

Catherine and Young People
By Sister Barbara Jeffery
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Catherine was born at the end of the 18th century and lived through to the middle of the 19th century in a Dublin that was undergoing radical changes at that time. This whole era could be compared with our own time with its huge technological developments and many forms of mass communication. The changes that Catherine witnessed as a young child and teenager are definitely mirrored by the huge changes that have happened within our own lifetimes and in the lifetimes of the young people growing up in our world today. Catherine also came through a time of riches and poverty that has probably not been paralleled until our own times. This seesaw movement was to have a great impact on her life and she saw the advantages that could be made by the benefits of a good education. As an adult Catherine was realistic and practical and she realised that young people and especially women had to learn new skills so that they could earn a living. Today there is still a crying need for young people to learn new skills and to increase their motivation in our fiercely competitive world.

We know from Catherine's own story that she received her faith from her father's influence and her grace from her mother. We know too that Catherine was soon joined by her sister Mary and her brother James and one imagines that their early childhood was happy and contented. The first dark cloud on the horizon must surely have been the death of their father. That death had repercussions for them all down the years but especially for Catherine. How many of our young people today come from family backgrounds that are rocked by tragedies or indeed involve the splitting up of the family unit? It seems strange to say that Catherine was not unfamiliar with this situation. By 1798, the family was split up between the Armstrong and the Conway families but after about a year Catherine had no option but to go and live with the Protestant Armstrong family as well as the rest of her family. Catherine was already mature beyond her young age but she knew that she needed spiritual support to stay strong to her beliefs against an unremitting onslaught of anti-Catholic sentiments levelled at her in the Armstrong household. She had to seek out and gain strength from various clergy in the area at the time.

In Pope Benedict's address to young pupils in Twickenham in September 2010 he said:

"What God wants most of all for each one of you is that you should become holy. ...by far the best thing for you is to grow in holiness."

Catherine has shown us all the way to do this – by seeking out those who can help us in the understanding and development of our faith. She knew that she did not have all the answers but she actively sought out those who could both explain and supply her with counter arguments to any prejudiced views put forward. Who do our young people seek out today? It is a question that should cause us all to reflect very seriously. Catherine has also shown us the beauty and power in simple prayers, repeated over and over and indeed many young people today enjoy the repetition that is in use in the Taize prayer used in the Church both in song and words. Perhaps simplicity is the key.

In 1799 when Catherine was about 21 years old William and Catherine Callaghan came into her life and wished to adopt her as the daughter they had never had. Catherine McAuley was now the one **receiving** shelter and alms and this experience made her very aware of how people, young or old, would feel in receiving help. She would never question the motives of those who later on would seek her out for assistance but would give warmly and generously. She too, would respond warmly to those seeking shelter and she went on to adopt both the children of her cousin Anne Conway and her sister Mary after their deaths – a total of nine children altogether. So it would not have been unusual for the House of Mercy to be reverberating with the voices of young children throughout the day.

Pope Benedict asked the young people in September:

“What are the qualities you see in others that you would most like to have yourselves? What kind of person would you really like to be?”

Catherine showed by her actions how she wanted to be a true daughter of Christ and Pope Benedict encouraged young people to have Christ as their role model. As he said,

“I am asking you not to pursue one limited goal and to ignore all the others. ... Happiness is something we all want, but one of the great tragedies in this world is that so many people never find it, because they look for it in the wrong places. The key to it is very simple – true happiness is to be found in God.”

Catherine had found that happiness and because she had this treasure in the depths of her being it allowed her to join the Callaghan household around 1803, even though they too, opposed her Catholic faith. Catherine however found other ways to express it, mainly by helping those in the locality and seeing God present in his gifts of creation and even in the structures of the building. In time Catherine was allowed to attend Mass and when ill-health struck down Mrs Callaghan, Catherine became a constant companion, spending many hours on the floor reading to the invalid. Here God rewarded Catherine’s patient endurance as she read to Mrs Callaghan from the Bible – another encounter with God from a source Catherine did not expect! Perhaps too our young people find an experience of God in many unexpected and unlooked for places. We should hardly be surprised that God will use every way possible to attract others to hear his voice.

