



# Tender Courage

by  
Sister M. Joanna Regan, R.S.M.

## **TENDER COURAGE**

A Brief Sketch  
of the First Sister of Mercy

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Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy

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## TENDER COURAGE

It began almost 200 years ago.

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 the woman of compassion, Catherine Elizabeth McAuley, an heiress who gave all her wealth to the poor, and a woman of faith who gave a new religious family to the Church.

Living within intersecting circles of suffering, Catherine learned early to enclose within her own heart the sufferings of others and to feel the pain in others as her own pain. Year by year, event by event, she developed that tender, courageous response that brought forth from the heiress the House of Mercy, and from the woman of faith the Sisters of Mercy.

### Land of Sorrows

Ireland in the late 18th and early 19th Century was a land made miserable. Its poor were wretchedly poor; its sick, helplessly sick; its ignorant, hopelessly ignorant. The instrument which kept the majority of the population so impoverished was the Penal Code. This punishment law, enforced through various Parliamentary Acts, applied since the 17th century against those who would not accept the English sovereign as Head of the Church. Catholics who resisted such acceptance had their lands confiscated, education denied, worship forbidden, and religious institutions demolished.

Those permitted to remain on confiscated lands had to pay rent to the new and often absent landlord. To prevent a future build-up of wealth or strength by the owner-turned-tenant, each had to divide his leased holdings among his children. Each succeeding generation received smaller and smaller parcels until there was left only the barest minimum to sustain life. Those put off their lands were left to wander into the slums of the cities or off to the barren areas of the west where the land produces little but rock, furze, and bog.

Probably in no other country under English rule at that time were the poor so blatantly and systematically kept impoverished by this enforced land surrender with its rack rents and absolute landlord system, as well as by disenfranchisement, deculturation, and the presumption of both law and genteel society that these Irish Catholics had brought on themselves

their own wretchedness by stubbornly remaining intransigent, unproductive, unruly, unkempt, and unwilling to better themselves.

The worst evils of an oppressive government were kept alive by ardent, religion-based political prejudices. On the Protestant side there was a strong antagonism against Catholic affiliation with the Pope, with Rome, and with the Catholic Stuarts. Catholics were thought to be traitors as well as a scandalous sect. Irish Catholics, in their turn, had a horror of everything Protestant coupled with a thorough-going hatred of England under whose rule they were suffering.

Moderate men and woman on both sides had begun to look for peaceful and just solutions to the social, political, and economic problems of Ireland. They were long thwarted, however, by the blazing hostility that sears both sides of the struggle-hostility that continues even to this day in northern Ireland.

The Repeal of the Penal Laws was begun in 1798 when Catherine McAuley was nearing 20. This set in motion the slow, steady, relentless progress toward an Ireland whose native people were free to own land, to pursue education, to build schools and churches, and to direct both local and national affairs.

Without the dedication of gifted men and women, tasks of rebuilding a life-style reflective of human dignity and restoring knowledge lost to the greater multitudes would have been impossible. Few provided efforts more lasting, more on-going than Catherine Elizabeth McAuley.

### Land of Promise

Not all Irish Catholics were abjectly poor. Gleaming white cottages housing sturdy farmers and their families dotted the entire land. In spite of hardship and handicaps suffered for their faith, these industrious and hard working families forced the land to yield a proud living.

In urban areas, as the Industrial Revolution gained momentum, the building of cities kept pace, bringing along a concurrent relaxation of the Penal Code. Enterprising builders, merchants, craftsmen, distillers began to amass modest fortunes regardless of religious affiliations. James McAuley, Catherine's father, seems to have been one of these. His steady rise is chronicled in leases signed from 1756 until 1783. On the first, he signed himself, carpenter. Later, he signed builder, then grazier (cattle grower), and finally, James McAuley, Gent. This last indicates a person of wealth and property whose land and investments work for him.

This new group of wealthy Catholics tended to become Anglo-Irish in their social customs, attitudes, and sympathies. If Catherine had a father other than James McAuley, she might have lived a graceful life in polite society, insulated from the sufferings of Ireland's poor and fed on false

assumptions concerning them.

### **Obligations of Wealth**

Born to comfortably wealthy parents in an age of sharp division between the have's and the have not's, Catherine learned from her father a different pattern in dealing with the poor from that which prevailed in upper class society. It was a recognized Christian duty to give alms to the needy. It was a lady's duty to distribute these alms. It was not, however, a practice to show understanding or compassion, but rather to treat the duty of charity as a condescension, the bestowing of a reward on those deemed worthy.

The manner in which James McAuley gathered the waifs and strays to his home at Stormanstown House on Sundays and holidays entered Catherine's heart and life experience before she was five. She observed the good manners extended to the least of the children her father taught and the concern with which he looked after their pressing needs. She evidently absorbed the effect kind treatment had on these children and also took in the importance her father attached to his Catholic heritage and to the children's.

