

CATHERINE THE ENABLER

Joanna Regan writes: *“Catherine McAuley brought her heart to misery. By courageous contagious concern for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the poor, the sick, and the ignorant, she broke through the impossibilities of her time. She animated many to walk with her. She animated others at centres of wealth, power and influence to share in her heroic efforts. She connected the rich with the poor, the healthy to the sick, the educated and the skilled to the uninstructed, the influential to those of no consequence, the powerful to the weak; to do the work of God on earth”*.¹

Catherine McAuley was a woman who believed she could make a difference. She was convinced that others too could make a difference, and that by enabling them to believe in themselves, they also had the power to make things possible. There are many aspects to Catherine’s enabling but today I am able to focus only on a few of these. The definition of enable is to authorize; to empower; to sanction; to qualify (fit, suit, adapt, limit).² It is to empower individuals and groups so that they are able to live with dignity and respect in their society. This is done by –

- Building relationships (welcoming attitude, warmth, love compassion, listening)
- Supporting, encouraging and facilitating
- Resourcing
- Including people in decisions that impact on their lives
- Challenging

Enabling Individuals

It is Catherine’s humanity/humanness – the kind of person she was and how she related to others – that gives us an insight into her enabling power. We discover this through her Letters and from descriptions of her by those who knew her well. We see a woman who loved deeply, who was vulnerable and could be hurt deeply, who could make mistakes, who had a sense of fun and laughter, who was flexible and adaptable. It was their personal experience of this human touch of Catherine that enabled so many people to trust in themselves.

The process of enabling others begins with the gift of presence to another. In one of the first biographies of Catherine, Vincent Harnett noted that her eyes had a *“penetrating but benign expression”* and that her *“deportmentwas most kind and compassionate.”* People immediately sensed her warmth and love reaching out to them and were able to relax in her presence. Vincent Harnett also comments: *“She was gifted with great observation and she seemed to be intimately acquainted with the workings of the human heart; so that with ease she adapted her conversation either for edification or instruction to the circumstances of the moment and always agreeably and with dignity.”*³

Teresa White, one of Catherine’s early companions and a close friend, described this open and welcoming attitude towards others to Sr. Austin Carroll. She says: *“There was something about her so kind yet so discerning that you would fancy she read your heart. If you came to speak to her of the most trifling matter, although occupied with the most*

*important affairs, she would instantly lay all aside and give you any satisfaction in her power.”*⁴

Another feature of Catherine’s ability to make people feel ‘at home’ with her was her humility. We are told that she never put on ‘airs and graces’ but interacted with others as an equal. In one of her visits to the new foundation at Carlow one of the novices wrote: *“I think what pleased us most in Reverend Mother, was the absence of a manner telling, ‘I am foundress’.”*⁵

Catherine supported, encouraged, facilitated and thus enabled those with whom she worked in a variety of ways. She was a great believer in learning by experience and helped her Sisters to do this. When beginning a new foundation, she usually brought with her a novice/ postulant together with one or two experienced women for a few months so that the new group could gain from the experience of those already trained in the more established convents. Nor did she leave these new groups to their own devices. In each new foundation she herself stayed for a month at least, and more than that when needed, in order to support and encourage the new community. She kept in touch with the various foundations through circulars, imparting newsy details as well as good and sound advice but she did this without interfering with the responsibility of the new local superior. Her support also included letters to these leaders, encouraging, cajoling, loving, and gently remonstrating when that was required.

Catherine’s capacity for enabling was most evident in her ability to recognize potential in people and to challenge this to be called forth. This is most apparent in her appointment of the young women she chose as leaders in the new foundations. She seemed to know intuitively what each person and each situation needed and was delighted when she saw their gifts and talents blossoming. On her appointment of Mary Aloysius Scott as the leader of the Birr community which was fraught with great physical hardships and problems, in a letter to Cecelia Marmion, she wrote: *“Sr M Aloysius - perfectly at home - the most vigilant clever manager I have met in some time. I never knew till now the loss she must have been to her father’s large family. We put our candles under a Bushel.....I never cease thanking God for giving me courage to bring her into action and she is delighted.”*⁶ Her advice to young superiors coming out of her own experience was to *“study the dispositions of all under her charge and employ them according to their abilities.”*⁷ She did not believe in pushing people beyond their limit and advised de Sales White in the following words. *“Let us take one day only in hands, at a time, by making a resolve for tomorrow, thus we may hope to take small careful steps, not great strides.”*⁸ At the same time her enablement of her Sisters also included checking or challenging them if she believed that this needed to be done. But always she did this in such a way that people were not ‘put down’ and their confidence in themselves was not eroded. Her advice to Elizabeth Moore is a very good example of this.