Pope Benedict told the young people:

“Not only does God love us with a depth and an intensity that we can scarcely begin to comprehend, but he invites us to respond to that love.”

Catherine responded to that love with a generosity of care for both Mr and Mrs Callaghan and such was her kindness that it could not do anything but call forth a reciprocal kindness in the Callaghans themselves. They left her the fortune that would allow Catherine to reach out to many more people and touch their lives with the same love with which God had touched hers. Catherine came to Dublin city in 1822 in charge of a fortune and with many opportunities before her. We might even

be tempted to compare her with some of the so-called celebrities of our day that some young people find so attractive, but as Pope Benedict pointed out to them:

“Being highly skilled in some activity or profession is good, but it will not satisfy us unless we aim for something greater still. It might make us famous but it will not make us happy.”

By this time, Catherine’s brother was already a surgeon at the Royal Military Hospital at Kilmainham and her sister Mary was married to another surgeon, William Macauley. Catherine was noted in the society of her day as gracious and sensitive. It was through her graciousness and sensitivity that Catherine saw, more and more, the degradation of women and children in Dublin. She began to realise that only one thing could rescue poverty-stricken women and children from their lot and that was education. She began to see that if young people had a talent or a skill they could use then this could be turned into something marketable. One could almost see Catherine as an entrepreneur of her day – but hardly a member of Dragon’s Den! She saw that young people had to have a belief in their abilities and that they needed to recognise that what they offered was of some worth. This is one of the biggest issues of our time – having a belief in our own worth. Our present day culture has had a great influence on this and not for the good. We live in a throw-away, instant society where everything has to be now or not at all. Any young person who perhaps need more time to develop or to hone their skills find they are left further behind and devalued. However the one person who will not devalue us is God and he loves us no matter how long we take to develop our skills. As God loves us, so we have this great gift of love within ourselves and as Pope Benedict said to the young people at Westminster Cathedral:

“We were also made to give love, to make it the inspiration for all we do, and the most enduring thing in our lives.”

Many young people do show this remarkable quality of love today – such as those who take a gap year before University and go out to countries that desperately need help to build such things as houses, welfare clinics and parts of hospitals for communities desperately in need. Catherine too wanted to build something that would endure for God’s glory and so she was not slow to learn from others who had paved the way before her - people like Nano Nagel, Teresa Mulally and Edmund Rice. She also took note of how other religions taught in their schools – notably the Kildare Society that was run by the Quaker Society.

Around 1827 Catherine felt drawn to put her new found wealth to a more practical use and after consulting her priest friends she decided to purchase the land at the corner of Baggot and Herbert Sts on which to build a house to give shelter and employment to the young women and children who most needed it. Her idea was to have classrooms, dormitories for those girls who were employed but had nowhere to live and a few modest rooms for her own living quarters and any young women who wanted to be engaged in this work. However it was around this time that Catherine began to suffer a series of bereavements that could have distracted her from her life’s mission. The Pope too, acknowledged to young people that it is not always easy to continue in our ideas of idealism and generosity:

“Every day we have to choose to love and this requires help. The help that comes from Christ, from the wisdom found in his word. And from the Grace which he bestows on us in the sacraments of his Church.”

One of the hardest bereavements for Catherine must have been the death of her sister Mary. Mary had been Catherine’s playmate as a child but then had come under the heavy influence of the Armstrong family and had drifted away from Catherine in matters of faith. This was the ever present anxiety for Catherine. Then in the early 1820s Mary was struck with tuberculosis and Catherine was more determined than ever that Mary should be restored to the Church. By her perseverance and gentle persuasion Catherine won Mary back to the faith in 1827 and her daughter Mary Teresa became a Catholic at this time as well. Maybe it was Catherine’s persistence that paid off but as Pope Benedict pointed out:

“Jesus is always there. Quietly waiting for us to be still with him and to hear his voice. Deep within your heart, he is calling you to spend time with him in prayer, but this kind of prayer, real prayer, requires discipline. It requires time for moments of silence every day. Often it means waiting for the Lord to speak.”

