in the person of the poor! ...Our hearts, then, should be replenished with love and gratitude to our divine Spouse, for allowing us so graciously to aid him in the person of the poor."[42]

In his biography of Catherine, Savage comments: "It was this deep personal love for Christ that she wished to be the heart and soul of her Institute. Her immense charity for the poor was but an expression of that love, and in the exercise of it she never lifted her gaze from Christ whom she found in each poor sufferer."[43]

In the Rule, Catherine wrote that the mistress of novices should teach those aspiring to be Sisters of Mercy that "this congregation is founded on Calvary, there to serve a crucified Redeemer."[44] This sense of Christ in the poor is carried on in the tradition of the early community. The original Guide was written in

order to "...record the manner in which our Constitutions have been explained and practiced, principally by our beloved Foundress,... displaying what the real spirit and object of the congregation is in its singular devotedness to the poor of Christ."[45]

Perhaps you remember Gerald Manley Hopkins' sonnet, "As kingfishers catch fire," in which he says that all creation cries out what it is, it speaks itself. He goes on:

I say more: the just man justices
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

That was Catherine's vision.

Conclusion

In our Institute Constitutions we read:

In responding to the demands of our mission
we rely on the Holy Spirit to lead us.
The word of God opens us
to contemplate the Divine Presence
in ourselves, in others, and in the universe.

Through prayer, we adore God as the Merciful One;
we seek to discover God's movement
in us and in our world;
we learn how to forgive
and we intercede for ourselves and for others.

Like Mary, we dispose ourselves
to receive God's word and to act upon it.
This rhythm of contemplation and action
is at the heart of our vocation to mercy.[46]

I think this sums up the sense of Catherine's apostolic spirituality that is our Mercy tradition and our heritage, and the foundation and horizon of our future.

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Braided Lives: The Vision of Catherine McAuley

Julia Ann Upton, R.S.M.

Perhaps the title of this essay has confused or intrigued you. I have borrowed the title of a novel by Marge Piercy.[1] If you are not familiar with her fiction, Piercy always structures her novels in such a way that the lives of her characters intertwine. I mean the term in the same sense in which Piercy used it, but as you will observe, I mean it in a broader sense as well.

If you examine a length of yarn, you will see the many strands that make it up. See how wispy each strand is? When the strands are intertwined, however, they gain body and strength and as those are braided one to the other their strength increases. We all live braided lives because our lives are intertwined. Your life is braided with mine as it is with Catherine's and the hundreds of thousands of women who have journeyed together in this Mission of Mercy. The broader sense to which I refer, however, is the realization that even within our lives there are plaits of work and play, family and friends, hopes and dreams, the spiritual and the not so. In fact, even within a single plait there are many strands. Within the spiritual plait, for example, there are strands of both public and private prayer, maybe a variety of spiritualities and religious practices. This was as true for Catherine McAuley in nineteenth-century Dublin as it is for us, although I will admit that our plaits are fuller. (No pun intended!)

Spirituality is an "in" concept these days. It seems to be easy to market, but less easy to live.

In the first part of this essay, you will find woven together some important sources for us as Sisters of Mercy. The most important source for me personally is the letters of Mother McAuley[2] which I have reread at every stage of my life as a Sister of Mercy. Very significant for us today is Mary Sullivan's recent book, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*,[3] which gives us access for the first time to the accounts of our beginnings as an Institute by those women who not only knew Catherine personally, but are themselves in no small part responsible for our being here today. Mary Sullivan's work also helps us to begin understanding the Rule Catherine left us by returning us to its sources.[4] Mother Austin Carroll's four volume *Leaves from the Annals*,[5] which in many cases made use of source material no longer available to us, is another valuable resource I have used. Finally, I also make reference to two other documents: what we have come to refer to as "The Spirit of the Institute,"[6] written by Catherine McAuley in July of 1841[7] to clarify her instructions for the benefit of the Bermondsey community; and two chapters of our first rule—those regarded as original compositions of Mother McAuley and appended to the Presentation Rule for use by the Institute.[8]

Using these sources, I will identify three strands that I see Catherine's vision compelling us to braid into our daily lives. I know that there are many more, but for the purpose of this discussion I am limiting my attention to these three. I have not selected them because I regard them as the most important, but rather because they seem to fall within the pale of my concerns as a theologian. These strands are: action/contemplation; union/charity; and daily news/Gospel. I will consider them in that order and then suggest some other strands that Catherine McAuley just might be challenging us to leave aside as we move into the next millennium.

Action and Contemplation

Spirituality is an "in" concept these days. It seems to be easy to market, but less easy to live. Much of it can even be called a "free-form spirituality" in which God seems to want nothing more than for us to feel good at all costs. People bend the rules to fit their individual circumstances and "adopt a talk-show morality that reduces human purpose to personal happiness and fulfillment. Ironically, this new feel-good pop theology is the antithesis of what religious has traditionally stood for."[9]

"If we want to have a spiritual life," Joan Chittister writes, "we will have to concentrate on doing so. Spirituality does not come by breathing ... but by listening ... with more than academic interest."[10] One part of spirituality is learning to be aware of what is going on around us and allowing ourselves to feel its effects. The other part, usually more difficult, is learning to hear what God wants.

"Active" and "contemplative" are terms commonly used to describe two dimensions of the same reality, but they are regularly used in a restrictive sense, as if an individual could be one without the other. In his book *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring*, Parker Palmer writes that "our drive to aliveness expresses itself in two elemental and inseparable ways: action and contemplation. One at the source, they seek the same end—to celebrate the gift of life."[11]

By virtue of baptism, Christians ought to follow Jesus in weaving together both action and contemplation. No way of life is purely one or the other; rather each ought to be a unique blend of activity and reflection on that activity, the very pattern we see Jesus live

time and again in the Scriptures:

> *That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door, and he cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another; he also cast out many devils .... In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there (Mark 1:32-36).*

We see a natural flow between the active and contemplative dimensions in the life and ministry of Jesus, much like the natural flow from high tide to low tide. And that is the same flow we find in the writings of Catherine McAuley. In "The Spirit of the Institute" Catherine shows us the fiber of her spirituality—faithful attention to the word of God. It is the same attentiveness we come to see in Jesus as we read the Gospels. Not only does he regularly go apart to pray, but he continually refers to the relationship he has with the Father. We see this most poetically in the Gospel according to John, but it shines through the other accounts as well. It is the "balanced life" which so much of the self-help literature of today expounds. Catherine says:

> *. . . we must consider the time and exertion which we employ for the relief and instruction of the poor and ignorant as most conducive to our own advancement in perfection, and the time given to prayer and all other pious exercises, etc., we must consider as employed to obtain the grace, strength and animation which alone could enable us to persevere in the meritorious obligations of our state. God . . . says: "attend to thyself."*[12]

> *We must, in the midst of the rudeness, impiety and impatience which we shall witness, preserve meekness, piety and unwearied patience. But in order to do this, we must prepare by application to spiritual exercises: prayer, examen, lecture, penance and self-denial. From each of these we draw new aid and the grace of Jesus Christ, which will accompany us in all we undertake with a pure intention of pleasing Him alone.*[13]

As recorded in "The Life of Catherine McAuley" by Mary Clare Moore (Bermondsey Manuscript) we read that:

> *Each hour of the day had its allotted duties. They rose early, and regular devout exercises of prayer and spiritual reading were practiced. Although these were of some continuance, they did not satisfy the devotion of our pious Foundress, who besides private meditations used to rise at an earlier hour than the rest, with one or two of the juniors, to say the whole of her favourite Psalter, and read some spiritual book.*[14]

And Clare Moore concludes by stating that Catherine McAuley taught the sisters to "love the hidden life, labouring on silently for God alone ...."[15] Without careful attention to our principal collaborator (God) and healthy attention to our physical, spiritual and emotional selves, we run the risk of being entrapped ourselves in the spiral of violence, unable to speak the truth with compassion. "A prophetic stance suffused with contemplation," observes Elizabeth Johnson, "is being glimpsed as the crucial spiritual force that seeks expression in the coming forms of religious life."[16] "Contemplation is a way of seeing that leads to union. As a result, a certain intuition arises by which one begins to know and love the world as God does."[17] "Contemplation, the coming to see as God sees, is required of us all. For some people the cloister is a vehicle to contemplation; for others, God is found in the faces of the poor [sick and ignorant!]. In both cases, contemplation is both the beginning and the end of the enterprise."[18]

Union and Charity

The day I entered the community, during the ritual I was presented with a beautifully framed calligraphy of Catherine's gift to us: "My legacy to the Institute is union and charity." How important she regarded this legacy is illustrated by a story related by Mary Clare Moore. Mother Catherine had spoken, as she thought, rather sharply to another sister in the presence of others. Still disturbed by the incident a few hours later, Catherine went to the Sister and asked if she could recall who had been present at the time. Since several had been there, the Sister answered that she could hardly say, for she had not noticed which they were. But Catherine pressed her to try and call them to mind and bring them to her. They were summoned, "and when all assembled our dear Reverend Mother humbly knelt down, and begged her forgiveness for the manner in which she had spoken to her that morning."[19] Mother McAuley not only did not let the sun set on her anger, but she did not allow it to darken her breaches of charity either. In her there was a deep wisdom, probably borne of her experiences in family life. She knew that even what might appear to be inconsequential compromises of charity, can fester and infect our relationships with others and the integrity of the common life. Even when she suffered under extreme duress, as in the chaplaincy crisis, although the struggle was great, Catherine did not yield to bitterness or dissension:

> *We have just now indeed more than an ordinary portion of the Cross ... but may it not be the Cross of Christ which we so often pray to "be about us"? It has not the marks of an angry Cross, there is no disunion, no gloomy depression of spirits, no departure from charity.*[20]

As Mary Sullivan relates, in the Bermondsey annals it is reported that when Daniel Murray visited Baggot Street on December 13, 1831, the day after the

founding of the Institute, Catherine asked the Archbishop what Rule they were to follow. Opening the book of the Presentation Rule at the "Chapter of Union and Charity," he said, "If they observe that, it will suffice." For six to seven years, therefore, that single chapter from the Presentation Rule served as the only designated "Rule" of the Sisters of Mercy.

In his critique of contemporary society, Thomas Moore observes that while people have a spiritual longing for community and relatedness and for a cosmic vision, they fail to seek it with sensitivity of the heart. "We want to know all about peoples from far away places, but we don't want to feel emotionally connected to them. Our passion for anthropological knowledge is paradoxically xenophobic. Therefore, our many studies of world cultures are soulless, replacing the common bonding of humanity and its shared wisdom with bites of information that have no way of getting into us deeply, of nourishing and transforming our sense of ourselves. Soul, of course, has been extracted from the beginning because we conceive education to be about skills and information, not about depth of feeling and imagination."[21] The way he describes our society is an antithesis to the way in which Catherine McAuley lived and the way in which she encouraged her sisters to live. Her acquaintances came from all walks of life, so no one fell beyond the embrace of her charity.

"In our world," he writes, "there are not just wounded individuals but crucified peoples, and we should enflesh mercy accordingly. . ."

With more than the xenophobic interest to which Moore refers, the challenge for us continues as the 1995 Chapter Initiatives call us to extend these boundaries of community:

> *To probe our understanding of ourselves as vowed women in the Church, including struggles with our ecclesial identity and with issues of race, culture, language and gender; to deepen our shared Mercy spirituality; to address new forms of commitment to Mercy life; to discern what God's Spirit is freeing us to do for the church and for all women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society; to call ourselves to accountability for acting upon our insights and convictions.*

Daily News and the Gospel

Elizabeth Johnson reminds us that the contemplative attitude is not otherworldly but profoundly turned toward this world in celebration and resistance, knowing that the Creator is also the Redeemer. The challenge for the community of Mercy continues to be braiding together the items we hear and read in the day's news with the good news we read in Scripture. Like the prophets of old, we are challenged to be prophetic witnesses. This prophetic stance, Johnson observes, is marked by a number of characteristics which include: "attentive listening to the creative Spirit of God, connecting with the suffering in a situation and evaluating its causes, naming what is unjust, being empowered to articulate an alternative future based on the dream of God for the world, bringing compassion and hope to the brokenness, resistance and challenge to the status quo that would maintain it."[22] This sounds like a job description for Sisters of Mercy in the closing years of this millennium.

The challenge continues in a recent book by the theologian, Jon Sobrino, S.J. "In our world," he writes, "there are not just wounded individuals but crucified peoples, and we should enflesh mercy accordingly. To react with mercy ... means to do everything we possibly can to bring them down from the cross ... working for justice ... and employing in behalf of justice all our intellectual, religious, scientific, and technological energies."[23] In the recent film "Dead Man Walking" we witness the work of Helen Prejean, C.S.J., among those condemned to die. Her work is not an anomaly either today or in years past. In the pages of our own history we read of Mother Elizabeth Moore:

> *At the Assizes a woman was sentenced to death for alleged complicity in the murder of her husband. At first she had been arrested on suspicion, but was set free on giving security for her appearance at the trial. Friends advised her to leave the country, but ineffectually, for she thought the forthcoming evidence could not convict her. Hence the verdict of the jury and the resulting sentence broke upon her with a shock that produced the deepest despondency, increased by the remembrance of the opportunity of escape she had failed to improve.*
>
> *Capital punishment for a crime of this nature is of rarest occurrence in Ireland, and when it does take place scathing ignominy and shame follow the branded name for a century at least. The Sisters found the poor creature utterly inconsolable, nor could they win her thoughts for a moment from the fearful death which was to mark her children and their descendants with public scorn. Mother Elizabeth seeing the anxiety of the Sisters, determined to go herself; and long did she listen to the outpouring of the poor woman's woe, her grief and terror at the near prospect shutting out the future world completely from her view. Though it be true that most of those who receive capital punishment have already given the same to*

some innocent neighbor or friend, yet in particular cases, like the present, it is hard to think that a human being could be found to enforce the law. The paroxysms of the poor creature were fearful. Sometimes she would suddenly put her hands about her throat and exclaim: "Oh! then, asthore, isn't it a terrible thing to be hanged like a dog?" Again she would sink into a horrible reverie, and now and then suddenly cry out: "Ah! Sister, would you be satisfied to be hanged yourself?" And then she would wring her hands and sway to and from in uncontrollable anguish. By the soothing power of prayer Mother Elizabeth calmed her down so considerably as to induce her to listen to a simple course of instruction on the great truths of eternity, and to prepare in a spirit of resignation and repentance for the death that was inevitable. At length, of her own accord, she asked for a priest and made her peace with God. Mother Elizabeth visited her every day, even during the annual retreat, a time exclusively devoted to spiritual exercises. The poor penitent finally accepted death in a spirit of expiation and conformity to the divine will. Happily, fortitude was not indispensable, for to the last she appeared incapable of commanding even a semblance of it. This has been the only instance of the execution of a woman since the establishment of the Sisters in Limerick, 1838.[24]

Contemporary practice of theological reflection is nothing new for Sisters of Mercy. Although it might have become buried under layers of legalism when Canon Law attempted to hold us hostage to a way of life that was contrary to our founding vision, when we read the stories of the women who walked these paths before us, we find ourselves challenged by their wisdom and courage.

Tangled Lives

If you have had any experience with braiding you know how prone the process is to tangles. These tangles are only avoided by constant attention to the process—sorting, separating and combing with care. Returning to Joan Chittister's definition of contemplation as "the ability to see through, and to see into, and to see despite, and to see without blinders," I see that there are at least four aspects of the contemplative dimension which have more or less disappeared from our lives and to the extent that they have, this contributes to the tangles in our lives. These elements are: silence, solitude, sabbath and stability.[25] Each in its own way and in moderation helps us to avoid unnecessary tangles.

The Sounds of Silence

Whatever happened to the "sounds of silence" about which we were singing a generation ago? Now we live with noise pollution, and many of us find silence a burden, others a possibility too frightening to even consider. As a result, Muzak fills our elevators, and televisions blare from every room in the house from morning until night. We have the expression, "I don't have time to think," but the reality is that we no longer have the quiet to think.[26]

In a recent *Time* essay, Pico Iyer observed that first we have to earn silence, and then work for it—that is, work "to make it not an absence but a presence; not emptiness but repletion." Whereas some might see silence as a pause, Iyer sees it as "that enchanted place where space is cleared and time is stayed and the horizon itself expands." "In silence," he continues, "we often say, we can hear ourselves think; but what is truer to say is that in silence we can hear ourselves not think, and so sink below our selves into a place far deeper than mere thought allows. In silence, we might better say, we can hear someone else think."[27]

The fullness we all seek is speaking in the silence within us . . .

