

# *Catherine McAuley and the Path of Mercy*

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First published in Sisters of Mercy  
Editions du Signe, 1996  
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## *The Pathway Appears*

Catherine McAuley was born on September 29, 1778 at Stormanstown House just outside the city of Dublin, Ireland. Through his work in the building trades her father, James McAuley, was able to provide comfortable circumstances for his wife, Elinor Conway, and their children. In addition to Catherine, the McAuleys had a daughter, Mary and a son named James.

Even more than comfortable circumstances, James McAuley provided his family with the example of a heart stirred by the plight of the poor. Often gathering poor children who lived in the vicinity of Stormanstown House, he taught them the truths of the Catholic faith. Even though Catherine was only five years old when her father died in 1783, his compassionate spirit continued its formative influence.

The death of James McAuley marked the beginning of a long period of instability for his survivors. Elinor McAuley, described as charming though somewhat frivolous, was not as financially astute as her husband and, under her unskilled management, the family gradually declined into poverty. They became dependent on the goodness of relatives and eventually moved into the home of her brother, Owen Conway. Two years later Elinor contracted tuberculosis. She had given up the practice of her religion at her husband's death fifteen years earlier. She now faced her own death tortured by fear and anxiety. Her disturbed and disturbing passing left its mark on Catherine, engendering a fear which did not leave her until late in her life.

Soon financial reverses assailed the Conway household. To relieve them of concern for her, Catherine joined her sister and brother in the home of another relative, William Armstrong. Under the influence of these Protestant relatives, Mary and James had given up the practice of their faith. In this environment, there was little tolerance for the Catholic religion. Catherine was often put to the test. Despite the limitations of her own religious education and total lack of support, Catherine steadfastly held to her beliefs in the midst of regular questioning and ridicule.

## *Preparing for the Journey*

In 1803, God's goodness manifested itself in the form of an invitation to take up residence with Catherine and William Callaghan, friends of the Armstrong's. The Callaghans had

recently returned from many years in India. As Mrs. Callaghan was in delicate health, they offered Catherine a position as her companion. This was to be a twenty-year sojourn, a time of learning and of deepening conviction. Here the tender power of mercy began to more clearly shape Catherine's life.

Long unable to freely study or practice her religion, Catherine found herself now at liberty to do both. She began to attend church services and sought out local clergy who instructed her in the tenets of her faith. Though the Callaghans gave financial support to Catherine's charitable works, they asked her not to display religious artifacts in their home. Respectful of their wishes, she knelt before the intersecting panels in her bedroom door or found the sign of the cross in the interlacing tree branches. Inspired by her father's memory, Catherine began catechetical instructions with the household servants and the poor children of the village. She taught needlework to young women and opened a small shop to sell their wares. As Mrs. Callaghan's health became more frail, Catherine gradually assumed increased responsibility for the management of the household and for Mrs. Callaghan's care. A member of the Society of Friends, Mrs. Callaghan took great comfort in having the scriptures read to her. This Catherine did by the hour. Ultimately, inspired by the devotion of her gentle caregiver, Catherine Callaghan converted to Catholicism.

The loss of those she loved was a constant theme in the life of Catherine McAuley. The death of Mrs. Callaghan was followed by that of Anne Conway Byrn, Catherine's beloved cousin. Anne left four small children who Catherine brought to live with her at Coolock House. As Mr. Callaghan's health began to fail, he looked to the disposition of his property and fortune. Considering Catherine as one of his heirs, he inquired of her what use she would make of a possible inheritance. She responded that she would use the benefice to provide protection and education for young servant girls.

William Callaghan's will named Catherine McAuley and Robert Powell, his niece's husband as joint executors. Unfortunately, this gentleman was overheard by Mr. Callaghan remarking on the ungracious treatment Catherine would receive when Mrs. Powell became mistress of Coolock House. These remarks led William Callaghan to add a codicil to his will naming Catherine sole residual legatee. She was to inherit William Callaghan's entire estate – amounting to approximately \$3,000,000.00 by today's reckoning.

### *A Direction Chosen*

Because the Powells contested the will, the Callaghan estate did not become available to Catherine immediately. When it did, she began to put into effect her plan to educate poor servant girls. Her inheritance allowed her to think now in broader terms and so she extended her vision to include a variety of social services for poor women and children.

In 1824, she leased property at the corner of Herbert and Baggot Streets in Dublin and hired a contractor to commence work on the building. The McAuley family looked askance at this project, her brother James christening it "Kitty's Folly." There was, however, no folly in Catherine's choice of location for her social service center. It was in the heart of an affluent Dublin neighborhood. Her clear intention was to bring the wealthy into daily contact with the poor. Her hope was that those who God had blessed with material security would thus be moved to support and perhaps join in her service.

