CATHERINE

A Reflection on Values from the Mercy Tradition

CAROL ESTELLE WHEELER, RSM
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Mercy High School
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Dedicated to
Estelle Ryan and Frederick Grant Wheeler
in whose home
I first learned hospitality

The fourth printing in memory of
Fred Wheeler, Jr. (1946-2001)
known and loved for the
hospitality of his table
INSTITUTIONS IN THE MERCY TRADITION "ARE NO MORE AND NO LESS than particular embodiments of human endeavor; as such, they are in need of continuous conversion if they are to retain their value as witness to the coming reign of God...."¹ For this assertion I am indebted to Sr. Helen Amos, who spoke it to a gathering of Mercy secondary educators some years ago. It is no less true today. And there is no better time than a time of significant celebration to return to our roots, to our founding stories—for we learn who we are, indeed, we continue to create who we are through the stories we tell. An anniversary year provides the opportunity not only to rejoice but also to renew—to renew in the deepest sense. It is my personal and professional pleasure to offer this reflection on Catherine McAuley and the Mercy tradition as part of Mercy High School’s celebration and reflection for the sake of ongoing conversion.

But I want to begin with a digression. I want to recount a story which, in one way, has nothing to do with the stories which found and develop what we call the Mercy tradition. But in another way—in that way in which all things human are related—this story has everything to do with our stories. It is a story with which you may be familiar, for it has been told publicly and eloquently by Philip Hallie— in a book, in articles, and in lecture. It is the story of a small village in southeastern France called Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. Philip Hallie discovered the story of this village when as a student of ethics, he was searching for the moral opposite of cruelty; that is, he was searching for the positive ethic, not just the negative ethic “Thou shalt not be cruel.”² He had been studying the nature of cruelty—not only individual acts of cruelty but also institutional cruelty, that “persistent pattern of humiliation that endures for years [in which] both the victim and the victimizer find ways of obscuring the harm that is being done.”³ He arrived at the conclusion that “a disparity in power lay at the center of the dynamism of cruelty.”³ Thus he first thought that the opposite of cruelty should be freedom from this disparity in power. Then he realized:

But if cruelty is one of the main evils of human history, why is the opposite of cruelty not one of the key goods of human history? Freedom from the cruel relationship, either by escaping it or by redressing the imbalance of power, was not essential to what western philosophers and theologians have thought of as goodness. Escape is a negative affair. Goodness has something positive in it, something triumphantly affirmative.⁴
Hallie continued to study the embodiment of cruelty which we know as the Nazi extermination camps, including the so-called medical experimentation on children—such cruelty that, even for the people who were eventually liberated from these places, stayed with them for the rest of their lives. Hallie concluded that liberation was not enough; it only ended the cruel relationship, and even that just on one level. The opposite of cruelty had to be something more.

In his search he came upon the story of a French Huguenot village of about 3500 people who had saved the lives of some 6000 persons, most of whom were Jewish children whose parents had been murdered in the camps. The people of this village, who were for the most part themselves poor, in the midst of daily danger of destruction by the Nazi conquerors of France, simply started to save the children. They took them into their homes, they established some houses especially for their safety and care, “they took many of them across the terrible mountains to neutral Geneva, Switzerland, in the teeth of French and German police and military power.”5 They welcomed these refugees; in the deepest sense, made them feel at home. One woman who had been saved by the people of Le Chambon wrote a letter to Philip Hallie in which she said:

Never was there a question that the Chambonnais would not share all they had with us, meager as it was. One Chambonnais once told me that even if there was less, they still would want more for us.

... If today we are not bitter people like most survivors it can only be due to the fact that we met people like the people of Le Chambon, who showed us simply that life can be different....6

Thus Philip Hallie concludes that it was “the enduring hospitality” of the people of Le Chambon that helped the refugees “find realistic hope in a world of persisting cruelty.”7 This hospitality—which the people of the village saw as a simple necessary response, which came from their conviction that we are all children of God and therefore must care for one another, and their belief that such care is a privilege—this enduring hospitality not only saved but “deeply changed so many lives.”8

I offer this story as a backdrop to our consideration here, and as something to which we shall return. I offer it to you also as a story which Catherine McAuley would understand.

