

Venerable Catherine McAuley and the Dignity of the Human Person

Mercy Conference and Retreat Center

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1:00-1:45 pm

Presentation

*Come Holy Spirit Come
And Renew the Face of the Earth!*

Introduction

It is a joy to be here with you today in the Mercy Conference and Retreat Center for the Catherine McAuley Day of Prayer. Fifteen years ago, I was teaching seminarians at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver about the principles of the Second Vatican Council as related to the dignity of the human person. In this context, the insight came to me that our Foundress Venerable Catherine McAuley had anticipated over one-hundred years before the Council the same principles, and she had put them into practice. This presentation follows the structure of *Gaudium et spes, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (December 7, 1965). I identify its principles about human dignity, and offer examples of them from Mother Catherine's life and teachings.

I. The Dignity of the Human Person

A. In the Vatican II Documents: *Gaudium et spes* and *Dignitatis Humanae*

Gaudium et Spes, the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World identifies two theological sources for the dignity of the human person: 1) being created in the image and likeness of God (#12), and 2) being redeemed by Jesus Christ, who fully reveals the dignity of our human nature to us because he assumed our human nature (#22). Section #17 of *Gaudium et spes* describes human freedom as an exceptional sign of the image of God

in the human being, who needs to act out of conscious and free choice. It calls forth the “noble destiny” of human beings who must be considered “whole and entire, with body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will” (#3). This human dignity is enhanced by fostering the integration of the passions towards spiritual goals in a unified life (#14); by forming the intellect towards the truth and objective moral standards (#15-16); and strengthening of the will towards good choices (#17).

In *the Declaration on Religious Liberty, Dignitatis Humanae* (December 7, 1965), we find the Council further articulating these principles, while encouraging contemporary men and women “who are becoming [1] increasingly conscious of the dignity of the human person, ... [2] demanding to exercise fully their own judgment and responsible freedom in their actions, and [3] [wanting] ... not be subjected to the pressure of coercion but be inspired by a sense of duty. At the same time [these women and men] are demanding constitutional limitation of the powers of government to prevent excessive restriction of the rightful freedom of individuals and associations. This demand for freedom in human society is concerned chiefly with... what concerns the free practice of religion in society” (#1).

In the new evangelization of the Second Vatican Council, the Church offers to enter into a partnership with human beings, to foster renewal, and to remove obstacles to renewal. The Church identifies her motivation in *Gaudium et spes*: “[It is] not earthly ambition, but [the Church] is interested in one thing only---to carry on the work of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit...”(#3).

Mother Catherine McAuley formed her Institute of the Religious Sisters of Mercy with the same motivation. She stated that the works of the Institute must be done **for** Christ, who is found in the poor, and done **by** Christ because all the good of one’s actions should be attributed not to oneself but to God. To be reminded of this purity of intention, Catherine

McAuley suggests that each sister visit the Blessed Sacrament both before and after she goes out to teach or to visit the sick. One of her maxims (August 7) stated: “Our Divine Model, Jesus Christ, should be in regard of a religious like a book continually open before her, from which she must learn what she is to think, say, and do---in what manner---[and] at what time.”

B. Fostering Human Dignity in Religious Life

In the *First Conferences* Mother Catherine McAuley gave to her companions after her first profession of vows in 1831-32, she invites each sister to grow in personal perfection:

“The esteem of perfection, and of all spiritual things which conduce to it should make a deep impression on our hearts. We should encourage each other to it not merely by words and ordinary conversation, but much more by our actions and the general tenor of our lives.”

(1:4). She recognized a deep desire of the heart as the crucial starting place for all movement towards the perfection of the human person: “The attainment of Christian perfection is not to be accomplished by constraint: It is the heart that must undertake it... the good of our perfection is in our will, for if we have not an ardent sincere desire of becoming perfect all the care and instruction we could receive will avail little.” (2, 7). Mother Catherine often added an analogy of St. Gregory to being in the midst of a rapid river, such that if a sister were to stop from striving even a minute, she will run the risk of being carried backwards downstream. (6, 14-15).

