

Chapter III

Blest too are the sorrowing; they shall be consoled.

This particular beatitude has many facets and applications. St. Thomas relates it to the Gift of Knowledge by which we are able to judge everyday things and events from God's viewpoint using creatures not as distraction but as a way to God. Besides empowering us to share in the redemptive work of Christ in responding to the needs of the world, it also demands that we ourselves be clearly aware of our own need of God's healing and consolation. Too, by our identification with Christ in our own personal suffering, we will be strengthened ourselves to become a source of comforting to others even at great personal sacrifice. In any case, it provides a medium through which the paradoxes of daily life are integrated and transformed in the power of the Paschal Mystery.

As we penetrate more deeply into the growth of Mother McAuley's interior life, we are drawn to contemplate, in the spirit of the third beatitude, the unfolding of the presence of both Christ the Consoler and Christ Crucified expressed in and through her. Moreover, as her whole life testified, she saw within its everydayness, as well as within its incongruities and surprises, the consoling and sustaining presence of a loving Father. "Let us not," she counsels, "have recourse to creatures in our difficulties. Let us go to him who alone can share our sorrows and lighten their weight." It was also very clear to her that the source of one's own power as healer and consoler came from the recognition of one's own need. We find that in her prayer for the poor she not only asked God to have pity on them but to make her a channel of comforting and peace. While she emphasized the fact that by our vocation we are engaged both to comfort and instruct the sick poor of Christ, she reminds us: "If our hearts are not moved, in vain shall we move the hearts of others." In an outburst of exaltation, she calls to us: "Oh! what an ineffable consolation to serve Christ in the person of the poor and to walk in the very same path which he trod." And again, "God 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"

Although in our concentration on the depths of her holiness, we are conscious of its transcendent quality, we must ever keep in mind that as such it was but the flowering in grace of her own humanity. Otherwise all that she is will have escaped us and we will not have discovered the warmth of her tenderness, the lilt in her Irish laughter, nor the comforting power of her voice. Indeed it seems that within the scope of this beatitude, mourning none the less, we may come to realize her own oneness with us. This particular insight came to us from a very provocative essay written by Sister Mary Sullivan, RSM, in the Fall, 1992, issue of *The Mast Journal* of the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology. Sister develops the theme that Catherine in her frequent use of the words *comfort* and *console* was naming the profound mercifulness of God. "Comfort," she writes, "I believe is Catherine's way of naming both the effect of actively merciful relations and work and the profound mercifulness of God which she believes makes possible all genuine human comforting."

This human comforting for Catherine was not only a kind of experience in her life of God's merciful love, but it reveals also her own human need of comfort. Her letters tell us of the comfort she finds, for example,

in the completion of the laundry for the poor, as well as “the quietness of mind” in the counsel given her in regard to the Kingstown controversy. It comforts her that the novices are so well initiated in the real spirit of their state. In spite of the poverty at Birr she finds “two great comforts: excellent bread and sparkling water.” She longs, too, for the comforting presence of Frances Warde at Baggot Street. All human comforting for her has the signature of God's mercy.

In the midst of the difficulties peculiar to each of her foundations, in her relationship with the Sisters she was not content merely to console them or even to give them money from her meager resources. As Sister Mary Sullivan observes she “animated the zeal of her companion.” She aimed to imbue them with “the true spirit of the order” which she defines as “their own union in charity and their mercifulness toward others.” For her the beatitude of mourning was not completed purely by giving comfort but should also give new life, new hope, and a lifting up of the heart immersed in the Mercy of God. She animated them not only by her words, her example, and her affection but by her commitment to the works of Mercy. This animating permeated by her own joyful spirit found expression in her letters, her witty anecdotes, and her delightful verses. Hers was a deep Christian joy springing from a heart centered in God, a kind of eastering of the Spirit in spite of hardships and trials of every kind. Well could she reminisce with her Sisters upon the past referring to them as “those happy hard times.” We can also picture her singing at recreation and suggesting that there be a piano in every community room. In making her own first overseas foundation in London at Bermondsey in spite of a great deal of apprehension, she wrote to Frances Warde, “They say the travellers leave dear Ireland tomorrow. I have a list of songs for the journey.” Again to an over-anxious novice mistress she counselled: “Dance every evening.” In spite of the burden and heat of the day she would have us walk on our Mercy journey in joy, for she truly believed in the living presence of the Risen Christ.

