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The Charism of Charity Transcending Centuries and Cultures

BY

DOROTHY MACDOUGALL, S.C.

Introduction

I want to begin this talk with a brief story I read a number of years ago in *The Christian Century* because I believe that it succinctly reminds us why the charism of charity has been able to transcend centuries and cultures.

In 1923 in southern Poland a Quaker nurse died. In that region the only cemetery was a Catholic one. Because the nurse was a Quaker, she could not be buried there. Finally, after much discussion, the Church officials decided to bury the nurse just outside the cemetery fence. During the night, some of the simple village people, who loved the nurse, met together in the cemetery — and moved the fence! The Quaker nurse was in the cemetery!

This story illustrates the characteristics of inclusivity, imagination, and willingness to risk. But the underlying virtue that calls forth all else is charity. The Catholic villagers loved that Quaker nurse!

My belief is that the charism of charity has transcended centuries and cultures to the extent that our foundresses and Community members and lay associates have been willing to break through the biases of culture to reveal God's love to the world. I hope to give supporting evidence to this belief in these reflections.

Joan Chittister notes in *The Fire in These Ashes* that the relationship between culture and religious life is tightly woven and that religious life comes out of a culture to challenge it.¹ Religious figures who make the defining questions of humanity the centerpiece of their lives have been recognized by people of every culture to be guiding spiritual lights. Vincent de Paul was certainly such a person for both church and society in the France of his day.

¹ Joan Chittister, OSB, *The Fire in These Ashes* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 5-7.

The charism of charity which Vincent learned from Jesus, the Evangelizer of the Poor, and which inspired the priests of the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity and many lay missionaries, had already crossed an ocean and bridged a culture when it reached the communities represented here. Bishop Joseph Benedict Flaget, at the request of Rev. John David, brought the rule of Saint Vincent to the urban United States. The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth received the rule from Emmitsburg to be adapted to the Kentucky frontier.

The members and associates of all of our communities have been guided by the spirit of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac as they met the needs of their times and geography. The most direct way for me to reflect on how this happened is to tell you what I see from where I stand; that is, I will tell stories from the SCN tradition. Then through the panel members' conversation and our reflection and sharing time as a total group, we can get a much fuller and clearer picture of how our desire to share this common gift, this charism of charity, has shaped our varied ministries, challenged aspects of our culture, and changed our own lives. The stories told may also give us a glimpse of some of the fences which have been moved in our traditions; and help us note fences that need yet to be moved!

On the Kentucky Frontier

The SCN story really began in 1808 when the Church created four new dioceses: New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Bardstown. Bishop Flaget's vast diocese included the states of Kentucky and Tennessee and the Indiana and Michigan territories. Father John Baptist David was in charge of the diocesan seminary. The two churchmen decided that they needed some women to help with the spiritual needs of the people, and they began to make that call in their itinerant preaching in Kentucky.

On 1 December 1812, two women responded to the call. Betsy Wells did not stay beyond the early days, but Teresa Carrico became known as the community's "foundation stone." We are told that it was the humble and simple Teresa who encouraged Father David to begin the community, even though resources were slim to non-existent. Not young when she entered, Teresa lived one month beyond Catherine Spalding, the nineteen year old who joined the others in January, 1813 and was elected their leader when there were six Sisters.

The Sisters very soon began a school for girls, and as their numbers grew, their works of charity multiplied. When the cholera epidemic struck Bardstown and Louisville in 1832, they closed schools in both places so that the teachers could nurse cholera victims. So many children were left homeless as the cholera epidemic raged that Catherine and her Sisters soon opened an orphanage. Then seeing the ongoing need for healthcare, they decided to set aside some rooms in the orphanage for the sick. Thus by 1836 the SCNs had the beginnings of their first hospital.



Elizabeth Teaches Young Children.

Painting by Elizabeth Prongas.

The National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Emmitsburg

As we think back on those days, we see our Sisters as hardy pioneer women, always trying to meet the most pressing needs of their times. They had their trials; for example, three Sisters from Nazareth Academy died nursing persons with cholera. We know, too, that it must have been difficult for the small community to continue to expand into new ministries as more and more needs appeared.