*Don’t let crosses vex or tease
Try to meet all with peace and ease
Notice the faults of every day
But often in a playful way.*⁹

Enabling Public Groups

Catherine loved the poor and while she saw the need for individual charity and almsgiving for the poor she also knew that this alone would not change the unjust structures in the wider society which locked them into a vicious cycle of grinding poverty. She saw the need to address the injustices that excluded the poor from accessing the services which would empower them to liberate themselves from this life of poverty. She rightly read the ‘signs of the times’ and thus developed her vision for the poor of Dublin (and later for the poor outside Dublin) which would empower them to take charge of their own lives. It was not enough to ‘hand a fish to people when one could teach them how to fish for themselves’.

Catherine was convinced that education in particular, especially for women, would be the means by which poor children would improve their lot. In the Original Rule she wrote: *“The sisters shall feel convinced that no work of charity can be more productive of good to society, or more conducive to the happiness of the poor, than the careful instruction of women since whatever be the station they are destined to fill, their example and their advice will always possess influence...”*¹⁰ Consequently she used her resources and she set out to establish schools for the poor in Dublin. We know that she went to France to learn the latest methods of Education. For Catherine, formation as well as information was an important element of education. People were trained not only in the moral virtues such as honesty and trustworthiness, but also in practical skills thus making her students *“fit for heaven without being unfit for earth.”*¹¹

She always looked at people’s needs and saw how different circumstances required adaptation in the content of the curriculum. For example, in 1823, in Middle Abbey Street Parochial school, Catherine trained the children to do needlework and embroidery which she later enticed her wealthy clients to buy. When the house in Baggot Street was built, she introduced Arts and Crafts, and more advanced courses in home management in the House of Mercy. The students were trained in dress making, crochet, weaving, laundering and cooking. Domestic skills equipped girls to become servants and practical skills such as knitting, sewing etc helped to supplement their income. In a way one could say that Baggot Street became an Institute of adult education, an employment Bureau and a sheltered workshop for many girls not yet employed. This was an achievement when one realizes that The Agricultural and Technical Instruction (Ireland) Act was not passed until 1881.

She was also ahead of her time in adopting a pupil-teacher system. For promising pupils who wished to become tutors or governesses in middle and upper class homes she introduced courses of training in Baggot Street schools. In 1836 her school in Baggot Street had the status of teacher training centre from which young women were placed in employment two years before the establishment of the Central Training School in Marlborough Street Dublin in 1838, a training school which remained exclusively male until 1842. This was an extraordinary achievement in promoting the role of women in a male dominated society and enabling them to take responsible positions in that society.

Catherine always aimed to bring the human face of suffering into the vision and consciousness of the well-to-do as a way of challenging them to share their resources with the poor. It was with this in mind that she built her convent in the up market area of Baggot Street. The presence of the poor was not welcomed by everybody there but some hearts were eventually changed and a network of support was established and resources were connected with human need. She also established pension schools, an initiative which caused some controversy at the time, one of her purposes being, to imbue the more well off students with a sense of responsibility for the poor. What Catherine could not have foreseen was that the ripple effect of her work of enabling the poor to access education and other life resources would eventually lead to change in the structures of Irish society and would ultimately spread across the globe.

At the core of Catherine's 'enabling power' was her contemplative stance on life. In her letter to DeSales White she said: "*We have one solid 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.*"¹² and at the same time she shows that the works of mercy 'are the business of our lives'. Catherine's prayer flowed from her deep personal love of God and her deep love for God's poor. This enabled her to have a harmonious relationship between contemplation and action. In 2001 Dorothee Soelle said "*What really happens in mystical union is not a new vision of God but a different relation-ship to the world – one that has borrowed the eyes of God.*"¹³ It was the seeing through 'God's eyes' that enabled her to stand in solidarity with the poor through hospitality thereby enabling them to trust in themselves. There was always the human touch which enabled, and an avoidance of too much bureaucracy which has the capacity to crush the human spirit. She took to heart Jesus words in the synagogue: "He sent me to bring good news to the poor"

How can we as Catherine's followers continue her ministry of enabling in the 21st Century?