As well as losing valued family members and priest friends, Catherine at the same time was attracting young women who looked carefully at what she was trying to do. Young women like Fanny Tighe, Anna Maria Doyle, and Georgiana Moore who first came into Catherine’s orbit as a governess to all her adopted children. By 1830 there was a group of about nine women with Catherine involved in the project to empower the young women and girls of Dublin. It seemed that Fanny Tighe and Catherine even went as far as to visit France to see the educational methods employed there. Catherine examined different teaching styles and she was not slow to offer Catholic education in the new premises in Lower Baggot Street. Catherine also made sure that each home of the pupils was visited and that a relationship was built up between the women who were teaching and the families who were being taught – quite revolutionary in her day! When the school opened in 1827 there were between 200 and 300 children enrolled.

In May 1828 Catherine was able finally to take up residence in Baggot St and live amongst the young women who shared her vision. She needed this support as she was already experiencing certain rejection and ridicule from some family members for spending her inheritance in this manner and she also faced the condemnation of those who lived in the area where the house was situated. Her biggest cross to bear though came from the antipathy she suffered through some of the clergy. They could not see how a mere woman could be engaged in such matters and were not backward in criticising Catherine. She, on the other hand, did not retaliate but kept firmly to her path of enabling young women to take their rightful place, whilst still extending courtesy and humility to all the clergy who came to hear of her efforts. Again it is possible to think of situations today where young people are stereotyped and ridiculed for being involved in projects to try and improve other peoples’ lives. It is at times like this, that like Catherine, they need a strong conviction about what they are doing and they need the support of like-minded people.

Catherine had that kind of support from the other young women who had joined her and by 1830 there were now fourteen women working alongside her in the House of Mercy. It was now that

Archbishop Murray asked Catherine to consider forming her group into a new religious order for the Church. In a way, it was Catherine's **Annunciation** moment when the Archbishop waited for her **Fiat** and Catherine responded to that challenge with a deep felt love of God and his will for her life. The Archbishop promised Catherine that she could still pursue her apostolate outside the confines of the Convent and so Catherine began the long journey of establishing the Sisters of Mercy. As we know, on September 8th 1830, Catherine, Anna Maria Doyle and Elizabeth Harley went off to the Presentation Convent in George's Hill to begin their training. During her time in George's Hill the most worrying thing for Catherine, was the inability to know how her young women were coping without her. She must have already been aware that some of them might be drawn to excesses of asceticism without her guiding hand there to caution restraint and this indeed did seem to be the case. One young woman, Caroline Murphy died in June 1831 and another, Anne O'Grady was also close to death. Luckily enough, Catherine had her friends, Fr O'Hanlon and Fr Burke who kept a watchful eye on the young occupants of the House of Mercy and who encouraged stability within the house. We can perhaps see parallels within our own days where young people can follow a trend to their detriment without the intervention of a wise figure to give guidance. There were the well publicised cases of a large number of suicides in Bridgend near Cardiff during 2008, when 17 youths, both boys and girls committed suicide for no apparent reason. Parents and guardians have remained baffled to this day as to the underlying reasons that led to such a tragic choice. However in some ways it seemed like a cry from the heart to be heard and to be guided. We need to stay vigilant enough to hear these desperate cries for help when they come.

On 12th December 1831 Catherine, Anna Maria and Elizabeth made their Professions and thus became the first Sisters of Mercy – a new order within the Church. Catherine hurried back to Baggot St and Archbishop Murray appointed her as Mother Superior the next day. The work of schools now became paramount amongst Catherine's ministries and she decided that any school run by Sisters of Mercy should follow the lines set down by Lord Stanley as part of the National School system. Therefore Baggot St School could be seen as a teacher training centre – well ahead of other educational establishments of the same era. To say Catherine McAuley was ahead of the game, is putting it mildly! She also saw the need for secondary education and for schools for the middle class children. Her reason for this was to encourage the better off children to be aware of those in need. This idea of one group of youth helping others continues to this day with our Youth Mercy Associates in London, Newcastle and Elgin in Scotland to name just a few areas. John Wraith, a Mercy Associate working in the Philippines has highlighted his work many times to different groups and he has gained an enthusiastic response from the young people in St John's Wood in London who actively work to forge links between themselves and children in the Philippines.