During the three years required to erect the building, Catherine prepared herself for the work ahead by studying educational methods. She traveled to France to observe the educational system there, visited the prestigious Kildare Place Society Schools around Dublin and became an instructor at St. Mary's Poor School. She continued to oversee the management of Coolock House while she prepared for its sale. During the illness of her sister Mary, she moved into her home to care for her and her children. Mary died in 1827. When her husband also died two years later, their five children chose Catherine as their legal guardian bringing to eleven the number of her children in her care.

The house on Baggot Street was ready for occupancy on September 24, 1827. Coincidence or act of providence, the fact that this date is the Feast of Our Lady of Mercy inspired Catherine and her co-workers to give the name House of Mercy to the new building. Thus they claimed an identity and a spirit for their works. Anna Maria Doyle and Catherine Byrn, who had joined Catherine in the preparations, moved into the building and began the works of mercy for which it was intended. For the next three years, the House of Mercy and its works flourished. The first year saw two hundred girls enrolled in the school. To the ministry of education and the refuge for young women were added the visitation of the sick poor. Many volunteers attracted by Catherine's spirit and inspired by her work, joined their energies to hers.

### *A Path Named Mercy*

A core group of twelve women lived at Baggot Street in these early years devoting themselves full time to the works of the House of Mercy. Over time, they adopted a common horarium, began to dress simply and similarly and lightheartedly called one another "sister". The question of their status gradually became a serious one, however. Archbishop Murray of Dublin and several others among Catherine's friends and advisors encouraged her to consider establishing a religious congregation. The fact that religious communities of women were, in this era, cloistered made this idea uncongenial to Catherine. But assured that she and her companions would be able to continue the work among the poor, which had become so central to their endeavors, she finally consented.

On September 8, 1830, she, along with Anna Maria Doyle and Elizabeth Harley, went to the Presentation Convent on George's Hill, Dublin to begin their novitiate. Catherine was 52 years of age. Fifteen months later, on December 12, 1831, the three novices professed their vows giving birth to the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy. Catherine's vision was expressed concisely and clearly in the original constitutions: "The principle aim of this

congregation is to educate poor girls, to lodge and maintain poor young women who are in danger...and to visit the sick poor."

What had begun as a personal dream, had, through the benefice of William Callaghan and the urging of the Church, now taken its place as the central purpose of the new order.

Eight years later, asked to recount the beginnings of the congregation, Catherine offered this simple and self-effacing description:

"It commenced with two, Sister Doyle and I. The plan from the beginning was such as is now in practice. In '27 the House was opened. In a year we were joined so fast that it became a matter of general wonder...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 Harley to George's Hill to serve a novitiate for the purpose of firmly establishing it. In December '31 we returned and the progress has gone on as you know." (Letter to Sister Elizabeth Moore, January 13, 1839)

### *The Pathway Branches*

The concluding phrase of this simple narrative, "...progress has gone on as you know," embraces an amazing story of growth and expansion. As Catherine's passion for the poor took root in the hearts of her companions, the gift of Mercy spread across Ireland and England. In the ten years between the founding of the order and her death, Catherine founded nine Convents of Mercy. The first was to the town of Tullamore in April, 1836 and the pattern begun here was repeated in many subsequent foundations. What drew Catherine to Tullamore was the severe poverty and the need of the people. "If we don't take Tullamore, no other community will," she declared, relying as usual on her Provident God to prosper the work and provide for the sisters. As superior of this new community, she took her first companion Anna Maria Doyle, now Sister Mary Anne.

Here Catherine initiated the practice of remaining with a new foundation for its first month, assisting in the establishment of the ministry and leading the Thirty Days' Prayer for the success of the foundation. Another custom begun in Tullamore was the practice of holding a public profession ceremony in order to introduce the townsfolk to the life and spirit of the Sisters of Mercy and to inspire other young women to enter the community. Before Catherine left Tullamore she had the pleasure of welcoming two new members.

Over the next five years, Convents of Mercy were opened in the Irish towns of Charleville, Carlow, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Birr. Bermondsey and Birmingham in England are also among Catherine's foundations. Although she was quick to note that "every place has its own peculiarities and feelings which must be yielded to when possible," she also, in each place, repeated the pattern established in Tullamore. To each foundation she provided her loving presence and prayer until the sisters were reasonably secure and the ministry well established. Where possible, she conducted public ceremonies of reception

or profession to introduce the townsfolk to the meaning of lives dedicated to God. Time after time, she depleted the number of sisters at Baggot Street in order to respond to a need urgently expressed. She placed her whole confidence in God who rewarded her generosity in kind. In a January, 1839 letter to Sister Elizabeth Moore, Catherine wrote:

“We have now gone beyond one hundred in number and the desire to join seems rather to increase, though it was thought the foundations would retard it, it seems to be quite otherwise. There has been a most marked Providential Guidance which the want of prudence, vigilance, or judgment has not impeded, and it is here that we can most clearly see the designs of God.”

