

**Follow on from Sr Maureen Murphy's Reflection on
'Catherine McAuley & the Young'
by Sr Maura Halpin
Clevedon 07.05.11 & Handsworth 18.06.11**

However, having had a preview of Sr Maureen's research into 'Catherine and the Young' I thought the logical follow-up would be to imagine what Catherine's thoughts might be today on the spiritual formation of children and young people.

We live in wonderful times. Life is good for us whatever the economic situation and whatever Government is in place. However, how often do we express our concerns for children and young people and wonder where they receive their FORMATION today?

With regard to their religious & spiritual formation, school is the only place where most of them have spiritual formation. Preparation for the sacraments of Reconciliation & First Communion takes place in Year 3 when the children are 7/8. In Birmingham Confirmation takes place in Year 6 when the children are 10/11. In between those years and into secondary education only the schools are officially responsible for religious education. Very little happens at home and in most cases nothing happens in the parish unless:

- Families come to Mass and where there is a children's Liturgy
- Where there is a youth Prayer Group.
- Youth Mercy Associates

Where these occur they are blessings in the formation of the future church and indeed for the youth because you and I know that their FAITH will be their greatest Gift in the years ahead.

For many children and young people, however, the greatest influence is our Celebrity Culture and what Facebook and technology bring into their lives in an instant. Along with these is, peer pressure - to have the latest & best! We are also aware of course of the ongoing debate about the sexualisation of children with regard to clothing, adverts, tv programmes before 9pm. It is very difficult to counteract media influences but we need to try.

Two experiences which influenced my ministry over the past year were:

- **Our General Chapter 2010**
- **A Study Day on Vocation at Oscott College, July 2010**

Among the themes reflected on in Chapter were 'Counter Culture' and 'Evangelisation'.

The Day at Oscott College was for School Leaderships and Governors and was about developing a Culture of Vocation in Schools.

What do we mean by 'Counter Culture'? This concerns us as Sisters and Associates but is also a concern for all the Baptised. Are we Sisters & Associates seen to challenge the prevalent cultures of today? Are we proclaiming the counter culture which is the Gospel Culture, the Mercy Culture? It is so easy, isn't it, just to go along with it, thinking we must keep up with the times or just to make comments like 'the youth of today.' We are fortunate to have a role model in Catherine McAuley whose concern was for the poor & those who needed formation.

The day at Oscott College had a great impact on me. Christopher Jamison OSB, the former Abbot at Worth Abbey was one of the speakers. He reminded all Headteachers & Governors that the Government Curriculum for schools is 'Heartless' and that in many Catholic schools Spirituality is 'bolted on' to the curriculum rather than being an integral part of the child's curriculum.

Schools were encouraged to develop a Vocation Culture within the Curriculum. An example of this would be that along with talking to children & young people about a career, schools might also ask children & young people 'What might God be calling you to be or to do? What gifts has He given you which you could develop so as to do something special in life?' In this way we are teaching children & young people that **every** job is a vocation and that it is God who gave us the gifts to enable us to do this job well.

The vocabulary used in schools is an example of the 'heartlessness' of the curriculum - *Targets, strategies, performance management (PM) SATs, goals, framework, scaffolding, hooks*. Teachers are expected to '*hit the targets*'. What is meant of course is that a teachers must make sure they help each child in their class to reach his or her potential in each subject! To be successful a headteacher and staff are now expected to 'drive the school forward' or else...., words of Michael Gove here in Birmingham this week. If you have any dealings with schools listen to the vocabulary and note its 'heartlessness'.

Many newly qualified teachers being interviewed for a post in school today have great difficulty in describing what a Catholic ethos might look like. Words such as 'respect, honesty, good behaviour' come easily to mind but they might need to be prompted to add words like 'prayer, liturgy, Sacraments'. Non-Catholics on the interview panel in my recent experience, expected to hear words like 'God, Jesus' in the answer.

Many of our young Catholic teachers have had no real formation in the Faith. They may go to Mass but they don't have the language or vocabulary of our Faith.

One of the ministries that Sr Maureen & I have had the privilege of doing over the past 4 or 5 years is Retreat Days for School Staff. All schools are now encouraged to have one of their Training Days as a Retreat/Reflection Day. Over the past year we have changed in what we say to & do with these staff which will include teaching assistants & secretaries.