And so, to the story of our beginnings. Perhaps you have already at least met Catherine McAuley, our friend and founder, born in 1778 to “comfortably wealthy”9 parents in Dublin, Ireland—a time and a place where there was vast and abject poverty among many, especially among Ireland’s Catholics. Catherine was orphaned by her teens, having lost her father by age five, after which the family means began a steady decline until there was little left when her mother died. She, as well as her sister and brother, relied on the kindness of relatives.
In her forties Catherine found herself an heiress. She had lived twenty years with William and Catherine Callaghan. As Mr. and Mrs. Callaghan had grown elderly, she had managed their home and estate, Coolock House on the outskirts of Dublin, and had given much help to the poor in their name. She had nursed Mrs. Callaghan, who was an invalid in her later years, and was with her at her death. When Mr. Callaghan died in the early 1820s, he left the entire estate to Catherine; it would have been the modern equivalent of about one million dollars. "The steps she took to use that large inheritance, not for herself but for others, are among the first legal records of her life."10 The basic outlines of the story are familiar. She "determined that her inheritance would be used for the relief and instruction of the poor and that she would build a refuge for distressed women of good character."11 She built a large building on the corner of Baggot and Herbert Streets, a fashionable area of Dublin. She wanted the poor to have visibility among the rich, and she wanted the young women she was training to be near to suitable employment. She opened a school there and she initiated visitation of the sick poor in hospitals and in their homes. Other women joined her in these good works. And so it all began.

There is much more to the story, of course, but I'd like to approach it a different way. I'd like to pull up out of our tradition's beginnings the following: (1) three primary concerns of Catherine; (2) three major characteristics of her approach to her work; (3) three of her personal qualities which flavor the Mercy tradition; and (4) what I believe can be identified as the attitude or posture which underlay all she did, was her "hallmark,"12 as Sr. Joanna Regan says, and which I believe, continues to inform the tradition at its core.

Let us begin with what can be called Catherine's three primary concerns, the motivating concerns which led her to embark upon her entire project. The first, indisputably, is her concern for the poor. Catherine had learned this at her father's knee during the first five years of her life. He taught her "a different pattern in dealing with the poor from that which prevailed in upper class society."13 He taught her that condescending distribution of alms was not adequate. On Sundays and holidays, James McAuley gathered the children of the poor into his home, extended them good manners, treated them kindly, taught them about the faith, ministered to their needs. Indeed, it is suspected that he embarrased other members of the household with this behavior.14 Catherine never forgot this. Later, the Callaghans, with their Quaker sense of "practical concern for anyone in need...gladly encouraged Catherine's compassionate desire to be of some service to the poor..."15 And when she built the House of Mercy on Baggot Street, one primary intent was to provide education for the children of Dublin's poor—both contemporary schooling and education in the faith.

It is not surprising, then, to find the following in the opening sections of the Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy today:
We as Sisters of Mercy
freely responding to a call
to serve the needy of our time
commit ourselves to follow Jesus Christ
in his compassion for suffering people.

Recalling the word of Jesus
that he is one with his suffering members,
we respond to the cry of the poor.

Through direct service
and through our influence
we seek to relieve misery,
to address its causes
and to support all persons
who struggle for full dignity.16