Why such fear of silence? I think the real fear is of emptiness. Because we are so culturally adapted to having someone else fill in all our silent spaces, we either plug ourselves into someone else's thoughts and values, via car radio or CD player, or fill in the silent spaces with our own inner chatter—"monkey mind," as one author calls it. The fullness we all seek is speaking in the silence within us, but we block it out with "the static of nonsense day in and day out, relinquishing the spirit of silence, numbing our hearts in a noise-polluted world."[28]

Flight from Solitude

"Never be alone, never be lonely" is the message pounded into people unconsciously by the entertainment industry. The image that flashes across television and movie screens is that happiness and popularity are to be found only in an endless round of the social swirl. Our cultural dualism, Parker Palmer points out, leads us to think of solitude and community as polar opposites.[29] The irony is that instead of finding community at the other pole, one finds loneliness, and what has been lost in the mad dash away from even the possibility of solitude is one's self and the heart of the world. "The price for this evasion," Rollo May writes, "is a deep loneliness and sense of isolation. With these go depression and the conviction that we have never really lived, that we have been exiled from life."[30]

Our Lost Sabbaths

In *The Silent Pulse: A Search for the Perfect Rhythm That Exists in Each of Us*, biologist George Leonard develops the thesis that the entire universe has a single pulse, sharing the same heartbeat. We experience this phenomenon periodically, label it "synchrony," and regard it with surprise. Leonard has studied the phenomenon with the discipline of a scientist and sees it as the right order of things, the "silent pulse of perfect rhythm."[31]

Do you remember the days when our culture kept Sunday holy unto the Lord? Stores, even pharmacies, were closed. We wore Sunday clothes, indulged in the Sunday pleasures of visiting, family dinners, and relaxation? What has happened to all our lost sabbaths?

Do you remember the days when our culture kept Sunday holy unto the Lord? . . . What has happened to all our lost sabbaths?

"Time," the historian Edward Thompson observes, "has become a currency which we "spend" instead of "pass."[32] We are all so busy that we no longer have time to relax—to sabbath. And what are we so busy doing? Studies across the country have shown that Americans spend more time shopping than anyone else. Not only do they spend a higher fraction of the money they earn, but with the explosion of consumer debt, they are now spending what they haven't earned.[33]

The ideology of modern economics would have us believe that material progress has resulted in greater satisfaction and a sense of well-being. The reality, Juliet Schor points out in her study of the "overworked American," is that the rising workload has contributed significantly to a variety of social problems: an alarming increase in stress-related diseases, particularly among women; a "sleep deficit" among Americans, with the average person getting 60-90 minutes less a night than she should for optimum health and performance; and most alarming of all is our neglect of the children, up to 1/3 of whom care for themselves.[34] The economist Sylvia Hewlett links this "parenting deficit" to a number of problems plaguing the country's youth: poor performance in school; psychological problems; drug and alcohol use; and teen suicide. Children are being "cheated" out of childhood, and there is a profound sense among the children that adults just don't care about them.[35]

We are now a nation locked into a work-spend cycle with leisure—sabbathing—left out of the loop. This maniacal life-style is now seen to be a kind of drug. First you like it, then you get used to it, then you need it. Psychologists and sociologists are drawing our attention now to this madness that has us "psyched up" at all hours—dealing with things, organizing bits of information, making schedules, grinding out publications. As Carol Orsborn notes, with apologies to Descartes, "I do, therefore I am."[36]

In "Making Sense of Soul and Sabbath; Brain Processes and the Making of Meaning," James B. Ashbrook advances two interconnected speculations: that sabbathing is found in the brain's biorhythms; and that the essential structure of our unique individuality requires sabbathing for its coherent vitality. "Because our essence as human beings involves the making of meaning, the biorhythms of sabbathing and remembering are the means by which soul makes its story viable."[37]

Memory consolidation takes time ... specifically a period of 1 to 3 years. To be retained, memories must be dreamed, and dreaming involves intense emotional appraisal over time.[38] Without working memory, nothing is personally meaningful. We have no unique identity ... no sense of continuity ... lack a sense of self.[39] In truth we lose our soul—that basic structuring of our unique self-world interaction.[40]

Ashbrook recounts a wonderful anecdote which reportedly took place in Africa during the last century. He tells of a caravan of traders that had been pushing their porters hard. Eventually, the porters stopped, and nothing would get them going again. When the traders demanded to know what was wrong, the Africans explained: "We have been traveling so long and so fast that we need to wait for our souls to catch up with our bodies." While Ashbrook calls jet lag "an empirical equivalent" of "waiting for our souls to catch up with our bodies,[41] I think North Americans' souls are still on the losing end.

Talmud scholars teach that the Sabbath is important for three reasons: it equalizes the rich and the poor, so that for at least one day a week everyone is the same—equally free; it gives us time to evaluate our work, just as God evaluated the work of creation on the Sabbath; it gives us time to contemplate the meaning of life.[42] In nature God offers all of us a chance to enter the crystalline state. Sabbathing is not impossible, does not require great wealth or a monumental time commitment. "To leave the dysrhythmic city streets for some deserted wood or meadow or seashore is often enough in itself to trigger a period of perfect rhythm[43] and allow our souls time to catch up with our minds and bodies.

Finding Stability in an Increasingly Unstable World

"Stability," not only sounds antiquated, it sounds downright un-American. After all, we are the "west-

ward ho!" nation that prides itself on progress—or at least on the illusion of progress. In aikido, you are taught to become fully aware of and take responsibility for your own center. Then your center becomes one with the center of the universe.[44] But then that would require standing still, mindfulness, commitment—concepts that have become antithetical to this technopoly. Instead of being captivated by the holy, we are seduced by the new. "We not only believe in change," Rollo May observes, "we worship it."[45]

The increasing incidence of homelessness in American cities and towns is a metaphor for homelessness in our hearts.

Always on the move, we are unable to put down roots, we no longer have a sense of place. The increasing incidence of homelessness in American cities and towns is a metaphor for homelessness in our hearts. "Homeless people embody a deprivation of soul which we all experience to the extent that we live in an inanimate world without the sense of a world soul to connect us to things."[46] In Europe a community's "home" is the village church. In New England villages, May points out, we probably see the last vestige of this in the "common." What has replaced common ground for the rest of us? The Mall—our "new cathedrals."

In 1992 the African nation, Ivory Coast, although not without controversy and dissention, completed the largest basilica in the world. In the same year The Mall of America near Minneapolis was completed—"a retail/entertainment complex of unparalleled proportions." Is that what the world needs—yet another retail paradise?

In a presentation James Appleberry made at California State University in 1992, he observed that "the sum total of humankind's knowledge doubled from 1750 to 1900 (or 150 years). It doubled again from 1900 to 1950 (50 years) .... [and] again from 1960 to 1965 (5 years). It has been estimated that the sum total of humankind's knowledge has doubled at least once every five years since then.... It has been further projected that by the year 2020 knowledge will double every 73 days!"[47]

I wonder how I will be able to cope with such relentless change. And then I remember an experience I had standing on the beach at Paradise Island in the Bahamas one day. An avid swimmer accustomed to the wild Atlantic, even I knew the surf and the undertoe was too dangerous that day. So I stood ankle-deep and admired the raging power of the usually calm Caribbean. As I did, I realized that in order to remain upright, I had to dig my feet into the sand, because the sea was stealing the ground from beneath me. "How like life!" I observed. In the turbulent times one needs to dig in deep. That's one way of practicing stability.

By Way of Conclusion

In *The Unsettling of America,* Wendell Berry uses two images to illustrate these opposite approaches to life: a strip-miner and the old-fashioned idea or ideal of a farmer.[48] The first is exploitative; the second nurturing. "The first principle of the exploitative mind is to divide and conquer. And surely there has never been a people more ominously and painfully divided than we are—both against each other and within ourselves."[49] What we lack in our day is a sense of peace—quiet, deep, relaxed peace.

Berry looks to the Amish as model nurturers—a community in the full sense of the word. They are able to survive because at their center is God, and they seek to live in harmony with all creation. They have not sold their souls to institutions, and so are not victimized by them. Berry calls the Amish "the truest geniuses of technology," because they understand the necessity of limiting it, and they know how to limit it, because the health of the community is their standard.[50]

What Rollo May refers to as "the seduction of the new,"[51] and Neil Postman calls "our boundless lust for what is new,"[52] is basically consumerism, the addiction to consumption. People who are addicted in this way are not able to become rooted, and find repetition itself boring. They have no felt connection to things, no appreciation for symbols or rituals. To be addicted is to have sold your soul. "To elevate one god," Neil Postman writes in *Technopoly,* "requires the demotion of another. 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me' applies as well to a technological divinity as any other."[53] When one renders to Caesar the things that are God's, one can't then render them to God.

I began my college education as a chemistry major, and I recall making various types of solutions. In a super-saturated solution, there is too much solid to be absorbed by the solution, and consequently some of the solid material is lost from the solution, and settles at the bottom of the beaker. Ours is a super-saturated society. We have too much of almost everything—noise, information, consumer goods. My concern, both as a theologian and as an educator, is that what will be lost is what we need most to survive as a people—the essence of our humanity, our soul.

In the words of Jon Sobrino, what is required of us is "an awakening, but from another type of sleep, or better, from a nightmare—the sleep of inhumanity. It is the awakening to the reality of an oppressed and subjugated world, a world whose liberation is the basic task of every human being, so that in this way human beings may finally come to be human."[54]

"Keep to your centre," Mother Elizabeth Moore cautioned, "give yourself unreservedly to God ...."[55] She obviously absorbed the philosophy and spirituality of Catherine McAuley whose voice reminds us still: "We have one solid comfort amidst this little tripping about: our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back."[56]

Endnotes

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Developing a Discerning Heart: The Dance of Catherine McAuley

Grace Leggio Agate, R.S.M.

In two of her letters Catherine uses the image of dance. She writes:

> *"Dearest Sister M. de Sales, I think sometime our passage through this dear sweet world is something like the dance called Right and Left. You and I have crossed over, changed places, etc., etc. Your set is finished for a little time, you dance no more, but I have now to go through the figure called 'Sir Roger de Coverly' (which is) too old for your memory. I'll have to curtsie (sic) bow in Birr presently, change corners going from one I am in at present to another take hands of everyone who does me the honour and end the figure by coming back to my own place. . . .We have one solid comfort amidst this little tripping about: our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back."*[1]

From this letter we gain insight into the depth of Catherine's spirituality. All her movements in the dance come from her center, her center being God. In a letter containing news of the mission to Birr, she concludes the letter by telling her sisters to "dance every evening."[2] Choosing to give all of oneself to the art of dance requires discipline, hard work, practice, making choices, mastering choreography and movement.

"Discernment represents the effort of the Christian to discover the authentic response to God in the concrete situations as the expression of God's will in the present moment."

Catherine gave all of herself to the art of the dance. While very young, she began accepting the invitation to follow God's lead in a dance that would not only change her life, but also the lives of the poor, and the lives of the women who would come and join the dance of mercy. Catherine was able to follow God's lead by mastering the dance of discernment. The dance involved that she learn the steps that would lead her to a loving relationship with God and allow that relationship to shape and determine the direction of her life. A direction that would take her beyond her own dreams and expectations, she was able to do anything that God wished of her. Catherine's life was shaped by allowing the Lord of the Dance to lead her to create new dances unimaginable to her society.

The times in which we live demand that the followers of Jesus Christ be men and women who are skilled in the art of discernment. Discernment not only for major transitions but discernment that takes place in the daily events of life, so one sees God in all things. Using the image of the dance in relationship to the discernment process, I will present how developing a discerning heart is a timeless legacy offered by Catherine McAuley to those who desire to join the dance of mercy in a world on the threshold of a new millennium.

"Dance is an art form that is dedication and work. It takes many years of training to make dance look effortless."[3] While training, the dancer masters the principles of movement in learning what is to be moved, where and how to move, and with whom one will move. In dance the body is moved as a whole, or as parts in isolation and in coordination. Physical space and interior space are the places in which dance comes alive in movement expressed and achieved through action and in relationship to the world.

"Discernment represents the effort of the Christian to discover the authentic response to God in the concrete situations as the expression of God's will in the present moment."[4] It is an art form that is dedication and work taking many years of training to look effortless. While training, the discerner masters the principles of discernment in learning what is to be moved, where and how to move, and with whom to move. In discernment the heart is moved by awareness of desires reflected upon in prayer. Responding in deep trust and love the discerner makes choices that lead to action that is in rhythm with the desire of God and in relationship to the world.

"We are all dancers. We use movement to express ourselves, our hungers, pains, angers, joys, confusion, fears long before we understand these words. And we continue to express ourselves with movement throughout the span of our lives."[5] Long before we have words to express our experience of God acting in our lives, we know the movement of God. In becoming aware of the movement of God in prayer and in the actions of our life, we become discerning people and come to see God in all things. "Knowing the steps ahead of time is not important; but being willing to engage with the music and move freely onto the dance floor is the key."[6] The movement of this presentation will take us onto the dance floor where Catherine McAuley follows the lead of the divine dancer as she learns, masters, and creates a new dance.

Learning A New Dance

The foundation that is necessary for discernment is that "the person must be committed to growing in his or her relationship with God."[7] The desire of the heart is to respond in love and trust in God. It is allowing the relationship with God to determine the directions of one's life. The seeds of Catherine desire for God and her desire to relieve the misery of the poor where sown by example of her father, James McAuley. "He knew at what cost his forbears had treasured as their most precious heritage the pearl of great price, their faith; and for his part he valued it no less than they did. It was not a treasure to be buried in a napkin; but one that must be shared with others."[8] Catherine's memories of her father gathering the poor in his home to feed them both physically and spiritually left an indelible impression on her. "One small child's heart stirred with pity for those who were poor. These stirrings grew strong and deep. Mercy, "misericordia" — bringing one's heart to misery, to wretchedness — shaped the core of the developing child into a woman of compassion, Catherine McAuley, an heiress who would give all her wealth to the poor, and a woman of faith who would give to the church a new religious family."[9]

The desire of the heart is to respond in love and trust in God.

In 1783 the peaceful and secure life of the McAuley family came to an end with the death of James McAuley. Bereft of her husband's presence and example, the young widow, Elinor McAuley, became careless in the practice of the faith and the good works her husband so openly practiced. Her lack of managerial and financial skills reduced her family to becoming boarders in the homes of relatives. After the death of her mother in 1798, "Catherine, her brother and her sister were passed from one relative to another-and, from one faith to another, for some of their relatives were non-Catholic."[10] The Armstrong household in which Catherine was welcomed was Protestant and not open to Catholic sensibilities. Catherine remained, not without trial, faithful to the faith in which she was baptized. Having received little further instruction in the faith since the death of her father, she was uncomfortable in attempting to defend the faith she so deeply loved. "To be a Catholic in the circles in which Catherine was then moving was to belong to a despised, pitiful minority. The survival of her faith was nothing less than a miracle of God's love."[11]

As the body of a dancer is shaped by muscle strength and coordination control, so too was the heart of Catherine being shaped and predisposed to the dance of discernment. In "The Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits" suitable for the first week of the Spiritual Exercises, norms are presented that "might be helpful in understanding interior movements which happen in the 'heart' of man and woman. By the grace of God, we are meant to recognize those that are good so that we might let them give direction to our lives and those that are bad so that we might reject them or turn aside from them."[12] Catherine recognized her deep desire for God was to be lived and expressed in and through the Catholic faith. Providence was at work. Her early experiences of grief, dependence, homelessness, hunger, and prejudice would become the source for the works that would become the hallmark for her House of Mercy.

Mastering A New Dance

Early in her twenties, Catherine was invited by William and Catherine Callaghan to live with them. "Joining their household in 1803, Catherine remained with them for twenty years, years which may be termed her 'hidden life' in which she was not only developed spiritually, but also learned the management of a large estate."[13] In her care of Mrs. Callaghan she learned to tend the sick. During this time, Catherine had an opportunity afforded few Catholic women of her day: the Quaker influence of daily reading and praying the Scriptures. One can only imagine how Catherine's heart danced in time to the beat of the example of Jesus Christ as it was revealed to her in the Gospel.

The great mission of the dance is to contribute to the betterment of people. The highest function of dance is to ennoble men and women. This cannot be accomplished until the creative artist becomes aware of the world and her responsibility to lead instead of follow, to unfold instead of repeat and to bring self-realization to its highest peak.[14] Catherine was learning to lead as she followed in the steps of the Lord of the Dance. At Coolock she was able to live the legacy bequeathed her by her father. That is, to live her faith deeply and to minister to the poor. More and more within a loving relationship with God she allowed God's agenda, received in consolation, to become her choice. "At this stage Catherine formed a quite extraordinary resolution: not to marry, but to remain in single life because she felt that God was calling her to devote her life to others, in particular to the needs of distressed young women."[15] The needs of the young women were the uppermost in her mind and she longed to alleviate their unfortunate and dangerous situations. Her dream was to offer a safe haven. "A most compassionate dream and it actually was the germ of a plan that grew into her third great Mercy apostolate: the setting up of the House of Mercy in Baggot Street, which in God's good time would develop into an employment bureau, a shelter workshop, a school for

home-science, a night refuge, a hostel for working girls and a haven for hundreds of homeless young women roaming the streets of Dublin."[16]

In "The Greater Discernment of the Spirits" for the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises the following norms are offered to persons experiencing certain movements that commonly occur.

