

Commemorating Venerable Catherine McAuley

MIC, Baggot Street, Dublin on April 11th, 2023

Homily for Mass

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Friends

Today we gather to commemorate the official recognition by the Church of the holiness of life of Catherine McAuley by honouring her with the title of **Venerable**.

It is good that we celebrate this occasion within the context of the glorious liturgy of Wednesday of Easter Week.

Let us start with the Gospel -

In the story just heard, two discouraged people consoled each other as they walked that eleven-kilometre stretch of road separating Jerusalem from Emmaus. A deep dark disappointment dampened their spirits. Jesus, to whom they had entrusted their lives, was crucified; Jesus, who had given **them great hope for the future** was dead and buried. **Their hopes were shattered**. They had been nurturing a very natural human hope of success, which was now falling to pieces.

They are trudging disconsolately along the road when **Jesus (the stranger) joins them**. They do not know it is Jesus but His presence brings, not new information, but a new point of view. A new alternative perspective. Walking with them on the road to Emmaus, Jesus speaks to them through **the Scriptures**. From him they learn that those who look to Scripture for guidance in life will not encounter easy heroism. True hope, like every other value worth having never comes cheap. It always undergoes trial and suffering. Jesus gradually leads the two discouraged people to see that the God in whom they put their trust is not a triumphant God but a humble, loving, God and the Cross is the sign of the height, the breadth, the length and the depth of God's Love. **This was a new perspective for them**.

What has Catherine McAuley to say to us today about true heroism, true holiness, true joy?

Let us take a step back -

Firstly, what was it about Catherine's life then that enabled the Church to say with moral certainty that she lived a heroically holy life - that she was worthy of the title Venerable ? After all, to all intents and purposes she lived a very ordinary life!

Secondly, what happens when the Church scrutinizes the life of a Servant of God (name given to a person whose life is proposed for sainthood?)

A Church Perspective

When the Church looks at the life of a person in order to discern the person's holiness, **she looks to the last ten years of that person's life**.

Catherine McAuley spent the last ten years of her life as a religious Sister of Mercy. (She made her profession on December 12 1831 and she died on November 11 1841, about six weeks after her 63rd birthday and just a month short of her tenth year in religious life).

The Church looks at the person's life from the perspective of **how she lived the virtues of Faith Hope and Love, Prudence, Justice Fortitude and Temperance and the commitments of her state in life** (for Catherine - Poverty, Chastity and Obedience in her later years) **steadfastly and perseveringly**.

The reason the Church focuses on these latter years is that these years are influenced by how the person has lived her life from the beginning. We arrive at the sunset years of life moulded and formed by the choices we have made in the various circumstances life offers us.

The Church also looks for three elements that qualify action as heroic. These are:

- Actions performed at a level, which is **beyond what is normally expected of a good person**. This is obvious in Catherine in the way she used **all her inheritance for the poor. Her acceptance of the necessity of becoming a religious sister so that the poor might be more surely served, even though this was a long way from what she had imagined for herself**.
- The practice of these acts is **continuous and progressive**. Catherine's love of and practical care for people less fortunate than herself is obvious in her life from the time she began to help the tenants on the Callaghan estate in Coolock. She helped them
 - through her teaching days in St Mary's in Middle Abbey Street,
 - to her building of the House of Mercy in Baggot Street,
 - through her founding and guidance of the early steps of the Sisters of Mercy.
- This behaviour becomes a **powerful example and encouragement** for those who are in direct or mediated contact with the Servant of God.
In 1827, her first companions who came to help her with her works of Mercy in the house on Baggot Street in Dublin were attracted by the way she lived, which one of them described as a "prayerfully quiet way of being". Thousands of women, from many continents, down through the years have been inspired by her life and charism. Her "light" is no less attractive today than it was in 1827.

The theologians who scrutinised the life and work of Catherine as she responded to the action of God in her life found that Catherine's spiritual greatness lies in:

- her **strength of spirit and dependence on God** that kept her faithful to the Catholic Faith
- her **marvellous docility to the whisper of Divine Providence**, which drew her, humble and obedient, step by step along the path of her specific vocation. Catherine's spirituality was focussed on the suffering Christ. She would say that the new congregation was "founded on Calvary there to serve a crucified redeemer" Her goal was to bring the world around her to the Cross and to that Merciful Love that flows from the crucified Christ
- her **total sacrifice of all that she was and had for the sake of the poor, sick and uneducated**

Her Prayer Life

Catherine's **knowledge of Scripture is electrifying especially for an Irish Catholic woman** of her day. She herself was exposed to the transforming power of God's word, which she read, meditated upon, absorbed and translated into action. In her own words, **"The life and teachings of Jesus Christ should**

be as a book always open before us, from which we are to learn all that is necessary to know”. In addition, **“what Jesus said and did was said and done to give us an example which our lives should be spent copying”**. (Catechesi Tradendae no. 49: “everything that Jesus said and did teaches us” Pope St John Paul II).