Venerable Catherine McAuley introduces several practical guidelines to foster in her sisters their human dignity in religious life. The first is to focus on doing ordinary things extraordinarily well (10, 26). The second is to concentrate only on each particular day (14, 36 and 7, 17). The third is to practice a humble attitude towards oneself and towards one’s work in the Institute (16, 41 and 7, 17-18). A fourth is to identify the particular passion which is

most likely to lead her into error or sin (9, 23). A fifth is to study and integrate what she learns (18, 45). These guidelines orient the theoretical intellect towards the truth of religious life as well as the truth about one's self. They orient the practical intellect and will to make small, repeated, practical choices which develop habits supportive of the striving for perfection. They also dispose the sister towards rooting out habits which are obstacles for the full development of the human person in union and charity.

C. Fostering Human Dignity in Apostolic Work

Gaudium et spes offers a gripping analysis of the human situation in the world which has “critical and swift upheavals spreading gradually to all corners of the earth,” and “a huge proportion of the people of the world ... plagued by hunger and extreme need while countless numbers are totally illiterate” (#4). Nineteenth century Ireland shared in these particular human situations due in great part to the effects of the Penal Laws, which were a “body of legislation operative from the 16th to the 19th century, mainly in England, Scotland, and Ireland, designed to discriminate against and oppress Catholics in the exercise of their religious, political, social, and cultural life.”(NCE, xi 62) Because of natural famines in the countryside, families could not always afford to feed their children. Young women were sent into urban centers to find employment. Starvation, urbanization, and industrialization uprooted the traditional structure of families, and consequently young women were faced with many threats to their human dignity.

Catherine McAuley's apostolic work moved into these situations of woundedness, and sought to elevate them by creating intermediate institutional structures of support for young women of good character in need. In 1824 she purchased property in Dublin, and for three years watched over the construction of a large building. On September 24, 1827

Catherine McAuley opened her House of Mercy for “Distressed Women, Orphans, and School (Miley, *Ideals*, 25). The School helped many to overcome illiteracy. A portion of a letter she wrote to request funds for her project follows:

In these schools five hundred poor girls may daily experience the blessing of religious instruction, and being practiced in various branches of industry come forward shielded ... and prepared.

Young tradeswomen of good character who have employment yet not sufficient means to provide safe lodging are invited to this house at night as their home--- (Neumann, 68).

In addition to free schools for the poor, Catherine McAuley also opened pension schools for middle class children in which the sisters zealously worked to foster virtues and the full development of human personality in their students (Miley, 33-36).

Venerable Catherine opened an employment office to train women to find suitable jobs. In 1838 she wrote to Francis Warde that: “Twenty went to situations in one week and twenty more came in.” (Newmann, 116). She also followed up on the work environment where they were placed. Catherine McAuley opened a laundry business in the Home of Mercy to provide both work experience and income for many women. She helped girls with criminal records for stealing or prostitution to find alternate ways to support themselves. One historian summarized: “During her visits among the poor, she was deeply impressed by the necessity of providing Preventative Help rather than Corrective Help. Many unemployed young girls, seeking the means of an honest livelihood, became the victims of unprincipled men who took advantage of their penury.” (Miley, 51-52) *Gaudium et spes* echoes this concern in its section subtitled “Respect for the Human Person”:

Wishing to come down to topics that are practical and of some urgency, the Council lays stress on respect for the human person: everyone should look upon his neighbor (without any exception) as another self, bearing in mind above all his life and the means necessary for living it in a dignified way...

The varieties of crime are numerous: ...all violations of the integrity of the human person, such as ... undue psychological pressures; all offenses against human dignity

such as subhuman living conditions,... prostitution, the selling of women and children, degrading working conditions...(#27).