One of the groups of persons whom Catherine saw as clearly not having full dignity was women, particularly women of inadequate means who needed to work to support themselves and their families. A story told by many accounts of Catherine’s life is that of a young domestic servant who came to her for help when she was managing Coolock House. The young woman let Catherine know that she was in danger of sexual abuse at her place of employment and needed a place to live; she asked Catherine to assist her. Catherine tried by going to existing institutions providing housing for young women but was put off and delayed by what we would call bureaucratic red tape. The girl was abused, and Catherine never forgot this. When she became an heiress, she determined that she would build a refuge for women in this kind of need. She was also concerned that women be given the kind of education and training that would enable them to improve their potential for good employment and thus improve their life situations and their ability to provide for their families. She was also, as always, concerned about their instruction in the faith. It is clear that Catherine’s concern for women extended beyond the desperately poor. As the works of mercy expanded to other parts of Ireland, she and her sisters began opening academies, day schools, for middle class young women, especially in areas where other religious orders already had poor schools. In some areas an academy was opened because it supplied an income which enabled the sisters also to open a poor school. That her concern for women included women of all stations is apparent in her own words. She wrote:

No work of charity can be more productive of good to society or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women...since whatever station they are destined to fill, their example and their advice will always have great influence and wherever a Godfearing woman presides, peace and good order are generally to be found.”17

In addition, “she told her dearest friend [Frances Warde] that the education of the middle-class was of ‘utmost importance’ because these children were the ‘link between the high and the low classes.”18 The current Constitutions of the
Sisters of Mercy cites Catherine's "special concern for women," along with her "preferential love for the poor," among the five major guides to be used when carrying out the mission of mercy. 19

Catherine's third primary concern was for the sick and dying. No doubt her sensitivity in this regard derives from her own life experiences. She had lost her father by age five. At thirteen she not only saw her mother to her death but witnessed her mother's remorse and fear of dying. She later nursed Mrs. Callaghan in her illness, and was present at her death and later at the death of Mr. Callaghan. She also nursed her own sister Mary in her terminal illness. When she established the Sisters of Mercy,

...she saw it as an important duty to visit the sick poor in their homes and to assist the dying to die at peace.... One of her first collection of prayers hand-copied from the few available printed Prayer Books of the day were prayers to be said at the bedside of the sick and dying. 20

From Baggot Street, Catherine began the visitation of the sick in their homes and also gave attention to the patients of Sir Patrick Dunn's Hospital. "She wanted to comfort and assist hospitalized Catholics whose spiritual needs were so neglected at that most crucial time, especially as a Catholic priest was rarely granted entrance." 21

There is a further comment which should be made here regarding these primary concerns—for the poor, for women, and for the sick and dying. That is, Catherine McAuley's concern was always a combined concern for both the physical and spiritual well-being of persons. She functioned at the same time in the practical order and the order of faith. Indeed, so much so were these two dimensions combined that it may be said that in practice she did not see them as separable.

Now to three major characteristics of her approach to her work. Catherine may be described as innovative, collaborative, and highly professional. The springboard of her innovation was response to need. Her focus was on things not being taken care of elsewhere by other people and/or institutions, on works crying out to be done. The young servant girl who needed a place to live could not find one. The children of Dublin's poor were not being educated. Too many young women had no access to the education and training that could make a difference to the quality of their lives. The Catholic sick and dying at Sir Patrick Dunn's Hospital were not receiving the spiritual support they needed. In Carlow, the Presentation Sisters had a school for the poor and the Ursulines had a school for the wealthy, so Frances Warde, with Catherine's blessing, opened an academy for the middle class.

Not only was Catherine an innovator in what she did but also in how she did these things. The very basic project which she initiated, the House of Mercy at Baggot Street, was entirely untypical: unmarried ladies who were not religious gathered together responding to the needs of poor people in the middle of an affluent area of Dublin, going through the streets to do good works unaccom-
panied by men. Catherine McAuley never intended to found a religious congregation. Indeed, it was apparently an uncongenial idea to her. She made the decision to do so at the urging of the archbishop, Dr. Daniel Murray, who convinced her that only this would ensure the future of her work. And so she took herself off to the Presentation Convent in 1830, along with two companions, to make her novitiate and be educated in the religious life. But her sisters were to be a new style of religious women in Dublin, for they

walked the streets on errands of mercy without relinquishing prayer, silence, meditation, and recitation of the Office. Many did not know what to make of this. So much speculation existed on their Church status and degree of respectability that Catherine, always willing to honor the sensibilities of others, urged Archbishop Murray to obtain a written approval from Rome on their efforts. She would not permit these sensibilities, however, to curtail needed works. Approval was granted....22