> *We can become discerning persons by examining carefully our own experiences. If in reflecting on the course of our thoughts or our actions we find that from the beginning to end our eyes have remained fixed on the Lord, we can be sure that the good spirit has been moving us. But as what started off well in our thought and action begins to be self-focused or to turn us from our way to God, we should suspect that the evil spirit has somehow twisted the good beginning to an evil direction and possibly an evil end. As we continue to make progress in the spiritual life, the movement of the good spirit is very delicate, gentle, and often delightful. When the evil spirit tries to interrupt our progress, the movement is violent, disturbing, and confusing.*[17]

"The worm of doubt and confusion gnawed away within her conscience, bursting out of its hiding place when she moved to the country. What was the right thing for her to do, the right way for her to live? That had to be resolved. And now she had the time and urgency to resolve it."[18] Throughout most of her early adult life she lived in households hostile to the precious gift of her faith. Though born into the Catholic faith, she had as yet little knowledge of the faith, although she had received Holy Communion. At this time in her life she is able to seek and receive the necessary instructions. "It was then that . . . the long, lonely and confusing years were over."[19]

The death of Catherine and William Callaghan brought an end to the hidden life of Catherine McAuley, a hidden life that schooled her in unifying contemplation and action. She proposed contemplative action on behalf of the poor so she might see God in all things. "Action will always set up the need for contemplation. But true contemplation is never a mere retreat. Instead, it draws us deeper into right action by getting us deeply in touch with the gifts that we have to give, with our need to give them, with the people and problems that need us."[20]

Inheriting twenty-five thousand pounds and Coolock House would make it possible for Catherine to use her gifts to aid the poor of Dublin, especially the young women in need of safe shelter. William Callaghan "knew from living with her, that she would use it for the poor. By willing his fortune to her, he knew he was investing in her and in the work of Jesus Christ."[21]

The hidden life at Coolock gave Catherine time to be centered more deeply in God, a center from which all her future actions would flow. Her desire was only to respond to God in trust and love. She was to live her relationship with God as her life unfolded, "in the context in which as disciples of Jesus we live day by day. It is not a separate compartment of daily life; but on the contrary, the ground on which everything else stands; the fundamental relationship which roots and feeds and gives shape to life as a whole and all that it contains."[22]

Her desire was only to respond to God in trust and love.

Creating A New Dance

On June 22, 1824 Catherine leased "from the Earl of Pembroke property at the corner of Baggot Street and Herbert Street in southeast Dublin, at a cost of 4,000 pounds and an annual rent of sixty pounds, for the purpose of building a large house for various kinds of religious, educational, and social service of poor women and children."[23] It was her intent to live in the house and to welcome other women who desired to do charitable work. Her original intention was to create a lay community: "Ladies who prefer a conventual life, and are prevented from embracing it from the nature of property or connections, may retire to this house. It is expected a gratuity will be given and an annual pension paid sufficient to meet the expense a lady must incur. The objects which the charity at present embraces are the daily education of hundreds of poor female children and the instruction of young women who sleep in the house."[24]

The building of her dream house provoked jealousy and opposition: ". . . she was confronted with a mounting barrage of anger, fear, ridicule as her building went ahead. Anger from her family who felt so defrauded that her brother James dubbed her house 'Kitty's Folly.' Fear from her Protestant neighbors who opposed an 'establishment for the relief of the poor' which would downgrade their locality. Ridicule from the curious who questioned what was afoot and were told it was being built at the expense of 'a Miss McAuley who had lately come into possession of so much money as not to know what to do with it!'"[25] The shadow of the cross was making itself known. This would not be the last time the shadow would fall on Catherine. As a discerning woman she knew the rhythm and beat of the dance. "If the lives of Jesus' followers in some way mirror the Cross of Jesus, they are true disciples. Conversely, the Cross of Jesus above all points the way to the true path of discipleship."[26]

On September 24, 1827 the first House of Mercy

was officially opened and dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy. One lay woman had given all she had so those in need would be fed, housed and educated. The dream grew as others joined Catherine in service to the poor. Those gathered at Baggot Street were not members of a religious community; however this was not clear to those outside the house. The building had been approved by and blessed by the archbishop, the ladies attended Mass and followed set times for morning and evening prayer, dressed simply and called each other Sister. Years later Catherine would describe the growth of the community: "It [the congregation] commenced with two: Sister Doyle and I. The plan from the beginning was such as is now in practice . . . Seeing us increase so rapidly, and all going on in the greatest order almost of itself, great anxiety was expressed to give it stability. We who began were prepared to do whatever was recommended and in September 1830 we went with Dear Sister [Elizabeth] Harley to George's Hill to serve and novitiate for the purpose of firmly establishing it."[27]

"If we allow God to stay close to us, God invites us constantly to open our minds and hearts more, to revise our values and our ideas about how things should be, to risk feeling insecure."

Heading Catherine's account, the reader would have no idea of the anguish she had experienced in coming to the understanding that God was asking of her something she had no previous intention of doing. "I never wanted to become a nun. I only wanted to serve the poor, because that seemed to be what God was asking of me."[28] Being a nun in nineteenth century Ireland generally meant a cloistered life. Serving the needs of the poor meant life outside the cloister. "because her own life had been scarred by poverty, she could relate to the poor from a lived experience which sensitized her towards those who were hungering not only for food, but for religion, education, peace, kindness and justice.

Catherine's was not just a humanitarian concern for social needs. Hers was, rather, a social apostolate as a means of bearing witness to the love and mercy of God."[29] It was for Christ's poor that she built her dream house. How could Christ's poor best be served? She "prayed to become the person God destined her to be; to allow her relationship with God, and hence the grace of God, to determine the shape and direction to her. For the sake of the poor, Catherine became the nun she never intended to become and her beloved poor would be served long after her death. In mastering the art of the dance, Catherine had learned that it "...is not a question of being able to move according to one's own will, but to move where and how the dance may be directed."[31]

In the midst of her "tripping about" Catherine McAuley danced to the music of the god who had captured her heart. The dance led her to a love relationship that gave shape and direction to her life so that she was able to respond to the desire of God. In the intimacy of the dance, Catherine came to know that "God creates out of love and desires nothing more than a return of love."[32] Her willingness to live and return love is evident in the way she lived and prayed:

> *My God, I am yours for time and eternity. Teach me to cast myself entirely into the arms of your loving Providence with the most lively, unlimited confidence in Your compassionate, tender pity. Grant, O most merciful Redeemer, that whatever you ordain or permit may be acceptable to me. Take from my heart all painful anxiety; suffer nothing to sadden me but sin, nothing to delight me but the hope of coming to the possession You, my God and my all, in Your everlasting Kingdom. Amen.* [33]

Developing a discerning heart is the timeless legacy offered by Catherine McAuley to those who desire to join in the dance of Mercy. Those who join in the dance will come to know, as she had come to know, that "If we allow God to stay close to us, God invites us constantly to open our minds and hearts more, to revise our values and our ideas about how things should be, to risk feeling insecure. God constantly takes us beyond what we thought was safe and established to something new, different and greater." [34]

Notes

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Contributors

Grace Leggio Agate, R.S.M. (Brooklyn) is Director of New Membership for the Brooklyn Regional Community. She received her M.A. in Theology from St. John's University, New York, in 1985. As a founding member of Tabor Retreat Center in Oceanside, New York, she is involved in the ongoing development of adult spirituality through workshops and retreats on the art of spiritual direction.

Angela Bolster, R.S.M. (Ireland) is the first woman religious in Ireland to receive a Ph.D. She is the author of four documents on Catherine McAuley. She prepared the documentary study or Positio on Catherine McAuley for the cause of her canonization. She was the first woman appointed by Rome as Vice-Postulator for a canonization process.

Megan Brown, R.S.M. (Merion) is a pastoral counselor at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Pennsylvania. She is particularly interested in the interplay of psychology and spirituality. For the past ten years, she has been exploring the connection between the charism of Mercy and personal and systemic development.

Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M. (Detroit) is a former Vice-President of the Sisters of Mercy of the Union (1984-1991), and past Provincial Administrator of the Sisters of Mercy in Detroit. She is currently a doctoral candidate at the School of Religion, University of Iowa.

Mary Rose Bumpus, R.S.M. (Cincinnati) is a doctoral candidate in the field of Christian Spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA. She holds an undergraduate degree in music, and graduate degrees in psychology and theology. She has served as formation director for the Cincinnati regional community, as a counselor for Catholic Social Services in Nashville, TN, and as a high school music and religion teacher.

Ann Marie Caron, R.S.M. (New York) is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Saint Joseph College in West Hartford, Connecticut. She has taught at Mercy College and Iona College in New York, and has also served in parish ministry as Director of RCIA and Religious Education.

Mary Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M. (Burlingame), holds a Ph.D. from Notre Dame University. After finishing many years of teaching philosophy at the University of San Francisco, she continues her research, writing and presentations on Catherine McAuley's spirituality and the Mercy tradition. Some of her articles have appeared in *Review for Religious* and *The MAST Journal*.

Mary Sullivan, R.S.M. (Rochester) holds a M.A. and Ph.D. in English and a M.Th. in Systematic Theology. She is Professor of Language and Literature at the Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York. A prolific scholar and writer, her most recent book is *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*. She serves on the editorial board of *The MAST Journal*.

Marilyn Sunderman, R.S.M. (Cincinnati) holds a Ph.D. in contemporary systematic theology from Fordham University and is Assistant Professor at St. Joseph's College in Standish, Maine. She has taught courses in theology and spirituality at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. She specializes in Latin American liberation theology, with interest in the Christology of Juan Luis Segundo.

Julia Upton, R.S.M. (Brooklyn), Ph.D., is Professor of Theology and Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at St. John's University in New York. She is the author of *A Church for the Next Generation* and *Becoming a Catholic Christian*. She is the founder and list manager of Mercy-L, an internet site for Sisters of Mercy, and serves on the editorial board of *The MAST Journal*.

Their Inscape Is Their Sanctity: A Fractal of Mercy

Megan Brown, R.S.M.

It is a privilege for me to be here today to share some of my reflections with you. This talk was originally written as a presentation to a class in systems thinking. The instructors for the class, one of whom is an Associate in Mercy, had invited me to talk about the mission of the Sisters of Mercy because they felt there was a natural connection between their experience of mercy and systems thinking. The preparation for that class led me to read Margaret Wheatley's book, *Leadership and the New Science*. I am not a mathematician, nor am I an expert in systems thinking; however, I am a poet and in reading Margaret Wheatley I became captivated by the poetic imagery of fractals. Here was a concept I felt I could understand—pattern within pattern within pattern! How like Merton, I thought: "Mercy within mercy within mercy!"

What is the nature of this mercy, I wondered. Does mercy have a fractal quality to it—endlessly repeating itself in our world? Could that be our mission? For an answer or better still, a description, I turned to an old friend—Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose notion of inscape had long held my imagination. This was it! I had the basis of my presentation: the fractal quality of mercy; the uniqueness of Catherine's understanding of mercy! The pattern of mercy, repeating itself endlessly through us! Now, could I put it all together?

In "putting it all together," I decided to talk first about my understanding of fractals (with an apologetic nod to Wheatley), attempt to explain inscape, and then weave the two together using Catherine's vision of connectedness. What I give to you this afternoon is the fruit of all this thinking, wondering, praying and imagining!

. . . the patterns inherent in the natural world have much to teach us about ourselves.

Fractals? What are fractals? A mathematician by the name of Benoit Mandelbrot, in observing the natural world, was struck by the crookedness of its shapes. In transferring that wonderment to mathematics, fractal geometry was born. Whereas Euclidean geometry deals with shapes that are essentially flat, fractal geometry views shapes as increasingly complex at every scale. Nature, therefore, has a fractal quality to it. Indeed, the patterns inherent in the natural world have much to teach us about ourselves. Our own circulatory systems, the delicate branching of a fern, cloud patterns—all are examples of fractals. Wheatley cites Briggs and Peat who in "their intriguing exploration of the mirror world of chaos and order make the observation that...the whole shape of things depends upon the minutest part. The part is the whole in this respect, through the action of any part, the whole in the form of chaos or transformative change may manifest..."[1] The part is the whole. The whole is the part. We are part and whole simultaneously. We move towards increasing complexity and utter simplicity. Hold this paradox lightly and let us continue.

Perhaps some of the most beautiful images of fractals are those generated by computers. Equations that are fed back on themselves change. Wheatley observes: "After countless iterations, their tracks materialize into form, creating detailed shapes at finer and finer levels...Everywhere in this minutely detailed fractal landscape there is self-similarity. The shape we see at one magnification we will see at all others. No matter how deeply we look, peering down through very great magnifications, the same forms are evident. There is pattern within pattern within pattern."[2] The part is the whole. The whole is the part. How are we attentive to the unfolding of the patterns in nature, in our life with ourselves, with others, with God?

It is now that we turn to inscape. It seems to me that Hopkins can help us to discover some of the fractal quality of our lives. What is inscape? I will let Hopkins speak for himself from his journal: "As air, melody is what strikes me most of all in music and design in painting, so design, pattern or what I am in the habit of calling inscape is what I above all aim at in poetry."[3] Inscape is each object in nature, animate or inanimate, in its particularity, its uniqueness, its individuality. This tree is like no other. This root like no other. This leaf like no other. Hopkins pays careful, close, loving attention to the individuality of each thing, each person.

Thomas Merton picks up Hopkins' theme in *Seeds of Contemplation* when he observes: "The forms and individual characters of living and growing things and of inanimate things and of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God. Their inscape is their sanctity."[4] My inscape is my sanctity. No one else images God the way I do. I am me. Unique. Like no other. My inscape is my sanctity and so, too, is the patterning of my life, i.e. the fractal quality of my life. As Margaret Wheatley observes, fractals are about quality, not quantity. They are about the way organizations shape themselves. They are about relationships...pattern within pattern within pattern...the fractal quality of mercy...the particularity of who we are...the paradox of the part and the whole.

Wheatley continues her observation that "the very best organizations have a fractal quality to

them...These organizations expect to see similar behaviors show up at every level in the organization because those behaviors were patterned into the organizing principles at the very start."[5] One woman's heart patterned into us who share her vision, the gift of mercy. Catherine's dream of interconnecting circles of mercy does indeed have a fractal quality. Her inscape, her particular vision, birthed a new way of women being in the Church. The "walking nuns" who sheltered women, taught children, nursed the sick poor continue to walk today. Our Dublins are Chicago and Philadelphia, Cedar Rapids and Auburn, Buffalo, Pacaipampa, Auckland, Jamaica and Samoa. Our inscape is our sanctity. The beauty of Catherine's vision is our great gift.

Centered in God—there begins the patterning of mercy.

What about this fractal quality of mercy? It seems to me that Catherine's gift of connectedness, of seeing the patterns and the inscape of mercy, is what compelled her to hear the cry of the poor in her own heart and to attract others to join her. Her first teacher, her father, was her model for this sense of connectedness. From the earliest age she learned to connect her own personal resources to those who did not have access to what they needed to live in dignity. This was a woman who never pitied, who did not condescend. No, this was a woman who from her earliest years learned to call forth in others their own self-worth. Is this not the pattern of mercy? It is not for us to "bestow gifts like benevolent persons in the world," but rather to "bestow ourselves." Such is the graciousness of this woman...such is the fractal quality of mercy..the inscape of our graciousness.

Catherine's handling of the Callaghan wealth gives us another insight into how she understood this gift of mercy. Carmel Bourke suggests that Catherine saw herself "merely as a steward of the Callaghan wealth."[6] It was her means to her cherished dream—to build a place where she could help those who were poor to acquire the arts and skills they needed to live in dignity. I have only recently begun to appreciate that Catherine built her House of Mercy in the center of fashionable Dublin! What courage! Indeed, what audacity from one whom we know to be of ladylike demeanor and gentle, courteous manner! Catherine's vision of connectedness impelled her to place at the center of fashion a place where the needs of the poor could be met. She would not hide the poor! No, she would connect the poor with the rich. The pattern of mercy was beginning.

Throughout her brief ten years as a Sister of Mercy, Catherine continued this pattern of connectedness. Her letters are rich in their descriptions of her way of being with her sisters. Indeed, her letters themselves served as connectors among the various foundations of the young institute. In them we discover the wit and charm of this woman, as well as her deep felt sense of the Providence of God. For me, it is through some of the statements in these letters that the depth of Catherine's being is revealed; that the fractal quality of mercy is enfleshed; that Catherine's own inscape is discovered and appreciated.

