

Catherine E. Maguire, RSCJ (1910-1998)

Catherine Elizabeth Maguire was born on January 19, 1910, the second of the six children of Thomas J. and Winifred Soraghan Maguire. Sorrows and financial difficulties as well as her own intellectual brilliance made Catherine very mature and responsible from early childhood. She taught herself to read before going to school, excelled in her classes consistently from the First Grade on, read and wrote constantly, and after graduating from St. Cecilia's parochial school, won scholarships to St. Catherine's Academy and then to Mount St. Vincent College from which she graduated *summa cum laude*. She had two articles of literary criticism published in learned journals even as an undergraduate. Obviously, she could have had an outstanding literary career. Blanche Mary Kelly, a graduate of Kenwood and a distinguished professor of English at Mount St. Vincent, put her in touch with Mother Dammann and introduced her to the writings of Mother Stuart. In the five years after she graduated from college, Catherine earned a Master's degree at Columbia University, taught, and gradually became more sure of her vocation to the Society.

She entered at Kenwood in February, 1936. Mother Ursula Benziger appreciated her intelligence and maturity and the very considerable sacrifice she had made in entering religious life. Throughout her life she was quiet and shy, observant of life around her, and faithful to her religious obligations. As a teacher she expended her energies on class preparation, on keeping up with developments in her field, and occasionally doing some original writing (in prose or verse) when time allowed. She took her doctorate at Fordham University, her dissertation being on Piers Ploughman. The one break in her thirty years of college teaching, first at Manhattanville and then at Newton, occurred in 1965-66 when she received grants for research from two learned societies and visited Oxford, Louvain and Rome.

Despite Sister Maguire's reticence and tendency to seek solitude, she exerted a powerful influence on those who came to know her well. Some of her students spoke of her as the most important intellectual influence in their lives and others have said that it was her religious dedication that made the most lasting impression on them. Her friends among the faculty members greatly admired her scholarship and her dedication to her religious life. It was certainly through her fidelity to her duties that she made her greatest contribution to the educational mission of the Society.

She retired to Kenwood in 1991 and contributed in her own way to the Pax Christi community. Later, her mental powers began to fail, but in the last couple of months of her life she began to read to a group of elderly Sisters, thought that she was teaching classes again, and shared her own enthusiasm with her "students." She died very peacefully on January 5, 1998.

Seven Words and a Rock.

It is so terrifyingly easy to talk in platitudes about women; and though, as Janet Erskine Stuart cautions us, we have platitudes always with us, it is all but criminal to add unnecessarily to their number. But it seems a devil-and-the-deep-sea choice between platitudes and nonsense. Reams and reams of romantic nonsense have been written about women; nonsense that is still nonsense, though it traces women in Shakespeare, and women in Shelley, and women in the Roman martyrology; for it is crystal clear to the least observant eye that it is not what woman has been which counts, but what woman ought to be. And in this modern world of ours it is not so easy as it seems, especially for the educated woman in whom our primary interest lies, to say she must be thus-and-so.

Often souls are lead to model themselves too minutely upon some exemplar, and the result has been constraint, suffering, ultimate impotence, and final decay. Individual existences, with their special gifts and powers must not be sacrificed in the process of perfection. God is our only true Model, and therefore there are fundamental principles, divine, unchanging, rooted in the nature of woman, which form the foundation for the structure of her perfection in any age; but it is not all unchanging. It belongs to living things to undergo modification. What is completely immutable is dead. So in personality, the strongest are those which which can challenge the currents of circumstances and adapt them-

selves to new conditions, and at the same time keep a strong hold on the unchanging identity which underlies all modification. So in seeking to outline what woman ought to be, the eyes of our mind must be focussed on the modern woman, on the woman who, in the chaos and carelessness of our sceptical century can set the stage for her cause of canonization.

In this consideration, without any intention of presenting a model, but merely for the sake of authority, it is illuminating to investigate the life and work and maxims of Janet Erskine Stuart, quoted above on the matter of platitudes, a modern woman herself, the former Superior-General of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, who die^d as lately as 1913. She was eminently equipped to understand the problem. The daughter of an Anglican clergyman, she was converted to Catholicism in her twenty-first year, after passing through all the intensely harrowing, and mentally agonized stages of scepticism and unbelief. A woman of superb intellectual endowment, said to have had the brain "of two men and a half," she was confronted with the age-old and perpetually new problem of the intellectual "equality" of man and woman and the similarity or dissimilarity of their adjustment to contemporary conditions. An educator of girls all her life, her paramount preoccupation was the formation of the ideal Catholic woman.