She was also a collaborator and a connector. She did not just do good work as an individual. As soon as she had the wherewith, she invited and inspired others to work with her and to work together for the sake of what needed to be done. She explicitly sought to connect the people of affluence with the poor who needed their assistance. She kept appropriate channels of communication open. Even though initially she was not intending to found a religious order, she saw her work as part of the work of the Church. At each step of the way she discussed her plans with certain priests whom she respected, and valued the advice they offered. She was in contact with the archbishop as each new outreach developed.

It should be especially noted that Catherine understood collaboration to be a true collaboration of partners. “She refrained from making decisions for others, choosing rather to point out matters to be considered.” 23 When new foundations went out from Baggot Street, she chose to “create local foundresses rather than superiors of branch houses dependent on Baggot Street....She did not want the limitations of one locality to hamper the work of another area.” 24 This approach was, of course, innovative as well as collaborative. When she was nearing her death, she refused to indicate a preference for a successor, relying on the provision in the Constitutions for the sisters to elect the next superior. It would be fair to say that this way of functioning indicated a confidence she had in the power of each person involved in the works of mercy and particularly in the power of their acting together.

There are sections from our current Constitutions which highlight this approach still. The section which discusses the vow of obedience says: “The spirit of obedience impels us to search together for God’s will in fidelity to our mission. Responsible obedience requires that we inform our minds and prepare our hearts for dialogue....” 25 And lest you think that the Constitutions does not have our lay colleagues closely in mind, when speaking of our
institutions it reads: "...together with our co-workers and those we serve [we] endeavor to model mercy and justice...."26 Participative structures and mutuality in decision-making should be expectable in the Mercy tradition, as part of the attitude and approach of collaboration for the sake of the works.

And third, Catherine McAuley was a professional—highly competent and calling for excellence, for "the best possible quality in the service rendered."27 We know that she

journeyed to France in 1825 to study the French Catholic educational system, journeyed in Dublin to schools of the monitorial system and the Kildare Place Society. For this reason, when the National Board of Education was established in 1832, [she] was one of the first to see the advantage of affiliating with it. On this occasion she wrote, 'We shall place our schools under the Board, because our children will improve much more when expecting the examination.'28

It is commonplace in the tradition to know that she wanted our services, in whatever domain, to be as good as or better than such services found elsewhere. The quality which she envisioned included even the most ordinary and routine aspects of such services. If these most simple and ordinary tasks are performed well, the quality of the service is enhanced. And so we have: innovation in response to what needs to be done, collaboration for the sake of the works, and professional competence and quality.

Next, to certain personal qualities of Catherine which continue to flavor the Mercy tradition—and indeed may be called values. Actually, the first two are clusters of characteristics. The first cluster is illustrated by behaviors that can be grouped under courtesy, charm, and graciousness. There are many examples from her life, but the most striking illustration seems to come from the several years she lived with her Protestant relatives who were hostile to Catholicism; her continuing relationships with her Protestant relatives, including her sister's husband who was vehemently anti-Catholic; and her twenty years with the Callaghans, who were tolerant but did not truly understand her devotion to her faith until the end of their lives. With all these people Catherine maintained not only cordiality but genuine affection and respect, and held no bitterness. Her composure in the face of adversity and her grace in the face of opposition are legendary in the tradition.