Visitation of the sick was as important as education to the original Institute of the Sisters of Mercy. They visited the sick in Dublin's Protestant Administered Hospitals. They also visited sick Catholics in their homes and in jails (Bolster, *Liminal*, 12-13). Together they elevated the professional level of tending to the sick poor. They trained health-care personnel and introduced measures to improve cleanliness and to control infection in the places where the sick were treated.

In their apostolic work with the dying the sisters' purpose was to prepare the person for union with God. Mother Catherine McAuley anticipated the claim of *Gaudium et spes* #19 that "[t]he dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God." In her *Familiar Instructions*, Catherine offered a flexible approach to men and women in different spiritual states: "We should never forget that the spiritual good of the sick is to be our aim... Where there is no hope of recovery, charity requires that we make it known gradually and cautiously, lest the patient be too much alarmed. We may suggest many motives for resignation; such as vanity of the world, the necessity that all live under leaving it, sooner or later; the happiness of dying in God's grace..."(*Familiar*, 18-21). She suggested that her sisters refrain from getting caught in theological arguments with men who would make fun of them and that they also refrain from offering advice on temporary affairs to the sick or to their families. All of Catherine McAuley's apostolic works and those of the Institute she founded were to be done in the spirit of charity, or love for the good of the suffering poor, sick, or ignorant person.

II. Solidarity with the Poor, Sick, and Ignorant

Initially, Catherine McAuley thought that solidarity with the poor meant sharing in the same impoverished conditions. She later realized that her charism of Mercy sought to

elevate human dignity and therefore required a different kind of solidarity. Roland Burke Savage, S.J. described her discovery this way:

Catherine's exactitude with regard to the practice of poverty was extreme and her desire to share fully in the hardships of the poor led her in the early days to be over-austere in the diet and clothing provided for herself and her Sisters... In consequence of the poor diet, many of the Sisters, who were greatly overworked as well as undernourished, fell seriously ill with violent scurvy... [The Surgeon General, Sir Philip Crampton] at once declared that an improved diet would be the best cure, and especially ordered beer for the Sisters. He tried to convince Catherine that the work of visitation of the sick was necessarily severe and unwholesome, and that, consequently, special care must be taken to build up the constitutions of the Sisters engaged in it. (137-138)

Solidarity involved attempts to elevate the person and the situation. In her conversion Mother Catherine anticipated the meaning of solidarity in *Gaudium et spes* as "...everyone rendering mutual service to each other in measure of the different gifts bestowed on each (#32)." In solidarity with the poor, sick, and ignorant the Sisters of Mercy offered the gifts of their professional training, their religious consecration, their friendship, and their material goods of shelter, clothing, and food. Mother Catherine stated in one letter, "A prevailing influenza among the poor of Dublin and great poverty --- the Sisters are constantly engaged." (Neumann, 279; and Sullivan, *Path* 112-121)

In a section entitled "Human Solidarity" in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read: "Solidarity is an eminent Christian virtue. It practices the sharing of spiritual goods even more than material ones." (#1948) Solidarity anticipates and prepares the way for the union of the family of God with the Holy Trinity at the end of time. The eschatological dimension of solidarity is clearly recognized in *Gaudium et spes* #32: "This solidarity must be constantly increased until that day when it will be brought to fulfillment; on that day mankind, saved by grace, will offer perfect glory to God as the family beloved of God and of Christ their brother." This eschatological dimension of the vocation to the Religious Sisters of Mercy becomes transparent in the Homes of Mercy founded by Mother Catherine McAuley:

“Far from diminishing our concern to develop this earth, the expectancy of a new earth should spur us on, for it is here that the body of a new human family grows, foreshadowing in some way the age which is to come.” (GS #39).

III. Urgent Problems for the Church in the Modern World

The preface to Part Two of *Gaudium et spes* identifies five urgent problems “deeply affecting the human race at the present day in the light of the Gospel and of human experience (#46): 1) marriage and the family, 2) the proper development of culture, 3) economics and social life, 4) the political community, and 5) the fostering of peace.