SCNs throughout history learned from those women, and continued to have desires beyond their energy and resources. Even in 1980, when Sister Marie Augusta Neal was conducting a follow-up to her 1967 study of American women religious, she commented on the fact that the SCNs in the study checked off a longer list than most other religious of services in which they thought the community ought to be involved. "Some may believe that this wide choice may be spreading yourselves too thin," she said in analysis; "others may say that the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth cannot say no to a human need." Or maybe it is just our pioneer roots grown deep!

The charism of charity was alive in those foundation days. The Sisters founded institutions that would continue service into the future, but they stopped what they were doing and met other needs when crises occurred. A major cultural crisis in this country, the Civil War, found the Sisters going to the battlefields of this "border state" to nurse soldiers from both sides of the conflict.

Mission and Dissent

The ministry of leadership called for gifts of intellect, imagination and physical endurance, but perhaps the most taxing times for Catherine Spalding came when there was need to question civil authorities or to dissent from the wishes of church leaders. There are records of both in Catherine's leadership. Father Gerald Arbuckle in *Refounding the Church* believes that "loyal dissent is essential for mission."² His definition takes away any pejorative connotation of the term and shows that dissent can be "the prophetic move by people who genuinely love the Gospel and the Church to offer responsibly alternative ways of preaching the Good News to the world of our time."³

² Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

We SCNs try in our ministries to keep the pioneer spirit alive and to respond to the needs of our times. But in our striving, we might at times seem less than fully cooperative to people who have a long-term plan in mind. (We have never been good at long-range planning. It is much easier for us to see a need and want to meet it.) I remember the early days of what we called “Search and Share,” our first attempt at small group sessions and learning a communal discernment process. We met often, and the first item on the agenda for us often seemed to be to try to change the agenda!

Just a year ago last June we had a General Assembly at Nazareth. The facilitator for the week had already worked with our community over many months in preparation for the writing of a new Mission Statement, so she knew us pretty well, and I believe that she really did appreciate our unique spirit. At one point, however, she called us “feisty women.” There are some definitions of “feisty” which I do not like, but the “frisky and exuberant” definition might just fit our pioneer spirit. It might signify also the desire of the Community to be faithful to the charism of charity even if we have at times strong opinions — or what we consider “responsible alternatives” — for living out that faithfulness.

Into a Multi-Cultural America

Earlier I alluded to Kentucky’s being a border state during the Civil War. That is not the only time we have juxtaposed “north” and “south” in the SCN community. The charism of charity has helped us to span those regional differences among ourselves as well as in ministry. Those who came from the north to a southern community had to get used to new foods and new ways of cooking and seasoning foods. All of us had the opportunity to learn new colloquialisms and even new ways of talking! Only a few times did superiors feel they had to say: “Sisters, the Civil War is over!”

African-American Culture

A predominantly white community ministering to people of African-American heritage has posed a more difficult move from one sub-culture to another. Perhaps this is an area where we wish we had much earlier come to an understanding of the need for dissent. It also shows the effect of the southern culture on our religious community.

The benefactor of a hospital we opened in 1874 in Kentucky expressly limited our service to "white people." Another hospital we took over in 1877 in the same state was open to all races, although there were separate buildings for white and black patients. The hospital with the limitation in the deed in time became a serious concern to the Community, and in 1945 our leaders sought out a descendant of the benefactor and had the restriction removed.

When SCNs took over a hospital from two doctors in 1946, they deleted a restriction to serve only whites before the contract would be signed.

In 1940 the SCNs agreed to build a hospital in Ensley, Alabama (near Birmingham) specifically for African-Americans, since these citizens did not feel welcomed in other hospitals in that deeply southern state. Our Superior General at that time explained the Council's decision to go to Ensley as one based as surely on faith and confidence in Providence and the sense of being impelled by love as any decision made by Catherine Spalding in her day.

The financial investment of the SCN community in the Ensley hospital was augmented by fund-raising that crossed racial, religious, and state boundaries. The hospital served a need not only for African-American patients; it also provided a place where African-American physicians and surgeons could practice their medical specialties.

SCNs also staffed a number of African-American elementary and high schools during the pre-Civil Rights days and beyond. When the last Sister of Charity of Nazareth left the high school in Ensley, it was said: "The Sisters changed a Mission School into a school with a mission!"

