

Mercy in Action: Together We Can

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for
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In *Sisters*, a book about the history and impact of nuns in America, John J. Fiaka writes,

Sisters were, far and away, the biggest risk-takers of the [American] church, often taking out big mortgages to build schools and hospitals, gambling on a future that would rise above the shanties and mean streets where they worked. A fiery twenty-six-year-old Sister of Mercy, Mother Mary Baptist Russell, built many of San Francisco's first charitable institutions that way. Care for the poor now and worry about the financing later, was her motto, causing one bishop to tut-tut that "her heart was bigger than her purse."¹

For sure, the story of nuns in Australia reveals a similar tale about how these women got things done. In her book, *Women Out of Their Sphere*, Anne McLay mentions an "irate cleric" who "once fumed that the Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia had out-stepped 'the proper bounds' for women by getting 'out of their proper sphere'" – whatever that means! – after Ursula Frayne spent money on a house for little Aboriginal girls, "young savages" as he called them."² Ursula, undeterred by his ignorance, was merely "following in the footsteps of her foundress, Catherine McAuley, in offending male clerics, who wished to hold on to their prerogatives."³ But this is not the only incidence of clerical obtuseness in Australia, or elsewhere. More than one bishop found it difficult to relate normally to such resourceful women as the Sisters of Mercy who, as McLay writes, used "their social conditioning as women . . . constructively to amass the necessary money" to fund their Mercy ministries in Australia, and elsewhere.

Who were these Sisters of Mercy, and who was this woman Catherine McAuley? Allow me, if you will, to say a few words about her and her "walking nuns" before I turn more directly to my topic this morning, Mercy in Action.

In speaking about Catherine McAuley, I want to echo Sister Regina Kelly, a Sister of Mercy and the finest teacher I ever had, who wrote that Catherine was a remarkable woman who once walked the poorest sections of Dublin city, saddened and stunned by what she found there – ignorance, neglect, disease. She was appalled by the all too visible hunger and hopeless prejudice. . . . These Irish poor has no way out, caught as they were in a bitter struggle of political-religious ideas and ideals that denied them food, freedom, property and education. [Catherine] knew there was something she had to do: she comforted, she prayed, she instructed, she consoled; she returned again and again. Finally she started an institute of women religious who could bring to those in need the incomparable quality of God's mercy.⁴

Catherine was energetic, committed and focused. She sent her women of mercy to all parts of Ireland and England, personally opening 12 of the 14 original Convents of

Mercy. Today, Sisters of Mercy carry on her tradition in 44 countries around the world, serving in ministries too numerous to mention, but always endeavoring to reveal the human, merciful face of God to everyone they meet, whether poor or rich, male or female, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and everyone else in between and beyond.

We who are Sisters of Mercy believe in Catherine's dream. We believe that a better world, a more peaceful and equitable world is possible, and, like Catherine and those first Sisters of Mercy, we are willing to work with others of good will to make it so. Those who know us – or know of us – know we are practical and down to earth. If we see something that needs to be done, by golly, we just roll up our sleeves and get to it.

I suppose most nuns are like that, although someone once told me a story about three nuns – one a Franciscan, the other a Dominican, and the third a Sister of Mercy. It is a story that I think describes us Sisters of Mercy very well. These three women were deep in conversation – probably talking about re-configuring! – when, suddenly, the lights went out. In the spirit of St. Francis, the Franciscan fell down on her knees and thanked God for the gift of deprivation, for the opportunity to know the experience of the poor who are always deprived of some necessity or other. The Dominican, in the spirit of her great intellectual tradition, stood up and began an eloquent oration on the light of the mind and the power we have to see beneath the surface of things. As for the Sister of Mercy, she changed the light bulb.

That was one of Catherine's greatest gifts to us – her genius for practical action. To change a light bulb is emblematic of what we Sisters of Mercy are about. We are practical, tuned in to need, "doers of the Word and not hearers only."

All of us here today stand in a very long line of women who have exemplified Mercy in Action since that first House of Mercy was opened on Baggot Street in Dublin in 1827. Just look around this great country of yours – and beyond your shores as well – and you will see the legacy of Mercy in Action in the schools and hospitals, clinics and child care organizations, and in many more institutions and projects that bear the name and spirit of Mercy. Still, when it comes to writing history,

Most histories of the Catholic Church . . . have been written about men – the priests, bishops and cardinals credited with building [a nation's largest churches]. But the reality[is] that if you were educated in a parochial school, nursed in a Catholic hospital or had other contact with a church institution, the face of the church you saw most often was a woman's. For every priest there were at least three sisters.⁵

And many of those "sisters" have been Sisters of Mercy.

