THE PRIORITY OF MERCY

BY

EDWARD QUINN

In quolibet opere Domini apparet misericordia, quantum ad primam radicem (*Summa Theologica* I, 21, 4).

GRANTED the pre-eminence of charity among the virtues, the superiority of the contemplative over the active life, there is still a sense in which we are most like to God when performing the works of mercy. For the whole order of things, the relations between creatures and the pale semblance of rights which we are permitted to assert in the divine presence, are dependent on the Creator's prerogative of mercy. Whatever is, is the consequence of God's mercy removing the defect that is non-existence; the even more abysmal deficiency that is sin is removed by his greater mercy and by that very fact we are brought without merit into a still higher order of justice. This last was effected by a mercy determined to stir our hearts and to show how much God would be like ourselves: because divine beatitude can admit of no defects, God *as* God cannot suffer with us; but becoming man, he could both remove misery and feel it—he knew *com*passion.

Without the imprint of that merciful personality on the world, misery and pain had but little power to stir and call forth effective compassion. But where Christ's passion had moulded souls for so many centuries and distress was so acute and widespread as in the Ireland which knew all the torments and few of the benefits of the Industrial Revolution in its early stages, the call for mercy was insistent and compelling. This and the other English-speaking countries formed a providential background for the work of the first Sisters of Mercy and their foundress, whose life-story is now for the first time worthily related.[1]

Born in 1781 in Dublin, deprived of a devout father two years later and of a more easy-going but still loyally Catholic mother at seventeen, Catherine McAuley spent her adult life to the age of forty-three cut off from normal Catholic surroundings with kind but bigoted hosts and witnessing the defection of her brother and sister from the faith. But just as criticism and cross-questioning only

1 Roland Burke Savage, S.J., M.A., *Catherine McAuley* (Gill & Son, 15s.). Of Mother Teresa Carroll, on whose *Life* (published 1866) subsequent studies were based, Fr Savage writes: 'Chronology made little appeal to her'; she was also uncritical and inaccurate. The new life is based on the careful study of first-hand sources.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300020450 Published online by Cambridge University Press

made her own faith more firm, so the material comfort she enjoyed failed to blind her to the misery of the Irish poor; in fact the beginnings of the work of the Sisters of Mercy were made possible by the wealth inherited from Catherine's last host—blessed with the grace of faith some hours before his death.

Interesting as it is, the story of her foundations is a familiar one: there were setbacks, the usual agonising disputes with persons only concerned in their way—unhappily a mistaken way—to realise the will of God, but there were also achievements so numerous and so great, expressive of a single-hearted devotion to the image of our Lord in the faces of the poor, that they can only be attributed to outstanding sanctity. For our purpose it is not necessary to recall the details, but rather to indicate the general character of Mother Catherine's work and raise the question—which is facing other religious orders today—of its place in the very different circumstances of the mid-twentieth century beneficently pagan welfare state.

The work of the Sisters of Mercy is defined in relation to the sick, the poor and the ignorant; but primarily it is directed to the poor. They will nurse the rich and educate the children of the mighty, but they were founded to succour the ailing who had otherwise no support and to provide both religious and secular training for children who might otherwise have remained ignorant of God's law and man's. But above all, and notably in the person of their foundress, they were adaptable. When mercy calls, it is too late to seek for a definition: there is a concrete piece of work to be undertaken, unmistakable in its appeal. Here, too, has been the great advantage of the independent house. The foundress was opposed to centralisation, as many of the Sisters are today, because the family spirit can be better maintained in a single house—perhaps with some subordinate establishments—and because each community is then more completely at the disposal of the bishop for the needs of the locality where it happens to be situated; one would expect, too, that living the whole of one's religious life in a particular area would facilitate the intensely personal approach that is necessary in the works of mercy.