Venerable Catherine McAuley identified these same problems in the nineteenth century. She initiated effective responses to each problem as appropriate apostolic works for her religious sisters.

A. Marriage and the Family

Gaudium et spes’s discussion of marriage begins with a very strong premise: “The well-being of the individual person and of both human and Christian society is closely bound up with the healthy state of conjugal and family life.” (47) After describing various aspects of crises in marriage and the family, *Gaudium et spes* encourages various groups to work collaboratively to support the family: “Everyone, therefore, who exercises an influence in the community and in social groups should devote himself effectively to the welfare of marriage and the family.” (#52).

Catherine McAuley intervened to support families in distress. For example, when the Baggot street residence was opened, Catherine initiated a special Christmas dinner for many poor children and orphans in the vicinity of the Home of Mercy. This annual dinner continued for many years afterward.

In the Home of Mercy, Mother McAuley protected and formed young women who were to become married. Sister Teresa Carroll described it this way: “The Foundress built a house for these women, of whom seventy was the average number protected ..[from being exposed to precarious living and working situations in Dublin]... The average period of their stay was three or four months... They were trained to laundry-work, needle-work, or whatever else they seemed best suited for...” (Carroll, 148-49). Most of the women came from impoverished backgrounds where they had not had the opportunity learn how to care for linens, china, silver, and good furniture, or to develop proper etiquette.

Because of the penal laws these young women also often did not know even how to read or write. Consequently, the Sisters of Mercy began to educate them with a view to supporting marriage, especially in the middle classes. They started a sewing business and laundry. Mother Catherine wrote to Sister Francis Warde from Dublin, April 1838: “We are likely to have the long desired public Laundry built this season; ... What a comfort if I am permitted to see some secure means of supporting our poor women and children established, not to be entirely depending on daily collections which are so difficult to keep up.”(Bolster, *Positio*, I.224). The sisters soon taught the women residents how to read and write, and they taught them etiquette for easeful interaction with people from different social levels in society.

The Sisters also opened an employment agency so that they could place these women in homes which could employ them until such time as they chose to marry. Catherine McAuley followed the situations of the women closely while they were working in other people’s homes to be sure they were not exploited. Her decision to allow women to live in the Home of Mercy for a few months until they were able to earn their own living came from a failure she had experienced after asking an establishment which decided things by committee was unable in time to accept a woman in immediate danger of seduction by her employer. In

another situation where it appeared as though a husband intended to make a young woman his mistress, Catherine McAuley intervened directly by confronting the man in person and freed the girl from this compromising situation.

B. Proper Development of Culture

Gaudium et spes analyzes the remarkable interrelation between culture and the development of the human person: “It is one of the properties of the human person that he can achieve true and full humanity only by means of culture, that is through the cultivation of the goods and values of nature (#53).” A caution is then raised: even though culture is essential for the development of the person, it must never dominate the person.”...[C]ulture must be subordinated to the integral development of the human person, to the good of the community and of the whole of mankind.(#59).

In the Ireland of Mother McAuley’s time, the Protestant English culture had done everything possible to erase the memory of the Catholic Irish culture. Priests were put to death, the faithful forbidden to receive the Sacraments, monasteries destroyed, and Catholic schools closed. People were unable to live the inherited culture of the Catholic Faith (Bolster, *Positio*, II. 724-25). Into this situation Catherine McAuley created institutions to enable the reflowering of Irish Catholic Culture.

Bessie Belloc, in *Historic Nuns*, describes the rich notion of culture which was embodied in the education of the Sisters themselves:

Another main object, and indeed, the primary end of the Order of Mercy, was the instructing of the ignorant; the getting real thought and real principle into the minds of children and empty-headed adults. To this end Mother M’Auley spared no pains in training the young Sisters for their duties. Besides a thorough English Education, which she considered indispensable, she made the Sisters keep up in music, for the Church; painting, useful in many ways; and foreign languages, so necessary for the Sisters who visited the prisons and hospitals of seaport towns (Belloc, 93).