"Our hearts can always be in the same place...centered in God for whom alone we go forward or stay back." Centered in God—the spiraling of Catherine McAuley's mission has as its center the mystery of the heart of God. The part is the whole. The whole is the part. It is God alone who has spoken to her heart throughout all her years of personal loss and deprivation. Indeed, Catherine's novitiate was served long before she arrived at George's Hill. And always, always, her heart was centered in God. The fractal quality of her being, her inscape, rested deeply within the compassionate heart of God. Faithfully she placed her fears, her doubts, her anxieties into that loving heart—this remarkable "Sister of Divine Providence"—this person to whom "the grave is always open."

Centered in God—there begins the patterning of mercy. There is our legacy. Catherine's attentiveness to the cry of the poor began in her attentiveness to the cry of her God. We know how she loved retreat—how she cherished the Thirty Days Prayer. We have seen her gift of graciousness with all people—the rich, the poor, the clergy, those who misunderstood her, and in the deaths of those whom she dearly loved. How, how did she sustain all this? What is it that we need to learn from her? It seems to me that she gives us the answer to both questions. We are to be centered in God. Our inscape, the patterning of mercy, is found in God. In God we hear the cry of the poor. In the poor we hear the cry of God. Let us be attentive to this fractal quality of mercy. Let us know our own call to sanctity.

We recall Wheatley's observation that the organizations that seem to work well are those whose "behaviors were patterned into the organizing principles at the very start."[7] Yes, we are the inheritors of this patterning of mercy. We are to "dance every evening," to love with compassion, to dare justice, to rest in the heart of God. Our inscape is our sanctity because one woman from Dublin dared to trust her own experience and so birth mercy to the world!

And so today, this day, let us with Catherine discover the fractal quality of this dear Institute of Mercy. Let us be brave, gentle, courageous and compassionate in our being with one another. Let us call one another to holiness! Let us call one another to service!

We dare to claim the richness of our heritage. We dare to name as our own that gentleness, courage and generosity of service that mark us as women of the Church, responsive in faith to the challenge of the gospel in our day. We dare to hold with tenderness the treasured legacy that is Catherine's gift to us...a union and love so impelling and urgent among us that compassion is birthed anew wherever we walk. We are bonded as women are bonded...with dear memories, stories shared ...dreams dreamt...visions fired...gathered to witness that peace means the willingness to accept diversity...that union and charity proclaim that we stand together in our fragility, daring to celebrate that compassion is the precious heritage of the broken ones. This is our moment, our time, our sending, our summons. Let us dare to live as Jesus did...vulnerably, boldly, defenselessly, prophetically...with integrity...so that the littlest and poorest of this earth will live again in hope!

Endnotes

1. Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organizations from an Orderly Universe* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1994) 127.
2. Wheatley, 128.
3. John Pick, ed. *A Hopkins Reader.* (New York: Image Books,1966) 20.
4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1949) 25.
5. Wheatley, 131.
6. Mary Carmel Bourke, R.S.M, *A Woman Sings of Mercy.* (Sydney: E. J. Dwyer, 1987) 6.
7. Wheatley, 131.

Questions for Discussion

(Use this space to jot down your questions and comments. Send them to Julia Upton, RSM, St. John's University, Jamaica, New York, 11439.)

The Pathos of Mercy: Exploring a Vista of Catherine McAuley's Gospel Charism

Ann Marie Caron, R.S.M.

Jon Sobrino was born and grew up in Spain's Basque region. When Sobrino was a novice in the Society of Jesus in 1957, he went to El Salvador. There he saw appalling poverty but "did not really see it." Later he reflected, "poverty had nothing to say to me for my own life as a young Jesuit and as a human being. It did not even cross my mind that I might learn something from the poor."[1] Today Sobrino, a Latin-American liberation theologian, is known for his writings in Christology and on the church in El Salvador. Through the intervening years, the poor of El Salvador themselves have awakened Sobrino, as so many others, to the reality of an oppressed and subjugated world. In 1992 he escaped death on the night his Jesuit brothers, including his good friend, Ignacio Ellacuria, were brutally martyred. Jon Sobrino continues to learn from the poor. He has come to know that the liberation of the world "is the basic task of every human being, so that in this way human beings may finally come to be human."[2] Sobrino's work reiterates a truth taken up today by the universal Church as the preferential option for the poor. With insights from these theologians, people in the third world and the first world see today that the experience of the poor is Christian spirituality.

Sobrino also recognizes that in our contemporary world, the term mercy has both authentic connotations and inadequate connotations, even dangerous ones. (1) Mercy suggests a sense of compassion. The danger is that it may seem to denote a sheer sentiment, without a praxis to accompany it. (2) Mercy can connote "works of mercy." The risk is that the practitioner of such works may feel exempt from the duty of analyzing the causes of the suffering that these works relieve. (3) Mercy connotes the alleviation of individual needs. But the risk is to neglect the transformation of structures. Lastly, (4) mercy may connote "parental" attitudes, but risk paternalism. To avoid these limitations and misunderstandings Sobrino choses to speak of "the principle of mercy." As a theologian Sobrino locates this principle as the basic activity of God and Jesus. Mercy abides as a constant in God's salvific process.[3]

Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan exemplifies the principle of mercy: the basic structure of response to this world's victims.[4] Sobrino sees this parable as a presentation of what it means to be a human being: making someone else's pain our very own and allowing that pain to move us to respond: "In this reaction to the ought-not-to-be of another's suffering, one's own being, without any possibility of subterfuge, hangs in the balance."[5] Consequently, the principle of mercy affects subsequent interactions.

Sobrino is articulating the biblical principle of mercy within the context of his reality, "the crucified peoples of El Salvador," but he is writing to first world readers. His book led me to reflect on Catherine McAuley's timeless legacy of gospel mercy, our own lives and ministries. God's poor across time invite a reclaiming of mercy. Through the narratives of past and present mercy ministries we glimpse Catherine's living legacy.

. . . pathos . . . denotes that quality in events, circumstances, persons, etc. which stirs an excitement and evokes pity, sadness and compassion.

The lens I will use to focus my reflections is pathos. From its Greek root pathos can mean disease, a form of suffering, or feeling. It denotes that quality in events, circumstances, persons, etc. which stirs an excitement and evokes pity, sadness and compassion.[6] In the language of scripture, pathos connotes God's compassion and mercy, and the beatitude to be merciful as God is. In the gospel story the Samaritan, moved by pathos [compassion, mercy] was awakened [saw] and responded to need, acting on another's behalf.

Catherine McAuley experienced pathos—her passion and compassion for the poor. She was a woman whose heart was moved by the people who were placed along her way. Catherine interiorized the sufferings of others, especially the poor, so that their sufferings became a part of her and were transformed into an internal principle, a spirituality of mercy. In the stories we know so well from biographies, essays, and the letters of Catherine McAuley, her pathos can touch us. In these stories we remember a root metaphor of her living legacy. Catherine's stories are also an invitation to remember how people and events have awakened us too to respond.

After recalling a few examples of stories from the life of Catherine, I offer two stories of Mercy ministries from the regional community of New York. Through these stories, a vista of Catherine's living legacy opens. This celebration of Catherine's timeless legacy becomes an invitation to move into a new tomorrow through remembering our past and present

responses of pathos and solidarity.

Catherine's Response: Pathos and Solidarity[7]

Dr. Edward Armstrong, friend, confidant and supporter of Catherine McAuley, "was convinced [she] was raised by Providence as a special instrument of mercy to [God's] suffering and afflicted children."[8] Identification with Jesus in his mission and profound gratitude for the mercy of God are two major themes of her spiritual teachings and living legacy.

We remember that when Catherine was with the Callaghans "the poor and little children were her special favorites; these she labored to instruct, relieve and console in every possible way."[9] While Catherine taught the children of Coolock village, she also reached out to the poor children of Dublin. We recall her in the female school of St. Mary's parish, Abbey St. There, in a lower room she opened a shop, so that these young women could sell the various kinds of needlework they had made. Catherine considered this a better way to nurture their "industrious habits," rather than "to give them money or clothes by way of alms." In this way Catherine helped the girls and young women gain self-esteem, self-respect and skills for a livelihood.

Catherine McAuley was a woman who looked and saw and felt what transpired around her in early nineteenth century Ireland.

She also visited the sick poor in their homes. On one of her visits Catherine discovered Mrs. Harper.[10] This poor, aged and deranged woman had once known better circumstances. Now everyone had deserted her. As Catherine was experienced in spiritual and material poverty, she felt impelled (pathos) to do something about the needs of others. Rather than taking Mrs. Harper to an asylum, Catherine brought her home and cared for her for about five years, until death came for Mrs. Harper.

While Baggot Street house was under construction, Catherine extended her interest to teaching methods developed in the most reputable schools. Because she was "not satisfied with the Lancasterian system, Catherine decided to visit France to observe methods used for the instruction of large classes in that country. There is no record of the visit beyond mention of it." Since she was already well acquainted with the work of the Irish Sisters of Charity, one of her biographers[11] thinks "the most likely place for her to go would be to the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul." Their work in the slums and elsewhere in France "presented an ideal that scarcely allowed improvement in method." By 1836 Catherine's school in Baggot Street enjoyed the status of a teacher-training center. Catherine was placing young women from her school in teaching positions.[12] "She had a vision of a new Ireland where an educated people with a renewed faith in God and in themselves" could again become "the land of saints and scholars."[13]

With the suffering poor of Charleville, Catherine suffered: "are not the poor of Charleville as dear to Him as elsewhere?". . . " Put your whole confidence in God. He will never let you want necessities for yourself or children."[14] When the poor school in Kingstown had to close because of lack of funds, she consoles Mary Teresa White: "Do not be afflicted for your poor, their Heavenly Father will provide comfort for them . . . He will not be displeased with me, because He knows I would rather be cold and hungry than the poor in Kingstown or elsewhere should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford."[15]

Yes, sometimes there is powerlessness. Catherine recognized that. And she also recognized: "There are things the poor prize more highly than gold, though they cost the donor nothing. Among these are the kind word, the gentle, compassionate look, and the patient bearing of their sorrows."[16]

In her instructions Catherine taught: "The life of Jesus Christ on which we are to model ours was a life of self-denial and suffering."[17] It is her own devotion to the humanity of Jesus Christ, especially Jesus' infancy and passion, that interprets her charity.

Many more instances could be cited to show what we so clearly know. Catherine McAuley was a woman who looked and saw and felt what transpired around her in early nineteenth century Ireland. "She listened and heard what reflected the joy and pain of life. Reflecting on what she experienced, she learned ways to be helpful to body, mind and spirit. She absorbed the existing reality of poverty, sickness and ignorance while struggling to develop better resources to alleviate these ills."[18] She prayed: "My God , look down with pity and mercy on your afflicted poor and grant us grace to do all that we can for their relief and comfort."[19] In her Rule she instructs: "If our own hearts be not moved, in vain shall we hope to move the hearts of others."[20]

On this day when we remember the anniversary of Catherine's death, I want to reclaim a symbol which evokes her desire to live in solidarity with the poor and her legacy. That symbol is her shoes, her "homemade boots" made at Baggot Street. "I have been long recommending these homemade boots, both for neatness and economy," she comments in a letter to Catherine Leahy in Galway.[21] It seems the money saved was set aside for the works of mercy.

A short time before her death, early on the morning of November 11, 1841, Catherine McAuley dis-

posed of her homemade shoes. As Elizabeth Moore recalls: "On Wednesday night or rather Thursday morning about two o'clock she called for a piece of paper and twine, tied up her boots and desired them to be put in the fire. The Sister to whom she gave them did not know what they were but had directions to remain at the fire till all was consumed."[22] Mary Sullivan conveys beautifully the essence of this final action of Catherine's life, a life marked by trust in God's providence and mercy: "she [Catherine] turned barefoot toward the God who stood before her in death."[23]

I hope one day that Catherine's "homemade boots" become a symbol as recognizable for us as the "comfortable cup of tea." It's sometimes said that shoes say a lot about a person. In this case that couldn't be more true. If you've had a chance to see a picture of the new statue of Catherine standing at the entrance of Baggot Street there seems to be an outgoing movement in the rendition of her feet. Her unenclosed religious order of women were popularly called "walking nuns." She had urged her associates, and herself, to go forward through the streets to those in need, "as if they expected to meet their Divine Redeemer in each poor habitation" (Rule 3.6); to trust in a merciful and Provident God; and to let go. This paschal rhythm was the dance of her life.

. . . Catherine McAuley's walking nuns were responding to the many pressing needs of European immigrants . . .

Beginnings of New York Regional Community

On May 14, 1846, Agnes O'Connor, with her sisters of Mercy, arrived in the Port of New York. Missioned from Baggot Street, the women of Mercy traveled by steamer from Dublin, Ireland, in response to the invitation of New York's Archbishop John Hughes. They were needed to minister to young Irish immigrant women in this port city. Almost immediately these women of Mercy, themselves immigrants in a new land, began their Mercy ministry providing shelter for Irish immigrant women. Very soon on the streets and in the alleyways of lower Manhattan, Catherine McAuley's walking nuns were responding to the many pressing needs of European immigrants: visiting of the sick in tenement houses and hospital wards, feeding the hungry, clothing the dispossessed, visiting prisoners, caring for widows and orphans, opening a library and instructing the ignorant. In the Port City of New York the gospel charism of the Sisters of Mercy took root and flourished.

Both the mighty Hudson and the East rivers flow from the North and join at the lower tip of Manhattan. Conversely, Broadway and its surrounding neighborhoods gradually push upward from Manhattan's lower east and westside neighborhoods, through the rural Bronx borough to an even more rural Westchester and beyond. The community of Mercy women moved their residences and refocused their ministries in response to demographic changes and pastoral needs.

With the Chicago Regional community, the New York Regional community shares 1996 as an anniversary year. In May our sesquicentennial opens onto a year long celebration of 'Amazing Grace.' As the wisdom writer of Ecclesiastes sings: "I know that whatever God does endures forever, nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before God" (Eccl. 3:14). In the unfolding story of the New York Regional Community's journey of 150 years, the year 1995 was distinguished by several centennial celebrations of Mercy ministries: Mercy Hospital in Watertown, NY; St. Joseph Home for Women in Worcester, MA; and Mercy presence in Sacred Heart Parish, Mount Vernon, New York.

Sacred Heart Parish in Mount Vernon, New York: Seeds of Growth[24]

Sacred Heart Parish finds its foundational roots in the same nineteenth century narrative of immigration. From the earliest years of this mission come stories of collaboration and hospitality. Irish and German immigrants extended the hospitality of their homes as gathering places for eucharist and engaged in the first educational venture in Mount Vernon. From the 1840's to the first decades of the twentieth century, a continual influx of new immigrants — especially of Irish, German and Italian nationalities — made their homes in this settlement, now a city, measuring only 4.5 square miles. The population of the city totaled about ten thousand in 1890. There were only dirt roads; travel was by stagecoach. Here the work of Catholic education antedated the opening of the mission church, or Chapel of Saint Michael as it was named, by one year (1859); the establishment of the parish of the Sacred Heart by fourteen years (1872); and the advent of the educational ministry of Mercy (1895) by thirty-seven years.

When the new parish school was opened in September 1895 the local newspaper reported it would "be under the care of the Sisters of the parish."[25] They named no religious community.[26] In May 1895, however, the leadership council of the New York Sisters of Mercy had accepted the invitation of the pastor, Father Flynn, to take charge of the new parochial school in his parish. He had also planned to provide a convent for the sisters. They, however, had already purchased a house in the parish which they opened in 1895, or perhaps as early as 1892.[27] The mission was

known as St. Joseph Academy, for Mrs. Margaret Radley from whom the sisters secured the house for a nominal sum had an ardent devotion to St. Joseph.[28] She stipulated that the convent be placed under the saint's protection. Eight Sisters of Mercy were in residence. Three sisters taught in the parish school, one was named as superior, and the others worked in the Academy which may have been a preschool or possibly a boarding school for young children. When Sacred Heart parish school opened in September 1895 there were one hundred and ten pupils and three Sisters of Mercy: Sisters Mary Seraphine, Mary Josephine and Mary Anita. In 1917 the present convent which is located next to the school was opened. Some years later the programs of St. Joseph Academy must have ceased and the house was closed.

Perhaps the image that best sums up these decades is one of building structures.

