

## Chapter II

*Blest are the lowly (meek); they shall inherit the land.*

As we ponder the meaning of the second beatitude, we discover that it completes the first. It moves from the essentially contemplative aspect of that beatitude to challenge the temptation that comes from the exercise of power, the abundance of possessions, and the prestige of one's social status. It means the surrender to God's power within us using all our gifts and possessions as stewards of his mercy. It means the abnegation of the hidden renunciation of all competitiveness, all self-glorification, bitterness, and vexations. It is the practical application of the spirituality of self-abandonment demanding a continual return to God's presence within us. It is the realization that only in his power can we become channels of mercy to the world. Submission to the divine initiative will result in the possession *of the land* in that gentle strength which is the result of stability of spirit. It brings with it the reward of serenity and peace.

In the light of the second beatitude, it is not difficult to see how Mother McAuley's dependence upon God became concretized in a very practical way in her personal relationship with the Sisters and the leadership qualities that marked her prudent, firm but gentle guidance in the formation of an apostolic community that became a hallmark in the history of the church.

As she moved among the Sisters, her relationship with them was always characterized by love, patience, and availability as her letters indicate. Although requested by Archbishop Murray, she was very reluctant to assume the title of Reverend Mother. One of her novices observed that she never referred to herself as "I am the foundress." Indeed in the early days of Baggot Street she served at table. Even on occasion she gave up her iron bed to unexpected guests and slept on the floor. "Like the poor," she said, "we must be satisfied with inconvenience." Much later in her life, a year before her death, she expressed the desire to stay at Birr, her last foundation in Ireland, "not fearing to go begging if necessary." In all truth could one of her novices recall: "The ideal she fashioned with words walked before us daily."

Besides being a very gifted woman of great sensitivity and compassion impelled by an all-consuming desire to take her stand with the poor, she had a remarkable administrative ability, coupled with a spirit of discernment of the issues involved in directing the course of a growing community new in the church. Her formation of the community went far beyond what we might call social relationships with its members. Indeed they became involved with her in the very formation of the original rule as well as an open discussion relative to particular community problems. Extracts from the early memoirs show clearly that, long before Vatican II, Catherine applied the principles of collegiality and subsidiarity in the government of the community. The Sisters, still only novices, were consulted not only in relation to the horarium, the religious garb, and the problems relating to the apostolate, but they reviewed with her the various rules of a number of Dublin congregations. We read: "After she carefully reviewed all the different rules with those who were to form the Institute, they all chose the Presentation Rule." We know, too, that she made significant changes in this regard and adapted it to the demands of an apostolic congregation free to serve the needs of the church. Some years later she wrote in a letter to Charlesville: "We did not ask for a confirmation of it from the Holy See until we had reduced it to practice."

In her establishment of the various foundations it is noteworthy that she affirmed time and again that each foundation was established to meet local needs rather than functioning as branch convents dependent on Baggot Street. She feared that the limitations of one locality would hamper the Mercy Ministry in another. She had no desire to hold on to power and build up a vast institution. Her whole attitude was expressed in her dying words. In answering the query of a young novice, who, while weeping, asked her what the congregation would do without her, Catherine answered: "If the order be my work, the sooner it falls to the ground, the better. If it is God's work, it needs no one."

Although she felt that flexibility for her was essential to the unimpeded exercise of the ministry of mercy, the unity of the congregation lay in the deepening of the spiritual bond that united them in mercy. It was her practice to stay at least a month with each new foundation measuring the time by the Thirty Days Prayer. She was also convinced that communication was necessary to preserve the unity that marked even their most disparate works with that irreducible quality called by many names—the *Spirit of the Institute*—the *Spirit of Mother McAuley*—today—the *Charism of Mercy*.

She kept her hand on the pulse of the congregation by means of her *Foundation Circulars to the Foreign Powers* regardless of the demands made upon her health by all her journeying up and down Ireland. She was also concerned about the financial situation of many of the foundations. By 1832, the Callaghan bequest had been depleted. She had to make use of bazaars, charity sermons, even to establishing a public laundry to bring all possible revenue to God's poor. In facing the demands of clergy at Baggot Street and in some of her foundations, as well as those imposed upon her by some lawyers, she maintained a spirit of quiet control and self-possession. All the while she took Christ at His word: "Be not solicitous." She continued to do all in her power to alleviate the miseries of the society in which she lived.

We find her in the spirit of the Second Beatitude standing before us "with open hands" with that liberty of spirit that enabled her to realize within herself the words of the Psalmist: "But the meek shall possess the land and they shall delight in abounding peace." (Psalm 37,11)