Some of Catherine's graciousness is related to the second cluster of qualities —her sense of humor, wit, and lightness of heart. Her letters, of which we have many, are scattered with humorous references, including jests at herself. Famous among Sisters of Mercy is a little verse which she wrote describing a good superior. It included the lines: "Notice the faults of every day/But often in a playful way" and "Avoid all solemn declaration./All serious, close investigation/Turn what you can into a jest/And with a few words dismiss the rest."29 It is certainly not that she didn't take life seriously, but she clearly did not take it nor herself too seriously.
Perhaps one thing which enabled her to be this way was the third personal quality which I would highlight—her courage, courage for the sake of the work. “There is no evidence that Catherine saw herself as a woman who dared to be different.” 30 And yet she was. She and her companions dressed in fashion and gained admittance to the prestigious Kildare Society to learn about their schools. They looked like upperclass Protestant ladies and by the time it was realized that they were Catholics, it was too late. She did something similar to obtain admission to Sir Patrick Dunn’s Hospital. She risked the irritation of the wealthy by bringing the poor into their midst. In her forties she went to the Presentation Convent to make a novitiate so that she could do something she hadn’t intended to do in the first place, i.e. start a religious congregation. She sent her sisters into the streets to where people needed them in a time when religious women were cloistered and people came to them for services rendered. She decentralized in a time of centralization trends. To give a solid start to new beginnings in other places, she continually sent out from Baggot Street some of her strongest colleagues and dearest friends. “Her gaze was so fixed on what needed to be done she hardly noticed that she refused to be confined by convention or custom.” 31 She was, indeed, courageous.

We look at these items from our past, we retell these stories from our tradition, not to imitate uncritically, for “the context of our actions and decisions is not the same. But we can discern patterns or paradigms which may be life-giving for us, in our own time.” 32 And these stories lead us to what may be called the attitude or posture underlying the entire tradition. We can penetrate it by looking at Mercy, at what it means to be merciful people; or at Compassion, at what compassionate presence in service means; or at Hospitality, which is the entry point which I prefer. One of my favorite sections in the Constitutions reads:

We strive to witness to mercy when we
reverence the dignity of each person,
create a spirit of hospitality
and pursue integrity of word and deed in our lives. 33

I believe that through these brief words, “create a spirit of hospitality,” we gain access to the heart of the matter. Joanna Regan tells us: “Gratitude for the gifts of God’s mercy, [Catherine’s] hallmark, opened these gifts to others in endless, bottomless hospitality.” 34 It is noteworthy that this hospitality issues from gratitude. Regarding gratitude, Louis Dupré has observed:

In gratitude we temporarily abandon the standpoint of our own private needs and affirm our dependence with respect to the other. In this attitude of profound humility we cease to take ourselves as the center of existence…. we allow the Other or others to be what they are…. Yet gratitude does not consist in passive resignation: it actively reaches out to the other, regardless of personal feelings or desires. As such it sets the primary condition for any kind of spiritual life, and, indeed, for Christian love itself. 35
It is this response to the other which allows others to be what they are, who they are, which is also the touchstone of true hospitality.

The word, even the concept of hospitality, in popular discourse is easily superficialized. At times we use the word to refer to a kind of niceness, a type of surface friendliness, especially if people are guests in our homes. We can even speak of being "hospitalable" when our hearts are not in it—as a kind of bottom line of civilized behavior. I don’t want to dismiss the importance of bottom line civility, but there is something more here. We are perhaps vaguely aware of it, for we recall that in our Western tradition hospitality is something also owed to strangers.

In a book entitled Reaching Out, Henri Nouwen has devoted approximately one-third of his attention to hospitality. He sees it as the focus of one of the three movements of the spiritual life, the movement in which we reach out to other human beings, the movement, as he calls it, from hostility to hospitality. Nouwen’s reflections serve to remind us that hospitality is not easily achieved. To truly offer others a hospitable space, where they can be who they are, we have to transcend our ambivalence toward the stranger—and everyone is in some way a stranger—our fear of the other, even our hostility to the other.

Since Nouwen sees the movement from hostility to hospitality as determining the nature of our relationships with others, he considers it significant in all relationships. He focuses, however, on three: between parents and children, between teachers and students, between professionals and patients or clients. It is not difficult for us to recognize an imbalance of power inherent in each of these three relationships. As parent, as teacher, as healer, we have always been in the position of greater power. The task has always been to meet the other in such a way that the other person not only is never demeaned, never humiliated, but is acknowledged and supported in the power which is truly hers or his, is “restored to value.”