Years of Growth 1900-1960

In the immigrant church of the United States, education, especially of children, was a high priority in parishes. This had a significant impact on the work and expansion of religious congregations. The parochial school system was predicated on the separateness or segregation of Catholic immigrants, who experienced the American environment as hostile to their religious values.[29] During the first half of the twentieth century the increasing enrollment in the parish elementary schools demanded renovations, the construction of larger buildings, more classrooms and more sisters. This occurrence is repeated in the chronicle of the sisters and Sacred Heart parish school.

I found very little specific information about the individual sisters during these years. Therefore the theme of pathos, can only be implied from the story of corporate ministry of the sisters as elementary school educators, at first of immigrant children, and later of the children of immigrant parents. In addition, the sisters at Sacred Heart convent, like many sisters in parish schools across the United States, taught in the religious education programs (CCD) for public school children and monitored the children at Sunday Masses. On a limited basis, they visited the sick in their homes or in the hospital, visited poor families in the parish and, when needed, the homes of the children. Some sisters gave music lessons. Others organized the Immaculate Conception, St. Aloysius and Angel Sodalities which steadily increased in numbers. By the late 1940's the sisters opened the first kindergarten in the Sacred Heart school. They also began the McAuley Guild for young women in the parish. They held the Guild's monthly meeting and annual Communion breakfast in the convent. Regularly on Sundays, these young women visited Welfare Island to help patients to and from Mass, visited area Catholic homes for the aged, and did similar volunteer works.

During this half-century sisters and parish schools had been agents of americanization for Catholic immigrants. In the historical-cultural ethos of these pre-Vatican II years, the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's, the parish was centered in the person of the pastor. The religious life of Catholics was centered around the parish. Changes in U. S. immigration policies, a very gradual movement of Catholics into the economic mainstream, and urban and suburban mobility would gradually change the parochial schools. Well before the 1960's many parish schools were no longer serving an underprivileged class. This was the case at Sacred Heart.

Perhaps the image that best sums up these decades is one of building structures. This image was even used to praise the sisters' work at Sacred Heart parish: "to the Sisters of Mercy who mark their 68th year of work here, this school means 68 years of forming the most magnificent structure imaginable, little minds into big minds, little souls into big souls, and little children into Christian ladies and gentlemen."[30]

Sacred Heart Parish: 1982 to the present

Slow growth and new life have now come to a very changed parish and its surrounding center-city neighborhood on Mount Vernon's south side.[31] American blacks and the new wave of immigration, especially peoples from Haiti, Jamaica and other areas of the Caribbean region, have given rise to a new multicultural configuration in Sacred Heart parish and school. Today this small sized parish operates on a financial "shoe-string" woven from parish support, interparish financing, and small grants for both the social projects and the school. The partnership of clergy, laity and sisters doing together the gospel works of mercy shapes a parish community and its mission in this inner-city environment.

100 years of Mercy Presence

In 1995 the Sisters of Mercy celebrated their one hundred years of Mercy presence and ministry in the parish. Today the sisters of this local community all participate in parish ministries and events whenever possible. The sisters on the parish staff coordinate many of the pastoral efforts with other parishioners. There is a catechumenate for adults and for children and the full celebration of the Rites of Christian Initiation. The 9:30 a.m. Sunday parish Mass and children's liturgy of the Word precedes the Sunday religious education program for all children of the parish. Liturgical and catechetical ministers are nurtured. There is a teen group, as well as a large group of senior citizens that continues to involve many people

in a variety of activities. The homebound and the sick in hospitals are visited regularly. Events like the annual Mardi Gras party, an annual Carribbean Mass sponsored by the Office of Black Ministry of Southern Westcester, a weekly Mass in Haitian, the practice of using the Black American Catholic hymnal, *Lead Me Guide Me,* at all Sunday Masses and bi-lingual celebrations (English and Haitian) at Christmas and Easter draw the community together in song, prayer, and celebration. Times of festivity are often accented by shared meals of ethnic foods. These and other gatherings further express the rich cultural diversity of the parish and build community. The faces and effects of poverty, however, are also very evident in the neighborhoods surrounding the parish and across its geographic boundaries.

Out of this struggle a dream was born.

Signs of the Times

While browsing in the history room of the local library I came across a story titled, "Woman in the Cellar." The story reported how Janitor Howland often saw a woman's face in the cellar windows of Sacred Heart church during the 1880's. The cellar was an unfinished basement with a dirt floor and a running brook.

Sometimes the janitor saw the woman on the side steps of the church or when she gathered water from the well in the church yard. But she would hurry back to her remote and hidden home in the dark, dank cellar. There this poor woman lived for months. The janitor said little about her to anyone. "Some in the community who heard about the woman said it was all a ghost story."

When the woman was finally sought out she was found lying on a bed of evergreen branches under the basement stairs which led to the upper church. She was sick and near death. No one ever learned her name before she died. All that was reported about the woman in this 1889 story was that she had "celtic features." The tragedy of homelessness must have been an all too familiar experience for those nineteenth century European immigrants.

A century later women continue to be nameless and homeless. Women passing through Mount Vernon are no exception. The congenial outreach of neighbor to neighbor so evident in the late 1950's has not disappeared totally. But today many, many more people, especially women, fall through the cracks. No women's shelter existed in the area until the winter of 1984. Through an area ecumenical project Sacred Heart parish began to take its turn in opening its cellar basement (now a hall sparsely finished, known as the Social Center) to host a temporary night shelter for women.

Sacred Heart-Mount Carmel School of the Arts

Catholic schools have always served children of different denominations. That is true at Sacred Heart where by the late 1970's the children represented the faiths of several Christian communions. Their parents were struggling to provide them an alternative, Catholic education. During the decade of the 1980's the threat of school closings was often talked about. When the archdiocese began to negotiate school mergers and closings with the five Catholic parishes in Mount Vernon, the Sacred Heart school principal, pastor, teachers, a grant writer and a dedicated group of school parents and other parishioners worked long, hard hours and months to keep the school open. Out of this struggle a dream was born.

The school survived the closings. Grant money and a willingness to see new dimensions of the children's potentials moved the dream to a reality. Early childhood programs for three- and four-year olds have been opened; the emphasis on catholic education, faith and academics is enhanced by a dedicated faculty; a few computers introduce the children to computer literary and enrichment; and a full program of the arts was slowly inaugurated for all of the children. To allow for the necessary room expansion grades five through eight meet in the Mount Carmel School building just a few blocks away. Sacred Heart School remains the site for the primary programs. But the dream did not stop here.

Sacred Heart - Mount Carmel School of the Arts was recognized as a National School of Excellence. The good news came in Spring 1994 when the school was awarded the "gold." Right on time for a centenniel celebration. One of the early accounts of the parish testifies that in the mid-1890's a tradition of plays, musicals and similiar entertainment united the growing parish family in song and recreation. As early as 1896 an operatta entitled, "A Day in the Woods," was presented by the school children in the school hall. In 1897 the old church building, St. Michael's, was converted into a Lyceum for parish entertainment. Every year thereafter the school children entertained with plays set to music. Who would have imagined that this tradition of song and artistic celebration would be carried on by the children a century later!

September 1995 marked the one hundredth anniversary of the Sisters of Mercy presence in the parish and their leadership in the ministry of education and outreach to the people of this parish and vicinity. Like bookends the decades nearest the turn of the centuries of these one hundred years are characterized by service in diverse, multicultural faith communities.

In this story of pathos and response to human cries and joys we are invited to ponder, question and read with new eyes mercy today into tomorrow. Catherine's biographers describe her as a woman with an "extraordinary reverence for and confidence in the Holy Sacraments."[32] "Her charity did not confine itself to the relief of their temporal wants only; she took pity on their spiritual ignorance and destitution." Her instructions on the sacraments, "whether to seculars or Religious, were calculated to awaken sentiments of lively faith and most confiding love."[33] She recommended the same advice to the sisters in their instructions to the poor. This ministry in its several expressions is at the heart of forming a people of faith at Sacred Heart and the sisters model leadership in this area.

Catherine had a practice of sending young women who joined the congregation to serve in their home localities whenever possible.

During her life Catherine McAuley had realized and respected local needs and preferences among the foundations. In one of her letters she expressed her belief: "Every place has its own particular ideas and feelings which must be yielded to when possible."[34] She was willing to accommodate; she also encouraged the sisters to do the same for the sake of the mission. Catherine had a practice of sending young women who joined the congregation to serve in their home localities whenever possible. "She considered that their knowledge of the parish in which they had grown up was invaluable in helping the new community to discern the local needs and plan their apostolate."[35]

Mercy Center, South Bronx[36]

Like the ministry at Sacred Heart in Mount Vernon, Mercy Center is also an inner city ministry. Its South Bronx neighborhoods, however, are in the poorest congressional district in the United States. Mercy Center opened in 1990 as a counselling center for the parents and children of St. Pius X School. A large classroom had been partitioned to allow for office space and a meeting room. The salary for a part-time director, a position held by a sister, and the Center's operational costs were funded by grants from the Dallas and New York Regional Communities. Thus the Center's name: Mercy. In order to minister to women's needs as fully as possible, this Center is financially and corporately independent of both the parish school and the parish itself. It is a corporation. Funding remains dependent on grants and fund raising activities. Fees are usually not asked for the services provided by the center.

For over seventy years, St. Pius X School has worked closely with parents in providing quality Catholic education to the children in its South Bronx neighborhood. The neighborhood is beset with problems of the inner city. The families deal with the daily stresses of crime, violence, drugs and economic deprivation. Often coupled with this stress is a lack of knowledge of how to be effective parents. Problems are compounded by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Many suffer from low self-esteem and live their lives in isolation from the rest of the community. Isolation is a big element in the lives of the women. From its beginnings as a counseling center for the parents of school children, Mercy Center has serviced mostly Latino (Puerto Rican) and African-American mothers. Over 80% are single-parent families. This Center is testimony to Catherine McAuley's special preference for poor women. As she believed: "no work of charity can be more productive of good to society, or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women, since whatever be the station they are destined to fill, their example and advice will always possess influence, and where ever a religious woman presides, peace and order are generally to be found" (Rule 2.5).[37]

In its various components the Center aims to be wholistic. Among its offerings are individual and group counseling, workshops on parenting skills and personal growth, retreats, weekly scripture sharing, gatherings for aerobics and workshops on health, outreach through home-visiting and a place to be welcomed. Through these activities, Mercy Center provides parents, women especially, with opportunities for personal growth and development, enhances their parenting skills and creates space for the women to form a supportive community with one another. Thus the staff of Mercy Center and the programs offered consciously promote systemic change especially by promoting full human development and developing indigenous leaders.

This includes empowering women to get in touch with the gift of themselves, to come to value that gift more, and to learn skills to foster the blossoming of that gift. "Through counseling and their interaction with one another, the women come to change their views of themselves, gain a sense of community and grow in self-esteem. Workshops add to this the personal skills needed to improve how they are living."[38] Thus a woman can come to know her own strengths and also find strength in the support the women are for each other. Personal and group counseling helps them learn how to articulate their needs and their rights. Hence they become their own advocates.

A core group of women has been involved in the planning, carrying out, and evaluation of all the activi-

ties of Mercy Center since its inception. Each year new women have been invited to be part of this process. Through this consciously collaborative effort, models of domination and subordination are altered in order to foster new styles of collaboration that enhance participation and ownership and develop indigenous leaders. Thus "in its goal of fostering the full development of women, Mercy Center calls forth and supports the leadership gifts of the women served."

The first year the Center was opened there was a plan in place to reach out to women in their homes. With funding from grants, two mothers from the parish have now assumed a strong leadership role in home-visiting. They have reached out to many mothers and provided them with the opportunity to discuss personal and family issues. The mothers have appreciated this outreach. "In the neighborhood, many women never leave their apartments except for the absolute necessities. It is essential for us, the Church, to reach out to them." As a result some have begun to participate in other activities of Mercy Center; while others have requested follow-up visits. "Woman-to-woman in the home" is an important component of Mercy Center.

In the Fall of 1994 a second sister began working full time at the Center. Her responsibilities have included developing the women's weekly scripture sharing group, limited pastoral counseling, and other activities that include planning a fund raising event (WomenSing), becoming more familiar with other agencies in the area (it is not uncommon for area agencies to lose their funding and be closed), and out reach. In the Fall of 1995 the staff opened their programs, especially the Parenting Skills worshops, to parents in the three other Catholic Schools in the immediate area: St. Luke's School, St. Jerome's and Immaculate Conception. These schools are within walking distance of each other. Eventually Mercy Center aims to become a neighborhood based community organization. Already they receive referrals from neighborhood agencies and public school parents.

One Tuesday, at the end of the weekly scripture sharing session one of the women said, "Let's not send the petition we're signing over to the police station. Let's march over there right now." And as a group they stood up, gathered a few more people as they moved along and went and spoke to the police about the women's concerns as parents for the safety of their children. "This took a great deal of courage, because the drug dealers could have threatened them or harmed them if they were watching this little parade go to and from the police station." The women had a goal in mind. They went as a community. They were not paralyzed by a feeling of helplessness. And they were willing to take steps to act for change. As one of the Sisters reflected, "That was a moment of spirituality in action, and moments like that give me passion, give me energy for my mission of mercy."

Another simple story is one the sisters told me the day I visited the Center. It is a story about the sense of pride the families struggled to own within their apartment buildings and it illustrates the people's sense of self-giving, community, hope, and acting for change. "The families go all out to decorate the inside of their apartments at Christmas. One year a family or two decided to brighten the dirty, urine smelling hallway. Christmas decorations went up and some were pulled down. They continued to monitor the hall and persisted in expressing the spirit of the season — keeping it visible, not only behind their private, closed, and secured doors. Gradually neighbors from other floors came to admire the decorations and the idea spread throughout the building. This made a change in the quality of their lives and was pleasing to the eye." A sister reflected: "It's not about changing systems of government or of church, but life in their own hands."

Everydayness . . . can become revelatory, and the presence and power of God's sacred wholeness can be experienced in every human being.

Conclusion

These stories, stories of pathos, insight, awakening, response and action allow us to reflect on Catherine's living legacy, to read mercy today into tomorrow. Cathérine lived the belief that "If our own hearts be not moved, in vain shall we hope to move the hearts of others." As this theological reflection demonstrates, the pathos of mercy invites us to see that "Everydayness . . . can become revelatory, and the presence and power of God's sacred wholeness can be experienced in every human being."[39]

In an article on religious life Joan Chittister commented: "The point now is to release everywhere in society, at every level, through every individual member, wherever those members are, whatever separate things they do, the white heat of the congregation's charism in one great corporate mind and one easily seen communal heart. I can work against homelessness in the second grade, in the parish, in the chaplaincies or in retreat centers. The important thing is that I know what my congregation is about and that I commit myself to it somewhere. . . . It is a case now of knowing what part of the reign of God we are in the process of creating... "[40]

As sisters, associates and partners in Mercy, we are blessed with Catherine's living and timely legacy of response: pathos, gospel Mercy and "homemade

shoes." This essay has examined one vista of her legacy. May it be an invitation to our continued reflection on our stories and Catherine's living legacy: yesterday, today into tomorrow.