Sharing her father with these children was the beginning of her giving to the poor according to their needs rather than according to her own convenience. Others of the household seemed to find the Sunday intrusions an embarrassment.

### **Pain of Loss**

The mystery of suffering entered the life of the child Catherine at the death of her father in 1783 when she was hardly five. The McAuley circumstances began to decrease steadily. Stormanstown House, the home of so many memories of her beloved father, was sold and the family moved to smaller quarters on Mary Street. From here, Catherine probably made her First Communion and Confirmation at St. Paul's Church. While no record exists of her having received these Sacraments, she often claimed the grace of Confirmation sustained her throughout her personal struggle for integrity of faith. An observant child, Catherine recognized that while she had been schooled in every refined and useful accomplishment, her religious education was quite inadequate. She observed that none of the relatives and friends who frequented the house had the courageous, firm, gentlemanly stance toward Catholicism that her father had had. She realized too that her mother, a young widow described as an independent thinker, leaned more toward the Protestant response to life than to the Catholic.

Whatever tensions or perplexities this set up in the teen-age

Catherine, she was most attentive to her lovely mother as much to assuage her grief at the loss of her husband and protector as to win her approval. Although very successful at forming perfect and graceful manners in her three children, Catherine, Mary, and James, Elinor Conway McAuley was very unsuccessful in her attempt to manage her husband's estate. Pre-Victorian ladies, as well as their successors, were not educated to manage affairs of finance. Because each new need was met by selling off a parcel of the estate, at Elinor's death there was little to leave her three children.

The death of Elinor McAuley was made particularly painful by her remorse and fear of dying which teen-age Catherine would willingly have taken away. Poorly instructed as she was, however, she hardly knew what to do or to say. This experience proved so shaping an event that years later when Sister Catherine McAuley established the Sisters of Mercy, she saw it as an important duty to visit the sick poor in their homes and to assist the dying to die at peace with God and man. One of her first collection of prayers hand-copied from the few available printed Prayer Books of the day were prayers to be said at the bedside of the sick and the dying.

### **Catholic-Protestant Tension**

After Elinor McAuley's death, Mary and James went to live with cousins of their mother, the Armstrongs, who were vigorously Protestant. Catherine chose to live with her mother's brother, Dr. Owen Conway, whose family were practicing Catholics. Here she found a most congenial atmosphere. Along with her social duties, she visited the poor, tended the sick, and taught children during afternoon outings in Dublin with her cousins and their friends. But this respite was short-lived. When Dr. Conway's fortunes reversed drastically, Catherine had first-hand opportunities to experience hunger, cold, and other privations of the poor. She discovered that in spite of her training as a refined and delicate lady, she could endure a great deal of hardship. Some of her ability no doubt sprang from this very training. To this Spartan-like background, however, she had added the hidden and often unrecognized factor, spiritual strength harvested from private prayer, reflection, and habitual acts of loving sacrifice for others. She learned so well to ignore her own discomfort in favor of another's that when the Armstrongs offered her a home, she accepted in order to reduce the burden on the Conways.

In the Armstrong household Catherine was surrounded by Protestant society hostile to Catholicism. No morally upright and staunch Christian of the 19th Century could be indifferent to the religion practiced by the members of his household. William Armstrong was aggressive in his

attacks on the Roman Catholic Church and determined to win Catherine away from the religion associated with servants and ignorant peasants. Often hearing Catholic teachings held up to scorn and the practices of the faithful ridiculed, Catherine felt the burden of her own ignorance of religious truth beyond all but an elementary level.

Caught in the tension of wanting to do what would promote harmony within the home, yet finding herself strangely unable to yield the religion of her father in which she had been baptized and confirmed, Catherine became a student of Protestant and Catholic teachings. She consequently began to realize how much of what she had heard in attack and defense sprang from prejudice and lack of knowledge. For herself, her studies strengthened her Catholic faith, resolved her doubts, and enabled her to give her whole being to it with great peace.

Catherine both loved and admired her relatives and Protestant friends. She would have chosen to be one in sentiment and practice with them if it were possible. Finding that impossible, her exquisite courtesy forbade her to offend by any outward or visible practice of faith those who had given her a home but forbidden Catholic practice within it.

To remain resolute under attack without aggressiveness, to endure deep hurt without bitterness, to continue to hold in affection those who opposed and criticized what she so loved, pointed to rich gifts of the Spirit at work in her understanding love and tender courage.

### **Hidden Life**

After almost five years at the Conways and Armstrongs, Catherine was offered in 1803 still another home with distant cousins of her mother, the Callahans, returned from a 20 year sojourn in India. Charmed by her grace and abilities, this childless couple, well past the stage to attempt to bring up a small child asked the self-possessed young woman to be a daughter to them. Gradually they gave over to her the management of their Coolock home and estates, enabling her to do much good for the poor in their name.