In the encyclical “Dives in Misericordia,” “Rich in Mercy,” Pope John Paul II speaks of true mercy as creating equality between people: “An act of merciful love is only really such when we are deeply convinced at the moment that we perform it that we are at the same time receiving mercy from the people who are accepting it from us.” He further points out that mercy brings it about that people meet one another in that value which is the very person, with the dignity that is proper to us as persons. We are brought back to the people of the little French village, who somehow managed to welcome the children of the Holocaust in such a way as to restore their value to them, not just save their lives. Catherine McAuley would have understood.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the two words most frequently translated as mercy are hesed and rahamin. Hesed is the word used in connection with God’s covenant with Israel and implies a profound faithfulness—a fidelity not only to the other as other but also to oneself in one’s commitment to the other.
The nuance of *rahamin* is different. Deriving as it does from the word for womb, it suggests the fundamental bond of mother and child, a love that is not merited but gratuitous, constituting “an interior necessity: an exigency of the heart.”39 It is this word which eventually becomes the characteristic of God and ultimately becomes used exclusively for God.

I do believe that Joanna Regan is correct in identifying Catherine’s gratitude for God’s mercy as her hallmark, and in noting that it was this posture of gratitude which was the foundation of her enduring hospitality. I do believe that this profound hospitality is at the foundation of the Mercy tradition and that through it we may eventually be brought to share, as indeed Catherine was, in *rahamin*, the quality of God’s love which spills over because it has no choice and profoundly restores persons, in whatever setting, to the value which is themselves.
Notes

3Ibid.
4Ibid., p. 25.
6Ibid., p. 27.
7Ibid.
8Ibid.
10Regina Kelly, RSM, “Remember Me Affectionately to All,” published by the Sisters of Mercy of the Union, Potomac, Maryland, 1978. No pagination.
11Regan.
12Ibid.
13Ibid.
14Ibid.
19Constitutions, paragraph 7.
20Regan
21Ibid.
22Ibid.
23Ibid.
24Ibid.
25Constitutions, paragraph 28.
26Ibid., paragraph 5.
27Burns, p. 5.
28Ibid., p. 6.
29Regan.
30Ibid.
31Ibid.
33 *Constitutions*, paragraph 8.
34 Regan.
38 Ibid. p. 414.
39 Ibid., p. 416.
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Kelly, Regina, RSM. "Remember Me Affectionately to All." Published by the Sisters of Mercy of the Union, Potomac, Maryland, 1978.


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mission statement. This publication honors the thirtieth anniversary of Mercy High
School, Baltimore, Maryland. These two Mercy schools, among others, are places
where the spirit of Catherine McAuley "walks," where the vision of Catherine and
her Sisters of Mercy is reflected in the continual passage of young women into the
adult world.

Sr. Carol E. Wheeler, RSM, received her B.A. in English from Maryville College of
the Sacred Heart, the M.A. in philosophy from Georgetown University,
and M.A. in education from The University of Chicago. She also holds
a Certificate of Advanced Study in philosophy of education from Chicago.
She was the founding president of the Mercy Secondary Education Association, an
international network of Mercy high schools. In 1988-89, Sr. Carol spent a
sabbatical year in the Research Fellows Program at the Yale University Divinity
School. She has been principal of Mercy High School in Baltimore since 1977.

In September 1998, Sr. Carol was a keynote speaker at the Australia/
New Zealand Mercy Secondary Education Conference in Auckland, N.Z. Inspired by
the striking similarity in spirit, values and emphases between these schools and the
Mercy schools in the U.S., she returned to New Zealand from December 1999 to
mid-April 2000. She lived with the Sisters of Mercy, St. Mary's Convent, Auckland,
located on the same grounds with St. Mary's College (secondary school), which she
visited frequently. She also had the privilege of visiting four of the other five Mercy
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