

Chapter IV

Blest are they who hunger and thirst for holiness; they shall have their fill.

This beatitude has both an intrinsic contemplative dimension and an extrinsic apostolic application. It flows first as justice or the liberating presence of *God with us*. It is not only an insatiable desire for God's life within us but an urgent need for sharing that love. It brings to our external acts an ordered love that interprets the law in the light of human needs and reaches out to global realities. Its corollary then is the fifth beatitude:

Blest are they who show mercy; mercy shall be theirs.

This beatitude provides the outlet for the reckless outpouring of the divine impulse of the Fourth Beatitude which then becomes the very incarnation in very concrete ways of the inexhaustible Mercy of God. This selfless expression has its source in the self-giving of the first beatitude, the humility of the second, and the contrite spirit of the third. As such it is in essence this outpouring of God's mercy which we too have received.

For Catherine this compassion is not the expression of a sentimental sensitivity. Neither is it a kind of Christian philanthropy that eases one's conscience. For her it was, above all, the fruit of her contemplation of the *suffering Christ* and her conviction of his presence in the lonely, lost, and abandoned of this world. As a result she brought to all who suffered in any way the liberating power of the compassionate God dwelling within her. This ideal she lived and bequeathed to us as the very source of the charism of Mercy.

As we examine the counsels she gave the Sisters in her letters and in the *Spirit of the Institute*, we find repeatedly there is no dichotomy between prayer and action but a blending of the two. For Catherine this fusion was to be the essence of one's vocation in Mercy. She could truly affirm then that Ministry was the *raison d'etre* for which the congregation existed. In effect, the world became the cloister of the first Sisters of Mercy. This openness to the world was indeed a radical departure from the norms of religious life as understood and zealously defended in Catherine's day. So it was that she assumed a prophetic role both in the church and in society, a role that opened a new way in religious life for the whole church. In her it would seem that the words of the Lord to that other reluctant prophet, Jeremiah, were verified:

For it is I this day who have made you a fortified city,
A pillar of iron and a wall of brass
Against the whole land:
Against Judah's kings and princes,
Against its priest and people.
They will fight against you but not prevail over you,
For I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.

(Jeremiah 1, 18--19)

So conscious is she of the radical nature of the work the Lord is calling her to that in her early writings we find her repeated insistence of the necessary relationship between prayer and ministry. She writes: "The spirit of the Institute is Mercy toward those who are afflicted with ignorance, suffering, and like miseries. This requires such a combination of the spirit of Martha and Mary that one does not hinder but helps the other." She further specifies that the time given to prayer and other pious exercises we must consider as

employed to obtain grace, strength, and animation which alone enable us to persevere in the meritorious obligations of our state. She warns us, too, in very strong language, that if we were to neglect these means of holiness, we should deserve that God should stop the course of his graces to make us sensible that all our efforts would be fruitless except we were continually renewed and replenished by the Divine Spirit. She leaves us also the beautiful image of the compass to bring us to an ever deeper realization that the still point of all our actions is centered in God:

“We should be as the compass that goes round its circle without stirring from its center. Now our center is God from whom all our actions should spring as from their source.” At the same time she is very much aware that we are but earthen vessels. She reminds us that we ought to have great confidence in God for of all the offices of mercy, the spiritual and corporal, constitute “the business of our lives.” She realizes, too, that the spirit of prayer should be most dear to us but it should not withdraw us from the works of Mercy but should be regarded as a temptation if it did so.

She also warns us:

“Let us take care of the worm of good works which is the vanity arising from self-approbation and esteem.” In the same strain, she writes:

“That which we say to and for others cannot but regard ourselves; if we pray for their conversion, let us also mentally join ourselves with them that we may be truly converted from whatever is contrary to the sanctity and purity of our state.”

From her own experiences she is well aware of what solace the sick poor hunger for in their misery.

“These three things the poor prize most, more highly than gold though they cost the donor nothing. Among these are the kind word, the gentle compassionate look, and the patient healing of sorrows.

Catherine wished to assure us above all else that:

“This treasure [of his Mercy] we possess in earthen vessels to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God not from us.” (II Cor. 4,7)

As we move from these considerations, we become more fully aware that, for Catherine, the Christ of prayer became visible in the faces of the poor. This profound conviction, which had its source in her interior simplicity, found its most concrete expression in the most comprehensive and vital chapter of the *Original Rule*, namely Chapter 3 on *The Visitation of the Sick*. Not only is it the longest chapter in the rule but it also lays the theological foundation for the works of Mercy as well as for the Institute. In this magnificent chapter she stresses the close interrelationship of the corporal with the spiritual works of Mercy. At the same time she examines in detail the manner and dispositions required for their exercise. Her ministry always went beyond the physical to the psychological and spiritual needs of those she served. This pattern grew out of her role not only as a healer but as a counsellor and above all as an educator. For her, *instruction* was an integral part of her ministry from the very beginning.

In a more lyrical vein Catherine gives us in her *Magnificat of Mercy* yet another testament of its meaning. She wrote as early as 1828:

Sweet Mercy! soothing, patient, kind;
softens the high and rears the fallen mind;
knows with just rein and even hand to guide
between false fear and arbitrary pride.
Not easily provoked, she soon forgives;
feels love for all and by a look relieves.
Soft peace she brings whenever she arrives,
removes our anguish and transforms our lives
lays the rough paths of peevish nature even—
and opens in each heart a little heaven.

In the practical order, the flexibility that characterized her foundations resulted in a diversity of works of Mercy. Six years after her missionary journey began, there were twelve Mercy convents in Ireland alone and two in England, each concerned with the needs peculiar to its own situation. Such diversity she commended so long as it retained the original *Spirit of the Institute*. At the same time she feared lest any foundation become complacent, Her constant cry was:

“We can never say enough!”
“When you have enough, divide!”
“Experiment!”
“Hurrah for foundations!
Makes the old young
and the young merry.”

It is important to note that in all aspects of the various ministries as they grew under her leadership she saw her Sisters as educators raising the consciousness of the poor to a better self-image and providing the means by which they might become accepted members of society. Nor did she hesitate to encourage the support of the laity to supplement the labors of the Sisters in their work. Before she died the Sisters were not only engaged in visiting and caring for the sick in their homes and hospitals, opening poor schools and pension schools, caring for orphans and visiting prisons but they found their way into the work houses. There Irish refugees dispossessed of their farmlands along with the diseased and crippled and other outcasts were crowded together living under the care of the government amid appalling conditions. Well could Catherine say in a kind of intuitive prophetic vision: “The objects of the Institute are vast and deep.”

She saw the spread of the communities like “Christ's fire spread upon the earth.” She received calls from Irish and English bishops, even from Nova Scotia and South Carolina. At the age of sixty-one, two years before her death, she volunteered to go to Nova Scotia. Even though her offer was not accepted, she still believed: “We ought to provide for the instruction of the poor and relief of the sick in the colonies.” Her wish was fulfilled a year after death. In 1842 the first foundation in the new world was made in St. John's, Newfoundland. Fifteen years after her death, The Institute had become global, totalling three thousand Sisters in Newfoundland, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and South America. She had indeed communicated to this first generation of Sisters the holy passion that impelled her to relieve any kind of suffering, any layer of ignorance, any degree of misfortune. She could cry out in an outburst of joy: “Mercy is flowing everywhere.” This *everywhere* has now become the whole world. She would open our eyes, too, to an unknown future calling us as she did her own Sisters: “To be like rivers opening out into the sea without losing any of the sweetness of the waters.” She calls us to a new hunger and thirst to reach out to the needs of our time animated by her spirit and bearers of her name.