One area these staunch Quakers would not permit to Catherine during the 20 years she lived with them was the presence in the home of any visible sign of Catholicism. She had trained herself early to see the reflection of God's presence in nature and in artifacts. It was not difficult for her to make the cross beams of the door the cross before which she prayed, nor to find her prayer community "below stairs" with the servants. The depth, intensity, and single-heartedness of this prayer so dearly bought shaped and sustained her.

During these years, Catherine met learned and holy priests who directed her reading of the Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, and the

writings of many saints. Mrs. Callahan whose health had failed often required nursing care which Catherine lavished upon her, caring for her and comforting her in every way. For long hidden years, the sacred readings read as Mrs. Callahan lay sleeping or resting penetrated the mind and heart of Catherine McAuley. She read these books not out of a sense of duty, nor to be learned, nor to satisfy curiosity. She read them to seek, a way of life, a way for her to respond to the world in which she was living and to feed as well the life of prayer she continued to live in secret.

Catherine herself had experienced hunger, cold, ridicule, scorn; she had experienced being homeless, being dependent on the will of those who provided for her; she experienced what is called today second-class citizenship; she had, in fact, as she glided through the drawing rooms, ballrooms, and down the avenues of princely estates experienced what the Irish poor experienced so much more desperately.

Although she spent whatever free time she possessed in the service of the poor and the sick and in instructing the children of Coolock, a call was growing within her to do something more permanent for Ireland's poor.

! ! ! ! !

Catherine, the woman, prepared by God for the remarkable events that were to transpire, became in quick succession heiress, builder, foundress, missionary, and heroic daughter of the Church.

### **Heiress**

William Callahan delighted in the skill with which Catherine administered his contributions to the poor. As a Christian gentleman, he took seriously his responsibility to give 10% of his income to charity. Watching her stretch this charity to provide for as many as possible, he remarked she would do great good with whatever money she had. At his death in 1824 he named Catherine his sole heiress. The estate he left her would translate in modern inflationary times to approximately \$1,000,000.

### **Builder**

Of the many experiences she had while administering Coolock House, the most difficult were those when she was asked for help and could not give it. One experience in particular bred in her a determination to find some means to respond to needs without bureaucratic red tape. The crisis situation that haunted her involved a young domestic servant in moral danger at her place of employment. She needed a place to "live out". The girl had her pride and did not seek to be taken in out of charity. She wanted a proper place to live and she asked Miss McAuley to help her to find it.

Catherine went immediately to those institutions that house young women. She was put off until the committee should meet to examine the request. Her pleas about the urgency involved had no effect. Catherine attended the meeting of the committee to no avail.

The girl was victimized.

When Catherine McAuley found herself an heiress, she made two resolutions. She determined that her inheritance would be used for the relief and instruction of the poor and that she would build a refuge for distressed women of good character.

The resultant House of Mercy, a huge building on the corner of fashionable Baggot and Herbert Streets, Dublin, opened formally September 24, 1827, Feast of Our Lady of Mercy. The placement of her house where the poor would be visible to the rich and where young women could find employment nearby was deliberate. At the House of Mercy, young hopefuls were trained in needlework, laundry, and other domestic services. Careful training improved job possibilities and provided a ladder upwards. Instruction in faith and its practice and training in good manners were designed to lay a solid foundation for the

day they would preside over hearths of their own.

Convinced that the careful education of women contributed to incalculable good not only to them, but also to society, Catherine fostered a fine sense of individual dignity, attentive care to person and surroundings, and sound devotional practices as her paramount aim. She knew what her society had to say of the Irish poor. In her mission of service, she wanted to provide means for unprotected girls and women to develop beyond that criticism.

### **Lay Apostle**

Determined to provide education to the children of the poor of Dublin, Catherine acquainted herself with current techniques and procedures at schools in France and Ireland. When she presented herself at the prestigious Kildare School, she found a vigorous and thinly disguised proselytizing at work. To offset this, she provided for the inclusion of a large schoolroom in building a House of Mercy where, along with up-to-date schooling, the Catholic faith would be taught and practiced.

