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*A Reflection on the Spirituality
of Venerable Catherine McAuley
as Rooted in the Beatitudes*

*Sister Mary Jean Tobin, R.S.M.
Sister Mary Eloise Tobin, R.S.M.
December 12, 1993*

To all the Sisters, women in the incorporation process, and Associates of the Providence Region of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, this reflection is lovingly dedicated.

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Prologue

In writing this reflection on *The Spirituality of Venerable Catherine McAuley as Rooted in the Beatitudes*, we hope to bring to our Sisters and Mercy Associates, particularly of the Providence Region of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, deeper insights into what has been called “the spirit of Mother McAuley.” We hope to discover not only the richness of her growth in the Spirit but also the value of an integrated Gospel-centered spirituality which, as a result, is not dormant but always alive and open to new expressions and new ways for any age. For indeed “His Mercy is from generation to generation.”

It was not our intention to make a documented study of our sources particularly in reference to the life of Mother McAuley since we were writing for those we believe to be already familiar with those sources. Our primary source, of course, has been taken from Mother McAuley's own writings, supplemented from such contemporary authors as Sister M. Carmel Bourke, R.S.M., Sister Angela Bolster, R.S.M., and Sisters M. Joanna Regan and Isabelle Keiss, R.S.M. We also found invaluable the scholarly essays of Sisters Sheila Carney, R.S.M., Mary Sullivan, R.S.M. and Mary Daly, R.S.M., in the *Mast Journal* of Fall, 1992.

For the sake of clarity, we have structured each chapter with an explanation of the general meaning of the Beatitude in question, or any other related terms. This is further enriched by a chart found in the appendix which shows the relationship of each Beatitude to the Gifts of the Holy Spirit as conceived by St. Thomas Aquinas and elaborated in *The Divine Pity* by Gerald Vann, O.P.

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To the Regional Leadership Team for officially placing the seal of Mercy on our humble endeavors.

Exposition

In order to bring the reader to a deeper knowledge of the theological foundations of this study, a brief comment must be made regarding the interrelationship of the terms *kingdom* and the *beatitudes* in general. In addition, each chapter is prefaced by a more detailed explanation of the particular beatitude in question.

As we read the beatitudes we cannot fail to note how vitally and inherently they are ordered to the kingdom. The term *kingdom* as used here has both a present and future significance. In the present, the kingdom signifies the reign or rule of Christ which prepares the way for the possession of the future kingdom in glory. As such, this rule of Christ demands a continual conversion of heart, a total reversal of values resulting in an ever deeper experience of God's presence, enabling us to accomplish his will. Thus it is, that fidelity to the rule of Christ comes to be realized here and now by grace and later by glory.

It is very difficult within the limitations of this study to do justice to the richness of the theology of the beatitudes. We must then be content to offer a very simplified outline of their meaning. We hope they will become a guide to the readers as an appreciation of their implications in the development of the spiritual life of Mother McAuley and, consequently, of the vitality of the spiritual legacy she has left us.

In using the term beatitudes or blessings, Jesus was following the tradition of the Old Testament. In that context humanity's happiness was recognized as granted by God as a reward for human merit as it pertained to this life. (In this regard see especially Chapter 26 of Deuteronomy.)

In the New Testament Jesus uses the beatitudes as an introduction to the New Covenant. They are to be seen as qualities of mind and heart essential in the formation of a Christian disciple, the full rewards of which are both prospective and eschatological.

St. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica* Ia, IIac, Q 69, calls them gifts by which a person becomes amenable to Divine Inspiration given in situations in which the promptings of reason are not sufficient. He also calls them acts by which a person possesses a kind of happiness which will be completed in the future life. For further elaboration see the chart in the appendix.

Suffice it to say, in the proclamation of the beatitudes, Christ is not offering a new code of ethics nor rewards for an accumulation of merits. Rather he is underscoring the actuality of the presence of the kingdom for those open to receive his power within them here and now as they journey toward its glorious fulfillment in the Father's house.

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 predominately 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.

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)

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.

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.

Chapter V

Blest are the single-hearted; they shall see God.