Catherine centred her devotional prayer on Christ and on God’s universal Mercy (Psalter of Jesus¹, Thirty Days Prayer). If you read Catherine McAuley’s letters or her Retreat Instructions, you will find that there is no sentimentality. Her prayer reflects her time and place but deeper still it reveals a soul that recognised the importance of a vital prayer life and connection with Jesus Christ. She would say herself; **“how can we teach the Love of God if our own hearts are cold”**. **She described prayer as a plant, the seed of which is sown in the heart of every Christian but its growth depends on the care we take to nourish it. If neglected it will die. If nourished by constant practice, it will blossom and produce fruit in abundance”**. Catherine reminded those who would share her life and charism to cultivate a contemplative attitude to life because she knew from experience that out of a contemplative heart would flow compassionate service for those in need and the fruits of prayer are seen in our everyday choices/actions in life.

Her Ordinary Actions

What Catherine asked of herself and others was the fulfilment of ordinary everyday actions, done with perseverance, attention and love instead of spectacular efforts abandoned at the first hurdle. It is through her very ordinariness that her strength of spirit and her holiness become visible. Her letters are full of anecdotes of ordinary everyday happenings; concern for somebody who is sick, rejoicing at someone’s success, sharing tidbits of information and advice, commenting on someone’s behavior, delighting over a gift, and being devastated at the news of illness or a death. What makes her letters so attractive and readable is their unaffectedness and the warmth, friendliness, care for others and interest in the detail of the other person’s life that is evident in every line that she wrote. Underpinning all is her unshakeable faith and trust in God.

Her Humility

Another aspect of Catherine’s heroism is her **humility**

When the theologians were looking at the life of Catherine McAuley at the time she was declared Venerable on April 9 1990 by Pope St. John Paul II, the central virtue that they discerned in Catherine was humility.

From her letters and writings it is clear that she was convinced that she was **“God’s instrument”**, a strand in the great tapestry of God’s Divine Plan – only a strand but a very necessary one. It was her grounded self-acceptance of who she was before God, nothing more and nothing less that was the secret of her humble hospitality. There was room in her heart and in her house for all who needed hospitality – family, friend or stranger. In opening her heart to God she opened her hands to those around her and exemplified living the Gospel imperative **“love one another as I have loved you” (John 16:12)**.

Catherine was conscious of her own limitations and this knowledge saved her from any messianic complex that can characterise a person who does great things. A novice in Carlow who met her a number of times, said about her **“there was in her, an absence of a manner of telling ‘I am the foundress’. She was cheerful and motherly with all of us and looked very devout in her prayers”**.

¹ In the Psalter of Jesus, the name of Jesus is mentioned numerous times calling on his Mercy.

Catherine rarely drew attention to herself except when necessary as we see when she was very ill. While in her health, she served at table, helped in the laundry, looked after her own room, and never exempted herself from the ordinary work of the house.

Underpinning Catherine's humility is her unwavering trust in and devotion to her **"humbled abandoned agonizing Christ"**. **"The humbled, abandoned, agonizing Christ, this is my Christ, him will I have and hold. Outside of him, nothing"**

Her humility also lay at the source of her gratitude and prayer. We hear her pray; **"May God bless the poor Sisters of Mercy and make them very humble that they may not be unworthy of the distinguished blessing that God has bestowed on them"**.

In conclusion

To look to the future with Joy is to Hope this is the message we take from today.

Two disciples on the road to Emmaus

The two people who left Jerusalem in deep depression and sadness returned there in a matter of hours filled with a joy they wanted to communicate to others. Their close encounter with the Risen Jesus renews their hope and gives them a new sense of mission. They still have the same weaknesses as when they set out but their **discipleship is now fired with hope, which enables them to confront challenges with joy.**

Catherine McAuley

Catherine was a woman who looked to the Scriptures for guidance, something quite unusual for a Catholic of her time. She experienced suffering at all levels of her being. From what we know, she put her trust humbly and unwaveringly in her beloved crucified, abandoned Jesus. Catherine's hope in God never wavered to the end of her life. Given her humble trust in God, Catherine knew true joy in responding to her call.

Catherine shows us that **true joy gives us courage to venture out of ourselves and into the burning holiness of God. It is true joy that pain does not destroy which first brings maturity. Only joy that stands the test of pain and is stronger than affliction is authentic.** Catherine embraced the mission in life entrusted to her, and she lived it joyfully knowing that through this she would bring others to God and would grow into wholeness and holiness and into being the loving mercy-bearing person she was called to be.

What about ourselves here today?

What image do we convey today to the world around us? Do we convey the image of good workers, people who are committed, whose lives are organised and austere with timetables and rules?

Or, do we communicate the image of people who are happy, living their humanity to the full. Cultivating sensitivity and tenderness.

In short, do we communicate the joy of the Gospel?

Only a consecrated life that is joyful can affirm our vocation and has the capacity to call forth the vocation of others as witness in Catherine's life.

For us, as for Catherine and for the disciples on the road to Emmaus true joy that ignites the fire of love and inspires new life comes from close union with the crucified and risen Jesus. This union touches every fibre of our being, heart, mind, soul and body and transforms us.

Amen