She turned her attention also to the patients of Sir Patrick Dunn's Hospital. In many instances, confinement in early 19th Century hospitals was a last resort. Patients were sent when they were expected to die. Catherine who had nursed so many through their last illness knew first hand the fears that beset the sick and dying. She wanted to comfort and assist hospitalized Catholics whose spiritual needs were so neglected at that most crucial time, especially as a Catholic priest was rarely granted entrance. To gain permission of Protestant officialdom, she arrived in her carriage accompanied by other ladies of fashion. She sought visiting privileges on a regular basis. Here as at Kildare Schools, it was assumed that she and her companions were Protestants doing a charitable duty. Permission was readily granted. Later these visitors from the House of Mercy became the first Catholic religious to minister there. When cholera struck Dublin in 1832, Catherine and her sisters nursed the sick day and night. Sir Patrick Dunn's hospital had the lowest death rate of the epidemic. He attributed much of this success to the unflagging care of the Sisters. (This pattern of response brought Sisters of Mercy to the field hospitals of Crimea in Europe and those of the Civil and Spanish American Wars in the United States.)

### **Modern Executive**

Catherine was directing the affairs of three households when she initiated the school, the visitation of the sick, and the house of refuge which fast became a training school and an employment agency. Still

responsible for Coolock, she went to live with her sister's family because of Mary's terminal illness. Here she managed the home for Dr. William Macauley and their five children while nursing her sister. She visited Baggot Street daily, overseeing its development, having installed as residents two of her associates, Mary Ann Doyle and Catherine Byrne, her cousin and ward.

At her sister's home, Catherine was again under attack by relatives and friends for squandering her fortune on the thankless poor, for erecting a plain unadorned building in the heart of a fashionable neighborhood, and for her persistence about Catholicism. She stood her ground. Memoirs indicate a woman who could calmly assert she had been left the fortune in order to do good; who could defend money invested in needed services rather than on unnecessary elegance, and who could presume that in religious matters each must follow the dictates of conscience. Often her lively disposition and keen sense of fun enabled her to be playful in her replies. When deeply hurt, she remained grave and self-contained.

She attracted her two nieces and three nephews to embrace the teachings of Catholicism by this and by the quiet power at work in the way she lived her daily life among them. The challenging example of inner strength aroused her sister's interest in the religion of her early childhood and Catherine had the happiness of seeing Mary die in great peace, reconciled to her baptismal faith. Her brother-in-law William's death a short time later added to her responsibilities. William Macauley's will left his children free to choose for guardian either their Uncle James, an Army surgeon—proudly, militantly Protestant—or their Aunt Catherine—quietly, uncompromisingly Catholic. Much to James' chagrin, each of her two nieces and three nephews chose Catherine. Somehow, those who drew close to Catherine wanted to share in the source of her strength, goodness, and tender courage.

### **Foundress**

In rapid succession, the works of Mercy from Baggot Street increased. The number residing in the House increased. The number of associates increased. The number of poor who were served, visited, nursed, and instructed increased. A good deed, however rarely occurs on this earth that does not call forth both opposition and misunderstanding. Catherine's project became a storm center of criticism. Some of the faithful felt the House of Mercy rivaled works of the Sisters of Charity and would drain financial support from them. Some clerics took offense that lay women were doing freely and under self direction what the daughters of Mary Aikenhead, the foundress of the Irish Sisters of Charity and Nano Nagel,

foundress of the Presentation Sisters were doing within the structures of the Church. To further confound the issue, the builder of the House of Mercy had used conventual architecture; the ladies had adopted simple dress; and they had begun to address each other affectionately as sister.

Catherine was particularly devastated by these criticisms. She had carefully schooled herself to handle opposition with compassionate understanding, but opposition from those whose interests she supposed to be the same as her own left her knowing not where to turn. So deeply did she feel this new attack that in 1829 when the House of Mercy Chapel opened as a public oratory, she did not attend the opening Mass but prayed quietly alone.

Throughout Catherine's development as a mature Christian, she had had the direction of learned and holy priests. At each stage in her career, she had discussed her plans and aspirations with them. Dean Lube, Rev. Thomas Betagh, S.J., Rev. Edward Armstrong advised her concerning her early decisions regarding the use of her inheritance. Dr. Michael Blake, Bishop of Dromore, was a loyal friend and eloquent advocate of the new enterprise. Dr. Daniel Murray, Archbishop of Dublin, gave his official approval to each new outreach. Consulted on the erection of the House of Mercy, each had stretched Catherine's thinking, although neither she nor any of her advisors had thought she was in the process of founding a convent.

During the furor that the House of Mercy occasioned, one priest took it upon himself to inform Catherine that the Archbishop wanted the House of Mercy handed over immediately to the Sisters of Charity. It would be difficult to over-estimate the sacrifice that was asked of Catherine by this assertion. She had committed her entire fortune to works crying out to be done. She had her own plans for development of capable young women of enlightened faith and for the provision of a good education for the neglected children of Dublin's poor. To hand over what she thought was the work God gave her to do brought on hours of interior struggling in the darkness that often forges greatness of soul and full liberty of spirit.

At the end of her struggle, Catherine wrote to Archbishop Murray offering the House of Mercy to him. This may have been the moment which gave birth to the Sisters of Mercy.

