

## **The Cause for the Canonization of Catherine McAuley**

(This is the text of a talk given by Anne Hannon rsm to the Mercy International Association Archivists' Conference, November 2003)

One day last March I received a telephone call from Sr. Breege O'Neill, our Central Leader, asking me to consider taking on the position of Vice-Postulator for the Cause of Catherine McAuley. It came as a bolt out of the blue and I asked for some time to consider it. Although, I was apprehensive about taking the ministry on I found the idea very challenging. After some discernment I agreed. So here I am.

When I was missioned by the Central Team in Baggot Street I was given the following task:

- (a) to be proactive in enthusing the sisters and others to promote an awareness of the life, vision and virtues of Catherine among members of the congregation throughout the world, as well as among the public
- (b) to be active in encouraging prayer to Catherine on behalf of the sick, which could result in the miracles we need for her beatification and canonization.

It was a tall order but not impossible. Good is communicative of itself and I believe that what we have to communicate is good, very good. Many have said to me that trying to fulfil my twofold task is an impossible one in the present climate of distrust around the whole area of child abuse. But I believe that reliance on providence which was so much part of Catherine's life will carry me through. Catherine wrote, when in the midst of the Birr foundation, 'We have ever confided largely in Divine Providence. The Lord and Master of our house and home is a faithful provider. Let us never desire more than enough. He will give us that and a blessing, Catherine had a vision which has proved perennial and she is an inspiration to all races and creeds. Whether one is talking to sisters from Kenya or the Phillipines, Australia or Great Britain, United States or Ireland or wherever, one is struck by the great love they have for Catherine.

What is it about Catherine which has an appeal for sisters and people in every country? A saint in the Christian tradition is someone whose holiness is recognized as exceptional by other Christians. Was Catherine's holiness recognized as exceptional by those around her? Certainly, this was so. Archbishop McHale referred to her as 'the sainted Catherine McAuley who was destined like St. Paul, to be a vessel of election, selected by Providence to be a source of blessing at all times to the suffering poor and to the homeless and ignorant among the faithful of His Church'. Mary Vincent Hartnett said of her 'Her instructions were the fruit of prayer to which she had recourse in difficulty.' In her, Archbishop Murray felt 'a flood of devotion rising round his feet' while Bishop Michael Blake of Dromore looked on Catherine as 'one selected by Heaven to be specially endowed with exceptional graces. Her heart is overflowing with the charity of the Redeemer, whose all-consuming fire burns within her.' A Presentation Sister from George's Hill, reminisced that 'all who knew Catherine revered her as most saintly. We all loved her most dearly,' and of course her early companions attested to her holiness over and over. They felt that to have known her was to be drawn closer to God. In a foreword to K.M. Barry's biography of Catherine written in 1894, T .A. Finlay said of her, 'She possessed in rare degree the personal holiness which is the first requirement of effective Christian effort'. Her understanding of the Gospel precept of charity was to render the poor service in person. She took up and shared in their hardships; she became part of their daily life and shared daily suffering with them; she lightened their burden, not by stating a well-considered social policy for their relief, but by taking on her own shoulders a part of the burden under which they were bowed down. As Barry said, she threw open the doors of

Coolock and Baggot Street and indeed all her foundations and 'went out into gutter and garret to teach and soothe and shelter, with her own words and hands and fortune, the suffering members of Christ'.

The purpose of canonization is to set before the faithful fresh and unique examples of Christian holiness. It is the Holy Spirit who moves the faithful to recognize holiness and thereby establishes an authentic reputation for sanctity. At the end of the process, it is again the Holy Spirit who provides the necessary 'divine signs' in the form most often, of inexplicable physical cures. If God wants a Servant of God canonized, it will happen. In the letters of Paul, the earliest documents of the church, we find that the Christian concept of grace is manifest as faith, hope and love. Of these virtues love of God is supreme because through it the soul participates in the very life of God Himself and is united to Him. Love in Paul's view, animates and perfects the other virtues. Moreover, it is the one virtue that continues after death: in heaven, faith, and hope are no longer necessary because the citizens of heaven possess and are possessed by God's eternal love. Catherine had these virtues in abundance. Holiness implies 'wholeness'. To aspire to holiness is to aspire to something other than a 'complete' life or a morally 'good' life. The attraction of saints is 'their power to lure us beyond virtue to virtue's source'. The story of a saint is about God and his relationship to humankind. It is about the raw data of a human life transformed by divine grace. Saints have the same experiences as we do, but their insights into them are different. It is this which distinguishes the saint from others, and one saint from another. As Sisters of Mercy it is our task and privilege to search out and illuminate what it is that makes Catherine different; to discover what fresh and formative insight the love of God has produced in her and to trace the effect of her total surrender to God's will. Only God makes saints but it is up to us to tell Catherine's story. Her story is, as is the story of all saints, a love story. It is a story of a God who loves and of the beloved who learns how to reciprocate and share that love.