The three points of contact with modern life established by her enactment of these three roles make her deserving of attention when she undertakes to epitomize the ideal woman, as she does in the seven words:

" In self-control,

And comeliness, and quiet mirth - "

There is, perhaps, more than coincidence ^{in the fact} that the summary consists of seven words, a circumstance with a divine precedent; for as the Seven Words outlined with tragic beauty the stages of mystical life, so Mother Stuart's words, with a nice precision, divide the aspects of the ideal woman. The fact that she herself was the living counterpart of her expressed ideals, makes it all the simpler to appreciate her theory.

The most important, the most all-embracing, and the most fundamental quality is placed, with correct emphasis, first - " - in self-control, " she says, which lies in quiet of mind and firmness of will. It sounds simple enough, and even superficial enough, but it is so vital to the conduct of life that no price is too great to pay for the acquiring of the habit. It is so indispensable that no kind of duty can be well done without it and no action is too small in which to practise it. It plumbs the depths of every faculty, every instinct, every emotion, every course of conduct; and its application may be divided, as the application of every orthodox principle may safely be divided, into three relations: a woman's duty to God; her duty to herself in relation to God; and her duty to her neighbor in relation to God.

A woman's duty to God is, essentially, of course, the same today as it was long ago in Galilee or in Siena, and from that knowledge must grow great " quiet of mind," for it gives values and anchorage. Essentially it is this: The whole world is on this side - all that is best in it. God is on the other. "If thou wilt have Me, thou must give the other. " All life is seeking and all death is finding. And in this seeking (to use an analogy which would have appealed to Mother Stuart's gallant heart) we must " play up " to God, bear scratches and tumbles to be in at the death.

Our life must be a journey, glorious in faith and hope and adherence to what we don't understand. Above all we must cherish a true child's love for our Father, a conviction (which escapes us so often) that " His pattern is working beautifully - " All this, with our nature weakened by the fall, demands heroic self-control; but a self-control even more painful lies often in the application of these principles to life. Here is where firmness of will enters. In some instances, it may be necessary to check a flaming ardor, to harness the Pegasus of spiritual aspiration to the humdrum of life and duty, to preserve balance and harmony, the " nothing too much, " of eternal proportion. In other cases, and much more frequently today, it may be the fiercest of battles to choose God at the expense of the world - not in the sense of a consecration of life, but in the sense of control of action. It is terrifically hard, sometimes in the littlest things, ^{say} to " Here stands God - there pleasure - " and to choose God. In a world where all too often God and pleasure are diametrically opposed, it is the soul of iron who limits her falls to the " seven times a day " of the just.

Here then is the foundation, rooted in self-control, of the relation of a woman's soul with God. I say a "woman's " soul because I believe that a woman's spiritual problems are in great measure her own, distinct from man's. Nor do I feel any lack of proportion in devoting so much space to this single aspect. It is the foundation stone. It is all too frequently misunderstood or left uninterpreted; and without it all else is vain.

Next in the order of charity lies a woman's duty to herself in relation to God; and here we are embarrassed a little by the

impossibility of ^vdistinct division of our subject. We are trying to illustrate self-control, the first of the qualities recommended by Mother Stuart, by interpreting it in relation to the three divisions of duty; but when we come to the second duty we are forced to run ahead a little, and to say that a Woman's duty to herself is the acquisition of that comeliness which is the second quality.

Comeliness is defined as that which is suitable, pleasing or becoming. What is suitable to a woman? The question leads inevitably to that distinction between man and woman, who, according to Mother Stuart, "are incommensurable, and differ not so much in degree as in kind," - a distinction which, if acknowledged, would silence innumerable senseless controversies, even among Catholics, of our age. The feminine gifts are affection, insight, tact, sympathy, quick intuition ("a woman's faculty," says Mother Stuart, "and why not? Woman was the last step in creation, not man. If he has it he inherits it from his mother.") Hers should be the spirit of following which, St. Francis de Sales says, is God's ordinance for women, "not because they have not as good capacities but because God has willed it so." Women's strength lies in humility, submission, reserve, holding back.

