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## CATHERINE SPALDING: CO-FOUNDRRESS OF THE SISTERS OF CHARITY OF NAZARETH

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*The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth (SCN) maintain a vibrant presence in ministry in the US. This article presents an overview of their co-foundress, Catherine Spalding, and shows Mother Catherine to be the creative, mission-driven, and articulate leader that is still very much in need in today's society.*

If you all have hearts as devoted to the interests of the Community as mine is, there would truly be but one common interest, and self would be laid aside. – No one should be anxious to appear as having done more, nor others less. Our Community must be the centre from which all our good works must emanate and in the name of the Community all must be done. – Then let none of us be ambitious as to who does more or who does less. God will judge it all hereafter. (C. Spalding, personal correspondence, January 9, 1855)

### INTRODUCTION

Catherine Spalding, considered co-foundress of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth with Bishop John Baptist David, wrote many letters during her life as a sister, and the community cherishes those which survive. The above quote from a letter written to an unnamed sister describes the essence of Catherine Spalding's philosophy of all mission – that religious community must be the source of all ministry. As women entered religious life in response to a call from God and a desire to live that response in community, the community responds to the call of mission and sends the religious sister to serve in the community's name. A more modern version of Mother Catherine's beliefs is found in a statement popular among late 20th century community members: "Wherever one S.C.N. is, there is the whole community."

Mother Catherine Spalding was born in Charles County, Maryland, on December 23, 1793. At the age of 3, Catherine and her family moved to Kentucky; her mother died shortly afterwards and her father, Edward, soon remarried. Unfortunately, Edward made some very poor decisions, which

exhausted his resources as well as those of some family members who had pledged their possessions as surety for his debts; whether from despair or disappointment, he abandoned the family. Catherine's uncle, Thomas Elder, and his wife brought Catherine to Maryland and reared her with their own children (Doyle, in press). Her early losses surely prepared Catherine for the lifetime passion and devotion she displayed to the care and education of orphans, as well as to so many other areas of human need.

Catherine's uncle accompanied her back to Kentucky in January of 1813 when she came in response to an invitation to be part of a new religious community. That year the bishop of the new diocese of Bardstown, Kentucky, established in 1808, Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget along with Father John Baptist David had realized that there was a tremendous need for persons to offer various assistance, but particularly education to the thousand plus Catholic families and their children who had moved to Kentucky from Maryland after the Revolutionary War. Corcoran (1996) writing about Mother Catherine in a monograph on the educational ministry of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, offers this insight into both the need and the role of the two clerics:

These highly educated Sulpicians [Flaget and David] were already training the seminarians who had accompanied them [to Kentucky from Maryland], but they also recognized the need for schools to instruct the children of pioneer Catholic settlers near Bardstown, the See city of their new diocese. The problem lay in finding women "who would be sent" to teach these children. No doubt, the success of the school opened by Elizabeth Seton on Paca Street, Baltimore, in September 1808, had reaffirmed the viability of Catholic schools in the United States. The religious community, which evolved from this foundation, the Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg [the first American religious community of women], provided a model that these missionaries to Kentucky hoped to replicate in "the West." (p. 2)

The reader should note that the common or public school as it is known today dates from around 1840, well after religious communities had begun schools in the United States. Education was a scarce commodity; scarce for males, but almost non-existent for females. Wealthy families often employed private tutors; the only other options were schools sponsored by institutions of religion. Harvard University, for example, traces its roots to a 1607 school sponsored by a religious denomination. Females were virtually never allowed to attend any schools that males attended. Prevailing opinion held that women needed to learn household management and useful skills, such as sewing, needlepoint, cooking, playing musical instruments, and etiquette.