This seeing of God in the sixth beatitude is God revealing himself in every situation like the light shining in the darkness which the darkness cannot overcome. It flows from an attentive listening to the Word spoken interiorly and demands an asceticism of the heart. It brings about the oneness of all desires into a single desire: to serve God and to love nothing apart from him. It brings with it the peace of the seventh beatitude: *Blest too are the peacemakers they shall be called sons and daughters of God.* Peace is the result of singleness of heart and the more contemplative virtues of trust and purity of heart. For faith and trust are keys to peace and freedom of spirit. It also releases in us in times of conflict and persecution the power to surrender to the will of God. As we grow in the quiet presence of God, we radiate peace.

It is not surprising that this beatitude of purity of heart should illuminate all the others we have considered. For its light penetrates them with that inherent simplicity by which Catherine saw God revealing himself not only in prayer but especially in the faces of all who looked to her for healing, for counsel, for comfort, encouragement or for that wisdom which is "Christ the power of God and the Wisdom of God." (I Cor. 1, 24). When she was asked what qualifications a young woman should possess to become a Sister of Mercy, she brought together in one luminous statement a whole theology of a vocation in Mercy. She said very simply: "Union with God and love of the poor."

This growth in union with God, as she testifies in her letters and retreat instructions, is the very source through which the Divine Mercy and Compassion become efficacious. So we find in her admonitions to the Sisters an insistence for cultivating an asceticism of the heart.

She says: "The life and teaching of Jesus Christ should be a book open before us—and as a seal whose image we are to impress on our hearts."

"Why did God call us? To unite us to Himself—the very spirit of Jesus animating our every thought and action."

"No occupation should draw our mind from God. Our whole life should be a continual act of praise and prayer."

"How can we teach love of God if our hearts are cold?"

For her this union with God was not only to be a private practice but should flow from a union in charity that bonded the Sisters in the community of Mercy. It should be a community in which respect and acceptance of each person's gifts and limitations were essential: "This mutual love Our Saviour desires, should be so perfect as to resemble in some manner the love and union that subsists between Himself and His heavenly Father." On her beautiful chapter on *Union and Charity* she made it clear that such a spirit not only nourished each individual life, but was the very source of compassion in relation to those whom the Sisters served.

Sister Mary Daly, RSM, in her remarkable essay, published in *The Mast Journal*, Fall, 1992, and entitled, *Catherine McAuley's Original Rule and Her Understanding of the Order of Mercy*, appropriately remarks

that in her awareness of the Sisters' need for guidance in the attainment of these ideals Catherine left us in her Original Rule the chapters on *The Perfection of our Ordinary Actions* and *Of the Employment of Time* following those on ministry. These were succeeded by chapters dealing with the interior virtues and religious exercises and devotions proper to our growth in Christ and concluded with the chapters on the vows.

In this regard she showed herself well aware that this interior spirituality required constant discipline of heart and mind if it were to bear fruit in the works of Mercy.

We see Catherine, then, as a woman of prayer before all else. She was nurtured on the Word of God in her early years as Mrs. Callaghan opened to her the riches of the Scriptures found in her Protestant Bible at a time when the Bible was a closed book for women religious and the Catholic laity. From her dialogue with Mrs. Callaghan, especially when nursing her in her last illness, Catherine learned the art of prayer. By the time she came to Baggot Street her associates and later her novices saw her clearly as a woman centered in God. She had the ability to withdraw herself from the pressures of her stewardship. She insisted that fervor could be sustained by frequent acts of love of God, the source of which she often found in her beloved *The Jesus Psalter*.

From this deep personal union came the grace of the beatitude of peace and with it her joy and confidence in God. All of her contemporaries speak of her as possessing a serenity that flowed from her quiet surrender into what she called, "the arms of thy most loving providence." From her own experience she could well say: "Those that arrive at perfect union with God will feel such peace of soul, nothing can disturb it." Or: "Infinite is the love God bears such souls who repose in His protection."

In all her ministrations of the poor, in all that was asked of her in the establishing of the Institute, in the formation of her Sisters in a spirituality singularly both contemplative and apostolic, she did repose peacefully in his protection, knowing the intensity and power of his love.

As we come to the end of our reflection, we seek to identify that quality of the mind and heart of Catherine McAuley that best reveals the secret of her sanctity and the cause of her joy. We find it in the complete simplicity of her openness to God, that grace of the Beatitude of the Poor in Spirit by which all that touched her life was transfigured and became a blessing.