Dr. Daniel Murray arrived in person the next day, declaring he had not authorized the priest's visit or remarks. Archbishop Murray urged, however, that Catherine and her associates choose between religious and completely secular life. He strongly suggested that the work would have little future beyond her lifetime if it were not developed into a religious institution.

Her deep faith in the action of God in all events did not permit

Catherine to dismiss the Archbishop's suggestion, no matter how uncongenial she found it. And because her understanding of Catholic religious life was influenced by the environment in which she had spent almost forty years, she found it very uncongenial.

When she spoke of this development to her associates, some were delighted, some were willing, and some volunteers ceased their association. Three set out on September 8, 1830 for the Presentation Convent at George's Hill, Dublin, to be schooled in religious communal life: Catherine McAuley, Mary Ann Doyle, and Elizabeth Harley.

### **Novice**

Catherine had two different major superiors during her stay, each with a different attitude to the Dublin heiress preparing to establish her own Order. The first treated her as an older, mature woman, giving her the specific training required for a major religious superior. The second felt that Catherine should experience what every novice experiences. She sought to exercise her humility, patience, and charity. Sister Catherine, who had served many severe novitiates during her lifetime, met each test with that refinement of soul which only those possess who yield entirely to God.

For Catherine, the novitiate was a time of recollection, interior quiet, and deep prayer. Catherine acknowledged a deeper realization of Who had been calling her, moving her, and giving her rich blessings to dispense. She remarked later, "I feel a cog in some great wheel," an apt image in the early days of the Industrial Revolution. A sense of stewardship, not new to her, living as she did with relatives and benefactors, put down deeper roots as she prepared herself for consecrated stewardship. Again, she determined wholeheartedly to put her every resource at the disposal of God and His poor.

The novitiate was not, however, unalloyed joy. She was troubled by reports of sickness at Baggot Street. During her absence things had been deteriorating due to excess fervor. More than a few of the little band had injured their health in long fasts, prolonged prayers, and all night vigils added on to long hours of work. Catherine's practical zeal was sorely needed.

### **First Sister of Mercy**

The ceremony that marks the official beginning of the Sisters of Mercy was the profession held December 12, 1831 at Presentation Convent, George's Hill, Dublin. As soon as the ceremony ended, the three hurried across town to Baggot Street. Rejoicing at their return had brief existence. Catherine was not home long before two Sisters were buried in the vaults

of the Carmelite Fathers in Clarendon Street, with Sister Elizabeth Harley soon to follow. Death stalked the little community taking much loved Sisters, including her two nieces, Mary Teresa and Catherine Macauley, who had joined in her enterprise.

Archbishop Murray appointed Catherine first Superior of the Sisters of Mercy and confirmed her in office in the name of the Church. Her first duty was to receive her associates and to direct their novitiate. First among the seven received was Frances Warde, Catherine's close friend and confidant who was to become the American foundress.

Certain facets of her new life were uncongenial to her. She did not like a title of distinction; she did not want sisters to stand in deference to her when she entered a room; she did not want any difference to exist between choir (one with the duty to recite the Office in community) and lay sister (one with domestic and extern duties). Constant pressure concerning the status in the Church of the "walking sisters" promoted the gradual, though reluctant, taking on of practices similar to other Orders of the day. That the works of Mercy be done and that they be done by deeply religious women was Catherine McAuley's chief concern. What contributed to that, she would do or permit. Whatever hampered these objectives, she would not allow.

The first Rule of the new congregation consisted of a single chapter on union and charity. Members of the fledgling Institute cherished, supported, encouraged, forgave, and loved one another "without contention or reserve." At the same time, there were misunderstandings, hostile questions, antagonism, and rejections to be endured. The new style of religious women introduced to the Church in Dublin, walked the streets on errands of mercy without relinquishing prayer, silence, meditation, and recitation of the Office. Many did not know what to make of this. So much speculation existed on their Church status and degree of respectability that Catherine, always willing to honor the sensibilities of others, urged Archbishop Murray to obtain a written approval from Rome on their efforts. She would not permit these sensibilities, however, to curtail needed works. Approval was granted March 24, 1835. The Rule was confirmed in an incredibly short time on June 6, 1841.