## THE BEGINNING OF A COMMUNITY

Father David sought advice and help from Father Bruté – advisor to Mother Elizabeth Seton, foundress of the first American religious community of women, the Daughters of Charity – in beginning a community of women that would educate girls and young women on the Kentucky frontier (Doyle, in press). In 1812, in response to the new diocese’s needs, Father David asked for volunteers to begin a religious order to serve the pioneers in Kentucky. Catherine, at the age of 19, was the third of the first three young women to respond, and together they constituted a community that was to become the third American community of religious women, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, on the grounds of St. Thomas Farm in Nelson County, Kentucky, which had been bequeathed to two priests and the diocesan bishop. Teresa Carrico, aged 24, was the first to arrive and is often considered the heart of the community; it is believed that Teresa had very little education and apparently no aptitude for teaching, but her farming, cooking, and housekeeping skills enabled the community to thrive. Teresa’s holiness is legendary and her prayers sustained the whole community, especially Catherine in her leadership. Doyle writes, “These [skills] combined with a depth of spirituality to make her the lifelong heart of the community life and ministry at Nazareth” (Doyle, in press). It was Teresa’s prayers that are considered the foundation of every school and every ministry begun during her lifetime. The second member was Elizabeth Wells, aged 36, who left the fledgling community within 2 years of Catherine’s election as the first Mother Superior.

Who was Mother Catherine Spalding? Who was the teenager who arrived to join Bishop David’s group on a cold January day so long ago in Kentucky? Why had she come and what did she find? Doyle offers a sketch gleaned from the early annals of the sisters, community legend, and the writings of Catherine’s contemporaries:

What she had come to do was to give herself to a new religious enterprise, to be the third woman forming a convent, a much-desired goal of the bishop of the new diocese of Bardstown. Almost everything, perhaps, was new to her that day: the scene at St. Thomas, the companions who had preceded her, the clerics who would guide her and shape the enterprise, the teaching mission she expected to undertake, and the dire poverty she would endure in this beginning. Not new to her were the winter cold and hard physical work, nor the warmth of personal affection and white heat of purpose with which she would give herself to this new community and its mission. Nor were the qualities requisite for group leadership new in her character; her new companions would soon recognize and affirm those traits formed in her girlhood.

Ingrained and familiar above all on that first day of her new life were commitment to an ancient faith, bedrock convictions, and a spirit of pioneering, of readiness to sacrifice so as to pass on the fruits of that faith. (in press)

Father David had not encouraged the wintertime arrival of the three women because he knew well the privations of a Kentucky winter, the little food that would be available, the wind and the cold, as well as the primitive shelter. But the women had begged to come rather than wait for the spring and more favorable weather. When Betsy Wells and Teresa Carrico arrived, they had lived a simple life of poverty, prayer, and service. The arrival of Catherine prompted David to decide that the little group was now ready for a rule of life.

Because the Reverend (later Bishop) Jean-Baptiste Marie David, the priest who encouraged the women to form a Community, had come originally from France, he was familiar with the rule and spirit of St. Vincent de Paul. In fact, David had already seen this way of life interpreted by American women in Emmitsburg, Maryland, where Elizabeth Seton had founded the first American religious Community. On the very day that Catherine Spalding arrived at St. Thomas Farm, Father David gave the Sisters his handwritten copy of St. Vincent de Paul's rule as it was lived in Emmitsburg. (Doyle, in press)

Often Sisters of Charity of Nazareth are asked, "Are you a teaching or a nursing order?" The answer is "Both and more." Certainly one of the primary reasons for the founding of the community was education, but from its very beginnings, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth have considered themselves pioneers, like the early settlers they were sent to serve, and have endeavored, as several versions of their constitutions have stated, to meet the needs of the times. The first sentence of the Rule of St. Vincent de Paul as adapted for the Emmitsburg Sisters and given to then Father David by Mother Seton reads:

The object of the Institute of the Sisters of Charity in America, according to the plan laid down by St. Vincent de Paul, being first to honour Our Lord Jesus Christ, the source and model of all charity, by rendering to Him every temporal and spiritual service in their power in the person of the poor, either sick, children, prisoners, and others...the care of the poor of all descriptions and ages, the sick, prisoners, invalids, foundlings, orphans and even the insane in hospitals and private homes. (Sisters of Charity, n.d.)