Culture, for Catherine McAuley, meant far more than simply reading and writing. It included all the arts. For example, at the foundation in Carlow, “[t]he girls are obliged to acquire a perfect knowledge of the lessons at home, so that to hear the classes is all [sic.]: one French, another Grammar and Geography, and so on. (Bolster, *Positio*, I, 490). One educator described it, “her aim [was] to educate and elevate...”(II. 726).

“A poet by nature” Catherine McAuley often communicated with her Sisters in limericks (Carroll, 174). When the Sisters in one convent were particularly saddened, she recommended two hours of Irish dancing each evening for recreation. Further, she stated that every Home of Mercy should have a piano. In addition to poetry and music, the appearances of the convents and the Sister’s habits should be simple but beautiful. Aesthetics transmitted the culture of religious life.

Education of the sisters in professional areas was also emphasized. Between 1824 and 1827 Catherine McAuley studied the teaching pedagogy of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in France and in Irish Protestant Schools to enhance her teaching of Catholic children (Bolster, *Liminal*, 2 and 11). As a novice with the Presentation Sisters, she observed their classroom technique in educating children at George’s Hill Convent School (Savage, 267). She expected her sisters to prepare for the National Board of Education Examination of Irish Schools offered by the state since 1832. Catherine McAuley argued: “...to teach well, kindness and prudence, though indispensable, will not suffice without the solid foundation of a good education, and a judicious method of imparting knowledge. (Carroll, 174). She also “Pioneered the introduction of the Monitorial System of Education for Girls in Ireland (Bolster, *Liminal*, 232).

Religious education and culture were equally important for those who would work in catechesis. Catherine’s own ability in catechesis was renown as it led to the conversion of

many of her family members and acquaintances to the Catholic faith. She wrote a dialogue entitled *The Cottage Controversy* as a way of elevating apologetical discussions. In this dialogue, a poor Catholic woman catechized a wealthy Protestant woman. This catechetical device fits the cultural context of Ireland and echoes a view expressed in an 1833 letter stating that her foundation “is the first to be erected in the midst of the Protestant nobility ... at a time when they (the Protestants) were employing wealth and influence to allure Catholics from their faith (Bolster, *Liminal*, 5).

Catherine McAuley decided that the middle class in Ireland was particularly neglected in education. Upper class boys and girls were educated by Jesuit and Ursuline religious communities and the lower classes in the schools of the Christian Brothers and Presentation Sisters. Her decision to focus on the middle class anticipates *Gaudium et spes* #60:

Man is now offered the possibility to free most of the human race from the curse of ignorance: it is, therefore one of the duties most appropriate to our times, above all for Christians, to work untiringly...to ensure the recognition and implementation everywhere of the right of every man to human and civil culture in harmony with the dignity of the human person, without distinction of race, sex, nation, religion, or social circumstances. Hence it is necessary to ensure that there is a sufficiency of cultural benefits available to everybody, especially the benefit of what is called “basic” culture, lest any be prevented by illiteracy and lack of initiative from contributing in an authentically human way to the common good .

The Sisters of Mercy opened schools for large numbers of children. In her first written request for the architectural design of the large house on Baggot Street, she stipulated “[v]ery large rooms for poor schools, three or four. (Carroll, 92).” At the beginning, 200 children were received, but eventually as many as 500 children were taught at one time by six to eight teachers (Carroll, 170). At Kingstown 300 children were taught, in Cork around 1200, and by 1911 it was estimated that the Sisters of Mercy had over 200,000 children in their schools (Belloc, 96-98).