How touching—and indeed how true, but of conditions that are rapidly passing away—is the description of the Sisters of Mercy quoted at the opening of his book, by Godfrey Locker Lampson: 'the self-constituted intermediaries between all that is brilliant and prosperous on the one hand and all that is sordid and wretched on the other'! One sees them coming away from the castle gate loaded with gifts for the poor of the village, from the mansions of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300020450 Published online by Cambridge University Press

London's West End to the slums of the East; or one recalls the way in which they persuaded the wealthy to be benefactors of schools and hospitals, to pay lavish fees for their own dependants that the poor might be given the same opportunities of advanced education or of the best medical treatment. Clearly the local community is most suited to this form of mediation. But the concrete works with which the Sisters have been associated until recently now demand a different approach and seem at times to leave scarcely any scope for the exercise of what can properly be called mercy.

Redistribution of income is now more centralised and more effective than ever before. Whatever works of mercy may still be necessary, they demand a more complex organisation and a more general survey of both resources and needs than at any time in the past. They simply cannot be performed with the aid of comparatively small amounts raised locally and handed out for local needs. Schools and hospitals are no longer founded or maintained by the benefactions of the rich, nor are there persons too poor to be able to take advantage of first-class educational opportunities or adequate medical treatment. Certainly there is room within the state schemes for a more supernatural approach and for the exercise of Christian mercy, but only if accompanied by distinct natural abilities and manifest efficiency. It will require also a deep understanding of the attitude of the twentieth-century mind towards religion.

For those in desperate need, it is sufficient that aid comes from anyone who bears the outward signs of religion—the habit, a crucifix, a word of prayer—but for the more comfortable pagan of today and even for the thinking Catholic the atmosphere of a Christian hospital or school must be of a character to challenge new ways of thought and show forth the perennial appeal of Christ's mercy in new forms. Sisters of Mercy, vowed to the active life, must still be intellectually alert both to the movement of Catholic thought and to the outlook of a new age. Furthermore, whether in or out of state-schemes, secular training in the schools must be at least equal to anything that can be offered by non-Catholic establishments. It is not easy to see how this last requirement can be satisfied without some compromise on the earliest aims of the order. The material resources of private charity are simply not adequate to provide education at this standard; which means the definite adoption of governmental schemes or the imposition of very high fees, both very difficult to reconcile with the original spirit. For efficiency also a more rigorous selection of teachers and nurses than

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300020450 Published online by Cambridge University Press

can be made in an isolated community is necessary. Some degree of centralisation appears to be called for.

It is not for the outside observer to suggest a solution to these acute and—having in mind the beautiful simplicity of Catherine McAuley's aims—truly painful problems. But one may wonder whether an altogether new direction of activity might not be advisable, precisely in order to maintain that simplicity and to cope with the real misery of the present time. It was very late in life that the foundress began her great work and it would surely be in accordance with her spirit that—after a mere century of achievement—her daughters should find new ways of relieving our distress. Our wretchedness is not the result of economic anxiety or defective education, but of wilful estrangement from God in the midst of comfort:

> Too great inheritance and too much ease
> cheat mortal vision of immortal things.

Will not the simplicity and the poverty of the Sisters, coming with empty hands but merciful hearts, be the most certain way of succouring a weary and sated world, unaware of its own defects, undistressed by its crying need?

PALM SUNDAY

BY

JOHN TAULER

Intravit Jesus in Templum et ejiciebat omnes ementes et vendentes. And Jesus went into the Temple of God and cast out all them that sold and bought. (Matt. 21, 12.)

WE read in today's Gospel that our Lord went into the temple and drove out of it the buyers and sellers, saying to those who sold doves: 'Take these things hence'. By that he meant that he wanted the temple to be pure: 'It is my temple', he seemed to say, 'I have full right to claim it. I alone intend to dwell there. I alone mean to be its master.'

But, we may ask, of what temple is there question here? What is the temple of which God declares with such authority that he is the Master and where alone he means to be in command? This temple is the soul of each one of us, that soul which he has made to his own image and likeness as the Book of Genesis says: 'Let us make man to our image and likeness' (1, 26). And that is what he

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300020450 Published online by Cambridge University Press