

Catherine McAuley's Methods of Leadership Development



Spiritual leadership involves at least three efforts on the part of a religious or ecclesial leader:

- the *energizing* of a group around a worthwhile common purpose;
- the constant *evoking* of that new vision and dedication to that common purpose;

- and the daily *nurturing* of other leaders - the great “followers,” if you will, of the original leader of their common purpose.

If leadership does not foster future leaders, it will not be lasting leadership such as we see in Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, it will lack the energizing passion and empowerment that lead to ongoing commitment to a common purpose that is enduring and valuable in itself.

To speak of Catherine McAuley’s methods of leadership development is to speak of attitudes and behaviors in her that do not sound like “methods” at all. You will not find them listed in any books on leadership development - except the most wise and thoughtful, whose authors understand how groups of good people are moved toward ends greater than themselves.

But here is my short list of Catherine McAuley’s methods of leadership development:

1. her own good example
2. her spoken and written words
3. her affection and love
4. her purity of intention
5. her willingness to initiate, to venture into the unknown
6. her trust in others’ capacity to grow and develop
7. her emphasis on the community and its common purpose

8. her cheerfulness, sense of humor, and self-effacement

By these means Catherine nurtured the leadership of all the first Sisters of Mercy. From them, mostly young and relatively few though they were, have come all the works of mercy of all the congregations of the Sisters of Mercy in the world today, on many islands and nearly every continent.

Good Example

Catherine was convinced that we learn more by example than by precept or words, and that if we wish to *teach* something to others we must first *do* it ourselves. She felt strongly that this was the primary way that Jesus led his followers, and leads us. The four gospels are filled with the example of Jesus and with invitations to follow him. As she says in her “Spirit of the Institute” essay, “we should do first what we would induce others to do.”^[1] That kind of leadership inspires and animates, guides and teaches in a lasting way.

Catherine did not say “Follow me.” She said, “[Bear] some resemblance to our Dear Redeemer”—“Be fashioned on His own model.”^[2] In her *Practical Sayings* compiled by Mary Clare Moore, Catherine says that Jesus “said and did” what he said and did, not that we should simply talk about it, but that we should “show Him in our lives, in our daily practice.”^[3] Therefore she taught the first Sisters of Mercy how to humbly and gently care for the sick by the way she did this herself - at Baggot Street and in the hovels of the poor. She taught them how to befriend little orphaned children by the tender way she did this herself. She inspired and encouraged her sisters by her own care for the barefoot girls in the Baggot Street school, her own welcoming of homeless servant women, her own generosity and self-denial, and her own long, difficult travels to establish new works of mercy. She did not just organize the ministry of others; she rolled up her sleeves (perhaps literally) and did that ministry herself

Spoken and Written Words

Catherine also developed the spiritual leadership of the first sisters by her spoken and written words. She recognized, in herself and in those she led, the need for ongoing

learning, and she was willing to give time and attention to it. The Rule she composed, her “Spirit of the Institute” essay, her letters, and the biographical manuscripts written by her immediate contemporaries are all filled with her words of animating instruction, written and spoken. By these verbal means she constantly sought to form Mercy women and communities who would be future leaders, who would endure, zealously and faithfully, and who would continue to be, with God’s help, some of the “fire Christ cast upon the earth—kindling.”[\[4\]](#)

This was leadership development in Mercy spirituality and Mercy mission. And the earliest Sisters of Mercy seem never to have forgotten Catherine’s encouraging, energizing words, as their own lives, writings, and future leadership show.

Affection and Love

Probably the most effective, though un-programmed, feature of Catherine’s leadership development efforts was simply her affection and love for those she led. Certainly in Catherine this was not contrived. It was, I believe, a key aspect of her charism, her gift from God as our first leader.

