

*Boots,
Cracked Pots
and a
Place at the Table*
Mercy in a World Becoming

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PART 1

*“Boots and the Action
Reflection Dynamic”*



To live a spirituality of mercy is to live in the flow of the undeserved protective love that God holds for each of us, a love that wants to draw us into itself, enabling us to be and become all that we really are and all that we can be. This love wants to keep us safe from danger and yet to save and uphold us should we be overcome by such danger. It is constant, always active, moving in us to heal and bring to wholeness what is divided or wounded. It acts within us to enable us to be that same loving, protective, healing and enabling presence in the lives of others.

Active moving out to others in need as a manifestation of the primal mercy received from God who loves unconditionally is the mark of a mercy woman or man. Such a person is intent and focused on a hidden mission of sharing with others what has been received from the deeper Source. This provides the person of mercy with purpose for all that she or he does. Yet the 'doing', which is the outer manifestation of the inner gift received, is often all that is seen.

The image of 'boots on' captures the flavour of the relentless activity of the person of mercy. He or she is forever sensitised to need and responds to its imperatives. She puts on her boots or shoes or sandals or footwear to go out on the road or into situations where need beckons. She rolls up her sleeves and works tirelessly to relieve suffering in whatever way she can. This, consciously or unconsciously, is the prime purpose for all of her actions. For the one committed to spreading God's love and mercy wherever it is most lacking, boots on is purposeful action time.

But when the day is over it is 'boots off' – time to come home, take off one's shoes, let go of the day, and gather one's energies back to their Source. It is time to settle back, to review the day, either in conversation with others or in

quiet reflection alone — time to rest and nourish one's body and spirit, and so prepare for another day of 'boots on'. This lovely rhythm of boots on and boots off is the rhythm of work and rest, action and contemplation. It is a natural rhythm which often overbalances in the direction of too much action and far too little contemplation. Yet both are essential for the proper balancing of life and renewal of purpose. Contemplation is humankind's natural home. As a species, we were able to silently gaze on the beauty of the natural world long before we ever had language to speak of it.

From this we see that boots can be symbolic of the way we move around in the world. Our feet carry us to all kinds of places and our foot covering protects us and enables the journey. In today's fast-moving world a person who lives a radical spirituality of mercy must move in that world with purposeful steps, receiving mercy from the primal Source — often at the hands of others — and dispensing it wherever it is called forth by need. With boots on, we are geared for mercy action and, when our boots are taken off we relax, contemplate and refocus our energies and vision for another day of boots on. This rhythm can be seen as the dynamic of a healthy, purposeful life.

Catherine's Boots and Their Symbolic Word

Some years back when I was involved in co-facilitating a reflective morning entitled “Boots” and working with Nettie Doolan, a woman who had a great love of Catherine McAuley, the above insight into the significance of ‘boots on’ and ‘boots off’ came. It was as we prepared this session together that she saw the deeper symbolism in Catherine’s boots, and we set off on the journey of the reflective morning from there. We focused on the early days of the Sisters of Mercy when they were called the *walking nuns*, a name given to them because they walked the laneways of Dublin to assist those who were sick or poor or in any need that they could address. The title *walking nuns* (given to them because of their untiring work walking those streets and caring for those they encountered) was both a term of endearment and, on the part of some, a label indicating their disapproval of nuns being out on the streets when the proper place for them was in the convent.

As we continued with our preparation for the reflective morning, it became increasingly clear that for all of us, when we have our boots on we are in action mode. We are out and about, living our lives, often in the fast lane of the twenty-first century rather than on the streets or in the laneways of nineteenth century Dublin. However, whether the pace is fast or slow, with our boots on, we are actively working for the spread of the gospel in whatever way is ours to do—tending the sick or elderly, caring for a family, educating the young (or not so young), administering relief in a host of ways to those suffering, working for justice. But when we come home, we take off our boots, relax and enter into a time of rest, of reviewing what has happened in the day and generally preparing

ourselves physically and spiritually for another day of boots on.



When we look at the journey of the life of Catherine McAuley we have to admit that she was a boots on kind of woman. She was never more at home than when she had her sleeves rolled up and was engaged in responding in whatever way she could to the social needs so prevalent in society around her. It is no wonder that many were attracted to what she was doing and threw in their lot with her.

Catherine, and those who came to work with her, walked those streets ministering to those they encountered, doing what they could to comfort, heal or provide for them in their need. Many women were either invited back to the House of Mercy on Baggot Street or came to knock on its door for shelter and/or assistance.

The house, built with money that Catherine had inherited, was intended as a refuge, support and home for women in need, especially for young girls in danger from opportunist male employers who took them into service as serving girls and later harassed and preyed upon them. The mercy women who helped run the House of Mercy were boots on women of action just as Catherine was herself. Like attracts like! Even when the large house on Baggot Street was completed and provided accommodation and a safe space for women and girls who were poor or in need of skilling in a variety of ways so as to be less vulnerable to others, the early Sisters would still go out on the streets, seeking out those in need, to assist them in whatever way they could.

But Catherine could never have done what she did without boots off time as well as boots on. She was a great model of the need to come home, relax, have a little fun and most of all to pray. Her prayer was a constant deepening relationship with the God who dwelt within her heart and who called her through those encountered in the boots on time of the day. Time given to sinking into this relationship was a critical element in the life of Catherine McAuley and in the unfolding of life at Baggot Street in those early days.

It seems that right from her earliest years Catherine McAuley had been shaped in boots on mercy. She learned at her father's knee that faith and charity are two indispensable and inseparable partners that are called forth when confronted by need. She also learned here the value of home as a place of rest, refreshment and enjoyment, and as a place of sharing what one has with those who have not. Witnessing her father's religious instruction of poor children in their own home became the foundation for what unfolded later when, as the House of Mercy developed, religious instruction of poor women and girls became an essential ingredient of life in the House of Mercy.