So much for the distinction; and the cultivation of the qualities mentioned are more or less safely guaranteed to produce the ideal of comeliness; but this is not definite enough. Remembering always that what women need especially is balance, proportion, I feel that I am sounding no battle-cry of snobbery when I say that education - a higher education - is essential to the ideal woman, especially today. At any time the ideal would be she who had developed to the utmost and directed to the highest end, all

the natural as well as the supernatural capacities bestowed upon her by God; and today when competition is, rightly or wrongly, the informing spirit of all activity, when the urge for self-development is universal and occasionally absurd, the necessity for adaptation requires that the Catholic woman, too, actualize all her better potentialities. If we are to be the "coal and oil" for the Sun of the Firmament, we must be the best possible fuel we can make ourselves.

But this "development" should aim ultimately at the ability to judge wisely of persons and of things, to distinguish between the precious and the vile in literature, art, taste, conduct, and manners. The first three considerations are not exclusively proper to women. The ability to judge wisely is grounded in the study of religious and philosophic principles, and the thoughtful habit of referring all things to these principles. A similar study and application confers a power of discrimination in art and literature - a crying need in a chaos of painted and printed prurience. To an incalculable extent, in this matter, the future for good or evil hangs on the influence of woman, who invading the public lists of artistic creation and appreciation, dare not forget that here too she is the guardian of purity, the instrument of elevation. No proper or worthwhile work in these fields is accomplished by a woman unless she stays a woman, here as elsewhere, and does a woman's work.

In taste, conduct and manners, we come down to - or rather rise to - a consideration which is essentially feminine, and one which, for all its social value, has also a high spiritual significance. In a revelation made to a lay-sister in the Society of

the Sacred Heart, Our Lord instructed her in "propriety and decorum of behavior;" for, as Mother Stuart comments, "no outward movement, no expression of countenance, no attitude, no gesture, especially if habitual, is of indifference." Conduct and manners above all things demand the exercise of self-control, and attention and consideration for others. What is aimed at is simplicity, which is "conduct without pose, without even the carelessness which is a minor pose of its own; simplicity which is the outward expression of inward truth and of contentedness to be what one really is; security in the practised assurance of knowing what to do." For this perpetual watchfulness is necessary, to restrain all selfish tendencies. It makes, indeed, the very sternest demands on self-control, but here as always :

"Freedom is the end of all restraint,

As vines are bound to raise them from the dust."

These are woman's duties to herself, duties whose ramifications are in principle rigid, but in application disturbingly elastic, depending ultimately on the interpretation of situation and the demands of the hour.

Thirdly there is woman's duty to her neighbor in relation to God - her duty to her family, to her friends, to those with whom she comes in contact, with whom she works, to society in general. The general principle is that the ideal woman should be ready for every good work, according to the opportunities of her position. But this will speedily sink into a lifeless humanitarianism if we forget that our duty to our neighbor is in relation to God, that the duty is a spiritual one and should be approached in a spiritual way. Remembering the inevitability of the influence of soul on

soul, our message to others in word and act should be the deep intaken breath of prayer, given back as the sound of a voice carrying its gift from God. Our duty to our neighbor is for God, and should be carried on with God. The Catholic woman should hold it a sacred and a solemn duty to create about her a Catholic atmosphere, permeated with the presence of God which invests even common things with a sense of something great and good beyond them; an atmosphere of assurance, and confidence, and joy, and reliance on a power and love unseen but not unfelt. The Catholic woman, too, should cherish the spirit of self-sacrifice. For the sake of her sense of values, she must often see others go before her and take the prizes the world can offer.

But again this is generality and must be applied; by the teacher, for instance, who holds the souls of children in her hands and must be awake to her responsibility; by the mother, with her duties, physical and spiritual, to her family, with her sublime vocation of keeping souls in trust for heaven. For these two especially the Catholic atmosphere and spirit of prayer are vitally necessary; but even casual acquaintances may be helped and drawn to good by the contemplation of a woman's personal virtue, personal loyalty to an ideal. A sobering reflection here is the fact that it is impossible to do our duty to our neighbor unless we have first been mindful of that to God and ourselves; that the social responsibility, though third in the order of charity, requires greater preparation than the higher duties.

What a stupendous field for self-control !

But just as this control penetrates every phase of a woman's life, so too does that last quality, " quiet mirth. " Humor is, as