Catherine truly loved the first Sisters of Mercy and often told them so. They *knew* she loved them, individually and as a group. Her letters to them are filled with expressions like “my best love to all” and “my most affectionate love.”[\[5\]](#) She calls herself “always your fondly attached M. C. McAuley,” “your ever most affectionate M. C. McAuley,” “your old comrade,” and “your own old affectionate M. C. McAuley.”[\[6\]](#) Ursula Frayne is “my own dearest child,” Frances Warde is “my dearest old child,” Clare Moore is “our beloved old companion,” and the postulant Anna Maria Harnett is “my dearest darling youngest daughter.”[\[7\]](#)

Catherine’s love for her sisters was genuine and enabling. It was the love and affection she described in the chapter on “Union and Charity” in the Mercy Rule she composed:

This [mutual union and love] they should study to maintain and cherish so perfectly amongst themselves as to live together as if they had but one heart and one soul in God. This love for one another should be such as to emulate the love and union of the Blessed in Heaven. [\[8\]](#)

Modern analysts of leadership come close to naming Catherine's gift for affectionate leadership, though in different words. Warren Bennis says of good leadership and its effects: "People feel significant. Everyone feels that . . . she makes a difference to the success of the organization," that they "are part of a community . . . a family, a unity" and that "what they do has meaning and significance."[\[9\]](#)

Purity of Intention

Having and showing genuine love for those one leads was not, in Catherine's view, a dispensable trait in a religious leader. Moreover, it was, for her, intimately related to another of her leadership qualities: her single-minded purity of intention.

For Catherine, there was only one thing necessary: pure-hearted devotion to the will of God on human behalf, that is, to the mission of God revealed in and by Jesus Christ. Nothing else mattered except in relation to this overriding and merciful purpose. As she said in the Rule she composed for the Sisters of Mercy: "God and God alone must be the principal motive of all their actions."[\[10\]](#) Everything else was subordinate to that—what they had to eat, whether or not she had a bed, whether or not she or they were understood or misunderstood by clergy or others.

Such purity of intention called for great humility before the will of God. Figuring out "God's will" in a given situation was rarely an easy discernment for Catherine. God's will was not all black and white, with neon lights flashing around it. Most of the time God called her through gray circumstances, and she could only pray and trust that God was leading her and her sisters, and that God was doing God's work in her and in them, noiselessly but unfailingly. She could only try to keep her grasp on the central word of the Gospel and on those the Gospel called her to serve, at whatever the cost to herself. This required great integrity and honesty with herself.

Willingness to Initiate

Catherine's purity of heart blossomed into another of her great leadership qualities: her willingness to initiate, to go beyond the status quo, to venture into the unknown, for the sake of God's poor and suffering people.

In the years 1836 to 1841, Catherine went, sight unseen, to Tullamore, Charleville,

Cork, Carlow, Limerick, London, Galway, Birr, and Birmingham—with women she could little afford to lose from Baggot Street, all of whom had volunteered to go. Several places promised only a small house to live in, with no regular income, but this did not stop her merciful outreach.

Earlier, when the community numbered only ten members in 1832, and when they were already running a poor school and a shelter, Catherine, along with her sisters, volunteered their daily help at the cholera hospital on Townsend Street during the epidemic in Dublin. This work lasted seven months. Catherine later started a public laundry at Baggot Street, as a means to support the House of Mercy, even though she knew very little about running a commercial laundry.

In 1835 she started a poor school in Kingstown with what turned out to be an unfulfilled financial promise on the part of the parish priest. For Catherine and the early Mercy community, voluntary material poverty and great simplicity of lifestyle were thus not simply religious ideals, but genuine necessities—if the community was to extend the works of mercy to more and more people in desperate need of material and spiritual help. When she said, “God knows I would rather be cold and hungry than the poor in Kingstown or elsewhere should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford”—she *meant* it.[\[11\]](#)

Charles Cavanagh, Catherine’s always helpful volunteer attorney and financial accountant, apparently never made, or urged her to make, risk-avoidance a priority. When she said in 1841, “We have ever confided largely in Divine Providence—and shall continue to do so,” she meant this, not just in a spiritual sense, but in a purely economic sense as well.[\[12\]](#)

Yet Catherine was always willing to try new things: to hold public Bazaars and Charity Sermons to raise money for food and shelter for the sick poor; to add all-day employment training for the women sheltered in the House of Mercy; to affiliate with the government system of national schools if that would provide books and other supplies for the poor girls in the Baggot Street school; to start a pension (tuition-paying) school at Baggot Street (which incidentally failed miserably); and to go into city hospitals to visit poor, sick Catholics—hospitals where Catholic ministers were generally not welcome.