Of all the elements in the making of a saint, proof of a miracle is the one which most intrigues us. While miracles are a sign of divine approbation their lack in no way diminishes a candidate's reputation for holiness nor inhibits an authentic cult of the saint. Miracles are gifts, and who are we to say that God no longer responds to prayer addressed to saints? As Roman Catholics we shouldn't have any difficulty in believing in miracles. In fact, we have all experienced graced moments in our own lives and in the lives of others, which have come as gifts. To believe in miracles one must be able to accept gifts, freely bestowed and altogether unmerited. Neither should we find it difficult to accept that gifts have come our way because someone who cares for us prayed to God on our behalf. There can be no miracles without prayer, no prayer without confidence and trust. Because we are all members of the communion of saints, we are all connected in God, giving and receiving unexpected and undeserving acts of grace. It is a graced world in which we live and so miracles are entirely possible and do happen. Graces or miracles received by the faithful and attributed to a Servant of God are 'collected, sifted, tested, and authenticated as God's own proof of a candidate's holiness'.

What is the status of Catherine's Cause right now? Thanks to the Trojan work undertaken by Angela Bolster for many years the process for canonization is at the stage of readiness for beatification.

On the 13th. February, 1975 Angela was asked by Archbishop Ryan to assume total responsibility for the promotion of the cause of Catherine McAuley. She gladly agreed to this and commenced work in the newly created Diocesan Office for Causes in Archbishop's House in Drumcondra. She began to visit communities and to speak on Mother Catherine; an exercise which eventually became global and gave her a comprehensive insight into multi-

cultural Mercy Life. She published three books: *Catherine McAuley in Her Own Words; My Song is of Mercy and Justice, The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1827-1841* and *Catherine McAuley, Venerable for Mercy*.

Meantime, Archbishop Ryan set up a Historical Commission for the Cause of Catherine McAuley and Angela commenced the compilation of a Historical Report on the cause. This Report was submitted to the Irish Episcopal Conference for deliberation. A petition to have the cause formally opened went to Pope Paul VI.

Monsignor Hanly, the then Postulator of the Cause, requested through the Archbishop the *Nihil Obstat* of the Holy See for the introduction of the cause. This was granted on 16<sup>th</sup> June, 1978.

The diocesan tribunal was set up and the proceedings were handed in to the Sacred Office of Causes in four cartons. Angela then commenced writing the *Positio* on 2nd. February, 1980.

In 1982 the Postulator for the Cause, Fr. Martin Nolan OSA, nominated Angela for the position of Vice-Postulator and she was so appointed - the first woman to have been accepted by the Sacred Congregation for Causes! The *Positio Super Scriptis* of the theological censors was published and carried the *Nihil Obstat* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Angela presented the *Positio* for examination on Foundation Day 1984. This was studied by six nominated historical consultants, who in 1986 declared themselves to be very enthusiastic and positive. Added to this eight theological consultants presented equally positive reports on Catherine's spiritual qualities, her practice of heroic virtues, and her stature as a contemporary model of Christian living.

In 1990 Catherine was declared Venerable by decree of John Paul II. For various reasons, and those are not due to Angela, any urgency about the progress of the cause has been more or less dormant since then. It is up to us now to bring Angela's dedicated work to successful closure. There are some who have said to me that perhaps Catherine doesn't want to be canonized. But canonization is more for the inspiration of the faithful than for her glorification and she was always conscious of the power of inspiration and will, surely, pander to our need.

As you can see from the outline above the journey of a Cause is slow and painstaking and involves the judgment of God and man. The human decision is that of the Church, which after careful consideration, declares that the Servant of God practised Christian virtue in an heroic way, to an heroic degree. The divine voice speaks through miracles, and without it the Church does not give full weight of its authority for the naming of a saint. While we may not give public veneration to a Servant of God before beatification, we ought to promote private devotion to Catherine, in season and out of season, confidently expecting that the divine signs which the Church requires will be given.

We are Sisters of Mercy. The word Mercy makes us think of that particular quality in God, which is, for each one of us, the real reason for our hope and the grounds for our confidence and trust. God because of his great love stoops down to us in our weakness, with a divine power to support and a tenderness to console.

Catherine, is the exponent, *par excellence*, of the true biblical meaning of Mercy. In the bible *hesed* means more than Mercy or compassion. It carries with it the underlying note of steadfastness. Catherine saw Mercy as a gift to be passed on to and shared with others and everything that she did was motivated by a steadfast love.

We are Catherine's Sisters of Mercy, but we, by our religious profession, in a special manner, are, also, God's witnesses of mercy, witnesses to His power and His tenderness. We are instruments of His love. Catherine's steadfast faith, her single-minded purpose and her persevering dedication could not but edify our society which longs for spiritual heroes and heroines. The acknowledgement of her heroic virtue would be a strong example for good women everywhere. Let us go forth from here and tell her story, our story and God's story so that we may bring hope to a world which doesn't know it is without hope; bring faith to a world that is becoming more and more faithless and bring love to a world which sings about love but rarely truly experiences it. Catherine did it in her time and she expects us to do it in our time. Because Catherine did it; we can too.