C. Economic and Social Life

Mother Catherine McAuley's emphasis on building up the middle class also served an economic value. It tended to lessen the radical difference between the very rich and the very poor: "The purpose of the penal code was to destroy the economic life of Ireland and to demoralize and enfeeble its people" (NCE, XI, 67). Because Ireland's penal laws were repealed only in 1829, the very rich tended to be Protestants and the very poor Catholics. By inheriting a large sum of money from Protestants who converted to Catholicism, Catherine McAuley moved easily between poor and rich. She would use fashion and wealth to gain advantages for the poor. For example, she dressed well and rode in her carriage, to gain entrance to a Protestant School in order to learn its teaching methodologies for later application to Catholic Schools. In the *Positio* we read the following description of her ingenuity:

Whenever, therefore, she wished to urge her application for admittance into any of those establishments where she thought her services likely to be useful, she always took care to pay her first visit in her own carriage and attended by servants. She did this, not from any motive of ostentation or display, but from a wish to remove the obstacles that the world might raise to the fulfilment of her charitable designs. She wished to vanquish the world and its prejudices with its own weapons (Bolster, I.77)

She did the same to visit Catholic patients in a hospital which forbade Catholics to visit.

Catherine's personality then enabled her to assume a more humble presence to educate and visit the sick without using the artifice of her wealth. In this way, Catherine was an economic mediator.

Gaudium et spes #63 begins the section on economic and social life with a fundamental principle: "In the sphere of economics and social life, too, the dignity and entire vocation of the human person as well as the welfare of society as a whole have to be respected and fostered; for man is the source, the focus and the end of all economic and social life." Then in Section #67, the dignity of manual labor is emphasized because of its

association with the redemptive work of Jesus Christ "...whose labour with his hands at Nazareth greatly ennobled the dignity of work. This is the source of everyman's duty to work loyally as well as his right to work; moreover it is the duty of society to see to it that, according to the prevailing circumstances, all citizens have the opportunity of finding employment."

Mother Catherine's efforts in women's employment were discriminating in placement of persons:

Suitable employment shall be sought for, and great care taken to place them in *situations for which they are adapted*, in order that they may continue such length of time in them as shall establish a character on which they can depend for future support. Many leave their situations, not so much for want of merit as through incapacity to fulfil the duties in which they unwisely engaged. They shall not be encouraged to remain long in the House of Mercy, as in general it would be better for them soon to enter on that state and employment by which they are to live (Bolster, I,199, #2 and Carroll, 149).

The focus on the development of the middle-class anticipates the call of *Gaudium et spes* in Section # 66: "An end to excessive economic and social differences." In the Council's words: "To fulfil the requirements of justice and equity, every effort must be made to put an end as soon as possible to the immense economic inequalities which exist in the world and increase from day to day, linked with individual and social discrimination, provided, of course, that the rights of individuals and the character of each people are not disturbed." Education and professional training enabled children and adults to assume their proper place in society. By providing temporary housing, the sisters protected workers against inhuman living conditions, and by their training they protected them against being forced into employment which violated their personal dignity.

In one further area Catherine McAuley contributed to the urgent problem of economic development in the service of the common good. Before the repeal of the penal laws, Catholics were not allowed to inherit property. This legal discrimination by the English

against Catholics contravenes one of the fundamental principles of Catholic social teaching expressed in *Gaudium et spes* #91 as follows:

Private property and other forms of private ownership of external goods assures a person a highly necessary sphere for the exercise of his personal and family autonomy and ought to be considered as an extension of human freedom. Lastly, in stimulating responsibility, it constitutes one of the conditions for civil liberty.

The large inheritance Catherine McAuley received from her (previously) Protestant benefactors enabled her to build the Home of Mercy in Dublin. Private property enabled her to freely exercise her responsibility towards the poor distressed women and children of Ireland. Catherine distributed her wealth for the common good.