Two years later she wrote again to Sister Elizabeth Moore (Easter Monday, 1841) describing the spirit, which characterized the congregation and its members:

“All are good and happy. The blessing of unity still dwells amongst us and oh what a blessing, it should make all else pass into nothing. All laugh and play together, not one cold, stiff soul appears. From the day they enter, reserve of any ungracious kind leaves them. This is the spirit of the Order, indeed the true spirit of Mercy flowing on us...”

Catherine was also being depleted by the constant travel necessitated by the growth of the congregation. Her delight in these experiences, however, is captured in a letter to Sister Cecelia Marmion of January 4, 1841: “Hurrah for foundations, makes the old young and the young merry.”

While each new foundation was governmentally independent of the motherhouse at Baggot Street, Catherine linked them to one another through a constant round of visits and, more often, letters. The latter she called her Foundation Circulars. In them, she conveyed news of the congregation, offered or sought advice, created verses to amuse or to soften a correction, shared her joys and disappointments. To Sister Mary de Sales White she describes this constant round of travel as a series of dances:

“I think sometimes 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*, too old for your memory. I’ll have to curtsie [sic] and bow in Birr presently to change corners, going from the 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. I’ll then have a *Sea-Saw Dance* to Liverpool and a Merry Jig that has no stop to Birmingham and I hope a second to Bermondsey. When you, Sister M. Xavier and I will join hands and dance the *Duval Trio* each on the same ground.”

The letter then changes spirit as from this playful account she draws both insight and consolation:

“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. Oh may he look on us with love and pity and then we shall be able to do anything He wishes us to do, no matter how difficult to accomplish or painful to our feeling.” (December 20, 1840)

### *The Journey's Toll*

Catherine's letters are also sprinkled with news of her health – a fall down the stairs, a painful inflammation of the mouth, a sore leg. “I feel the frost most acutely in my right side from my hip to my ankle,” she wrote to Sister Cecilia Marmion. “I have put on a great flannel bandage with camphorated spirit, and trust God it will, like a dear good old acquaintance, carry me safe back.” (February 5, 1841) More and more it is her “cough” of which she writes. “To create some pious excitement my cough was worse last night than any cold night in winter.” (To Sister Frances Warde, May 1841) “I need not say much about the cough. If I bring it back it will speak for itself, if not, we have no objection to part this one companion.” (To Sister Julia Hardman, May 13, 1841) A letter to Sister Theresa White in 1838 indicates that the fear of death which had accompanied her earlier years had blessedly faded. “There is a most simple, inviting tomb just opposite the cell I occupy...It looks delightful and excites meditation of the most consoling kind.”

Catherine's last journey was to Birmingham. She set out for this final foundation in the happy knowledge that the Holy See had granted confirmation of the Rule and that her congregation was now firmly established. Once in Birmingham, illness began to make its claim on her. While she remained for the Thirty Days Prayer, her thoughts turned to preparation for her last days at Baggot Street. She wrote to Sister Theresa Carton with instructions for the preparation of the infirmary adding at the end, “It is strange to me... to write so much about myself and to give such trouble.” (September 8, 1841)

### *A Step Toward Eternity*

Once at home, Catherine began quietly to put her affairs in order. By early November she became bedridden and on the 8<sup>th</sup> she received the last sacraments. Visits from family and community members filled her last days. For each she had a personal word and a blessing. Although she had completed her formal will before leaving for Birmingham, she now told the sisters who kept vigil at the bedside that her legacy to the Institute was charity. She urged them to preserve union and charity, adding “Do this and your happiness shall be so great as to cause you wonder.” Concern for the fatigue of the sisters gathered round her led to her now cherished wish that they should “...have a good cup of tea when I am gone.” Catherine McAuley died on November 11, 1841 and, according to her wishes, was laid in the ground like the poor. The deep sorrow of family, friends and

community members is perhaps most simply and poignantly expressed by Sister Theresa White: "I feel sad to have outlived her."

"Each day is a step we make towards eternity," she told her sisters, "and we shall continue thus to step from day to day until we take the last step, which will bring us into the presence of God." The path of Mercy upon which Catherine McAuley faithfully walked, had finally led her into the presence of the God she loved and served with her whole heart.