

Who was God for Catherine? Who is God for you?



Christ the King
Detail from the Ghent Altarpiece
Jan van Eyck

As we celebrated the Feast of Christ the King on Sunday, I wonder how the scriptural image of Christ as King resonated for you. Do you find it helpful ... confusing ... alienating?

We all carry images of God: our attempts to imagine, to image, who God is. These images are always imperfect, since God is mystery, yet they are so important in our spiritual lives, affecting how we relate to God, to others – and to ourselves.

Sometimes the image of God we proclaim is not the image which is actually operative in us. We may need time to slow down and reflect on our images, to bring them to our awareness.

Sometimes we hold on to images of God which are false, seeing God as a harsh and arbitrary judge, for example. We may not realize the power these images have in us. Yet true images of God can be sources of consolation, faith, and hope.

In scripture, true images of God are expressed and given to us in a rich variety of situations, actions and interpersonal exchanges. Scripture contains many diverse images of God.

Some of the metaphors in scripture which point to the holy mystery of God are:

creator, friend, lover, healer, father, mother, teacher, lawgiver, shepherd, potter, king, source of life and energy.

The Gospels show us true images of God, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus has been described as “God’s self-image”.

**Col 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation**

Take a moment now to ponder:

What metaphors or images of God are life-giving for you?

What metaphors or images of God are limiting or constricting for you?

Turning now to how Catherine McAuley imaged God, we know that God was at the heart of everything she did.

“We have one solid source of comfort amidst this little tripping about, our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back.”

Letter to Mary de Sales White, December, 1840

Catherine’s letters and prayers give us insight into her spiritual life, and who God is for her. Jo O’Donovan rsm reflects that:

“Catherine came to God from below. As she admits herself, she had no doctrinal formation, and though she moved easily through scripture and used it with authority, she also interpreted it in terms of her own experience of self-bestowal in service of the most deprived and thereby shaped her own language of relationship to God. Frequently in her writings, she evokes the divine Providence, God as Provider, an image that recalls the shekinah, the sheltering divine presence that accompanied the Israelites on their journey through the desert to their promised home.”

The Lord and Master of our House and Home is a faithful Provider. Let us never desire more than enough – He will give that and a blessing.

Letter to Teresa Purcell early 1841



Washing Feet

Aaron Spong

Jo O’Donovan rsm continues: *“Catherine had a particular fondness for the Gospel story of the Washing of the Feet (John 13:2-11). She advocated that the Sisters, in imitation of Christ, must be ‘bent toward’ those they serve, bestowing on them not just gifts but their very selves. Echoing the Pauline text of divine self-emptying (Phil 2:5-9), the humble Jesus of the gospels who died on the Cross was her model of divine self-bestowal.”*¹

¹ <https://sistersofmercy.ie/2012/09/the-self-bestowing-god-of-catherine-mcauley/> “The Self-Bestowing God of Catherine McAuley, 2012

Anne Pate, Mercy Associates Network Facilitator (Victoria), November 2022



Colourful Catherine
Gavina de Castro rsm

This coloured pencil image is one of the new art works depicting Catherine submitted to Mercy international Association. You can read the artist's description, and view other submissions, at: <https://mercyworld.my.canva.site>

Who is God for you? The Senses of God

This exercise provides a way of engaging with your images of God, which you may find helpful to do by yourself, or in the company of others in your Mercy Associates group.

Begin by taking a few moments to become conscious of your breath. As you breathe in, imagine the Spirit breathing life into you. As you breathe out, experience the release of your exhale and allow your body to surrender more fully into the present moment. Continue to pay attention to your breath for a few cycles and then allow your breath to carry your awareness from your head down into your heart's centre.

I invite you to write your spontaneous responses to each of the following questions. Record whatever ideas or images come into your mind, without judging them.

- What does God look like?
- What does God smell like?
- What does God taste like?
- What does God sound like?
- What does God feel like?
- What does your sixth sense (intuition) tell you about God?

Shape what you have written into a poem, beginning each line with

'God looks/smells/tastes/sounds/feels/like...'

Take some time to read the poem aloud, and to notice what resonates, and what surprises or challenges you. Or, you might draw in response to this exercise.

We close with a prayer of thanks to the God who creates and sustains life.

Let us pray ...

Loving God,

We pray for the grace to move forward with love, faith, and hope ...

for the grace to bring more of what gives us life ...

and for the grace to continue to recognise your presence in our daily lives.

AMEN.