## EDUCATING WOMEN

Mother Catherine and the early sisters were educational pioneers; clearly Father David wished to offer education to young females who had no educational opportunities in the Kentucky frontier and were not permitted to attend school with males. While committed to that goal of Father David's, the sisters nonetheless developed and instilled in new members a sense of obligation to meet whatever need presented itself. In effect, whether nursing, taking care of widows, orphans, and the aged, protesting unjust treatment of peoples, visiting prisoners, writing or speaking, the sisters were and are educators. For is there not in every area of service, some kind of education going on, even if it is simply the example of one's life and presence?

Initially, sisters did domestic and farm work, cared for the priests and seminarians, visited and served the sick, and responded to whatever needs were presented to them. Father David asked Mother Elizabeth Seton of the Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg, to send sisters to train the members of the new community, but as she was either unwilling or unable to send sisters, he undertook the religious formation of the new community himself. Although the community was without European ties, Father David formed the community in the spirit of the rule of St. Vincent de Paul, especially as lived by the Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg who did send a handwritten copy of their rule to David to share with the sisters. Two years later in 1814 when the first school was opened, portions of that rule must certainly have been kept in mind:

In the United States education will be extended to female children in whatever station of life they may be, for which the Sisters shall receive a sufficient compensation out of which they will endeavor to save as much as they can to educate, also gratis, poor orphan children. (Sisters of Charity, n.d.)

In 1813, the 19-year-old Catherine was elected first superior of the new community that then numbered six women. Evidence suggests that the sisters did some teaching almost from the very beginning, but in 1814, the sisters began their first formal educational work when they opened a one-room schoolhouse, Nazareth Academy, at St. Thomas in Nelson County, Kentucky. Cecilia O'Bryan was the first day scholar. Eventually, paying boarders, non-paying boarders, and resident orphans would also comprise the student community. The little school was on its way to becoming a school of distinction.

McGill (1917) states, "In July [1825], the first public examination was held. The Fathers took pleasure in going from St. Joseph's College [in Bardstown] to question the young students and Henry Clay presented the diplomas" (p. 42).

Education of students by the sisters was thus limited to girls, in accordance with the practice of the times. From the establishment of the earliest schools until more current times, the sisters gave financial aid to those in need. Indeed, it may seem that some schools were established to meet the needs of the orphans housed with the sisters, while students whose parents had means would help support the school. No one ever got a completely free ride as documents indicate that everyone was expected to do some chore. Resident orphans assisted with housekeeping, although Mother Catherine and other superiors insisted that education take precedence over any labor.

Eventually, in 1843, Mother Catherine opened the first free school in Louisville; thereafter the sisters opened a free school whenever they began an academy. The sisters never viewed education as something available only to those who were able to pay for it. Indeed, as surviving letters from paying parents attest, some expected Mother Catherine and the sisters to give services far above educational ones, to provide favored treatment to their daughters, to provide extra food and luxuries. In more than a few cases, paying parents refused to pay, denied responsibility for payment, or offered unacceptable barter type arrangements such as an interest in property.

There is no doubt that Mother Catherine was an intelligent, astute individual and leader. Father David, himself well-educated, added the teacher training of the community to his duties in spiritual direction and formation of the sisters. He had earnestly requested that the Emmitsburg community send at least one sister to train the Kentucky Sisters of Charity for the tasks of teaching, and even had a particular sister whom he deemed well suited for the task in mind. His request was denied. Doyle writes: "He could not have her, but Providence was about to supply another woman who would become a one-woman normal school and the mainstay of the educational ministry for the next twenty years" (in press). In 1814, that woman arrived in the person of Ellen O'Connell, a trained teacher and daughter of a renowned professor in Baltimore, who gave the community the educational leader it needed to direct the establishment of a school, its curriculum, horarium, and the training of its teachers. Mother Catherine's humility, common sense, and desire to meet the educational needs of Kentucky pioneer children made her only too happy to entrust the welfare of the school to Sister Ellen, literally only a few months after her arrival. Ever dedicated to meeting the needs of the times, Catherine allowed Sister Ellen, new to the community and having only just begun her own religious formation as a sister, to begin the school. Sister Ellen also assumed the responsibilities that had previously fallen to Father David, of teaching the sisters the subject matter they needed to know as well as methods of teaching the various com-

ponents of the curricula. Doyle notes: “Ellen brought to Catherine a validation of her faith that a mission of teaching really could develop in rural Kentucky through the Sisters, the eighteen months of hardship and constant manual labor would finally bear fruit” (in press). Motherhouse archives reveal that the school’s first teachers were Sister Ellen, Sister Harriet Gardiner, and Mother Catherine, who to the end of her life was involved in virtually every work of the community.