To answer this question in a more discerning way, we need to 'borrow the eyes of God' and view people and all creation through those lenses. Like Catherine we need to read the 'signs of our times' and to be actively and passionately engaged. The poor are always with us. As in Catherine's day there will always be the need to respond as individuals to the individual needs of these poor. There will be need for – "*the kind word, the gentle, compassionate look and the patient hearing of their sorrows*"¹⁴ thereby enabling people to have a real experience of being loved.

In enabling disadvantaged people through the provision of a service we need always to be aware of the danger of acting in a paternalistic way and that instead of enabling them to overcome their disability we end up creating dependence rather than ownership and responsibility. The role of the enabler, as it was for Catherine, is to allow the people to choose what course of action they are able to take, and then to walk with them supporting and resourcing them in every possible way along their journey to self reliance and change.

A sign of the times is the fact that the gap between rich and poor has become more marked than ever and the global recession is hurting many people. Fighting poverty requires attentive consideration of the complex phenomena of globalization and its impact on the ‘little’ people at the local level in countries across the globe. The complexity and enormity of the current issues can be overwhelming and can have the effect of paralyzing us so that we end up doing nothing. Doing nothing was not Catherine’s way. We can always make a beginning and be consoled by the words of a leading organizational consultant of our time - Margaret Wheatley who says: *“I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again.”*¹⁵ The power of listening hearts is enormous and Catherine was a leading example in listening. We recall Vincent Whitty’s description of Catherine – *“... to me at least the climax of her attractions was that she was always the same, always ready to listen.”*¹⁶

*“Small is beautiful”*¹⁷ wrote Schumacher and so any initiative of bringing about social and systemic change needs to start at the lower end of the scale. Like Catherine, who gathered a group around her, we know that the collective action of a group of committed people can achieve more than one in isolation. We can also organize people around us to start a process of together dealing with unjust issues that impact on us, or to act in solidarity with a disadvantaged group should they request that support. Catherine gave the fishing rod in order to fish. Today we need to give more than the fishing rod to fish. We need to ensure that our rivers, lakes, oceans and beautiful earth are not destroyed. We need to educate ourselves and others to care for our planet and to allow ourselves to be amazed by the story of our universe. We have the resources to do that. Availing of the wellspring of Mercy Spirituality we can pray and reflect together, support one another as we plan together and then reflect on the actions taken in the light of the Gospel. The beauty of all this is that it is possible for each one of us to do something – at home, in our local area, in schools and in all our areas of work. As Mercies we are truly blessed to be part of the New Vision of Mercy International Association which commits us to use our resources to respond to issues of Global Poverty.

Catherine’s example of enabling will always be our inspiration. She may not have ever heard of the great Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu who lived two and a half thousand years before her, but the words attributed to him may well have been spoken by Catherine, the Enabler herself, and ones that we can take to heart as a model of enabling:

Go to the people

Listen to them

Learn from them

Love them

Start with what they know,

Build with what they have:

But with the best of leaders

When the work has been done, the task accomplished,

The people will say:

*“We have done this ourselves.”*¹⁸

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- ¹ Joanne Regan rsm, Tender Courage
² Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus
³ Vincent Harnett rsm, The Life of Rev. Mother Catherine McAuley
⁴ Austin Carroll rsm, Leaves of the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy Vol.1
⁵ Letter to Sr. M. Cecilia Marmion, January 15, 1841
⁶ The Annals of St. Leo's Convent of Mercy, Carlow
⁷ Quote from the Sayings and Statements of the Foundress, St. Maries of the Isle, Cork
⁸ Letter to Sr. M. de Sales White, February 28 1841
⁹ Poem to Sr. M. Elizabeth Moore, December 9 1938
¹⁰ Original Rule, Chapter 2
¹¹ Mother Teresa Austin Carroll, Life of Catherine McAuley
¹² Letter to Sr. M. de Sales White, December 20 1840
¹³ Dorothee Soelle. The Silent City
¹⁴ Familiar Instructions page 138
¹⁵ Margaret Wheatley, Turning to One Another
¹⁶ Sr. M. Vincent Whitty, Prefatory note written in 1860.
¹⁷ E. F. Schumacher, Small is Beautiful
¹⁸ (Adapted from a saying by Lao Tzu)