New candidates arrived at Baggot Street regularly. Highly gifted and much needed Sisters lived only a short time but the works went on. Asked to tell the story of her Institute, Catherine records:

*We now have gone beyond 100 in number and the desire to join seems to increase rather than decrease...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 see most clearly the designs of God. I could mark circumstances calculated to defeat it at once, but nothing howsoever injurious in itself has done any injury.*

*This is all I can say.*

*The loss of property has been supplied, the death of the most valuable Sister passed away as of no consequence. The alarm that was spread by such repeated deaths did not prevent others crowding in. In short, it evidently was to go on and surmount all obstacles, many of which were great indeed...*

*One thing is remarkable, that no breach of Charity ever occurred amongst us. The Sun never, I believe, went down on our anger. This is our only boast, otherwise we have been deficient enough.<sup>2</sup>*

The extraordinary success of the venture from Baggot Street brought petitions from all areas of Ireland as well as England to found Convents of the Sisters of Mercy. Knowing the terrible sufferings of the poor, she found it impossible to deny these requests regardless of cost. Negotiating new foundations, she sought to connect well-disposed wealthy Catholics with the needs of the poor in their areas. She made few demands for each establishment other than to insure the poor would be served and religious life protected. The work was endless and difficult. Without a community of support, it could not go on. Her concern was that those who performed these works have space and time with God and each other to develop and renew those virtues absolutely necessary for the monumental task before them. Whenever she was certain that there were funds to start them off, adequate housing, and a secluded place for prayer in the public Church, she immediately promised a foundation. Dividing her forces, she continually deprived herself of close friends and experienced religious.

Constantly depleting Baggot Street, Catherine gave to new beginnings at least one Sister, lending some others until candidates from the locality should arrive. She tried to hold a Public Profession to which both the rich and the poor were invited. Born before the media explosion, she nevertheless knew the value of "getting the message out." A good preacher could explain the meaning and purpose of the new congregation in such a way as to call forth generous response. Her

strategy was to arouse compassion in order to channel the wealth of a locality towards its poor. She believed God-given blessings were intended to bless the less fortunate. She encouraged others to the same view. From families of wealth whose daughters sought admission, she required a dowry in keeping with their means.

In those days, Sisters entirely supported whatever works they did. The building of schools, houses of mercy, orphanages, the distribution of food, clothing, medicines had to come from their own resources. Dowries, endowments from benefactors, monies raised at bazaars and lotteries enabled the works of Mercy to spread over Ireland and England during Catherine's short ten years as a Sister of Mercy. Within a few years after her death, convents began in Newfoundland, United States, Australia, and New Zealand.

### **Missionary**

Catherine utilized all modes of transportation as she embarked on her foundation travels. Post chaise, railway car, fly boat, packet, and steamer carried her to Tullamore, Charleville, Carlow, Limerick, Galway, and Birr within Ireland and to Bermondsey and Birmingham in England. She was negotiating foundations for Liverpool and Newfoundland during the weakness of her last illness.

In each foundation visitation of the poor began at once. Catherine urged her Sisters to adapt to local circumstances. Her own rich experiences permitted her to be an evangelist in Charlesville where one ancient coed, "Ah, it was the Lord Himself that drove you in amongst us!"<sup>3</sup> a pioneer in Carlow where no one had thought to provide furniture for the convent and where a pension (tuition) school was introduced for the new middle class<sup>4</sup>; a diplomat in Cork, where the bishop kept close watch on admissions; an incorporator and a visionary in Limerick, where she received two Poor Clare nuns whose convent had failed and where she discovered the National School (public) under Catholic auspices and urged this arrangement on all her convents; an evangelist in Birr where a schism had depleted the parish; as well as home visitor in Tullamore and Galway.

The first English novices sent over to Ireland to be prepared to make a foundation in the Bermondsey section of London were trained in Cork. After their profession, Catherine took them on a tour of the other foundations in Ireland to learn the various works and the different ways they were being carried out. The Reception shortly after their return to England of feathered and diamonded Lady Barbara Ayre with many members of the Court of St. James in attendance was probably the most splendid ever held by the Sisters of Mercy. Catherine commented, "The

poor will soon have the feathers and diamonds."<sup>5</sup>

The Foundress from Baggot Street had the liberty of spirit not to like the Convent designed by the famous architect, Pugin. "The convent is not more than half built, it is quite in the old monastic style, very heavy. Mr. Pugin the architect was determined we would not look out of the windows, they are up to the ceiling. I could not touch the glass without standing on a chair. I do not admire his taste, though so celebrated."<sup>6</sup> Its ethereal Gothic was lost on her who wanted Sisters to see beyond the convent to the needs of the world.

Architect also for the second Convent of Mercy in Birmingham, England, Pugin accommodated some of Catherine's complaints. He brought the windows to eye level and provided more places for light to enter. (Bermondsey Convent was destroyed in World War II. Birmingham's survived and is now registered as a National Historic Building.)

### **Major Superior**

When new foundations were made, Catherine gave on-the-job-training to her new superiors. She remained at least one month with them, longer if necessary. She measured this time with her much loved and efficacious Thirty Days Prayer. For Sister Elizabeth Moore in Limerick, she wrote a description in verse of the role of a good superior. This description travelled to almost every convent of the Sisters of Mercy in the world.