Footnotes

1. Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People Off the Cross,* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 2.
2. Sobrino, *Principle,* 1.
3. Sobrino, *Principle,* 17.
4. Sobrino, *Principle,* 10.
5. Sobrino, *Principle,* 18.
6. Oxford English Dictionary, Vol. XI, 1989 (2nd edition) s.v. patho-; pathos.
7. In preparing this section I rely on Catherine's biographers and Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). After the meeting in Chicago I discovered Mary Sullivan's recent article, "The Spirit's Fire and Catherine's Passion," in *The Mast Journal* 5:2 (Spring 1995), 10-15.
8. Quoted in Sullivan, 158.
9. Sullivan, 101.
10. Mary Bertrand Degnan, *Mercy Unto Thousands,* (Maryland: The Newman Press, 1957) 32.
11. Degnan, *Mercy,* 45.
12 See Angela Bolster, ed. *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1827-1841* Letter 27: 17 January 1836, p.19.
13. Mary Carmel Bourke, *A Woman Sings of Mercy: Reflections on the Life and Spirit of Mother Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy* (Australia: E.J. Dwyer, 1987) 44.
14. Letter to Sister Angela Dunne, 20 December 1837. *Correspondence,* 45-46.
15. Quoted in Sullivan, 330.
16. Quoted in Bourke, 47.
17. Bourke, 44.
18. M. Joanna Regan, and Isabelle Keiss, *Tender Courage: A Reflection on the Life and Spirit of Catherine McAuley, First Sister of Mercy* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988) 77.
19. Regan and Keiss, p.77.
20. Rule ch.3, art.16. Quoted in M. Angela Bolster, *Catherine McAuley Venerable for Mercy* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1990) 108.
21. Quoted in Sullivan, 331.
22. Quoted in Sullivan, 333.
23. Sullivan, 333.
24. Here I have relied primarily on materials available in the archives of the Sisters of Mercy, New York Regional Community. These materials include summaries of the parish written, for instance, after a pastor's death, or parish histories to mark an anniversary year. In these, as would be expected of the time, the sisters are on the periphery of the story, including the story of the success of the school. I am also dependent on Mercy archive records for what I can glean about the sisters. I extend special thanks to Sister Angela Perry, R.S.M., archivist; to Sister Marjorie Aidan Fahey, R.S.M.; and to Mrs. Nancy DeSantis for her assistance at the history room of Mount Vernon Public Library.
25. *Daily Argus,* September 3, 1895, "Parochial School Dedicated."
26. Two newspaper articles, one from *Daily Argus,* June 1893, "The Higher Branches of Art, Literature and Science to be taught in this city"; the other from March 12, 1894, indicated that the Dominican sisters would be "in charge of this new academy."
27. This date is found in a newsclipping from the *Daily Argus,* June 7, 1963: "The Sisters of Mercy purchased an academy on Third Avenue and Fourth Street in 1892 where they lived and conducted a pre-school for 50 pupils. Construction for the present building [the parish school] began in 1894, with a one-story building and four classrooms. The foundation stone in this building was obtained from the First Street excavation of the New Haven railroad cut."
28. Helen M. Sweeney, *The Golden Milestone,* 1846-1896 (Benziger Bros., 1896) 178.
29. Jay Dolan, R. Scott Appleby, Patricia Byrne, and Debra Campbell, *Transforming Parish Ministry. The Changing Roles of Catholic Clergy, Laity and Women Religious* (New York: Crossroads, 1989) 112.
30. *Daily Argus,* June 7, 1963.
31. Although the 1990 census is known to be flawed, the statistics do reflect the demographics of the parish. Almost all of the 51% of Mount Vernon's low/moderate income families live within the parish boundaries according to the City of Mount Vernon 1994 Census Tract map.
32. Sullivan, 117.
33. Sullivan, 144, 117.
34. Letter to Sister Elizabeth Moore, quoted in Bolster, *Venerable,* 74.
35. Bourke, 76.
36. In what follows I am dependent on Mercy Center reports available in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy, on conversations with Sisters Mary Ann Dirr and Mary Galeone, as well as on Mary Galeone's oral and written reflections presented at Mercy Day, 1995.
37. Quoted in Sullivan, 297. "Here religious woman [refers]... to any woman informed and motivated by her religious faith" (Sullivan 263).
38. Report on Mercy Center in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy.
39. Elisabeth Schüssler- Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 120.
40. Joan Chittister, "Religious Life is still alive, but far from Promised Land," *National Catholic Reporter,* 18 February 1994: 16.

Dream Shaping/Dream Sharing: The Educational Vision of Catherine McAuley

Marilyn Sunderman, R.S.M.

The vision of education of Catherine McAuley, the 19th century lady from Dublin, is rooted and grounded in the ideals and values of Christianity. For Catherine, the ministry of education is essentially a work of mercy. Involvement in educational endeavors is a way to carry out Jesus' challenge to love others by caring for them in their needs.

Catherine grew up in a society rampant with poverty, ignorance, sickness and unemployment. In response to the needs of her day, she developed educational opportunities from the pre-school to the adult level. Thus, she sought to empower persons, especially poor young women and children, to improve their human situation. According to Catherine's vision, education is an essential ingredient in the process of the betterment of both individuals and society.

This study looks closely at Catherine's educational vision. It provides a brief portrait of the outstanding qualities of this Irish woman that enabled her to become a prominent educator in her day. The study focuses on various people and situations that influenced Catherine's development of her vision of education and then describes educational principles and values delineated in her writings. It depicts qualities of the Christian educator that are inherent in Catherine's spirituality and discusses the social justice dimensions of her educational vision. It concludes with a brief reflection on some challenges her vision poses for the future of Christian education.

A Brief Portrait of Catherine

Catherine McAuley possessed many qualities of character that enabled her to become an excellent educator. She was a woman of keen intellect who inherited a propensity for independent thinking from her mother, Elinor. Catherine was open-minded and flexible. She readily adapted to changing circumstances. She was a woman of vision who possessed a remarkable ability to be practically oriented. Her very way of being reflected her profound commitment to Christian values.

Catherine was optimistic by nature. She was able to throw a "ray of sunshine on even the darkest hour."[1] Her sense of humor enabled her to keep a balanced perspective in life's most difficult circumstances. Catherine's correspondence indicates that she was a talented poet. She used her excellent command of the English language and her wit to create rhyme guaranteed to bring a smile to the faces of those who read her playful verses.

Catherine was consummately human and in her humanness lies her holiness. She looked upon love as the cardinal virtue to be developed in her life. She reminded her Sisters that charity refreshes and enlivens and that love of one's neighbor is living proof of love of God.[2] Catherine was demonstrably affectionate; she loved many dearly, including Frances Ward, her soul friend. She cared about each woman who companioned her in her community of mercy. She reached out in love to her relatives in times of joy and sorrow. When her sister Mary died, for example, Catherine responded by going to live with her brother-in-law William and his children. Her desire was to accompany her relatives in the difficult experience of mourning the loss of their and her beloved.

Catherine's loving nature was equally visible in the compassionate way in which she welcomed the poor into her life.

Catherine's loving nature was equally visible in the compassionate way in which she welcomed the poor into her life. She literally spent herself, i.e., her time, energy, talents and financial resources, to fulfil her dream of enabling the poor to live dignified lives. Throughout cities and villages in Ireland and England, Catherine and her Sisters became personally acquainted with many of the poor to whom they offered food, shelter, and clothing as well as educational experiences rooted in Christian principles

A very important dimension of Catherine's humanness is her acceptance of her limitations and imperfections. Speaking to her Sisters, Catherine insisted: "Let us not be distressed that others know our faults. We all have our imperfections and shall have them until our death."[3] In a desire to learn from her mistakes, Catherine invited a young Sister in her community to bring to her attention any of her faults or omissions of duty.[4] Her realistic sense of her own imperfections enabled Catherine to resist dwelling on others' shortcomings.

Catherine resembles Dorothy Day inasmuch as both women spent substantial periods of each day in prayer. Like Dorothy, Catherine oftentimes rose early in the morning to eke out some time from her busy schedule to rest in God's presence. Through her experiences of prayer, Catherine learned to trust God completely. In a letter to Sister M. Angela Dunne, Catherine wrote: "Tell me all the news you have about

your school, and sick poor, and your little children. ... Put your whole confidence in God. He will never let you want necessities for yourself or your children."[5]

It is noteworthy that when Sisters went forth from the original Baggot St. House of Mercy to commence ministries in such cities in Ireland as Tullamore, Carlow, and Cork, resources were lacking. No recruits to the Mercy community appeared in Charlesville; the new community in Birr was financially unstable. In the midst of such circumstances, Catherine trusted profoundly in God's providence. In this way, she lived out the counsel of her friend, Fr. Edward Armstrong, who encouraged her to place all her confidence in God.[6]

Catherine's educational vision was shaped by her personal qualities of openness of mind, flexibility, affection for others, acceptance of the shadow side of self, and constancy in communing with God.

Catherine's educational vision was shaped by her personal qualities of openness of mind, flexibility, affection for others, acceptance of the shadow side of self, and constancy in communing with God. Her compassionate love of the poor impelled her to provide them with practical educational experiences aimed at their self-empowerment. The Irishman Dr. Blake was correct in his assessment that Catherine was "one selected by Heaven for some great work."[7] The array of educational ministries she established attests to the fact that Catherine's mission was indeed a great work of mercy.

Influences on the Development of Catherine's Educational Vision

Various people exerted an influence on the development of Catherine's vision of education. These include her father James, the Armstrongs, and the Callaghans. Catherine's father, who died when she was only seven years old, was a true Irish gentleman.

On Sundays, he invited poor children into the family house at Stormanstown in order to distribute food and clothing to them and instruct them in the Catholic faith. Thus, at an early age, Catherine experienced her father as a role model. He taught her that true education must take into consideration the intellectual, spiritual, psychological, and material needs of a person. Most of all, he demonstrated to her that Christianity is a "treasure to be shared with others."[8]

After both of her parents were deceased, Catherine lived in various situations. At the Armstrong residence, she experienced a barrage of assaults on her faith. In order to more intelligently counter objections to such beliefs as the Eucharistic presence of Christ, she became more educated in Catholic doctrine. Fr. Thomas Betagh, a scholarly cleric in Dublin, introduced her to a variety of religious texts that enriched her understanding of the Catholic tradition. In later years when Catherine taught religion, she drew upon the knowledge she gained at this time of her life.

After living with the Armstrongs, Catherine took up residency with the Callaghans, an elderly couple who had amassed a considerable fortune in India. For twenty years, she lived with them at their Coolock House. Mrs. Callaghan was a Quaker. From her, Catherine learned reverence for the dignity of each person; concern for any person in need; the intolerability of injustice; respect for the talents of women; and the value of daily reading and praying the scriptures. These learnings became an integral part of Catherine's vision of education.

The Callaghans were very aware of their responsibility to share their wealth with both the poor they employed and the destitute in the village near Coolock.[9] To this end, they provided Catherine with material resources to support her errands of mercy to the poor and sick in the neighborhood.[10] She used these opportunities not only to distribute provisions to the poor but also to listen to their agonies and instruct them in the Christian faith. After the Callaghans died, Catherine began to teach at St. Mary's Parochial Poor School on Middle Abbey St. There she fostered a spirit of self-help in the poor by teaching them homecrafts such as needlework and knitting.

Catherine's Educational Principles and Values

Catherine deemed education one of the primary ministries of her religious community. The first decade of the existence of the Institute of Mercy brought phenomenal growth which included the establishment of poor, training, and pension schools. During this time Sisters of Mercy also sponsored catechetical programs for adults and established a teacher training center at the Baggot St. House.

During her novitiate year with the Presentation Sisters, Catherine was exposed to their system of Christian education. At this time, under the tutelage of these Sisters, Catherine gained experience in the classroom. Noteworthy is the fact that in the original Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy the sections which deal with education are taken almost verbatim from the Presentation Rule.

For Catherine, education is rooted in the r's of religion, reading, writing, and arithmetic. To these basics she added education in domestic science, since she realized that this type of learning would enhance the possibility of those enrolled in Mercy schools

being able to secure gainful employment. She insisted that each school day begin with a twenty minute lesson regarding some religious topic. She also encouraged teachers to begin and end instruction in other subjects with a short prayer or a brief spiritual reading.[11]

Catherine registered Mercy schools with the National School Board. She did so because she was convinced that exposure to national standardized examinations offered a peculiar challenge to students. Furthermore, since she realized that the number of Sisters available for teaching could not keep pace with need, she introduced the roles of teacher assistant and peer tutor into classrooms.

Catherine developed learning environments conducive to students' self-expression and creative exploration. She sought competent instructors to staff comfortable classrooms. Convinced that effective teaching occurs through both word and example, she wrote to her confidant, Sister Mary Frances Warde: "Sister Mary Teresa White has delighted me telling of the instructions you give. Show them in your actions as much as you can."[12]

Professional updating was an educational value Catherine embraced. She herself modelled this principle by spending time at the Kildare St. School where she studied advances in instructional methods. She committed resources to the ongoing professional development of her teachers and administrators. For example, she encouraged teachers at her pension schools to pursue further studies in languages, mathematics, music, and painting.[13]

As an educator, Catherine viewed herself as animator. She sought to inspire others to accomplish their educational mission of mercy by responding, in an integral way, to the needs of those they served. To this end, she emphasized the holistic nature of the learning experience.

Catherine's Spirituality and Qualities of the Christian Educator

In the spirituality of Catherine McAuley, it is possible to identify various qualities essential to the Christian educator. These include: a spirit of patience and humility; prayerfulness; acceptance of the cross; an attitude of mercy and love; and enthusiasm for service.

Spirit of Patience and Humility

According to the vision of Catherine McAuley, patience is a trait of the Christian educator. A playful verse that she wrote for Mother M. Elizabeth reads: "Keep patience ever at your side. You'll want it for a constant guide."[14] According to Catherine, it is imperative that the Christian educator maintain a calm and persevering manner in the midst of agitating situations.

Catherine describes humility as possessing self-knowledge, which includes the realization of one's inability to do even the smallest thing without the aid of both God and others.[15] According to Catherine, one who teaches should not seek to "excite applause, to be noticed, or to be particularly distinguished in that office."[16] Rather, the humble educator places her/his academic labors in God's hands and rejoices in whatever good is able to be accomplished in and through these endeavors. Likewise, when difficulties, set backs, and failures occur, the educator remains undisturbed at the deepest level. This is true since, as Catherine indicates, one's center is God from whom all originates and to whom all ultimately returns.

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Prayerfulness

In Catherine's spirituality, prayer is essential to the life of the Christian educator. To be genuine, the work of the educator must be rooted in an ever deepening communion with God, the source of one's generosity and courage in carrying out the tasks of this profession. For Catherine, teaching is an act of prayer and praise of God. To teach is to express in word and deed what one cherishes in the inner recesses of one's being, i.e., that God is Love and that the life of one who abides in God must overflow with love. The work of the Christian educator is meant to be a potent expression of the love of God and others.

Acceptance of the Cross

The Christian educator accepts the cross in ministerial experience. Referring to the cross of trials or opposition, Catherine perceptively notes that "Some great things which God designs to accomplish would be too much joy without a dash of bitterness in the cup."[17] Her reflection directly applies to the educator who experiences diminishments such as misunderstandings, inability to respond to the needs of some students, overwork, or lack of appropriate remuneration for professional services rendered. Through acceptance of suffering in whatever form it takes, the Christian educator follows Jesus who bore the cross of apparent defeat which paradoxically brought forth the glory of the resurrection. Like Jesus, the Christian educator believes that the bitterness in the cup will be transformed into the wine of new life.

Attitude of Mercy and Love

The Christian educator reflects the compassion of God. She or he chooses in freedom to respond to others' needs in a merciful, loving way. The educator whose ministry expresses the mercy of God "receives the ungrateful again and again and is never weary of pardoning them."[18] In Catherine's words, the "proof of love is deed."[19] The Christian educator regards students and colleagues with affection and reverence and, in this way, manifests what Catherine calls the "unction of charity."[20]

By fostering the full flowering of the gifts and talents of both students and colleagues, the educator demonstrates the empowering nature of love. She/he offers to and receives from others support and encouragement in the light and dark moments, joys and sorrows, accomplishments and failures that are integral to the human journey. By embracing the shadow side of self, the Christian educator is able to accept others' weaknesses and limitations and, thereby, extend Catherine's legacy of charity in the here and now.

Enthusiasm for Service

The Christian educator seeks to carry out ordinary responsibilities in an extraordinary way. She/he takes seriously Catherine's belief that "There is nothing of greater consequence than the perfect discharge of our ordinary duties."[21] The educator remembers Catherine's counsel that a person engage in each work as if it were the only one she/he has to perform.[22] For, according to Catherine, by taking small steps that lead to important strides in the ministry of education, one gives glory to God.

Social Justice Dimensions of Catherine's Educational Vision

Through her abiding respect, love, and concern for the neediest of her day, Catherine demonstrated her commitment to the social justice dimensions of the Christian educational vision. She understood that to be merciful is to act justly by being in solidarity with the poor. She realized that to live mercy is to seek and find Jesus in the faces of the starving, homeless, sick, uneducated, and unemployed and to extend practical, active love to them. Her statement, "The poor need help today, not next week,"[23] conveys the urgency she felt for the neediest. For Catherine, loving the poor meant empowering them, especially through education, to become the architects of their own future.

During her youth, Catherine personally experienced destitution when she lived with the Conways.

> *There were days when those of the household had almost nothing to eat, and there came at last nights when they had but the floor on which to sleep. ... Frequently after an entire day spent without food, they had nothing but a little bread at night.*[24]

Later in her life, as the first Sister of Mercy, Catherine consciously chose to identify closely with the poor. By adopting a simple lifestyle, she entered into solidarity with them. Her room at the Baggot St. House of Mercy was small and sparsely furnished. She wore second-hand clothing and ill-fitting shoes. Oftentimes, when there were visitors in the convent where she was staying, Catherine slept in an old chair. Whenever possible, she chose the least costly mode of transportation for her travels.

Catherine utilized her entire inheritance from the Callaghans to benefit the poor. When the Baggot St. House opened, she found a child on the city sidewalk. This little girl's "parents had just died of fever and the heartless landlord had evicted the child... from the dingy cellar they had called home."[25] Catherine's instinctive response was to take the child home with her. There she bathed and fed this orphan who became the first orphan to receive hospitality in the new House of Mercy.

Catherine was a visionary who dreamed of improving the social conditions of the neediest of her day.