The contributions of the Sisters of Mercy to your great country, and to mine as well, have not been insignificant. While our numbers may be diminishing, our legacy of Mercy in action is not. It remains to be passed on to a new generation of women – and men, and no where more so than in the ministry of education – in schools and parishes, in the classroom and in the home, through the media and over the internet, at home and abroad. This is not a task we can do alone, but together with others, lay and religious, we can pass on to a new generation of women – and men – our great and glorious Mercy tradition. How? By doing what we do so well – encouraging the young and the not

so young to be all they can be, to become thinkers and doers, and to make real in our fragile world the Mercy of God to all God's people.

Education

Angela Bolster, that determined Irish Sister of Mercy who spent her life working for Mother Catherine McAuley's canonization, believes that it was visitation of the poor in their homes and neighborhoods that convinced Catherine that permanent improvement in people's lives "could only come through provision of education."⁶ Why? Because Education is a basic human right.

Catherine may not have said it just that way – after all, "rights" talk wasn't exactly "the coin of the realm" in 19th century British-controlled and occupied Ireland, but I bet that if Catherine McAuley were standing here today, where I am, she would say it just that way – Education is a basic human right – and we Sisters of Mercy must do all we can to make that human right a reality, for she would be well-aware of Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights that declared "Everyone has a right to education" – poor and rich, boys and girls, black, brown, white and yellow, Christian, Jew and Muslim, immigrant and native born. If Catherine were here today, she would for sure be aware of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, especially Goal #2, "Achieve universal primary education", and I also think one of her aims would be to ensure that children everywhere, to the best of her ability and that of her Sisters of Mercy, would be able to complete a full program of primary school – that means at least five years of primary school. Why? Because Catherine would know that "A good primary education has a disproportionately positive effect on a person through the rest of his or her life."⁷ And she would want to have a hand in making sure as many people as possible were impacted by that "positive effect".

To educate is to provide schooling – to provide opportunities for people to learn, to develop their talents, to acquire skills, to learn how to think and express themselves, to develop insight about life, about the world, about one another, about God. The goal of education is train the whole person to be at once intellectually discerning and humanly flexible, tough-minded and openhearted; to be responsive to the new, and responsible for values that make us civilized. To teach is to help students – whether they are in Australia or Africa, in the Americas or Asia – to meet what is new and different with reasoned judgment and humanity. Education can empower people, and education can teach values – for good or for ill.

Years ago I read a book by Haim Ginott, *Teacher and Child*. He reprinted a letter written by a principal to her teachers at the beginning of a new school year. I have never forgotten that letter. "Dear Teachers", wrote that principal,

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no person should witness.

- Gas chambers built by learned engineers.
- Children poisoned by educated physicians.
- Infants killed by trained nurses.
- Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

So I am suspicious of education.

My request is:

- help your students become more human. Your efforts must never produce
- learned monsters,
- skilled psychopaths, or
- educated Eichmanns.

Reading, writing, and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.⁸

Let me repeat that last line: “Reading, writing, and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.” That sentence and sentiment is pretty powerful, and I think it has a lot to do with Mercy in Action.

As the great Central American Catholic theologian Father Jon Sobrino writes, “When Jesus wishes to show what it is to be an ideal, total human being, he narrates the [story of the] Good Samaritan.”⁹ We all know that story, I’m sure: There once was a man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He fell among thieves who robbed and beat him, leaving him for dead along the side of the road. Along came a lawyer who saw him lying on the side of the road, but he crossed over to the other side and went on his way. A priest came along; he also saw him, but he too continued on his way. But then along came a Samaritan who saw the half-dead man lying on the side of the road. He immediately stopped and helped the poor fellow who had fallen among thieves, even took him to an inn and paid the innkeeper to take care of him until the poor man was better. To quote Sobrino again:

More is at stake here than mere curiosity as to which is the greatest of the commandments. This parable is a presentation of what it is to be a human being. The total ideal human being is represented as one who has seen someone else lying wounded in the ditch along the road, has re-acted, and has helped the victim in every way possible.