*Don't let crosses vex or tease;  
Try to meet all with peace and ease.  
Notice the faults of everyday  
But often in a playful way  
And when you seriously complain,  
Let it be known to give you pain.  
Attend to one thing at a time  
You've 15 hours from 6 to 9*

*Be mild and sweet in all your ways  
Now and again bestow some praise  
Avoid all solemn declaration,  
All serious, close investigation  
Turn what you can into a jest  
And with a few words dismiss the rest  
Keep patience ever at your side  
You'll want it for a constant guide*

*Show fond affection every day  
And, above all devoutly pray  
That God may bless the charge He's given  
And make of you their guide to Heaven.*

The parting advice of your ever affectionate M.C.McA<sup>7</sup>

Catherine modeled whatever she suggested or required. She refrained from making decisions for others, choosing rather to point out matters to be considered. Having created local foundresses rather than superiors of branch houses dependent on Baggot Street indicates Catherine's search for the best method to help the poor. She did not want the limitations of one locality to hamper the work of another area.

The trend of the day was toward centralization, yet Catherine decentralized.

The trend of the day was toward cloistered settings for religious women, requiring students and others who needed their services to come to the religious institute. Catherine's Sisters of Mercy would go out from that setting to wherever they were needed.

There is no evidence that Catherine saw herself as a woman who dared to be different. Her gaze was so fixed on what needed to be done she hardly noticed that she refused to be confined by convention or custom. The only confinement Catherine accepted willingly was the confinement imposed by the Will of God, by the voice of God within her. She did not so much challenge the social mores of Church and world but rather adopted the mores of the Gospel message.

Catherine did not take philosophical or theoretical stances—nor was she opposed to them. But she felt life. She felt the joy of it and she danced it. Across the top of a letter describing the hardships of the Birr foundation, she wrote, "Dance every evening."<sup>8</sup> She felt the pain of life and cried for it. She entered others joys and added to them. She solaced pain and took it on herself. That she accomplished, under the grace of God, what was often pronounced not able to be done was due to the single-hearted unassuming way she took on the impossible.

### **Heroic Daughter of the Church**

The delineation of Catherine McAuley's earlier years has to depend upon the recollection and memoirs of her early associates. But her life as foundress of the Sisters of Mercy breathes forth from her own pen. More than two hundred extant letters pulsate with the ardor of a vibrant woman who called forth dynamic response.

The woman writing to keep all foundations abreast of one another is affectionate, tender, funny, graceful, confiding, wise.

The woman of business is direct, concise, well-bred.

The woman of the Church writing to bishops, priests, is open, candid, cordial, obedient, and dignified.

The woman who is Superior writing to censure is pained. She sandwiches reproof between affectionate greetings and long newcasts to insure it is the deed not the doer that draws her ire.

What shines through her letters as she encourages, cajoles, persuades, praises, finds fault, consoles, or spurs onward is her faith that whatever God permits is a blessing. If accepted, received, and embraced, every Cross will be turned into joy, into power to do good. There is no passivity in what she says. It is an active "Yes" that she encourages on all as they seek to do God's work on earth.

As a result of these beliefs, her external appearance was tranquil—an appearance emanating from integrated spirituality she urged on all. When engaged with another in discourse of any kind, she herself is described as compelling admiration for liveliness, graciousness, and scope.

Her spiritual teachings revolve about three themes: trust in the Father's Providence; identification with Jesus in His mission; and everlasting gratitude for the Mercy of God. Often-heard encouragements were: "Put your whole confidence in God. He will see that you want for nothing." "Without the Cross, the true Crown cannot come." "Where would we be if Mercy had not come to our aid?"

Jesus was the center and passionate love of her life. She took Him as her model, endeavoring to make His responses, her responses; His way, her way. Blessed by God and empowered by Him to bless and empower others, she never lost the sense that she was the steward of God's mercies.

Her preparation for death continued the pattern of her life. She laid aside one cherished piece of business, the building of a hospital to heal the sick. She then put all other business matters in order. She refused when asked to name a successor because the Constitutions gave the Sisters the right to elect her; she said an individual and personal farewell to every Sister attending her death bed. She asked that a comfortable cup of tea be ready for those who had kept the long death watch; she used the last of her failing energy to receive clergy and relatives, some of whom had been her most difficult antagonists. Her bequest to all her Sisters of Mercy is contained in the words, "My legacy to the Institute is Charity."<sup>9</sup>

She died November 11, 1841, having set in motion what was to become the largest congregation in the world ever established by an English-speaking founder.

The stirrings of one small child's heart cast fire. This fire, like that deliberately set to burn off stubble and weed at the end of harvest, became the flame from which fires were deliberately cast in fields throughout Ireland and the world to burn away poverty, sickness, and ignorance, the stubble and weed of advancing civilization.

