

## Chapter I

*Blest are the Poor in spirit; the reign of God is theirs.*

The original meaning of this beatitude is found throughout the Old Testament. The poor of scripture are called the *anawim*, the rural proletariat, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, and the oppressed. Eventually this sociological concept came to be applied in a spiritual sense. As such it came to be identified:

with those who stood before God in an attitude of humility, repentance, and prayerful openness;

with those affirming their own littleness and willingness to be used by God in a spirit of self-surrender and abandonment;

with those who as Yahweh's faithful remnant became the bearers of God's promise and plan in a society dominated by the rich and powerful.

It is in the Gospel that this ideal came to perfection in the Person of Christ and in his proclamation of the First Beatitude. Moreover it becomes for us:

A call to inner poverty demanding a renunciation of all disordered self-possession in terms of power, prestige, and possessions;  
A call to reorder our possessions on behalf of the poor;  
A call to live a life of simplicity present to his will in every situation;  
A call to use our gifts in love in service to the world;  
A call to both effective and affective poverty;  
A call to be a prophetic witness in an alien society.

*Blest are those persecuted for justice sake; the reign of God is theirs.*

Within the structure of the beatitudes, the first and last have a distinct correlation. Those persecuted for justice sake are the *anawim*, the poor in spirit. Both beatitudes are the only ones in the present tense in which God's reign is immediately realized. To heed the cry of the poor in an unjust society is to be open to rejection and persecution, a persecution taking often the form of ridicule, misunderstanding, envy, and all expressions of opposition whether open or subtle. Thus both beatitudes re-echo one another and co-exist.

We deem it advisable to study first this interrelationship as it appears in the life of Mother McAuley as fundamental to an appreciation of the foundation of her own spiritual growth and then as a source from which the other beatitudes come to fruition. Within this prospectus we turn now to the proper object of our study, the reflection on *The Spirituality of the Venerable Catherine McAuley as Rooted in the Beatitudes*.

Mother McAuley was indeed a woman molded by God. We may picture her as a young child laboriously tracing the name of Jesus from *The Jesus Psalter*, or as a young woman gathering the poor of Coolock Village around her, or later as an heiress reluctantly caught up in the great dilemma of her life when Baggot Street, almost unawares, began to assume the structure of a convent. However, we find her relentlessly haunted by the cries of the poor and drawn by a Love stronger than death.

When we come to consider what she might have become, we can see her as the much sought heiress of Coolock House with her wealth, her carriage, her servants, moving in a society Anglo-Irish and predominantly Protestant. She would have become just another statistic in the social register of a way of life that betrayed her heritage and all she stood for. We would have never borne her name.

We would like to see whatever touches her life as it gradually unfolds as the work of the Spirit forming her in the grace of the Beatitudes. We shall see that for her they provided a wisdom that enabled her to meet the shifting circumstances of her life in a continual surrender to all that the Father asked of her at the moment.

It was very early in her life that Catherine was exposed to circumstances which provided the human foundation for her gradually coming to a deeper awareness of that interior poverty which became a unique source of her response to all the complexities of her later life. For fifteen years after her father's death, she experiences various forms of poverty, both psychological and physical, even though in these adolescent years she was being formed to some extent in the discipline and niceties of the drawing rooms of the rich. Nevertheless, due to the extravagance of her pleasure-loving mother, her life came to lack the stability of a permanent, well-ordered family life. After a period of personal insecurity and rootlessness, the little family found themselves sharing the home of their mother's Protestant friend, Mrs. St. George. By this time, Catherine had not only suffered the effects of the loss of her father's patrimony, but she anguished over the spiritual destitution of her mother, sister and brother. She alone somehow held on to the faith of her father. At the time of her mother's death, the family of three became homeless and penniless. Catherine was then but twenty years old.

For a brief period after her mother's death, she lived with the family of her mother's brother, Dr. Owen Conway. Here she found herself in a Catholic environment which served both to nourish her faith and afforded her the opportunity, along with her cousin Anne Conway, to serve the poor in the slums of Dublin. She now felt that she had come home at last where she belonged. But this oasis of peace was short lived. Because of the reversal of the Conway's fortune, Catherine, together with the Conway family, knew what it was to be cold, hungry, even to sleep on the floor. To some degree the plight of the poor became her own.