. . . The ideal human being, the complete human being, is the one who interiorizes, absorbs in her innards, the suffering of another . . . Mercy, as re-action, becomes the fundamental action of the total human being.¹⁰

That’s another great sentence, “Mercy, as re-action, becomes the fundamental action of the total human being.”

So then, let me pose a few questions: Why human? Why not Christian? How should we teach our students so they can incarnate this ideal?

First, Why human? Why not Christian? Here I take my guidance from that great Danish Christian theologian, humanist and educator Nicholai Grundtvig, a man who invigorated the Danish spirit of democracy and humanity. He once said, “First a human being, then a Christian: this alone is life’s order.”¹¹ I think he was on to something. (I think it was St. Thomas Aquinas who said that grace builds on nature!) Likewise, I look to Paulo Freire, that great Brazilian educator who believed passionately in people, and who often said that We all have a vocation to be fully human. What did Freire mean? Here’s what I think he meant: Vocation describes a “call”, work that is given to us that we are meant to do¹², and the work that is given to us is to be as human as possible.

To become fully human we need to keep opening our hearts, no matter what. At this time when suffering and anxiety continue to increase, when there is always reason to weep for some unbearable tragedy inflicted by one human being on another, [we must] try to remember to keep [our] heart[s] open.¹³

And Any gesture of generosity, any reaching out to others rather than withdrawing into ourselves, into our own concerns or individual suffering helps to make us more human.

We become more fully human when we extend ourselves, like the Good Samaritan in the Gospel. According to Meg Wheatley,¹⁴ and this is what it means to have a vocation to be human, to reach out to another, to others, to re-act to their suffering. “Reading, writing, and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.”

How do we teach our students to be human? What is the methodology we should use? Listen to what Catherine McAuley has to say about teaching:

The first means which the saints have recommended to render us most useful to others is to Give good example “the good example which we give by leading a most holy and Christian life has the greatest power over the minds of others . . . [as] Saint Bernard speaking on this matter says, “Example is very efficacious and a very proper lesson to persuade because it proves that what it teaches is practicable and thus is what has most influence on all.”¹⁵

In other words, the method we are to use in teaching is “good example:

We are to *be* and *do* what we *teach*. If we wish to teach mercy, we must speak and act mercifully toward others. If we wish to teach forgiveness, we must forgive others and ask for their forgiveness. . . . If we wish to teach others to serve and respect those who are economically poor, we must first serve and respect them ourselves. This is the primary principle and method of Mercy education as Catherine McAuley conceived and practiced it.¹⁶

In addition, I think we also need an education that teaches the common humanness of the other, that stresses the values of caring, and that emphasizes compassion and responsibility, which prepares the individual for the doing of acts of good. The ability of legitimate authority – from parents and teachers, to politicians and religious leaders – to appeal to values of caring, justice and inclusiveness facilitates the doing of good. A society that teaches the common humanness of the other, that stresses the values of caring, and that emphasizes compassion and responsibility prepares the individual for the doing of acts of goodness. And a society that is not afraid to put the interests of those who are suffering above national self-interest will be the best teacher of the values we need so that metaphorically or really, we do not pass by on the other side when people are suffering.

If we are to be successful Mercy teachers in a contemporary context, we must become teachers **of** humanity and **for** humanity. — teachers who help students, no matter their age, to recognize in the face of every man and every woman, their brother and sister. Catherine McAuley’s “greatest influence as a teacher came from the recognition that she lived by the values she imparted.”¹⁷ and so too will ours.

To remember our heritage and legacy of Mercy is to risk living dangerously. Dorothee Soelle, the late German Christian theologian, wrote about a “new form of human development that is purged of compassion,” that perceives human beings as “singles”, that promotes “consumerism as the aesthetic fulfillment of humankind,” that “thoroughly

disposes of every sort of Christian or Socialist vision of humanity as so much obsolescence,” and that argues “there is no common good whereby human beings feel responsible for what happens to their village, or their part of the city, or to their neighbors and children.”¹⁸ Cognitive development is not enough in our Mercy schools. Of course We must teach students to care to learn, but we must also teach them to learn to care.

If we take our faith seriously, we will commit ourselves to Scripture study – I don’t mean that we shall all get degrees in theology, but we shall read and study the texts that hold sacred the collective memory of our ancestors in faith – from Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca and Ruth to the communities of the beloved disciples and apostles of Jesus the Christ. To do so, however, is to Risk living dangerously – just like Jesus and just like Catherine.