No doubt, no better expression of Catherine's adaptation to the spirit of the beatitude of mourning is to be found in what we might call her theology of the Cross. It was not a theology that grew out of the abstract conclusions of theologians or even out of the meditative commentaries of spiritual writers. Rather it was the outgrowth of her own deep union with the “Agonizing Christ” made concrete to her in the Paschal Mystery and a source of union with the Crucified. Whether we look at her problems regarding the chaplaincy of Baggot Street, at the jealousy and competitiveness that beset her from the supporters of the Sisters of Charity or the legal battles involving the foundation of Kingstown and the construction of the laundry for the support of the poor, or the contradictions that arose in regard to establishing or maintaining some of her houses, she saw all signed with the sign of the cross.

We find this *theology* best expressed in her counsel to her Sisters: “Submit we must but we should do much more, we should praise and bless the hand that wounds us and exhibit all around us a calm, quiet appearance and manner.” Again in reference to the chaplaincy dispute: “Thus we go on...flourishing in the midst of the Cross; more than a common share has lately fallen to my lot, thanks be to God. I humbly trust it is the Cross of Christ.” In her profound spiritual insight she did not blame human instruments as the source of whatever suffering entered her life: “Let us not think about the means employed to convey to us a portion of the Cross, being ever mindful it came from Himself.”

She firmly believed that without the cross the real crown cannot come. She was always deeply touched by the early deaths of many of her Sisters as well as by that of the members of her family. In the early years in the midst of her struggle to open Baggot Street she was bereft of the priests who were her most stalwart supporters. Her grieving was not that of the Stoic but that of a compassionate tender-hearted woman. She

was not ashamed of her tears. Writing of the death of her niece, Catherine, she says, "We feel just now as if the whole house was dead." Again in writing at the death of Sister Potter who died at the age of twenty she says, "I don't think any event in the world could make me feel so much. I cried heartily."

We read that toward the end of her life she found that the burden of her journeyings began to take its toll. In her later letters she speaks often of the physical sufferings she endured not being ashamed to admit her frailty and share it with her Sisters. At the same time she regrets not being able to do more for both her Sisters and her poor. Indeed it can well be said of her: "Blest are they indeed who go at great lengths and endure great discomfort to bring strength and courage to others." No more concrete analysis of the gradual deterioration of her health is to be found but in the doctor's final diagnosis as she lay dying. He testified that Catherine was then suffering from a serious mouth ulceration, pulmonary tuberculosis and emphysema, together with a suppurating ulcer in her lower back due to a hair shirt and chain which she wore secretly.

Truly indeed does the following prayer that she herself composed epitomize concretely all that her *theology of the cross* implied:

Christ suffered for me; let me suffer for Him
Christ bore His Cross: let me assist Him to bear it.
Christ was dishonored: I will not be honored
He died for me: Let my life be a continual death to self for His secret love.
Let me live not I but let Christ live in me (*Gal 2,20*)
Let Him dispose of me as He pleases.

This humbled, abandoned Christ she called, "my Christ." Despite its stark realism, Catherine's spirituality of the Cross was infused with the hope of the Resurrection. For she spoke often of her growing community in heaven. Indeed she prayed God "to bring us joyfully to the end of our journey...Will we all meet in heaven? Oh, what a joy to think of it." Her dying was filled with hope for she repeated again and again: "Oh indeed if this be dying, it is easy indeed. The Almighty has spared me so much."

Perhaps there is no better way to close this brief exposition of the third beatitude than to listen to Catherine who in her dying breath bequeathed to her Sisters and to us the gift of a cup of tea, a symbol both of her tender love and concern and the comforting presence of God among us. She says: "Now fearing I might forget it again, will you tell the Sisters to get a comfortable cup of tea when I am gone. I think the community room would be a good place to comfort one another. But God will comfort them." Earth and heaven meet in a cup of tea! And the meaning of the third beatitude has come full circle.