With great skill and enormous faith, Sister Ellen prepared to reopen the school. In less than 3 months, the school began again on August 23, 1814, which is considered the official beginning date of Nazareth Academy. At first, like any new enterprise, parents may have viewed the school somewhat skeptically, and the sisters struggled with having only a very small number of students. Within a short time, however, both enrollment and the reputation of the school and the sister-educators grew. The distance most students had to travel made commuting unrealistic and so the school became primarily a boarding school.

After building and establishing the school, the sisters learned that a deed restriction prohibited them from purchasing the property containing their home and school. Mother Catherine blamed herself for not researching the situation further before commencing building, but even David and Flaget were not aware that the property could never be sold. Doyle writes, “The community Annals record tersely that ‘the blow fell upon her as the most dire calamity she had ever known’” (in press). Mother Catherine’s life exemplifies a spirit of learning through all situations; her trust in God even in the most discouraging circumstances strengthened her faith and prayer life. Although the inability to buy the property was a devastating blow to the young community, after much prayer and consultation, they became aware of some property a few miles north of St. Thomas that a Protestant minister, Reverend Joseph Lapsley, was selling. The sisters moved from their original location to the present site of their motherhouse, two miles north of Bardstown. The new property was purchased with the dowry of Ann O’Connor, later Sister Scholastica O’Connor, a wealthy widow who had entered the congregation. In addition, Sister Scholastica brought furniture and other items that helped to furnish the school and convent, some of which are still cherished to this day.

## COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL CONCERNS

Sister Scholastica lived only a few years after entering the community, but she is credited with beginning the SCN music education program. A gifted musician in her own right, Sister Scholastica developed a curriculum; private music lessons were also made available to the delight of many parents who

considered knowledge of music and the ability to play or sing as essential qualities for a refined, educated young woman. Music remained an important part of the curriculum in all SCN schools throughout the years. Sister Scholastica also began the art program. Mother Catherine gave her strong support to both the sister-teachers and the students.

By 1826, the school had 100 boarders and numerous day students. Motherhouse archives contain many records from the earliest days. During that time period, the curriculum consisted of reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, plain sewing, grammar, composition, history and geography, logic, rhetoric and natural philosophy, ornamental needle work, embroidery and tapestry, drawing and painting, French, Latin, music, and politeness (*Clippings for Annals*, 1826-1849). By any standards and certainly by modern norms, it was a formidable course of studies. Thus, from the very beginning, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth sought to develop students who not only knew the three Rs, but also had an appreciation for those areas of study that nourish the soul and spirit as well as the mind.

In 1816, Mother Catherine's own sister, Ann, entered the community which gave her special joy. Years later, Ann's death at the hands of a slave gave Catherine the opportunity to practice a forgiveness she could never have anticipated and to educate the community and all who observed her in what it means to forgive. Like many Southern communities, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth owned slaves. Some, refusing to be separated from their mistresses, had accompanied women who entered the order. Some were part of the dowries of candidates. In the year 2000, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth joined with their neighbors, the Dominican Sisters and the Sisters of Loretto, in a ceremony asking forgiveness from the descendants of some of those held as slaves. While it is very hard to accept the reality that a religious community held slaves, it must also be stated, not as an excuse but as an aid in understanding, that in the 1800s the Catholic Church supported the concept of slavery.