D. The Political Community

Catherine McAuley understood herself and the sisters in her Institute as belonging first and foremost to the Kingdom of God, and secondarily to a temporal political realm. With this conviction she vibrantly lived the teaching of *Gaudium et spes* #72, that “[a]nyone who in obedience to Christ seeks first the kingdom of God will derive from it a stronger and purer love for helping all his brethren and for accomplishing the task of justice under the inspiration of charity.” (Sullivan, *Path*, 159-71)

It may seem paradoxical to those familiar with Mother Catherine’s maxims to discuss her contribution to the political community. She stated that politics was the one topic that Sisters should not discuss in the common life or in the context of apostolic works (Carroll, 163). In Ireland, political antagonisms between English and Irish, upper class and lower class, Protestants and Catholics raged furiously. She wanted her sisters to bring another dimension into the debate.

To hear nationalities discussed in a manner capable of wounding the most sensitive, would be exceedingly painful to her. And because England was regarded as

the hereditary foe of Ireland, she did not allow politics to be mentioned at recreation, lest any thing should escape an impulsive Hibernian, tending, in the slightest degree, to wound those who had crossed the sea, and left everything they loved, to learn the maxims of perfection in [Ireland]... (Carroll, 380).

Because the sisters were citizens of the city of God, they were sojourners in the city of man.

For consecrated persons, acting as eschatological signs within the Church, refraining from political debate can be understood in the broad sense as a political act which counteracts “an increase in tolerance for others who differ in opinion and religion...”(GS #73)

The actions of the Sisters of Mercy defended fundamental political rights in a situation in which the Penal Laws had barred Catholics from free public association, holding political office, serving on juries, and even voting. Catherine’s acts anticipated the principle of the right to free association emphasized in *Gaudium et spes* #73:

A keener awareness of human dignity has given rise in various parts of the world to an eagerness to establish a politico-juridical order in which the rights of the human person will be better protected---for example, the right of free assembly and association, the right to express one’s religion privately and publicly.

Ireland was based on an aristocratic model of government in which governing authority passed through blood lines. Catherine, well aware of this model, used it to support the common good. This is attested to in the well-known story of her bold direct appeal to the Duchess of Kent and the Princess Victoria for contributions to a bazaar to support the works of mercy of her Institute (Carroll 93-94; Sullivan, *Path* 141-42). Not only did the contributions bring assistance to the poor, they also awakened in the members of the aristocracy a deeper philanthropic spirit.

As the upper class seemed mostly caught up in a round of self-centered social activities, and the poor had no means to help other poor, once again Catherine McAuley turned to the middle class as the primary social group who would likely assume responsibilities for the common good. *Gaudium et spes* defines: “The common good embraces the sum total of all those conditions of social life which enable individuals families,

and organizations to achieve complete and efficacious fulfilment” (#74). The Sisters of Mercy encouraged the middle class to work towards the common good by their contributions of money, goods, volunteering of time, and supporting the vocations of their daughters to become a Sister of Mercy.

E. Fostering of Peace

Gaudium et spes gives a beautiful description of the nature of peace:

Peace is more than the absence of war: it cannot be reduced to the maintenance of a balance of power between opposing forces nor does it arise out of despotic domination, but it is appropriately called “the effect of righteousness” (Is. 32:17). It is the fruit of that right ordering of things with which the divine founder has invested human society and which must be actualized by man thirsting after an even more perfect reign of justice. But while the common good of mankind ultimately derives from the eternal law, it depends upon circumstances which change as time goes on; consequently, peace will never be achieved once and for all, but must be built up continually. Since, moreover, human nature is weak and wounded by sin, the achievement of peace requires a constant effort to control the passions and unceasing vigilance by lawful authority (#78)

Mother Catherine began by fostering peace in each sister and local community and then moved outwards in apostolic work in international relations. One of her favorite maxims was: “Whenever a religious woman presides, peace and good order are generally to be found” (Maxim for January 11). Within the human person, the intellect and will order the passions and senses, in religious communities, the proper religious superiors guide the members of the Institute, and in civil society, civil government provides authority and principles of order.