However, it is only in the Scripture in the following words taken from the Book of Sirach that we can fully signify all that she has come to mean and to be for the Church, for the world, and for us, her daughters, privileged to be impelled by her spirit and to become bearers of her vision wherever we are:

"...Suddenly this riverlet of mine
became a river,
then this stream of mine, a sea
Thus do I send my teachings forth
shining like the dawn,
to become known afar off.
Thus do I pour out instruction like prophecy
and bestow it on generations to come."
(Sirach: 24, 29--31)

Epilogue

As we come at last to bring together in a kind of final word what Venerable Catherine McAuley was and still is for us, we well might say that she reduced everything that touched her life to a single-hearted simplicity that bound together prayer and ministry in a beautiful synthesis that saw God in all things and all things in God. This immanence of God's presence was the source of her strong faith, her confident hope, and the ardor of her love. It produced in her a joy which was the gift of the Holy Spirit that spilled over into all her relationships, her friendships, and the simple pleasures of her life, giving her the capacity to bring to her ministry "the tidings of great joy."

The spirituality which she has handed on to us, although nurtured within the context of the Irish Church of the nineteenth century, was rooted in Scripture and Tradition of the Universal Church. As such it is open-ended. Its vitality has not diminished over more than one hundred years. Its spirit still lives and unites us Sisters of Mercy whether from South America or New England, from South Africa or Thailand, from Central America or Australia, from New Zealand or Newfoundland.

It challenges us today more than ever in our contemporary world. Catherine leaves it to us to point out new ways in which to respond to the voices of the ignorant, of the abused, of the addicted, of all the victims of a sick society. Although her message may be expressed in a new idiom, in a variety of languages and dialects, it remains unchangeable in a changing world. But we are not alone. Catherine has left us the example of her own saintly life and the beautiful symbols of the ring and Mercy Cross as signs of a dedication both selfless and joyful.

Although we hope most dearly for her canonization, perhaps we should realize that with our own gifts and through our own personalities we continue her presence within our communities, our ministries, and our broken world. This is all she asks.

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Appendix

Beatitude	Description	Gift of the Holy Spirit	Comment
<p>Poor in Spirit To be secure in insecurity Refusal to exploit the world to our own advantage Teach us to care and not to care Teach us to be still</p>	<p>1. Renunciation of a proud inflated spirit. 2. Reverence and submission to God. 3. Right use of the things of this world. 4. To possess things only in the framework of His Will. In order to possess what you do not possess, you must go by way of dispossession Empty yourself, see that I am God.</p>	<p>Fear of the Lord: Fear of all that will separate us from God. Reverential love. We hope for all things from one whom we love. Baptism: Power to enter the Kingdom, possession of the power and riches of the God life. I am Christ's.</p>	<p>1. We have nothing to lose—all things are in His keeping. Teach us to live in the Presence and be at peace.</p>
<p>Gentle Overcome tendency to move to the center of the stage</p>	<p>1. Realization of your need of God as a child needs a father. 2. Patience with ourselves; Patience with others. 3. Being slow to take offense, to harbor grudges. 4. To be self-possessed. 5. To accept without rancor what the day brings.</p>	<p>Gift of Piety: Gives us the loving trust of the child for the Father Love of the Providence of God in every event of our lives Devotion to His Will. Love of your family and community Confirmation: Sacrament of Social Action. Build up the unity of our homes, of our world, our parish, by the love power in us.</p>	<p>2. Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy will be done.</p>
<p>Those who Mourn Accepting the pain of true discipleship. We have not here a lasting city.</p>	<p>1. Sorrow for our sins as separating us from one whom we love. 2. Accepting the sorrow of our own little Passion as it comes to us. 3. Renunciation of whatever separates us from God. 4. Recognition of the fleeting character of this world. 5. Take up a cross with another.</p>	<p>Gift of Knowledge: To know God through His creatures: to use creatures aright. Penance. Go and sin no more. Take up life in love, expectation, joy.</p>	<p>3. We have not here a lasting city. We are pilgrims of Eternity. We must be conformed to Him in His sufferings in order to be transformed in the Resurrection.</p>