Although the exact details are sketchy, it is believed that Sister Ann Spalding was given a young female slave by her master after Sister Ann witnessed and protested an overseer's beating of the young woman who had apparently not known much, if any, kindness or understanding in her life. Sister Ann endeavored to bring both affection and healthy discipline to the young woman. Apparently angry over being corrected, she poisoned Sister Ann who on her deathbed forgave her. When Mother Catherine was notified, she responded in writing,

Sister Ann was right...[the girl] must be shielded at all costs. If you decide not to keep her, send her to me. I will be good to her for she gave Ann the chance

to prove herself a good Christian. I am blessed to have a saint for a sister. (as cited in Spillane, 1968, pp. 222-223)

In 1819, Mother Catherine's first term as superior ended, 6 years after her election. Despite the encouragement of David and her sisters that she accept the designation and responsibilities of "Mother" for life as some superiors in other communities had done, Mother Catherine stated that God's will would be better glorified by the keeping of the rule than by her being Mother for life. Thus, every 6 years she was re-elected Mother. In 1819, she was made Mistress of Novices and directed much of the education of the young women who would then become teachers. That same year, Bethlehem Academy, in Bardstown, Kentucky, opened and has been in continuous operation since that time; today the Archdiocese of Louisville owns and operates it as a co-educational institution in which Sisters of Charity have served in an unbroken line. St. Vincent Academy in western Kentucky opened the following year in 1820.

In 1823, Mother Catherine was sent to Scott County, Kentucky, to open a school bearing her name. A little over a year later, her successor died in office, and Mother Catherine was chosen to complete the unfinished term. Although Mother Catherine would have been glad to stay with her orphans and students, community leadership with its attendant demands seemed to claim many of her years. Her natural gift of intelligence aided her in developing business and management abilities which were sorely needed as the community and its ministries expanded.

By 1828 and probably earlier, the elderly were living at Nazareth – persons who had no other place to go – and they were a valued part of the Nazareth community. Some paid for their room and board, although it is believed that Mother Catherine agreed to arrangements less than strictly fair to the community for the sake of the persons in need. And so, care of the elderly became part of the sisters' ministries. The students saw this inclusiveness and no doubt living in such close proximity to the elderly and witnessing the sisters' devotion to and care of them, was a valuable education in the sacredness of all life for them. Mother Catherine must have viewed practically every circumstance as a teachable moment for someone.

Additionally, the sisters from very early days were engaged in what would be called special education today. The story of Polly Bullitt survives. Polly was considered to be a "not quite right" individual whose parents had left a great deal of money for her care. Mother Catherine agreed to offer Polly a home and education. Upon Polly's death, relatives challenging her will questioned her soundness of mind. In the subsequent litigation, Mother Catherine was a star witness. Polly's wishes were upheld and Mother

Catherine demonstrated that one could be unable to learn at a so-called normal pace and yet be competent to take one's place in the world and manage one's own affairs (Doyle, in press).

In 1831, Mother Catherine opened Presentation Academy, the first Catholic school in Louisville at the site of St. Louis Church, now the location of the present Cathedral of the Assumption. Presentation is the oldest existing school in Louisville. One reason for opening the school seems to have been the presence of a public school in the immediate vicinity. Given the sisters' reputation as teachers, it is not surprising that Catholics and non-Catholics enrolled in the school.

In 1832, classes were suspended so that the sisters who volunteered to nurse victims of the cholera epidemic in the city could do so. The generosity of the sisters, some of whom died of cholera themselves, is remembered to this day, although an incident involving the mayor of Louisville shortly after the epidemic seems to indicate a lack of regard for the presence of the sisters and the risk of their lives. Mother Catherine had agreed that the sisters would provide services at no charge to the cholera victims; the only stipulation was that their expenses be reimbursed by the city. The amount of \$75 was eventually paid to the community as reimbursement for expenses incurred. A Protestant minister alleged from his pulpit, however, that the sisters had been paid for their services, a charge to which Mother Catherine responded in a letter which gives great insight into her character and remains one of the community's most treasured items:

To the Mayor and Council of the city of Louisville:

