



Lent 2011 – Week Three

Light a candle

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Open the prayer time by reciting or singing the Suscipe of Catherine McAuley

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Input on Catherine McAuley

Transformation

Only those who have been transformed themselves to some degree can become agents of larger transformations. Transformation usually relies on the ordinary formative episodes of our lives. The psychologist Murray Stein says **“The transforming person is someone who realizes the inherent self to the maximum extent possible and in turn influences others to do the same.”** Such a person has the substance and style to inspire and elevate others to a greater moral largesse. Relatively few people have the moral courage to do the inner work that would make them transforming and transformational persons, which would result, according to Stein, in their lives showing **“ an extraordinary degree of uniqueness, imagination and pristine individuality”**.

Catherine McAuley was such a transforming and transformational individual with fire in her bones. She was fifty when she took her first steps towards making her life-long dream a reality. She experienced a defining moment in realizing her vision. The novelty of an intentional community of lay women without religious vows and enclosure brought such negative attention that a friend wrote **“the criticism threatened to discourage young women from joining Catherine’s endeavours and thus to undermine the very stability of the works of mercy to which she was committed, including visitation of the sick poor in their homes and hospitals”**. She began a long deliberation on how to proceed and decided, against her previous natural reluctance, that she should become a religious sister. She set out with two others Elizabeth Harley and Mary Anne Doyle for George’s Hill to serve the canonically required novitiate year, before professing religious vows on December 12, 1831, as the first Sisters of Mercy.

She developed extraordinary skill in conflict resolution with Church authorities. She has left us a priceless legacy of over three hundred letters from which shine forth a personality of amazing translucence and heart-wrenching honesty. Her legacy, of love and daring, challenges us to revive our own lost dreams and strive to bring them to fruition. The life-vision of Catherine provides us with a deep story of a woman whose shining idealism, indomitable courage, prophetic persona and formidable spiritual and intellectual gifts enabled her to be a transformational figure. From her early childhood to her middle years, she made the journey from beloved child to destitute orphan. She knew first-hand what it meant to be forced to the edges of her society and culture and to experience the prejudice of being Irish and Catholic in an age of intolerance. Taking Jesus as her exemplar, she was attuned to the Father’s will wherever it took her. She was transformed by it.

She met with trials and struggles and came to know the Cross well. The most formidable of these trials and struggles was the Chaplain Controversy, which took place during the most painful period of her life, in the last months of 1837 and lasted for four years. A dispute arose between herself and Dr. Walter Meyler, parish priest of St. Andrew’s. He was unwilling to assign a designated chaplain to serve the sacramental needs of the women and girls sheltered in the

House of Mercy, Baggot Street. She believed that the continuity of pastoral care was essential for the Sisters and the House of Mercy. Because of Fr. Meyler's decision, they would now have to go out to the parish church daily and on Sundays with the consequent freedom to dally on the streets before returning to the very shelter created to protect them from sexual and other dangers. Dr. Andrew Fitzgerald's summation of the controversy was **"a wanton unwarranted abuse of church authority"**.

Catherine was always aware of the attitude of Christ (John 15:14) **"I shall not call you servants anymore ... I call you friends"**. He emptied Himself, assuming our human condition, then He drew us up to Himself, lifted us up to become His friends. She had striven for years to put on the mind of Christ and in doing so had utterly transformed herself. She emptied herself of self-interest, self-will, all personal ambition or desire to dominate. When she became a religious superior she saw her role as one of service, not power. She had no desire to rule but knowing that **"all government comes from God"** (Romans 13:1) she submitted with mildness and simplicity. As a novice was heard to remark, **"I think what pleased us most in Rev. Mother was the absence of a manner telling: I am the Foundress"**.

The natural talent for leadership with which God had gifted her was enhanced by her feminine qualities of mind and heart and drew young people to her. Her patience, her compassion, and her good-humoured playfulness all helped to give life to her first community. She was very aware that her loving kindness must first be given to her Sisters, and from them flow out to the people to whom they ministered. The Sisters learned from this that they, too, like Catherine needed to be transformed in order to be transformational. She encouraged respect for the office of Superior but accepted no privileges for herself and never excused herself from the common duties. This attitude came from her respect for all her Sisters and her perception of the dignity and integrity of each person and the need for freedom, within authority, to develop fully as a human being both spiritually and emotionally. This concept of authority as service was the fruit of her humble acceptance of herself, her limitations, and of her role as an instrument God was choosing to use.

Catherine did a wonderful job in transforming her first Sisters. She appointed them to be the Superiors of new foundations. She delegated authority to them, while freeing them to act on their own initiatives. Her intention was to provide stability and order for the carrying on of their mission of mercy. No matter how far away they found themselves she constantly supported them with love, while encouraging them to use their own initiative, and to judge for themselves the local needs. This is clear from her words: **'I leave you free to do what you think best. I am satisfied you will not act imprudently, and this conviction makes me happy'**. How these words must have gladdened the heart of the receiver and challenged her to live up to Catherine's conviction of her good judgment. Catherine was a loving woman, but it was a strong love that called the Sisters to growth and maturity.

Catherine's grace of being able to let go and let others be never diminished. Rather, it increased in her soul as she approached the end of her life. She offered herself for the mission to Newfoundland declaring that the Institute no longer needed her at the helm. On the day she died the Liverpool novice who was destined to be the Superior of that place burst out crying and said **"Mother, don't leave us! What will the Congregation do if you die?"** The quiet answer of the dying woman was: **"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."**

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5 minutes silent reflection on what has just been shared about Catherine McAuley

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Take 5 minutes to allow everyone to share aloud the names of those they know who are sick and in need of prayer. Each person will write the names of the people they wish to pray for, on a piece of paper, and place them in a basket.

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Spend 15 minutes in silent prayer for the sick

Conclude with the prayer for sick through the intercession of Catherine McAuley

Prayer for the Sick

GOD OF LOVE AND MERCY
YOU INSPIRED CATHERINE MCAULEY
TO SERVE YOUR SON
BY RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF HER TIME.
MOVED BY HER CARE FOR THE SICK,
WE ASK THAT THROUGH HER PRAYERS
YOU REACH OUT WITH YOUR HEALING LOVE
AND RESTORE

TO FULL HEALTH.
WE ASK THIS IN COMPLETE CONFIDENCE
THROUGH JESUS CHRIST YOUR SON.
AMEN