First of all we now have our own very special venue, St Mary's Convent in Handsworth, which as you know was Catherine's last Foundation in 1841. She must surely be delighted to see teachers receiving some formation there so that they can pass it on to the children. We always receive true Mercy hospitality on those days and this too has an influence on staff. The Sisters & staff at St Mary's give time to us and wait on us all at table. This is a great witness to all and is Mercy hospitality indeed in Catherine's house!

Secondly, we have been influenced by our Chapter reflection & discussions especially with regard to Evangelisation and Counter Culture

Thirdly, we are now helping staff to develop a Vocation Culture with the children. We plan to invite School Leaderships to work with their teachers to integrate spirituality into each subject. One school has taken up this challenge.

All schools in our local Cluster are having a Vocations Day this term, some are celebrating a Vocations' Week. Sr Maureen & I have been invited to speak about our Vocation journey in a number of these schools. Each child will receive a card with the following prayer:

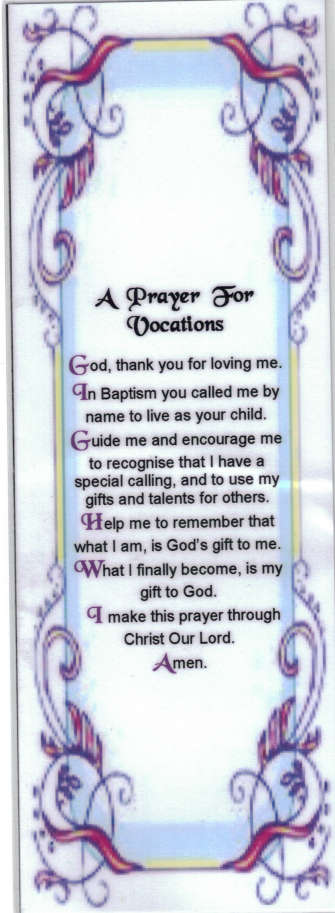
A Prayer For Vocation



Dates of Vocation:

- The Rosary*
Catholic Primary School
28th March
- St. Bernadette's*
Catholic Primary School
28th April
- St. Cuthbert's*
Catholic Primary School
28th May
- St. Gerard's*
Catholic Primary School
8th June
- Our Lady's*
Catholic Primary School
10th June
- Corpus Christi*
Catholic Primary School
13th June
- St. Wilfrid's*
Catholic Primary School
22nd June
- Holy Family*
Catholic Primary School
24th June
- Guardian Angels*
Catholic Primary School
24th June

A PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS
*God, thank you for loving me.
 In Baptism you called me by name
 to live as your child.
 Guide me and encourage me
 to recognise that I have a special
 calling
 and to use my gifts and talents for
 others.
 Help me to remember
 that what I am
 is God's gift to me.
 What I finally become
 is my gift to God.
 I make this prayer
 through Christ our Lord. AMEN.*



A Prayer For Vocations
 God, thank you for loving me.
 In Baptism you called me by name to live as your child.
 Guide me and encourage me to recognise that I have a special calling, and to use my gifts and talents for others.
 Help me to remember that what I am, is God's gift to me.
 What I finally become, is my gift to God.
 I make this prayer through Christ Our Lord.
 Amen.

How can we follow in Catherine's footsteps in her concern for children & young people? Perhaps we can:

- Have conversations in our families about children's access to the internet
- When choosing Godparents & sponsors can you as parents and grandparents support and advise so that these role models are faith-filled? In some families no catholic Godparent or sponsor can be found!
- Can we find the energy and enthusiasm to have Youth Associates or will stay as we are because it is comfortable?
- Can we keep an eye & ear on what the Government is doing in Education....Education Secretaries change so often and each brings about changes. Faith schools get a knock every so often. We might keep that in mind when we vote.
- On the other hand maybe faith schools are not the answer...if they did not exist, the family and Church might wake up to the reality that it is not the schools' responsibility to nurture the FAITH of the children...to teach them, yes...but may be there is a better solution.
- Remember Mary Ann Doyle's quote about Catherine.. Catherine's strong faith and courage urged her to challenge the efforts of the then Government to 'poison the young'
- Let us be active on behalf of our children and young people in whatever way we can
- If we cannot DO anything else we can do the best ministry of all...PRAY for children and young people...because they are the Church of the future, they are the Mercy people of the future, they are, we hope the priests and Sisters of the future and certainly the majority are the parents of the future.

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