With her own Sisters, Catherine shared herself most fully, seeing that a united community would be a happy one and treasuring each sister for her individual personality. This is something that our young people are searching for today – to be valued as a unique human being. This is something we all need to be aware of, as more and more people retreat into a world where only earpieces and hand-held technology count. These things are all very good, but they do not have the warmth of a person talking with you or listening with interest to your point of view. Catherine's joyfulness and conversation drew the younger sisters to her in a way that our modern technological tools do not. Again, an engaging quality of Catherine's with the younger Sisters was her sense of fun and playfulness. She could easily gently tease those Sisters who seemed too solemn for her liking but

would never take the teasing too far. Equally, if she felt that she was in the wrong with a Sister she would make sure that she approached her before the evening was through to ask for her forgiveness for the fault she had committed against her. This surely was a sign of her great quality as a Leader – to seek the forgiveness of those over whom you have jurisdiction. She also passed on that role of Leader to many of her young sisters as she sent them to be leaders of new found convents. She trusted them to be able to respond to the needs of an area, she encouraged them when they doubted their own abilities and filled them with a self belief.

Another aspect of Catherine's personality was acceptance of situations that could not be changed. This acceptance was often strained to the limits, for instance in the many deaths of young nieces and nephews that Catherine had to accept. At one point, she wrote about her niece who died in November 1833:

"I loved my Mary Teresa too much and God took her from me. We must love Him as well when He takes as when He gives. May I never be free from His Cross."

Sometimes our young people struggle to accept the course of events in their lives but Pope Benedict gave them the encouraging words:

"We need to have courage to place our deepest hopes in God alone, not in money, in a career, in worldly success, or in our relationships with others, but in God. Only He can satisfy the deepest needs of our hearts."

Catherine, certainly was someone who gave a shining example of this to all those around her. Other charismatic leaders of our own time have also reflected a deep spirituality and trust in God. People like Nelson Mandela, Ban Ki Moon, Secretary General of the United Nations and Aung San Sun Kyi, Opposition Leader in Burma.

Through this confidence in God, Catherine began making new foundations all over Ireland and then into England too, with further plans for Nova Scotia. As she famously said:

"Hurrah for foundations! They make the old young and the young merry."

Yet Catherine was all too aware that each place needed to be treated separately and not to be made carbon copies of each other:

"Every place has its own particular ideas and feelings which must be yielded to when possible."

Not only did Catherine treat places in this way but she most definitely treated the young in this manner and that is why they responded so warmly to her. We need to recognise the uniqueness of our young people today and learn never to be surprised at their abilities and hidden depths. (Story about Faron in Stanford le Hope)As Catherine said to her sisters:

Persons consecrated to God ...ought to be the most attractive people in the world, that their influence being boundless in their respective spheres, they may be so many magnets to attract to Jesus Christ all with whom they come in contact."

To sum up then, Catherine had the following qualities in abundance:
Innocence, Humour, Joy, Directness, Honesty, Enthusiasm, Perseverance, Acceptance, Sharing, Caring, Empathy, Hope, Courage, Impetuosity, Curiosity and LOVE.

How many of these qualities do we have and how readily do we share these with our young people today? Do we at times hide these inner gifts and therefore make others poorer for that hiding? As Nelson Mandela, another great figure who has appealed to the young in our own day, famously said in his Inaugural Speech as President of South Africa in 1994:

"We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

This is what Catherine McAuley achieved in her life and this is what Pope Benedict encourages all our young people to do in our own day. May we help them to achieve this and perhaps to go on as Pope Benedict encouraged them to become the *"future saints of the 21st century."*