Gentlemen: At that gloomy period when the cholera threatened to lay our city desolate, and nurses for the sick poor could not be obtained on any terms, Rev[erend] Mr. Abell, in the name of the Society of which I have the honor to be a member, proffered the gratuitous services of as many of our Sisters as might be necessary in the existing distress: requiring merely that their expenses should be paid. - This offer was accepted as the order from your honorable board, inviting the Sisters, will now show. - But when the money was ordered from your Treasury to defray those expenses, I had the mortification to remark that instead of saying "the expenses of the Sisters of Charity," the word services was substituted. - I immediately remonstrated against it, - & even mentioned the circumstances to the Mayor and another gentleman of the Council. - and upon being promised that the error should be corrected, I remained satisfied that it had been attended to; until a late assertion from one of the pulpits of the city leads me to believe that it stands yet uncorrected on your books; as these same books were referred to in proof of the assertion. - If so, Gentlemen, pardon the liberty I take in refunding you the amt. paid for the above named expenses. Well convinced that our Community for whom I have acted in this case, would far prefer incurring the expense themselves rather than submit to

so unjust an odium. - -

Gentlemen, be pleased to understand that we are not hirelings. - & if we are in practice the Servants of the poor, the sick, and the orphan, - we are voluntarily so. But we look for our reward in another and better World.

With sincere respect, Gentlemen. Your obt. Sert. Catherine Spalding, Sister of Charity (\$75.----). (C. Spalding, personal correspondence, February 10, 1831)

The Mayor eventually apologized, had the error corrected, and returned the \$75. Nonetheless, in the writing of her letter and with the return of the \$75 – a very large sum of money at that time, some of which she had to borrow – Mother Catherine established that the sisters give services freely and those services are not for sale.

## CONCLUSION

Under the leadership of Mother Catherine, the sisters continued to respond to the needs of the pioneers and the early settlers, whatever they were, and did not restrict their ministry to education, nursing, or any one type or types of ministry. The cholera and other occurrences left many children orphaned and so the sisters opened St. Vincent Orphanage in Louisville. For many years, the orphanage also doubled as a school for the children who lived there.

Mother Catherine was a familiar sight walking the streets of Louisville, often with several orphans in tow. Whenever she heard of a family in crisis, she would walk to wherever they were. If persons were sick, she nursed them; if despondent, she comforted them. If she found children who had no parents or parents unable to care for them, she simply brought them home with her to become part of the family, as she referred to all who lived within the orphanage. For many orphans, Mother Catherine would be the only mother they ever knew.

No doubt for these reasons, Mother Catherine has been called the founder of social work in Kentucky. Additionally, the need for nursing care prompted the sisters to open St. Joseph Infirmary in Louisville.

In addition to Nazareth Academy, the Motherhouse Campus was home to Nazareth Junior College, which opened in 1921, and a 4-year-college which opened in 1938. In 1920, a 4-year college was opened in Louisville and the two campuses were merged in 1969. Today, the Louisville campus, now a university, is called Spalding University, and through its mission, devotes itself and its programs to acting in the spirit of Mother Catherine Spalding, a true Kentucky pioneer who met the needs of the times, whatever they were, and refused to be limited to a single ministry.

Nazareth Academy in Bardstown, which closed in 1966, and Presentation Academy in Louisville were the first two schools established under Mother Catherine's leadership. The community's schools would eventually be found in many states including Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Tennessee. In 1947, the sisters were asked to go to India. During the discussion among congregational leaders, one sister stated, "If Mother Catherine were here, she would go." The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth have ministered in schools, hospitals, orphanages, and other endeavors in India ever since. In 1979, one SCN began a ministry forming adult lay leaders and catechists in the country of Belize, a ministry that flourishes to this day and has also resulted in a number of vocations to the community. In 1999, the sisters began ministry in Botswana, Africa, initially to help with the overwhelming needs presented by the AIDS crisis; today, the sisters also are involved in formal education in schools.

From 1831 until her death on March 20, 1858, hastened by an illness brought on from walking a distance in inclement weather to care for a sick man, Catherine Spalding worked either at St. Vincent Orphanage or at Nazareth as Superior of the Community (Doyle, in press). Mother Catherine Spalding's life was dedicated to fulfilling the motto of the Congregation, *Caritas Christi Urget Nos*, "the charity of Christ impels us." Mother Catherine Spalding, her daughters in community believe, was the best kind of educator – one who learned from and taught lessons in all the circumstances of life.

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