In Catherine's life, faith and action gradually became two sides of the one coin. In those early years when her father was still alive, Catherine was formed in the importance of love of God and the practice of her faith—a formation she never forgot and to which she clung above all else in later years. Her faith and her prayer became for her the powerhouse of all boots on activity. In such thinking she later formed her own companions as well as the women who came to stay in the house on Baggot Street.

Many of her familiar quotes give some indication of her thinking and teaching about what we might call walking

the mercy walk, and about the connection between action and contemplation.

We have one solid comfort amidst this little tripping about: our hearts can always be in the same place, centred in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back.¹⁰

Let us take one day only in hand, at a time... thus may we hope to go on taking short careful steps, not great strides.¹¹

Each day is a step which we take toward Eternity and we shall continue thus from day to day until we take the last step bringing us into the Presence of God.¹²

Mercy, the principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following him....¹³

From these words and others that could be added, we see that Catherine McAuley wore the boots of mercy in whatever she did. She was someone whose heart was always centred in God whether she was in the laneways of poverty stricken Dublin, on the road to a new foundation, or lying on her deathbed waiting to take the final step into eternity. For her, mercy – responding to the cry of poor people wherever they were – was the way of Jesus. It was the ‘principal path’ marked out by him and she followed that path absolutely. She met Jesus in her times of prayer but she never left that place when she went to serve others, because her heart was always in the same place. She was always with the One she loved, the One who was the Source of her power to do anything at all.

The conclusion of the reflective morning on ‘Boots’ was a ritual involving the wrapping up of a pair of boots in brown paper, tying them with string and placing them to burn in a symbolic fire at the centre of the gathering. This action brought to the minds and hearts of those present, the story of Catherine McAuley’s final hours. As she was approaching her death she had no more need for boots on,

and the familiar account of her wrapping up her home-made boots and dispatching them to the kitchen fire to be burned, just hours before she died, can be seen as an unpremeditated ritual of letting go of her days of action. As Mary Sullivan puts it so beautifully in her description:

This simple gesture of quietly burning her boots in the middle of the night stands as a remarkable symbol of Catherine's final abandonment of herself to the Providence of God. In this... she accepted the end of her walking... and turned barefoot toward the God who stood before her in death.¹⁴



Burning Boots Mandala 15

For each of us, at the point of death, there will be no more need for boots on. We will turn as Catherine McAuley did, to the One who has walked beside us and breathed within us in all of our boots on time in this life. Like her, we too will walk barefoot into God. We will finally behold and be fully absorbed in the God

whom we have contemplated throughout our lives. Our times of contemplation while we are still in our current reality are a preparation for the final movement of our lives beyond physical death. Then we will step into the dimension beyond space and time where we are totally immersed in that Love that has been with us all the time and perhaps we did not realise.

Now, as we begin these homely reflections, why not take off your own boots and quietly enter into the holy ground of your inmost heart? Come into the silence, let go of your day or your week. Gently lay aside your outer garment of activity, your roles, your performance, your activities and expectations. Allow yourself to be drawn deeper into

the words and heart of Catherine until you find their Source as she did. Sink into her spirit and reflect on your life, seeing whether you have been ambitious for taking huge strides into success, or simply satisfied to take one day at a time and to move with short careful steps. These steps you can take, believing that each step contributes to making a difference in the life of someone who is in need, someone who has been placed on your path to love with the same love with which you have been loved first.

This boots off place within your heart is the place of deepest humility. Here you can accept the smallness of who you are and the little you can do, relying on and trusting God to give the increase in your life and work. To walk in Catherine's shoes is to walk unpretentiously but faithfully in the truth of the human condition—that we are all small and powerless but we hold a treasure that goes far beyond us if we can let go of personal power and ambition and let God be God. These are the small steps that help transform a world.

For Reflection

Throughout her life Catherine would have worn many different kinds of footwear, symbolic of the vast changes in fortune that occurred for her. We can imagine the pretty shoes of her early years when the family was well off, and the shift to practical but shabby and worn footwear of the years when the family was reduced to poverty. In the years at Coolock, she would possibly have been attired in a range of shoes or boots that were elegant, sturdy and appropriate to her life as household manager, performer of charitable works and social activities of dinner parties and dancing.

Finally, as a Sister of Mercy, living the poverty to which she was committed, her boots were worn, shabby, filled with holes and hand-made as bought shoes were too costly. Footwear can speak loudly of one's fortunes, fashion sense, moods, values and commitments. It can be a fascinating way of reviewing one's own life.



In light of this:

- What can you remember about shoes you have worn over the years?
- What would each of these pairs of shoes say of your fortunes, fashion sense, moods, values and commitments?
- Can you identify with the journey of Catherine's life, with this focus on footwear? Does it reflect your own journey in any way?



Sit gently with one or two of the quotes of Catherine, cited above. Which of them speak to your life right now?



What is the balance of boots on and boots off time like in your life? Does it need any attention or change?

Blessing

Blessed be the mercy we hold deep in our hearts.
Blessed be the boots that carry us to action
for mercy's sake in our world.
Blessed be the rest times when boots are taken off.
Blessed be the prayer that rises in our boots off resting.
Blessed be the sacred balance of rest and contemplation.
Blessed be mercy received from others
and mercy given to all we meet.
Blessed be the mercy journey
that beckons us forward to need.
Blessed be the journey's end
when we take the final step into eternity.
Blessed be God, the Source,
Centre and End of all our mercy walking.

Amen.