Beatitude	Description	Gift of the Holy Spirit	Comment
<p>Hunger and Thirst for Justice To be constant. To overcome indifference. Integrity of Spirit.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Justice—moral goodness proceeding from faith, love, union with Christ 2. To be possessed of the inner power of Christ 3. One hungers and thirsts for possession of God. 4. Quiet refusal to flow with the current in matters of social behavior. 5. Power to live as a Christian and be a witness to Christ. 	<p>1. Gift of Fortitude: Power or Strength from union with God; a. to do what we ought—to seek the Kingdom of God. b. To overcome indifference to the Kingdom. c. To bear sufferings of life with patience. d. To be constant in the fulfillment of one's responsibilities.</p> <p>2. Source of Strength—The Mass—Through Him, with Him, in Him, Reception of the sacrificed Christ—Go and be a power in the world. Holy Eucharist and the Mass.</p>	<p>“I can do all things in Him who strengthens Me.” “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His Justice.”</p>
<p>Be Merciful <i>A voice to speak. Hands to touch. A heart to love.</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mercy likens us to God by similarity of works, for we seek to heal, to strengthen, to supply for the deficiencies of others. 2. To use our own suffering redemptively for our own sins and those of others. 3. To serve others with compassion and love. 	<p>Gift of Counsel; Sacrament of the Sick</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Direction of the Holy Spirit to show us what is best to be done; to help us forget ourselves in meeting the needs of others; to be able to bring Christ and not ourselves to others—His comfort and His strength 2. Counsel as to how best to use the sicknesses of our life, the weaknesses and dependence of old age, to be always ready to give ourselves up to His Mercy in our dying. 	<p><i>“Whatsoever you do to one of these the least of my brethren—you do to me—I was hungry, thirsty, naked, in prison etc.”</i> This is the judgment we should meet.</p> <p>Spiritual works:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prayer for others 2. Relieving ignorance 3. Counseling those in doubt and sorrow Reproving the sinner 4. Bearing wrongs patiently.

Beatitude	Description	Gift of the Holy Spirit	Comment
<p>Pure of Heart Empty yourself and see that I am God! We are intemperate when we do violence to the truth projecting on to God human limitations. A temperateness of the mind.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Single-Minded true Christian—sincere—faithful 2. A candle in the darkness, purity of the flame-giving light to others 3. I am to be light and fire in Christ 4. Rule of the spirit over the unified personality 5. Temperateness—control over the senses, the passions, goods of the body and the mind so that all is ordered to God. 	<p>Gift of Understanding; Sacrament of Marriage</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sense of the certitude of faith; sense of the perfection of God. A sense of God's presence in creation and consequently in the mysteries of faith. 2. Sacrament of Marriage 	<p>“You are the light of the world” “Lord that I may see.” “Thy Faith has made thee whole.” Parents are “the ministers of God's Omnipotence.”</p>
<p>Peacemakers Wholeness within ourselves and outside of us. <i>Shalom!</i> (Greeting of Christ to His own.)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Peace within oneself—unifying of all desires as aspects of one desire to love and obey God above all things 2. Peace in the Family—drive out selfishness, envy, jealousy, spite Learn the meaning of love that serves 3. Live in the present. Do what you can in planning for the future and leave the rest to God. 	<p>Wisdom; Holy Orders</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gift of Wisdom enables us to see and love all things in God as the unifying factor 2. All things have their importance in the eternal present 3. It is the whole of creation which is brought to the Mass, the whole Body of the Faithful; the whole world offered to God and God given to the world. 4. We can bring God to the world by our worship and by the service of love expressed in the beatitudes. 	<p>“<i>In His Will is our peace.</i>” (Dante) “We are all united into one holy priesthood whenever we offer ourselves as sacrifices to God.”</p>
<p>Martyrs Those who suffer for justice sake. Persecution: Temptation Peer pressure</p>	<p>The moral ideal of the beatitudes could not be more opposed to the practices and maxims which reign in the world—hence persecution follows. If you are not overcome by persecution, you will taste the fruits of the Kingdom and feel the supreme expression of love.</p>		<p>“Happy are they who are insulted, persecuted, falsely accused because of Me.”</p>