A Woman For Our Times
Catherine McAuley: 1778-1978

The publication of this stamp by the Republic of Ireland marks the 200th birthday of Catherine McAuley, an Irish woman of considerable wealth who devoted her life to the health, education and welfare of the poor. If her story were only a matter of individual dedication — one woman’s concern for others less fortunate — it would have ended with her death in 1841 and she would have been remembered today simply for her personal generosity. Instead, by some accident of canonical history, Mother McAuley and her “ladies of Baggot Street” emerged as the inspiration of generations of followers who formed what was to become the largest congregation of religious women in the United States and the second largest in the world. The change within continuity that marked her mission is paralleled by the striking change within continuity lived out in recent years by thousands of America Sisters of many congregations.

The special meaning of the life of Catherine McAuley for our times cannot be adequately understood by recalling the century-old foundations of the Sisters of Mercy across several continents in pursuit of the Irish immigrant, nor even their tireless service to men and women of every nationality in the hospitals, schools, and social agencies of yesteryear. That meaning is ultimately to be most clearly read in the fidelity with which today’s Sisters of Mercy hear the call to justice in 1978 and respond accordingly. For example, Theresa Kane, R.S.M., Administrator-General of the Sisters of Mercy of the Union, recently declared that the works of mercy in the contemporary world can no longer be confined to a servicing of the effects of poverty; today’s Sister of Mercy must also participate in the more difficult task of eradicating the causes of poverty. This, she explained, is the new social welfare to which the followers of Catherine McAuley are called, and should be understood as the unambiguous message of the Gospel.

Even in early 19th century Dublin Catherine McAuley knew that serving the poor meant more than meeting their immediate physical hunger. She also devoted enormous energy to the work of education because she understood the relation of learning to the development of personal autonomy and greater independence. Food, clothing, and shelter — the traditional summary of the poor’s needs — were not enough. The Irish people had been kept in ignorance and deprivation for hundreds of years and required something more than even the most charitable assistance in their struggle for survival. What Catherine McAuley sought

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to provide for them was basic justice and a chance for them to improve their lot in life, and this is what her followers tried to do years later in the missions abroad, particularly under the leadership of Catherine’s close associate, the American foundress Frances Warde. They and their followers spent themselves in helping thousands of men and women from Ireland to Australia achieve the literacy that would help deliver them from the crippling effects of humble origins.

Catherine McAuley first planned an organization of lay-women who would devote themselves to the service of the poor; already middle-aged when she began her religious probation in the Presentation Convent, it was only the last decade of her life that she spent as a professed religious. Although there was a rapid expansion of the infant Congregation from its founding in 1831, there were little more than 100 Sisters of Mercy by the time of her death, a number that was to grow to 30,000 more than a century later. But the spirit of the Sisters of Mercy was already well established: “the union of a life of prayer and contemplation with a life of the service of Christ in others.”

In Catherine McAuley this spirit was joined to the practical skills of a businesswoman and the natural leadership of an administrator. When she passed the mantle of office to her reverend mothers in their various locations, she left them a legacy of stability, of union, and of charity. Even in her last months, as she prepared for death, she was busy in sorting our her personal papers, consulting her attorney on matters of unfinished business, attending to the financial demands of the moment, and taking special pains that the other members of the community would not be overly concerned about her. A similar combination of profundity and practicality is shown in her ability to work within the structures of the Church while maximizing the independence of the Congregation; fortunately, the bishops recognized the importance of her mission, and she used her ability to communicate with them to promote her ideas of religious life.

Catherine McAuley was a woman ahead of her time and ahead of her Church. The rich heritage of the Sisters of Mercy in the service of the oppressed has a clear line of development from her original vision. Nursing both Union and Confederate soldiers in the Civil War, managing hospitals, visiting in city jails, developing social centers at Indian reservations — such heroism earned the admiration of earlier generations and its memory should be kept alive. What is perhaps less fully appreciated is the degree to which Catherine McAuley helped to break new grounds as to what women could do in providing leadership in health care and education. The emancipation of women as we have come to know it in the 20th century, particularly in their role as policy-makers in these fields, was already foreshadowed in her life and work.

Pious accounts of Catherine McAuley’s story have sometimes obscured the boldness of her challenge to the conventional Catholicism of her day and the contemporary reader will often be disoriented by some of the externals of the religious practice of her age. But it is not hard to imagine how concerned she would be for the voiceless and powerless of 1978, or how she would encourage greater opportunities for women to use their talents in the service of others. What is especially encouraging about Catherine McAuley’s commemoration, however, is its representative quality. Her followers, along with many members of other American congregations, have increasingly come to deal with the institutional causes of
poverty and powerlessness. They have begun to work competently in the public sphere, no longer content to interpret charity in apolitical terms. It would be false to try to annex the spirit of Catherine McAuley to a particular theological or political program, but she and her followers are calling on us today to consider more profoundly the positive implications of women's liberation and to participate fully in the worldwide struggle for justice.

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