Lest she be a burden to this stricken family, she accepted the invitation to join the household of the Armstrongs, where her sister and her brother had lived since their mother's death. Catherine was a young woman, now twenty-three, bred in the manners of polite society, intelligent, and attractive. In the minds of the Armstrongs her only fault was her stubborn adherence "to the church of the ignorant and the peasant." She often had to listen to prolonged and bitter debate reviling the doctrines of the Church, even at the dinner

table. She was also challenged to defend her own personal association with a class of people often identified "with public uprising, intemperance, and considered as enemies of the crown."

By this time the Protestant influence in her life became more pervasive. Wealth, power, and prestige could have been hers along with a kind of humanitarian care of the poor, as well as a peaceful union with her dear sister and brother, whose avowal of Protestantism must have caused her deep anguish. Catherine stood alone, self-possessed and faithful despite the pleas and taunts of the people she loved who were really her generous benefactors. Her prayer in these difficult days, as well as during the rest of her life, reflects her complete dependence upon God: "Not knowing what to do I have only to lift my eyes to you, O Lord." In this revelation of her soul, she shows herself spiritually united with the poor of Yahweh. She did indeed belong by choice with the poor, despised, and persecuted pitiful Catholic minority of Dublin society. Thus the pattern of her spirituality was being formed in her, a spirituality rooted in her own concrete experience of what it meant to be poor and to be persecuted. This pattern of conformity to the first and last beatitudes becomes more and more her own and serves as a matrix of all the others.

At the same time, she was convinced of her own need of a deeper, formal knowledge of the faith and was likewise consumed with the desire to alleviate the conditions of the poor. This opportunity was afforded her when, in 1803, she went to live with the Callaghans as their adopted daughter, living first in Dublin and later in Coolock on the outskirts of the city. Here began twenty hidden years during which time Catherine's vocation was being molded. These were years during which, in this predominantly Quaker household, Catherine's personal prayer was deepened by her growing friendship for Mrs. Callaghan, her works of charity expanded, and the freedom afforded her on her visits to Dublin helped deepen her knowledge of the faith under the guidance of the priests who befriended her.

Although Catherine was dearly loved by her foster parents and these years brought her much happiness, they were years marked by the sign of the Cross. Her strong friendship for Mrs. Callaghan was resented by Mrs. Callaghan's relatives. Catherine felt herself a cause of dissension in the household. Even her ministry to the poor of Coolock Village was marred by the interference of a Protestant minister's wife. More than that, she found the formal practice of her religion openly condemned by Mr. Callaghan, himself an agnostic. He was amazed that she identified herself, "with such a vulgar sect" and would countenance "no manifestations of popery" in his household. However, he reluctantly allowed her to attend Mass and perform her religious duties but at the same time denied her the use of his carriage.

In a house open to many guests, Catherine had to listen to much raillery against her faith. At table she very quietly and unobtrusively kept the days of fast and abstinence.

Not only did she gather the servants of the household around her for prayer but she also made the poor of Coolock Village the nucleus of her service of the poor, especially the young women to whom she taught needlework and domestic skills seeking also to find employment for them. She ingeniously found aids for devotion for them in the symbolism of the Cross in the branches of the trees and even within window frames and door panels. It is not surprising, then, under all these circumstances there began to grow in her a deep love of the Passion and a spirituality immersed in God's Mercy. In her own words: "the humble agonizing Christ is my Christ. Him will I have and hold. Outside of Him, nothing." She found peace in the Cross and her early devotion to *The Jesus Psalter* with its fifteen petitions and pleas for Mercy in the name of Jesus. Her growth in prayer was marked by an overwhelming zeal to advance the cause of the

poor beyond the confines of Coolock Village. She felt the necessity of an organized effort to reach out and bring them in from the highways and byways. Convinced of her own insufficiency, both material and spiritual, she waited upon the Providence of God.

God's answer came when on the death of Mr. Callaghan in 1822, she found herself a wealthy heiress, the sole legatee of his estates and holdings amounting to 25,000 pounds, equal to about \$1,400,000.00 in today's currency. She was independent at last. She became the recipient, as a result, of many proposals of marriage and the object of the unusual attention of her family who wished to benefit from this sudden reversal of her status, both as a family member and within the social circles of Dublin society. She was then forty-four years old.