Catherine's dream of doing justice through mercy quickly spread from her Baggot St. foundation to various places in Ireland and England. She always responded to immediate needs for food, shelter, and clothing. At the same time, she sought to effect systemic change by providing educational opportunities for the poor. Her first classrooms were in the Baggot St. House of Mercy. As years progressed, schools sponsored by her religious community sprang up in different locations. The purpose of these educational endeavors was to meet the ongoing needs of the poor and middle class.

Catherine was a visionary who dreamed of improving the social conditions of the neediest of her day. To achieve this end, she sought to build bridges between the uneducated and educated, the unskilled and skilled, the poor and rich. In Carlow, Tullamore, Charleville, and Cork, Ireland, she saw the establishment of secondary level pension schools. In these institutions, Sisters of Mercy and their collaborators educated middle-class students regarding their responsibility to respond to the needs of less fortunate brothers and sisters.

At first, Catherine and the small group of women attracted to living out her vision of mercy met with disdain because they took to the streets where they ministered to the poorest of the poor. In the midst of opposition, Catherine and her Sisters continued to extend God's healing mercy to those who lived in

slum areas in Ireland. Thus, these first Sisters of Mercy demonstrated that no obstacle could hinder their seeking justice and mercy for God's anawim or poor.

Catherine's Educational Vision: Challenges for the 21st Century

Carrying Catherine's educational vision into the future involves finding creative ways to embody her dream. Those committed to extending her educational mission into the twenty-first century must explore innovative ways to meet learning needs. Educators must offer instructional experiences to the unskilled and unemployed that will enhance their chances for a positive economic future. Perhaps there will be more mobile educational units in the future in order to make learning opportunities more accessible to the poor.

Through the use of more and more sophisticated telecommunication systems, members of educational institutions will be able to travel the electronic superhighway in unprecedented ways in the future. This will enable learning communities to respond more effectively and compassionately to the various needs of people at local, state, national, and international levels in the world community. Additionally, many will engage in foreign language learning at an accelerated pace through the use of computer technology equipped with visual, audio, and interactive capacities. This will enhance communication among various ethnic groupings and, thus, contribute to a greater appreciation of multiculturalism.

Service learning through volunteer commitments will be able to be integrated into all levels of the curriculum. This will enable Catherine's bridge building activity to continue in the present, since it will link persons of differing economic and educational backgrounds. It will also provide a mechanism for those being educated to extend the works of mercy to others in very meaningful ways.

Central to Catherine's educational vision is its religious dimensions. Those who carry her vision forward into the future must seek ways to communicate the richness of the Christian tradition in cultures in which the ethics of love faces such obstacles as self-centered individualism, materialism, and the devastating effects of violence and crime. In the midst of this situation, Catherine's prophetic message of mercy and justice is as relevant as it was in her own day. Catherine McAuley stands among those who endeavor to carry her educational vision into the twenty-first century. Her spirituality and timeless pedagogical principles provide wisdom and courage to all who seek to share the educational dream she shaped and implemented in her own century. May the grace of God and the empowerment of Catherine enable all who minister as Christian educators to embody her dream in vital forms in the new millennium.

Endnotes

1. A Sister of Mercy of the Diocese of Oklahoma, *The Spirit of M. Catherine McAuley* (Oklahoma City: Sisters of Mercy - Mt. St. Mary's Academy, 1922), 15.
2. Ibid., 12.
3. Ibid., 46 quoting Catherine McAuley.
4. Sister M. Angela Bolster, *Catherine McAuley in Her Own Words* (Dublin: Dublin Diocesan Office for Causes, 1978), 50.
5. Roland Burke Savage, S.J., *Catherine McAuley: The First Sister of Mercy* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, Ltd., 1949), 238, quoting Catherine McAuley.
6. See Bolster, *Catherine McAuley in His Own Words*, 24.
7. See Savage, *Catherine McAuley: The First Sister of Mercy*, 103 quoting Catherine McAuley.
8. Ibid., 7.
9. Sr. M. Carmel Bourke, RSM, *A Woman Sings of Mercy* (Sydney: E.J. Dwyer, 1987), 32.
10. Ibid., 26.
11. Savage, 268.
12. Mary Ignatia Neumann, RSM., ed., *The Letters of Catherine McAuley* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), 111.
13. See Savage, 269.
14. Ibid., 247, quoting Catherine McAuley.
15. Mary Teresa Purcell, RSM and M. Bertrand Degnan, RSM, Comp., *Retreat Instructions of Mother M. Catherine McAuley* (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1952), 101.
16. Ibid., 158.
17. *Familiar Instructions* collected by first Sisters of Mercy (St. Louis: Vincentian Press, 1927), 136.
18. Bolster,18, quoting Catherine McAuley.
19. *Retreat Instructions*, 147.
20. *Familiar Instructions*, 108.
21. *Retreat Instructions*, 161.
22. See *Familiar Instructions*, 91.
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24. M. Bertrand Degnan, RSM, *Mercy Unto Thousands* (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1957), 16.
25. Bourke, 43.

Open Receptivity to the Mercy of God

Mary Rose Bumpus, R.S.M.

The mercy of God, like the figure of Woman Wisdom, is a cosmic spirit whose presence is marked by her power to create, to heal, to restore, to renew, and to bring justice to the world. Buddhists call this spirit compassion, Navajos - reciprocity, liberation theologians - solidarity, and feminists - mutuality. Her universal character is described simply and eloquently by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

I say that we are wound
With mercy round and round
As if with air . . . .[1]

At the same time, the mercy of God is inevitably embodied: incarnated in distinct historical and cultural realities, located in specific places and settings, and enfleshed in particular communities and persons. Catherine McAuley was one such embodiment. Born in Dublin in 1778 and founder of the congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, Catherine became so animated by the spirit of mercy that she inspired others to become living witnesses to the creative and healing power of this great charism of God.

Part I: Introduction

In what follows, I will offer some reflections about one important dimension of the charism of mercy in the life of Catherine McAuley. I will also raise some questions about the meaning and significance of this aspect of the charism for those women and men of Mercy living and ministering today in the United States.

From the outset it is important to state that these reflections are offered hesitantly for the following reasons. First, a charism is both a gift and reflection of some face of the great mystery of God. That God is merciful is clearly manifested in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That God's mercy is ultimately an unfathomable mystery is demonstrated in the Christian Scriptures. The Scriptures tell many stories and use words with whole constellations of meanings to point to various aspects of God's mercy.[2] Scripture informs us that mercy involves God's deeds on behalf of the world and within the context of human history. It also employs the term "mercy" to describe the quality of God's care for the universe, i.e., God is compassionate, loving, tender, gracious, faithful, kind, slow to anger, etc. While it is very important to continue to reflect upon and try to articulate certain aspects of the charism of mercy which are experienced within particular cultural and historical milieus, it is also necessary to acknowledge from the outset that a mystery, a gift such as this, can never be fully understood or analyzed.

Second, there is much about the life and inner journey of Catherine McAuley that we will never know. As was the custom in her day, Catherine does not speak directly of her inner experience of God. Consequently, what may be gleaned about this relationship is that which shines through her letters, her retreat instructions, and the original rule.

Third, it is important to note that I am being very selective in this discussion. Many other aspects of the charism of mercy could be and have been addressed. The direction statement of the first general chapter of the Sisters of Mercy of the Institute of the Americas gives eloquent testimony to the fact that Sisters of Mercy today strive to be instruments of God's mercy to those most particularly in need.[3] This is an aspect of the charism which is clearly evident in Catherine's letters and which I am assuming in these reflections. Another important dimension of the charism is the understanding that Sisters of Mercy are united with the compassionate sufferings of Jesus Christ particularly by their presence with and among persons who are poor. It is quite possible that this aspect of the charism is being given its most lively witness today by those women and men who are working and ministering alongside persons who are poor in the less affluent nations of the world. This aspect of the charism, too, I am assuming.

In these reflections, I will be focusing on a third dimension of the charism, one which I believe to be primary in the life of Catherine, and one which, if diminished, can lead to a distorted understanding of other aspects of the charism. I would describe this dimension as open receptivity to the mercy of God. This open receptivity enables us to become aware that we live our lives in acknowledgement of our need for God's mercy and in gratitude for God's steadfast love. What follows is an exploration of the essential qualities of this dimension of the charism and a description of Catherine whose life gives eloquent testimony to the power of one woman's open receptivity to the mercy of God.

Part II: Open Receptivity to the Mercy of God

Gratitude

According to a number of philosophers, theologians, and psychologists, openness is "the most distinctive and essential structure of human existence."[4] For it is this openness which enables us to be present to God, to future possibilities, to the world, to others, and to self. As human beings we have been created with the capacity to be open to the transcendent. And it is this openness which allows us to respond freely to God's invitation to relationship and to receive freely the Holy Spirit who empowers us to enter ever more fully into this relationship of trust. It is in virtue of this fundamental openness to the transcendent that we may choose to accept the gift and power of God's life and

love, and to receive the signs and expressions of God's compassionate mercy.

Given the appropriate climate, human beings grow in "openness to experience."[5] As we become more and more open and develop our capacities for receptivity and presence, we also grow in our ability to see, experience, and appreciate all of life as gift. As Brother David Steindl-Rast describes it: ". . . everything is gratuitous, everything is gift. The degree to which we are awake to this truth is the measure of our aliveness. Are we not dead to whatever we take for granted?"[6]

If gratitude is the measure of our aliveness, then Catherine McAuley was indeed open to the life of God with which she felt herself surrounded.

If gratitude is the measure of our aliveness, then Catherine McAuley was indeed open to the life of God with which she felt herself surrounded. In fact, one cannot read her letters without getting the distinct impression that there is little in Catherine's life that she takes for granted. Her letters are overflowing with gratitude, and as far as Catherine was concerned, all of life was a manifestation of the presence of God's loving kindness.[7]

Catherine often expresses her gratitude, first for the ordinary everyday stuff of life.

> *Your packet of notes and letters afforded me great comfort, and I am most grateful to you and all my dear Sisters for them; they were real recreation to me. Please God I will soon have the happiness of thanking each personally.*[8]

> *I never like anything better than I now like a good drink of water. My health is remarkably good, thank God.*[9]

While "little matters" like these were not to be forgotten,[10] Catherine also gave expression to her "gratitude writ large" in her genuine joy and happiness where the life of the Sisters was concerned.

> *All are good and happy. The blessing of unity still dwells among us, and oh, what a blessing! It should make all things else pass into nothing. All laugh and play together: not one cold stiff soul appears. From the day they enter, all reserve of any ungracious kind leaves them. This is the true spirit of the Order; indeed the true spirit of Mercy flowing on us . . . .*[11]

For Catherine, God is the author of all life and the one who showers us with merciful love. This is just as true, and maybe even more so, in the midst of the most tragic events of life. On hearing of the death of one of the Sisters in the Limerick community, Catherine writes: "I do not think any event in this world could make me feel so much. I have cried heartily and implored God to comfort you. I know He will."[12]

All her life Catherine grew in her open receptivity to the merciful love of God, and she responded to God's loving kindness with a grateful heart. In her Act of Consecration, Catherine proclaimed it this way:

> *I consecrate my memory to Thee. It shall always remind me of your infinite perfections, your goodness, your supreme attractions. I shall place my delight in the remembrance of your favours, of your love and mercy to me. Could I use any means more effectual to penetrate me with love and gratitude towards you?*[13]

This spirit of gratitude - an essential quality of mercy - sees, acknowledges, remembers, appreciates, and receives the tender loving kindness of our God.

Acceptance

Catherine's spirit of gratitude was informed by and helped to shape her understanding of the human person as both uniquely gifted by God and as limited and finite. Human beings have their strengths and weaknesses, and Catherine was well aware of this. While she did not ignore either, her primary stance toward self and others was one of genuine acceptance, an essential quality of mercy.

This quality of acceptance is apparent even when Catherine is dealing with inherited understandings of person and of religious life which were dominant in the early 1800's. For example, in her retreat instructions given to novices, Catherine states that "the state of religious life is sovereign perfection." However, in light of her knowledge of human nature, Catherine qualifies this notion of perfection in significant ways.

> *Having done all you can, let not the embers of your weakness deter you from proceeding. There will always be something to deplore, and there would be neither priests nor nuns, did they wait till they eradicated all their imperfections. Our perfection does not consist in eradicating all imperfections but in using diligently every means in our power to attain perfection . . . .*[14]

In their context,[15] these remarks of Catherine seem to suggest that we are expected to do all in our power to attract the friendship of God and to become the persons that God calls us to be.

At the same time, Catherine makes it clear that this work, i.e., "perfection" of any kind, is not human work; it is the work of God. In this regard, Catherine can be found near the center of the Christian tradition which has long grappled with the precise roles of freedom and grace within the life of the Christian community. Catherine acknowledges that it is important for persons to make choices which empower them to grow

in mercy toward friendship with God. At the same time, she maintains that any such "transformation" is indeed the work of God. Here Catherine stands with other great spiritual leaders in a tradition which asserts that "conversion" or "transformation" is ultimately the work of the Spirit.

In addition, Catherine believed that this transforming work of the Spirit was designed for a specific purpose which included individuals but which also went well beyond them. According to Catherine, it is the order, the Institute of Mercy, which was designed for perfection, and its perfection is defined by the peculiar object of the congregation.[16] The object of the community of Mercy, as stated in the original rule, is as follows: " . . . a most serious application to the Instruction of poor girls, Visitation of the Sick, and Protection of women of good character.[17] For Catherine, then, this notion of perfection was continually being nuanced by her understanding that growth in the Spirit was, in significant part, the work of God, benefitted those whom the community served, and strengthened the individual.

It seems apparent from this discussion that Catherine saw human beings as gifted and talented and at the same time as limited and finite - persons who, by their very nature, stand in need of God's mercy.

It seems apparent from this discussion that Catherine saw human beings as gifted and talented and at the same time as limited and finite - persons who, by their very nature, stand in need of God's mercy. This understanding engendered in Catherine a consistent attitude and posture of acceptance toward others.

There is also a distinct quality of self-acceptance which can be observed in Catherine's letters. Her feelings, thoughts, and desires as well as her references to the feelings, thoughts, and desires of others are stated in a matter-of-fact way. We have already seen evidence of Catherine's openness to joy, happiness, surprise, wonder, excitement, etc., as we pondered the way in which her spirit moved in gratitude. And Catherine was no stranger to tears, frustration, feelings of sorrow, loss, anger, and disappointment.

Another disappointment to me. I cannot have the happiness of being with you . . . [18]
I feel quite deserted this morning.[19]
Thank God I am at rest again and now I think the name of another foundation would make me sick. But they say I would get up again. Indeed the thought of it at present would greatly distress me.[20]

In another very interesting letter written shortly after the death of one of the Sisters, Catherine expresses her doubts about contemporary piety and her desire that life might be different.

Mr. Mulhall, a very spiritual priest . . ., came to see us on the death of Sister Mary Francis Marmion and said: "I congratulate you. You have, or will soon have another friend in Heaven. How delightful to be forming a community there!" I asked him would it be wrong to hope that it was now formed.[21]

Catherine knew herself as a human being, and for Catherine, this meant that she was aware of her need for the mercy and love of God without denying the gifts and strengths which had been given to her. This kind of openness and receptivity which is manifested in acceptance of self and others will become more transparent as we look at two other essential qualities of mercy in which Catherine's spirit thrived, i.e., humor and mutuality.

Humor

One cannot help but appreciate and enjoy Catherine's wonderful sense of humor which appears again and again in her correspondence with others. And it becomes apparent upon further perusal that Catherine employed her sense of humor in at least three different ways.

First, for Catherine, humor was a forum for gently and sensitively pointing out to another some limitation which she believed needed acknowledgement. In writing to the mistress of novices and offering words of wisdom about lack of favoritism, Catherine writes a poem which ends this way:

Yet do you not know full well, my dear,
such love should never enter here?
By many pangs you've learned to know
it ever ends in pain and woe.
These things, my dear, do not forget:
Let none again e'er be your Pet.
And, lest an angry dart should strike -
in future, love them all alike.[22]

On another occasion, Catherine communicates to the assistant superior at Baggot Street that her sighs and complaints are considerably overdone. For whatever reason, Sister Mary de Pazzi did not like to see the sisters of the Baggot Street community go out to other foundations even for brief intervals of time. And when they left, Mary de Pazzi would commence with great lamentation. Hence, the following scenario:

Mother de Pazzi and I have kept up a regular concert of sighing and moaning since the Sisters went; but this day I was resolved not to be outdone, or even equalled, so commenced groaning for every sigh she gave, and now our sorrows have ended in laughing at each other.[23]

From these examples we can see that when dealing with the limitations of others, Catherine's playful nature allows her to communicate her basic acceptance of and affection for the person in the process.