Thus Catherine’s leadership was creative and responsive to new needs, not wedded to “what-we-did-yesterday” — and this, even at the cost of great self-sacrifice. By the

example of her own life, Catherine taught the first Sisters of Mercy to be open to new solutions to old problems, to prioritize human needs above possible risks, and to not be afraid to initiate.

Trust in Others' Capacity to Grow

Catherine knew our initial instinct “to put our candles under a bushel,” but she did not think this was a merciful posture.[\[13\]](#) So her whole method as a leader was patiently to encourage her companions' growth and development as leaders themselves, and to enlarge the space for their own initiative and creativity.

The superiors Catherine took to the new foundations were almost always timid and faint-hearted at first. Mary Ann Doyle was “retiring” and “could not bear to see strangers.”[\[14\]](#) Angela Dunne was older than the rest, and circumstances in Charleville were so unfavorable at first that she was tempted to disband the community. In Cork, in July 1837, Clare Moore, only twenty-three at the time, was “full of fears and doubts.”[\[15\]](#) In October, Catherine said of her: “She continues extremely timid and will not appear without me on the most trifling occasion—to visitors, etc., etc. She promises to overcome this.”[\[16\]](#) And overcome it she did, in spectacular ways, especially as superior in Bermondsey for most of thirty-five hard years.

Similarly, in Limerick, Elizabeth Moore was fearful. As Catherine confided in 1838:

We never sent forward such a faint-hearted soldier, now that she is in the field. She will do all interior & exterior work [for instance, mop floors or visit the sick and dying], but to meet on business—confer with the Bishop—conclude with a [new] Sister—you might as well send the child that opens the door. . . . She gets white as death—and her eyes like fever. She is greatly liked—and when the alarms are a little over, and a few in the House, I expect all will go on well.[\[17\]](#)

Even in Birmingham, Juliana Hardman was, at first, very reluctant to be superior. But Catherine felt “great consolation” in that choice, even though, as she told Juliana, the “only thing that embitters it a little is the recollection that it gave pain to you.”[\[18\]](#)

Catherine's method was always to appoint women whom she knew to be fundamentally the best-qualified, to believe in their capacity to grow and develop, and then patiently to assist that development—by her affection and advice, her supportive presence when possible, her encouraging letters, and her gratitude and praise for what they were accomplishing.

Sisters of Mercy are fond of remembering that Catherine frequently said: “Be careful not to make too many laws, for if you draw the string too tight it will break.”^[19] The whole point of her unwillingness “to give many positive directions about any duty,” except those in the Rule, was her desire to leave open space for her sisters' own zeal, initiative, and leadership. Their future as Mercy leaders would need their ability to see new needs, to be alert to new calls of God, and to have the courage and confidence to embrace new opportunities for acting mercifully.

Emphasis on the Community and its Common Purpose

Catherine's seventh method of leadership development was intimately related to all the rest of her methods: she constantly put before the first Sisters of Mercy the overarching, communal purpose of the congregation.

In Catherine's view, the Sisters of Mercy were *together* engaged in the great and dual purpose of yielding to the union with God that God desired to create in them, and of collaborating in the works of mercifulness that God asked of them and would accomplish through them. It was not Catherine's work, or theirs individually, in its origin or achievement. It was God's work, and as she repeatedly said: “If we are humble and sincere, God will finish in us the work God has begun.”^[20]

Catherine taught the early sisters that the two works of God in them—their union with God and their works of mercy—were “so linked together by our rule . . . that they reciprocally help each other.”^[21] That is, the holiness God wished to create in them would shape and guide their works of mercy, and the works of mercy themselves would nurture the holiness God wished to create in them.

By her spoken and written words, her example, and her prayer, Catherine tried to lead the first sisters to this understanding of their two-fold communal purpose, their

common vocation as Sisters of Mercy that was greater than the life or efforts of any one of them individually. It was God's "design," totally dependent on God's "guidance."^[22] Her own role was simply to constantly energize them around this common purpose.