Catherine saw herself only as the steward of this inheritance. Her family and friends soon came to realize that Dublin society had no attraction for her. She belonged to the poor who swarmed in numbers into the city, whose problems beset the Church and whose plight embarrassed the government. Her answer was the Baggot Street property, the negotiations for which were initiated with the blessing of Archbishop Daniel Murray, always her staunch defender and advisor. At a time when Church property was relegated to lanes and side-streets of Ireland, Catherine dared, under the guidance of Dr. Armstrong, to crash the enclave of the rich and powerful of Dublin society by building her House of Mercy for the poor within their sacred precincts. She brought together the two extremes of a society of which she was a part, hoping to raise the social consciousness of the one in order to alleviate the misery and poverty of the other. Thus the whole of society was the object of what came to be the scope of the Ministry of Mercy.

The years intervening between the establishment of Baggot Street and the founding of the Congregation were most purifying and crucifying for her personally. Again she was called upon to embrace the mystery of God's will however painful or contrary to her desires. She might well have stayed at Coolock House in the comfort of a beautiful mansion, economically secure, while at the same time serving the poor. Instead she sold her home and became poor, living with the poor and for the poor. By the time Baggot Street was officially open, the heiress had no money of her own. She sent a circular letter to her friends and wealthy neighbors soliciting support for what was now the new House of Mercy.

To the degree that the House of Mercy developed from a day school and night refuge into an orphanage and kind of social service center for the poor, to that same degree did Catherine suffer opposition from her own family and her rich neighbors. However, more painful to her was the affirmed, open opposition of the clergy who considered her an upstart, a parvenu, labelling her work unauthorized and unorthodox. This in spite of the fact that she acknowledged Archbishop Murray as her ecclesiastical superior. The two greatest tests of her self-emptying concerned, first, her own position as the sponsor and director of the House of Mercy; the other, the choice demanded of her by the Archbishop of founding a religious congregation or sacrificing all she intended Baggot Street to be. In the first case, she was falsely informed that the Archbishop wished her to hand over the institution to the Sisters of Charity, being allowed to keep a couple of rooms for herself and the use of a side entrance. Her only answer was that the house belonged to the Archbishop and he was free to do whatever he wished. Significantly, it is said Catherine then went to her room and was not seen for several hours.

In the second case, in view of the developments both in regard to the convent-life structure of the house and the life-style of its members, the Archbishop told Catherine that she must either become a religious or discontinue the work in the form it had assumed. Catherine was dismayed at ever becoming a nun. Besides

she had the fear that her work would be hampered by the requirement that at this time religious were bound by the vow of enclosure. We know what Catherine's answer was. The Archbishop took the courageous step of seeking from Rome the permission for founding a new religious congregation without cloister, a first for women in the history of the Church.

Of all the sacrifices she made for the poor, none cost her so much as the complete sacrifice of her will in embracing religious life. She was fifty-two years old when, together with Mary Ann Doyle and Elizabeth Harley, she began her novitiate with the Sisters of the Presentation on George's Hill. Among the many trials Catherine endured at this time, the most serious and painful came when doubts were raised concerning the legality of her profession by superiors whose way of life she did not intend to pursue. Catherine characteristically left the issue in God's hands. Archbishop Murray proposed a formula of profession incorporating simple religious vows with a statement in general of the works of Mercy that had already become part of the House of Mercy. On December 12, 1831, the first three Sisters of Mercy were professed. A new congregation was born, the first for women in the history of the church without vows of enclosure.

Within the scope of these years, from the death of her father in 1783 to the foundation of the Institute in 1831, the spirit and power of the beatitudes of the poor and persecuted had taken root in her, with their power to guide and sustain her amid all the incongruities and challenges that marked her life. In this regard she made her own her favorite chapters in the *Imitation of Christ*—one dealing with trust in God's mercy (*Chapter 30, Book III*) and the other entitled *Of Christ's Sufferings on the Cross and our own Self-Surrender* (*Chapter 8, Book IV*).

For the next ten years she was to become a prophetic voice not only in the history of the Irish Church but in her unique role in the historical development of apostolic religious congregations. She stood ready now to be the wounded healer, her arms outstretched to all the world, fully aware that only the poor and those prepared to be wounded can become bearers of God's love. It is in the light of the above that we now approach the study of her growth in the remaining beatitudes which are ordered in some unique way to capture more completely the inner meaning of the source of her dedication and her power.