Think about it: When did Jesus get himself in “big trouble”? When he studied and read from the prophet Isaiah, “The spirit of the Lord has been given to me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favor” (Is 61:1-2). When did Jesus get into trouble? When he tried to put into practice the teachings of the prophets. When did Catherine get into trouble? When she tried to put into practice Matthew 25: “. . . I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. . . I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, sick and you looked after me, in prison and you came to visit.” For Catherine and for the Sisters of Mercy who came to Australia, who came from Australia, who have labored in Australia and beyond Australia, for those Sisters who were “women out of their sphere,” there were no “savages”, only human beings who needed their care and concern and compassion. This is our heritage and this is the legacy we have to pass on to a new generation of women and men in Australia and, indeed, around the world.

Questions Rather than Answers

For those of us in the Roman Catholic tradition, I think we have to admit that for too long, our Church has focused on giving answers rather than on encouraging questions. Personally, I think Questions are more important than answers because answers aim to settle things whereas questions aim to “un-settle” things. People are less likely to savage and annihilate each other when their minds are not made up but opened up through questioning. Of course answers have their place; they can even be essential, but,

Questions deserve lasting priority because they invite continuing inquiry, further dialogue, shared wonder, and sensitive openness. Questions can relate people to one another, especially students and teachers; they may even focus concern about the common good in ways answers rarely can.¹⁹

I think Catherine McAuley was a questioner. She questioned poverty, hunger, bigotry, ignorance, and powerlessness; she questioned religious life, bishops, priests, and solicitors. She questioned her early companions in Mercy. How else could she have become the “inspired, creative innovator,”²⁰ she became? Innovators question, probe, try out new ideas. They risk new perspectives; they try to see things from a different perspective – a bit like like Mr. Keating, the teacher, the teacher Robin Williams plays in the film, *Dead Poet’s Society*. **[Show Excerpt]**

It wouldn’t surprise me one bit if Catherine herself stood on a desk or two in her day! Were she with us this morning, I think she would encourage us to do so as well. To the traditional three R’s – reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic – she might suggest we add three C’s: Curiosity, Creativity and Courage. Of course we have to prepare students to take exams; of course education has to facilitate the acquisition and development of appropriate tools, heuristic methods for successful researching, but education should also encourage inventiveness not unthinking conformity. If there is one thing Catherine McAuley and her Sisters of Mercy never were, it was conformists, for how else could they have accomplished so much for so many in, relatively speaking, a short 170 years? In Catherine’s spirit, may we be exemplars of personal and intellectual hospitality, open to new perspectives, new questions, even new answers to old questions. May we have the courage to create space in our schools and classrooms, in ourselves and in our students so that together we welcome questions that keep us open to inquiry, dialogue, and wonder.

Of course we must aim for Excellence in our schools, but excellence is not rigidity. Excellence is not omniscient teachers trying to fill pupils’ heads with vast amounts of date which in due course are decanted into examination booklets whose contents to a large extent will determine who will be deemed worthy to continue on to the next level of education. No, Excellence is enabling every student to achieve his or her potential; excellence is a teacher who loves teaching, who is prepared every times she steps into a classroom. Excellence is a teacher who knows how to expand the traditional structures of education into one that will fit the evolving needs of our world. Excellence is instilling in everyone associated with the ministry of education – teachers and students, principals and staff, parents and Boards of Governors, Bishops, Archbishops, Cardinals and Minsters of Education, Sisters of Mercy and lay colleagues – excellence is instilling in them the idea that education is – and must be – lifelong.

Night and Day

Education – learning – is not an end in itself. What do I mean? Perhaps a story can explain what I mean. There was once a rabbi who asked his students how they could tell when night has ended and day has begun.

You can tell when night has ended and day has begun,” said one of his students, “when you see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it is a cow or a horse.”

“No,” said the rabbi, “that’s not correct.”

“When you look in the distance and can tell if it’s an orange tree or an apple tree,” answered another.

“Wrong again,” said the rabbi.

“Well then tell us,” said his students.

“You can tell when the night has ended and day has begun,” said the rabbi, “when you look into the face of any man and recognize in him your brother, or when you look in the face of any woman and recognize in her your sister. If you cannot do that, no matter what time of the day it is by the sun, it is still night.”