Cheerfulness and Self-Effacement

For Catherine, cheerfulness was the effect of conscious gratitude to God, and thankful acknowledgment of God's gifts and promises. She felt that when we mope around, appear gloomy, and present ourselves as cross-draggers and dismal burden-carriers, we have lost sight of the gifts of God in ourselves and others and can then be of little help to one another.

For Catherine, the great task of leadership was to animate others to be leaders, and to show them the joy of zealous leadership. For this, her own cheerfulness was needed if she wished to enliven, and invigorate other leaders.

Catherine's cheerfulness was deeply related to her humility and self-effacement and to her own serenity and peace before the present gifts and future promises of God. It was not a superficial display, but a deep conviction of faith which she tried to share with the first Sisters of Mercy — to help them, too, to grasp this precious gift of the Spirit of God, this fruit of God's presence and love.

So in countless ways Catherine contributed to the happiness of the first Sisters—by her amusing remarks and anecdotes, her playful poems, her innocent teasing and mimicking, her proposing "nonsensical clubs" (in the novitiate, no less!), her singing humorous songs, and her cheerful, even joking acceptance of numerous inconveniences. There are, of course, many other ways of encouraging the happiness of those one leads, but they all require that one find deep within herself the faith, love, and gratitude that are the wellsprings of true joy.

Conclusion

In the end, any leader who is committed to developing the leadership capacity of others, of those who will come after her, must make a conscious decision to gradually diminish her own role and influence. This quiet retreat to the sidelines enlarges even

more the space for future leaders. It does not have to be dramatic or “announced.” It just has to be loving and cheerful, and fully trusting in those whose leadership ability one has long sought to develop.

That Catherine McAuley consciously entered this final phase of her leadership is clearly evident in the last months of her life. In the end, the culmination of all her leadership development efforts can be seen in her simple, trusting response to a question put to her on her deathbed. When she was “asked to name the Sister whom she would like to succeed her, she simply answered, ‘The Constitutions give the Sisters liberty of choosing for themselves, and I will not interfere.’ ”[\[23\]](#)

Remarkable signs of the fruitfulness of Catherine’s leadership development efforts can be seen in the lives, works, and worldwide spread of the Sisters of Mercy.... Catherine’s guidance, often by her own wordless example and her loving, patient trust, let these women become the Mercy Leaders God wished them to be. Today we can have little doubt that somewhere in the full embrace of God’s great Mercy, she is now gathered with them, still smiling, and once again saying to all the rest of us:[\[24\]](#)

I am delighted to find you are so happy - you never will be otherwise while the spirit of your religious vocation animates your actions.... As I am certain this is the course you follow, happiness must await you - even when you have much to deplore and many charges to make against yourself.... All unite in affectionate love to you.... Pray for me, your old comrade....

*Your ever affectionate,
M. C. McAuley*

Notes

[\[1\]](#) Mary C. Sullivan, ed., *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 463. Hereafter cited as *CCMcA*.

[\[2\]](#) *CCMcA*, 385, 390.

[\[3\]](#) Mary Clare Moore, comp., *The Practical Sayings . . . of Catherine McAuley* (London: Burns, Oates, 1868). Reprint edition: Mary C. Sullivan, ed. (Rochester,

NY: Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 2010), 25. Hereafter cited as *PS*.

[4] *CCMcA*, 270, 282.

[5] *Ibid.*, 418, 205.

[6] *Ibid.*, 275, 259, 362, 300.

[7] *Ibid.*, 192, 369, 406, 83.

[8] Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995, 2000), 304. Hereafter cited as *CMcATM*.

[9] Warren Bennis, *Why Leaders Can't Lead* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 23.

[10] *CMcATM*, 300.

[11] *CCMcA*, 104.

[12] *Ibid.*, 439.

[13] *Ibid.*, 346.

[14] *CMcATM*, 98.

[15] *CCMcA*, 92.

[16] *Ibid.*, 94-95.

[17] *Ibid.*, 159.

[18] *Ibid.*, 444.

[19] *CMcATM*, 179.

[20] *PS*, 3.

[21] *CCMcA*, 458-59.

[22] *Ibid.*, 179.

[23] *PS*, 29.

[\[24\]](#) *CCMcA*, 320, 362.

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