### **Spirit of the Congregation**

In every country where Mercy convents exist, Catherine's own spirit lives. Gratitude for the gifts of God's mercy, her hallmark, opened these gifts to others in endless, bottomless hospitality. Simple, joyous, and direct in her approach, she bequeathed those gifts to her followers. She desired to animate to patient, humble, compassionate service those, who with her, gave life and fortune to the poor and needy.

The mode of operation of the Sisters of Mercy endeavors to be Catherine's own. She made herself aware of the pain and suffering of others; held herself open to requests and importunities on their behalf; took counsel to discern how best to effect relief and improvement, organized her financial and personal resources, decided what to do; and then set out immediately with great faith and trust in God to do it. After her wealth had been entirely disbursed, giving from her poverty became her style of life.

The woman who would rather be "cold and hungry herself than the poor...should have to suffer"<sup>10</sup> also had the flexibility, detachment, and freedom of spirit to change her direction when necessary, to end an unproductive venture, and to set off on uncharted seas.

### **Challenge of Catherine McAuley**

In Catherine's day, the very few were wealthy; the many were very poor—pathetically, desperately, unbelievably poor. Few thought anything could be done; some thought nothing should be done.

Catherine thought differently.

In Catherine's day, the sick poor were destitute of help. The number of doctors and health care personnel being totally inadequate to Ireland's needs, the poor were thought of little consequence.

Catherine thought differently.

In Catherine's day, the poor lacked knowledge, education, and opportunity. It was thought that if the poor wanted these things enough, they would find away to get them.

Catherine knew differently.

In Catherine's day ignorance of the true teachings of one's faith; ignorance of another's beliefs; misunderstanding and ignorance of the Gospel message led to acts of shameful neglect, bloody vengeance, and

unbelievable atrocities. Most were satisfied with their spiritual ignorance, refusing to recognize that it was spiritual ignorance.

Catherine was not satisfied.

In Catherine's day, some who had been well off became impoverished. Many thought it well turned that the former rich should learn privation.

Catherine felt compassion.

In Catherine's day, the new rich were resented, resisted, and thought to be English sympathizers.

Catherine saw their potential for doing good.

In our day, in spite of energetic measures to alleviate the ills of society—poverty, sickness, ignorance—the poor, the sick, the ignorant abound; the alienated, the lonely, the deserted, and the physically abused abound.

In our world of indifference concerning belief, the erosion of faith in God and in transcendent reality have spawned self-destructive greed, selfishness, and life styles of out-maneuvering one another. Out of consequent erosion of integrity in word and work, dishonesty, brutality, and destructiveness abound.

When were spiritual and temporal works of mercy—performed with tender courage—more needed?

In her day, listening and hearing, looking and seeing, Catherine found her response-misericordia.

She brought her heart to misery. By courageous, contagious concern for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the poor, the sick, and the ignorant, she broke through the impossibilities of her time. She animated many to walk with her. She animated others at centers of wealth, power, and influence to share in her heroic efforts.

She connected the rich to the poor

the healthy to the sick

the educated and skilled to the uneducated

the influential to those of no consequence

the powerful to the weak

to do the work of God on earth.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "On Union & Charity". Rule of Sisters of Sisters of Mercy, 1831.
- <sup>2</sup> Letter to Sister M. Elizabeth Moore dated January 13, 1839. Archives of Sisters of Mercy, Limerick, Ireland. Reprinted in *Letters of Catherine McAuley*, edited by Sister Mary Ignatia Neumann (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), p. 155.
- <sup>3</sup> Sister Bertrand Degnan, *Mercy Unto Thousands* (Maryland: Newman Press, 1957), p. 190.
- <sup>4</sup> Carlow already had a school for the poor. Foundation policy required response to local need and forbade establishing institutions to rival one covering existing needs.
- <sup>5</sup> Letter to Sister Angela Dunn dated December 26, 1839. Archives of Sisters of Mercy Charleville, Ireland. Reprinted in *Letters*, p. 190.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 189-90
- <sup>7</sup> Archives of Sisters of Mercy, Carysfort, County Dublin, Ireland.
- <sup>8</sup> Letter to Sister Cecilia Marmion dated Jan. 4, 1841. Carysfort Archives. Reprinted in *Letters*, p.293.
- <sup>9</sup> Oral tradition of Sisters of Mercy. Sister Austin Carroll's *Life of Catherine McAuley* (New York and Philadelphia: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1866), p. 435.
- <sup>10</sup> Letter to Sister M. Elizabeth Moore dated Easter Monday, 1841. Limerick Archives. Reprinted in *Letters*, p. 330.

all are good and happy  
the blessing of unity still dwells amongst 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 an ungracious kind leaves them, this is the Spirit  
of the order indeed-- the true spirit of Mercy-- flowing on  
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M. C. McAuley

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M.C. McAuley