I believe Our future in this fragile world of ours depends on education, depends on an awareness that no one is outside our universe of moral concern., depends on an awareness that every person is a precious resource we cannot afford to waste, depends on our recognizing – and teaching our students to recognize – that every single person in the world is made in the image and likeness of God. And I believe **Mercy** education depends on our being able to tell – and teaching our students how to tell – when night has ended and day has begun.

I believe that this is the Mercy legacy that we have to pass on to future generations. It is a daunting task, one we cannot accomplish on our own, but Together We Can!

Let me close with these words of the Canadian Catholic writer, Mary Jo Leddy, words I think are apropos to our situation today:

I
have just one voice
to sound the alarm
to rouse the nations.
I can manage one or two songs
before I fall flat.
I
have only two hands
to raise the roof
that covers injustice,
only two arms to reach out
behind and before and all around.

Oh yes, I can type

but with only ten fingers. . . .

I have two big feet
which walk me only so far, only so long.
I can stand in
only one place at a time. . . .

I
live with a heart
that sometimes stretches
as wide as the world
pounding like a great cosmic drum
in an Alleluia chorus. . . .

Every now and then I
want to take it all to heart.
Want to. Cannot.

But WE
Yes WE.

WE
are the rag tag choir
performing well in a pinch.
Hoarse and strung out
we carry the tune
we blow the same horn
we chime in:
Kyrie. Gloria.
Miserere, Jubilate.
WE
the duet, the quartet, the ensemble
Together, Instruments of Thy Peace.

WE
have many hands
to make light work.
Together we shoulder the burden
and are borne along.
Born together. . . .

WE
are words becoming flesh
becoming words. . .

Together we stand
In some long line of solidarity
With those who have stepped out in faith
[Sisters of Mercy] . . .
Not the march of armies
only the widening circle of hope

upon the heels of us all.
Only a gathering of light.

And WE
dream that God
is dreaming of us,
dream that God is dreaming
in the day and in the night of our world.²¹

Together, my friends, WE **are** Mercy in Action. Together, WE Sisters of Mercy and our lay colleagues – women and men – are continuing the work of Mercy education in Australia, the Americas, and in many more countries around the world. And together, my friends, WE can pass on the legacy of Mercy education to a new generation of students, parents, teachers, staff, and Boards of Governors and Management. And WE can do it together with Catherine McAuley and all those great women whose legacy of Mercy in Action we hold in trust and whose spirit is alive and well in Australia, and beyond.

Thank you.

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NOTES

- ¹ John J. Fialka, *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 8.
- ² Anne Mc Lay, *Women out of their Sphere: A History of the Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia* (Northbridge, Western Australia: Vanguard Press, 1992), 8.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Regina Kelly, RSM, *Remember Me Affectionately to All* (Dallas, PA: Religious Sisters of Mercy, 1991 reprint), 2.
- ⁵ Fialka, *Sisters*, 1.
- ⁶ See further, Sister Angela Bolster, Catherine in Her Own Words, as quoted in Carol Rittner, RSM, "Our Heritage – Our Future" in *Sharing Our Heritage, Shaping Our Future* (Dublin: Sisters of Mercy, 1999), 10.
- ⁷ Sabina Alkire and Edmund Newell, *What Can One Person Do? Faith to Heal a Broken World* (New York: Church Publishing, 2005), 72.
- ⁸ Haim Ginott, *Teacher and Child*. (New York: Avon, 1975),
- ⁹ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 17.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Quoted in Carol Rittner, "Denmark 1943: A Documentary Discussion Guide to the Rescue of Denmark's Jews" in *Dimensions: A Journal of Holocaust Studies*. Vol. 7 #3: G11.
- ¹² Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2002), 58.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 59.
- ¹⁵ Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., ed., *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 463.
- ¹⁶ Sullivan, "Catherine McAuley and the Principles of Mercy Higher Education", 23.
- ¹⁷ Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, Ireland, "Mercy Philosophy of Education" (n.d.):2-3.
- ¹⁸ Dorothee Soelle, *Against the Wind: Memoirs of a Radical Christian* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 144.
- ¹⁹ John K. Roth, "What Teaching Teaches Me" in John K. Roth, ed., *Inspired Teaching: Carnegie Professors of the Year Speak* (Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Co., Inc., 1997), 203.
- ²⁰ Mercy Philosophy of Education, 2.
- ²¹ Mary Jo Leddy, nds, "Together WE". *Catholic New Times: Special Vocation Supplement* (February 17, 1991), 1.