Catherine McAuley wrote a chapter in the Rule entitled “Of Union and Charity,” which guided the Sisters of Mercy for the first ten years of the Institute’s existence. Union and charity was the formula for establishing peace among the Sisters within the Institute. Mother Catherine claimed that her only boast was that the sun never set on the anger of a sister, and that “no breach of charity ever occurred among us.” (McAuley, *Letters*, 155).

Introducing charity into situations of conflict in order to bring true peace, extended beyond the religious institute. “The Spirit of the Institute” described this Mercy charism:

We learn by visiting prisons and hospitals, and by reconciling quarrels what misery there is in the world. We must try to be like those rivers which enter the sea, without losing any of the sweetness of the water. We must, in the midst of rudeness, impiety and impatience which we shall witness, preserve meekness, piety and unwearied patience.” (Bolster, *Venerable*, 20).

In a town called Birr, their eleventh foundation in Ireland, the sisters brought reconciliation to a parish which a schismatic priest had split into two factions (Degnan, 298-301). In the Dublin cholera epidemic of 1832, when others hesitated to tend the sick, the Sisters of Mercy worked day and night, in four-hour shifts, to care for those suffering from the disease (*Positio*, I. 140-43; Sullivan, *Path*, 109-25). They instituted a reordering of health-care discipline. While over 161 persons died in the first three weeks of this epidemic, none of the sisters died. In other epidemics, however, many were lost through disease. (Savage, 147)

In a later cholera epidemic in 1855 the Sisters from Ireland and England nursed soldiers during the Crimean War under extremely difficult conditions of cold, lack of food, and disease. At the end of the war, when the sisters returned to London by ship, English Protestant crowds began to loudly ridicule them, until the English soldiers aimed their rifles at the crowd, indicating their respect for the Catholic nurses. By their act of charity, the war-like atmosphere of conflict was overturned and peace reigned from that time on for sisters on the streets of London.

At the time of Catherine McAuley’s death in 1841 there were fourteen autonomous foundations, each of which had the authority to make new foundations. By 1894 there were 77 independent foundations in Ireland, and by 1950, 198 foundations in Ireland; 108 foundations in England and Wales, 7 in Scotland, 14 in Newfoundland Canada; 252 foundations in Australia, 46 in New Zealand, 861 in the United States, 6 in Central American

and West Indies 12 in South America, and 5 in South Africa (Savage, 407-410; Sullivan, *Tradition*, entire).

Mother Catherine's dual principles of autonomy and flexibility were joined to dialogue and frequent communication both within and among her convents. She lived this principle daily within her communities by leading two hours of recreation each evening during which the sisters spoke with one another about daily events and read out loud the correspondence among convents which continuously flowed. This example anticipated a section emphasizing the importance of dialogue in *Gaudium et spes* #92: "In virtue of its mission to enlighten the whole world with the message of the Gospel and gather together in one Spirit all men of every nature, race and culture, the Church shows itself as a sign of the spirits of brotherhood which renders possible sincere dialogue and strengthens it."

To conclude this presentation, we need to think about the question: How was it possible for Venerable Catherine McAuley to anticipate over one-hundred years before the Second Vatican Council so many of its basic principles about human dignity in the Church and the world? A prophet is a person through whom God can speak to bring the world back in line with the Divine Plan once it goes away from this plan. According to one important scholar of Scripture: "The essential element of the prophet is not the prediction of future events; the prophet is someone who tells the truth on the strength of his [or her] contact with God; the truth for today which also, naturally, sheds light on the future. It is not a question of foretelling the future in detail, but of rendering the truth of God present at this moment in time and of pointing us in the right direction." (Hvidt, *Christine Prophecy*, p. 2)

Like prophets who went before her, Venerable Catherine McAuley was impelled by the same Holy Spirit who impelled the Council Fathers, and who impelled Mary and the

disciples at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is One and the same at each time and place. This is why we can pray today, “Come Holy Spirit and Renew the Face of the Earth”

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