The second manifestation of Catherine's sense of humor can be seen in the juxtaposition that occurs between the serious and the playful. Paradoxically, those things which begin as very serious matters are soon turned to light-hearted merriment and some things which begin in light-hearted jesting become the ground for that which is more serious.

For example, the first Mercy convent in Birr had no official name. From Birr Catherine writes to Sister Mary Cecilia Marmion at Battot Street, Dublin, about the Birr community's choice for a name:

> *We have proposed calling it Baggot Street. This little non-sensical proposition produced such immoderate laughing that I really was alarmed for Sr. Aloysius. I never saw her laugh in such a manner and I was choking. However, Baggot Street it is.*[24]

In another letter, Catherine reveals that her own inner thinking processes make the shift from serious to playful or vice versa. On one occasion, the English Sisters from Birmingham who were making their novitiate at Baggot Street asked if they could visit Limerick after their profession to see the new convent there. The trip would cost nine travelers at least eighteen pounds. Catherine reflects:

> *Ought I to sanction such application of money as if it were found on a hill? The Rational and Irrational powers have been contending ever since the thought was suggested. They discoursed as follows:*
>
> *R: Would not so much money accomplish some good and useful object?*
>
> *Ir: Perhaps that money would not be forthcoming for any other purpose, but lie dead and do nothing.*
>
> *R: Would not a mere visit of such distance tend to dissipate the fruit of their meditation for and after profession?*
>
> *Ir: Seeing a branch of the Institute so short a time formed now fully and regularly established might rather serve to strengthen their pious resolutions and animate their hopes for what they were about to undertake.*
>
> *R: Could they not be told of it? Surely they would not entertain any doubt.*
>
> *Ir: What we are told by unquestionable authority inspires confidence but what we see confirms it.*
>
> *R: Where would they lie down at night?*
>
> *Ir: Anywhere.*
>
> *R: They could not get into the refectory.*
>
> *Ir: They could get in, but it would be difficult to get out. I admit there would be more fun than feeding there.*[25]

By the time that Catherine had finished her inner dialogue, she had moved from very serious considerations of the issue to very playful ones. My hunch is that, consequently, the burden of choice became much less weighty for Catherine. In the end, they did not go to Limerick because the date of their profession of vows was delayed by their bishop.

Good laughter is an expression of love . . .

Finally, I want to mention one last dimension of Catherine's sense of humor as it will lead us to an exploration of our next essential quality of mercy. Catherine's humor is a sign of great affection for others. Karl Rahner in an essay entitled "Everyday Things" suggests that only those persons who have genuine affection for others have a "true sense of humor." Good laughter is an expression of love:". . . it may be said to give us a glimpse of, or a first lesson in, the love that God bears for every one of us."[26] Catherine's sense of humor was a sign and expression of her genuine affection and love for others.

Mutuality

Having described several ways in which Catherine employed her sense of humor, we are now ready to reflect upon a final quality of her open receptivity to the mercy of God: mutuality in relationship. Catherine's deep gratitude for the gracious love of God, her acceptance and acknowledgement of the need for God's mercy, and her rich sense of humor were highly significant in the ways in which she related to other members of her community, to persons who were poor, and to others as well. In addition, there are three rhythms in these relationships which are particularly striking — mutual trust, mutual need, and mutual love and affection.

Mutual trust was characteristic of the way in which Catherine interacted with others. Those who knew Catherine during her later years and wrote about her after her death consistently comment on her capacity and willingness to listen. They also remark on respect with which Catherine treated all human beings regardless of their status or social positions. Catherine could be trusted because she treated others with dignity, respect, and genuine affection.

Catherine, too, trusted others. It was not unusual for Catherine to ask very young women, those she believed capable, to be superiors of new foundations. Catherine offered these young women significant support by being with them during the first thirty days of a new foundation. Her trust in them is demonstrated in her letters to them. While she would offer advice or

make suggestions to these women, she also believed that the best person to actually make the final decision was the one in the midst of it. She writes to Sister Mary Teresa White:

You might write to him if you are not provided. I do not think it would be well to have a child who could not remain always, but I leave you free to do what you think best. I am satisfied you will not act imprudently, and this conviction makes me happy as far as you are concerned.[27]

And on another occasion she writes: "Thanks be to God, I find the Sisters can act as well as could be desired when I am not at home . . . ."[28]

Underlying these rhythms of mutual trust and interdependence is the basic pattern of mutual affection and love.

In addition to the mutual trust that one discerns in Catherine's relationships, there is also the mutual understanding of, expression of, and response to genuine need. In July of 1837 Catherine was away from her own Baggot Street community when she received word that her niece, Sister Anne Agnes, was dying and asking for Catherine to be with her. Catherine returned home immediately and subsequently wrote to Sister Elizabeth Moore: "I am weary of all the travelling, and this morning I fell down the second flight of stairs. My side is quite sore, but if ever so well able, I could not leave my poor child."[29]

This expression of need for support was not a one-way street. Catherine, too, did not hesitate to ask for various kinds of support. During the chaplaincy controversy at Baggot Street, Catherine made many attempts to settle the problematic situation with the local pastor. Finally she writes to Sr. Mary de Pazzi:

Will you relieve me from the distressing business about the chaplain. It is constantly before me, and makes me dread going home. I know it is not possible for me to have any more argument with Dr. Meyler without extreme agitation . . . .

Do get me through this.[30]

Catherine depended on the support and help which she received from her Sisters.

Underlying these rhythms of mutual trust and interdependence is the basic pattern of mutual affection and love. Nothing seemed so dear to Catherine as the bonds of charity and love which were formed among the members of the newly established congregation. The only rule which the community had in its earliest years was the chapter on "Union and Charity" adopted from the Constitutions of the Presentation Sisters.[31] And it was Catherine's greatest delight to experience that union and charity in the congregation.

One thing is remarkable, that no breach of Charity ever occurred among us. The Sun never, I believe, went down on our anger. This is our only boast. Otherwise we have been deficient enough and far, very far, from cooperating generously with God in our regard; but we will try to do better.[32]

This notion of union and charity was not simply a highly generalized communal concept for Catherine. In an age in which friendship was sometimes seen as contrary to one's relationship with God, Catherine delighted in friends and believed in the power of friendship.

Though absent, dear Sister,
I love you the same.
That title so tender
remembrance doth claim.

Your name is oft spoken
when, kneeling alone,
I sue for high graces
at God's Mercy throne.

Then I say not "Religion
to friendship is foe:
When the root is made healthy
the plant best doth grow.[33]

This affection and love permeates the spirit of Catherine. Gratitude, Acceptance, Humor, and Mutuality . All are enveloped with signs and expressions of affection, of mercy, and of love. Catherine's open receptivity to the mercy of God animated her relationships and because she was such an engaging person, she inspired others to participate in the creative and healing power of God's mercy. Having looked at four essential qualities of mercy, what can we say at this point about Catherine and the spirit of mercy, then and now?

Part III: Mercy, Then and Now

Catherine's Spirit

Catherine McAuley was open and receptive to life— to its serious and playful sides, to its joys and sorrows, to its age old rhythms of dying and rising, holding-on and letting-go, moving forward and standing still. When we participate in the fullness of life as Catherine did, we hold on to those ancient patterns which foster the genuine expression of the mercy of God. This will often require our courage and always our commitment.

At the same time, if we want to be open to new understandings and expressions of mercy, then we need to let go of ways of thinking and acting which are not adequate reflections of this charism. We might also need to let go of our preconceived notions about how mercy is to be embodied or enacted in particular

historical and cultural realities. The life of Mercy requires a kind of participation which, at its most fundamental level, means nothing less than the engagement of one's entire self.

Catherine McAuley sensed and responded to the basic patterns and rhythms of life, and she did so, not alone, but in concert. She was attuned to the subtle and, the not so subtle, patterns, gestures, movements, needs, and desires of others.

Like Catherine, women and men of mercy spend time with and listen to others. They learn to see as others see and to communicate in another's language. They recognize that all human beings are invited to experience and to participate in the spirit of mercy, and they take delight in the talents and gifts of others.

At the same time, women and men of mercy know themselves and others as vulnerable and limited. Catherine McAuley experienced herself as one in need of the tenderness, affection, compassionate mercy, and love of others. Both her early life and her later correspondence give witness to this. This kind of vulnerability and openness is experienced by anyone who acknowledges the pain and sorrow of life.

Women and men of mercy also know themselves to be limited and finite. While we try to act in concert with others, we find ourselves inadvertently stepping on one another's toes or missing another's outstretched arms. And, upon occasion, we move in the wrong direction altogether. Thus, it is important that we are ever aware that mercy is first and foremost a reflection of the life-giving dynamism, presence, and power of God.

Catherine McAuley's openness and receptivity to others and to life itself was rooted in her complete trust and confidence in the mercy and love of God. This implies that Catherine spent time being present to God. Being open and present to God means listening to the deepest inner desires of one's own heart, hearing one's ultimate longing for God, and attending to the quiet inner promptings of the Holy Spirit. Catherine became so attuned to promptings, gestures, expressions, and signs of mercy that one might indeed ask: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"[34]

Open Receptivity to Mercy in These United States

I would now like to bring these reflections to a close by making a few observations and raising a few questions about this particular dimension of the charism of mercy in the context of the late twentieth century United States. It is important to begin by acknowledging that the dominant culture of the United States encourages its citizens to succeed, to work hard, to make progress, and to strive toward self-fulfillment. These goals are not in and of themselves necessarily negative. However, as they are currently defined, a great deal of emphasis is placed on notions of individual control, i.e., mastering, achieving, making time, getting time, etc. And in addition, the culture encourages us to reach these goals by functioning almost entirely independently of one another.

Many of us, women and men of Mercy ministering and living in the United States, acknowledge that we have been influenced by and that we struggle with our cultural heritage. While we strive to recapture or to embrace the positive aspects of this culture, we also struggle against those aspects of the culture which are not genuine signs and expressions of a gospel way of life. In the midst of this struggle, it seems important to think about ways in which we might re-focus our energies in order to participate more fully in the healing and creative power of God's mercy and to respond more adequately in and to this particular cultural setting. I would like to offer a couple of suggestions in this regard.

First, it seems very important to me that we remember that Catherine lived a fairly balanced life. Indeed she was a woman committed to being an instrument of God's mercy to those most particularly in need. She was also a woman who was united with the compassionate sufferings of Jesus Christ particularly by her presence with those persons who are poor. At the same time, she was a woman in need of the tender mercy of God, and she was open and receptive to this mercy as it was manifested in the events of life and in the myriad kinds of relationships she had with others.

Forgetting this latter dimension of the charism can lead to a kind of deadly seriousness about ourselves as ministers, an over-emphasis on self-reliance and achievement, and a lack of balance between work and leisure, seriousness and play, self and other, and the inner and outer dimensions of our lives. Lack of awareness of this dimension of the charism can also lead to a kind of forgetfulness that it is God who is the author of all mercy.

Second, I think we might find it advantageous to ask ourselves the following kinds of questions: Are we willing to "work" a little less and, as Catherine put it, "waste time" with others? What are others saying to us about their need for God's mercy and their desire to participate in this healing and creative energy? How do we experience the mercy of God as it is manifested to us in and through others? Do we need to deepen our understanding that mercy is the sign of God's care for the universe and, consequently, grow in our ability to trust that the presence of God's mercy is at work in the world? Can we let go of our concerns about our ultimate destiny or about the ultimate destiny of our institutions just enough that we might sense the next movement of the Spirit in our communal life?

If we worked a little less and spent more time listening to the deepest desires of our own hearts, what would we hear today? Might we come to know ourselves as women and men in need of God's Mercy? Might this growing realization engender deeper levels of acceptance, provoke far-reaching and powerful

bonds of mutuality, and create more merriment and affection among ourselves and with others? Finally, might we come to that deeper gratitude of heart which Catherine evinced in her daily life for all the ways in which God's love surrounds us?

I say that we are wound
With mercy round and round
As if with air . . . .

Endnotes

1. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe," in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th ed., W.H. Gardner and N.H. Mackenzie, eds. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 93.
2. For further clarification about the ways in which the Hebrew words "rahamim" and "hesed" are translated by constellations of words relating to the concept of mercy, see the following: Rudolph Bultmann, "Eleos," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and abridged by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., The Paternoster Press, 1985), 222-24.
3. In the introduction to her book, *A Woman Sings of Mercy* (Sydney: E.J. Dwyer, 1987), Mary Carmel Bourke states that "Sisters of Mercy today strive to witness to God's loving-kindness and to be instruments of his mercy to all in need," viii.
4. Peter Hodgson, *New Birth of Freedom: A Theology of Bondage and Liberation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 159.
5. Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin Co., 1961), 173-74.
6. David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 12.
7. Catherine McAuley to Sister Frances Warde, 28 May 1841, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1827-1841*, ed. by M. Angela Bolster (Diocese of Cork and Ross, Ireland: Published by the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, 1989), 230. Hereafter cited as: *Correspondence*.
8. Catherine McAuley to Sister Mary de Pazzi, 3 October 1837, *Correspondence*, 33.
9. Catherine McAuley to Sister Teresa Carton, 19 January 1841, *Correspondence*, 189.
10. Catherine McAuley to Sister Mary de Sales White, 7 December 1840, *Correspondence*, 173. Catherine tells Mary de Sales that it is important not to forget little matters such as thanking someone for a letter.
11. Catherine McAuley to Sister Elizabeth Moore, Easter Monday, 12 April 1841, *Correspondence*, 221.
12. Catherine McAuley to Sister Elizabeth Moore, 21 March 1840, *Correspondence*, 126.
13. Catherine McAuley, "Act of Consecration," December 1831, *Correspondence*, 7-8.
14. Mary Teresa Purcell, *Retreat Instructions of Mother Mary Catherine McAuley*. Ed. Mary Bertrand Degnan (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1952), 26. These Retreat Instructions were compiled by Sister Mary Teresa Purcell from the notes taken by novices at retreats given by Catherine.
15. These remarks about perfection come at the center of reflections that begin with an invitation to union with God and end with a description of those who become God's friends through perfect love of God. Catherine is encouraging the novices to pursue this union with God wholeheartedly and with great vigor.
16. "And this being sufficiently established, it is not to be doubted, but that when God institutes a religious order, He gives at the same time the grace that is necessary for such an order, and for all those who are called to that order, that all may attain to the perfection for which it was designed; hence none can attribute to themselves the success that may attend their vocation, because it is the fruit which God intended to produce when He instituted the order and granted the means to propagate it" (emphasis added).
Catherine McAuley, "Spirit of the Institute," 1841, *Correspondence*, 245.
17. *Rule and Constitution of the Religious Called Sisters of Mercy*. This quotation is taken from a copy of the rule which was typed from an illuminated manuscript made in the 1850's. This copy contains the letter of approval by Pope Gregory XVI, dated June 6, 1841 and is available in the McAuley Room of the Russell College Library, Burlingame, CA, 1975.
18. Catherine McAuley to Sister Frances Warde, 27 September 1839, *Correspondence*, 95.
19. Catherine McAuley to Sister Frances Warde, 12 October 1840, *Correspondence*, 152.
20. Catherine McAuley to Sister Frances Warde, 12 October 1840, *Correspondence*, 152.
21. Catherine McAuley to Sister Elizabeth Moore, 24 March 1840, *Correspondence*, 127.
22. Catherine McAuley to Sister Cecilia Marmion, 11 March 1841, *Correspondence*, 207.
23. Catherine McAuley to Sister Mary de Sales White, 18 October 1840, *Correspondence*, 155.
24. Catherine McAuley to Sister Cecilia Marmion, 15 January 1841, *Correspondence*, 187.
25. Catherine McAuley to Sister Elizabeth Moore, 18 October 1840, *Correspondence*, 154.
26. Karl Rahner, "Everyday Things" in *Belief Today* [Theological Meditation Series ed. by Hans Kung], (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 30.
27. Catherine McAuley to Sister Teresa White, 12 October 1838, *Correspondence*, 67.
28. Catherine McAuley to Sister Mary de Pazzi, 15 November 1838, *Correspondence*, 73.
29. Catherine McAuley to Sister Elizabeth Moore, 27 July 1837, *Correspondence*, 29.
30. Catherine McAuley to Sister Mary de Pazzi, 4 October 1837, *Correspondence*, 34-35.
31. M. Joanna Regan and Isabelle Keiss, *Tender Courage: A Reflection on the Life and Spirit of Catherine McAuley, First Sister of Mercy*, (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988), 98.
32. Catherine McAuley to Sister Elizabeth Moore, 13 January 1839, *Correspondence*, 84.
33. Catherine McAuley to Sister Frances Warde, 1837, *Correspondence*, 47.
34. William B. Yeats, cited in Norman Jeffares, *W.B. Yeats: A New Biography* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988), 281.

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- **What is MAST?**
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