Breaking through barriers of culture to share the charism of charity in interracial situations presents us with an ongoing challenge. We had Sisters marching in Selma; our community sponsored sensitivity training workshops for us and those ministering with us when we knew we needed training in race relations; we studied the writings of African-American theologians; we have African-American members. But most of us would probably admit that, because of the ongoing racism of our culture, it is an ongoing struggle to be a challenge to the status quo.



Daughters of Charity tending to the wounded and dying during the Civil War. Saint Francis Xavier Church. Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.
The National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Emmitsburg

A Personal Experience

Those of us who have had experience ministering in an African-American community have been blessed with some specific insights. In the early 70s I was in the public school system in Louisville as a curriculum consultant in a drop-out prevention program in three schools with a total of 3,300 students. 95% of the population was black. At the end of one long snowy school day, I approached my car in the Junior High school parking lot. As I wiped away a blanket of snow, I saw that the car's windshield was shattered.

I do not know how the glass became broken, but that shattered windshield became a powerful symbol for that time in my life. My experiences with the African-American community wiped off the whiteness of my whole life's perspective, and I found a "real world" which was literally in pieces. In those minority schools, I moved in a world of inequality and injustice which had become the spawning ground of low self-esteem: little respect for education, ongoing violence and almost continual despair. This was after the civil rights movement, but before "forced bussing" in Louisville. I understood the pain of "*de facto*" segregation.

I found a new kind of God in that experience. My God was fully engaged in the struggle of the people. This was not a God who was going to quickly right the wrongs and "fix it" all, not a God in heaven apart from daily life, but a God who has compassion for those who suffer, and a God who expects us to care for one another and work together to bring about a more just and human world.

We SCNs worked hard to bring justice to our educational ministry by implementing what we had named in 1971 as Apostolic Priorities: Alleviating Poverty, Working against Racism, Effecting Peace and Humanizing Values. I believe that our charism of charity was at work in our culture, and this time charity bore the face of justice!

Dissent in the Inner City

It was at this same time that an inner-city housing ministry cried out for an act of dissent and our Sisters answered. Five SCNs in a group of twelve concluded that they had to gain the attention of those in power. They did this, as a last resort, by beginning to tear down an abandoned building and throw bricks and other building material into the street to obstruct traffic. They were willing to be arrested to achieve the goal of a new housing ordinance which would impel the city to quickly demolish abandoned buildings which were safety and health hazards in the neighborhoods of the poor.

Our Superior General went to court to testify on behalf of the members of our Community. One of the "offenders" was later invited to apply for a position in the Housing Office. When she received a diocesan Peace and Justice award several years later for her work in the housing ministry, the mayor of the city was there to laud the woman he wanted working with him, not against him! In this situation, authentic mission surely had called for dissent, and dissent carried forth the charism of charity.

An Example from Hispanic America

One final example of work with another culture in the United States reminds me of the Gospel story of the bent-over woman. One of our Sisters worked with Mexican-American farm workers in south Texas. Workers were forced to use a short-handled hoe, and thus to bend over in the fields all day as they worked.

Those in charge of the workers knew that long-handled hoes would make the work less back-breaking, but they feared that, at a distance, it would be difficult to tell who was working and who was resting if the workers were able to stand erect at their jobs. After months and years of bending over, the workers, like the woman in the Gospel, could hardly walk straight again. Our Sister, along with others in ministry with her, struggled to get legislation passed in Texas which would ban the short-handled hoe.

The legislation passed at the time of the death of our Carol Ann Messina. At her burial liturgy a short-handled hoe was carried in the offertory procession by a woman who had earlier been forced to use it in the fields. That hoe was a powerful symbol of oppression overcome by the charism of charity.

Charity as Hospitality

A face of charity which has always been important to SCNs is "hospitality." When a General Assembly discussed the need for a long-term care facility for our Sisters, the delegates emphasized that they did not want the facility to be only for our Sisters. And so in the licensing, it was stated that the home would be for SCNs and their "associates." We knew that we would have the right to say who the associates would be and so there was room for the Spirit to move!

When the building was ready, but no SCNs had yet moved in, the Louisville Ursulines' Motherhouse burned. Their Community needed space for some Sisters until repair work could be done, so Ursuline Sisters needing long-term care moved into Nazareth Home before any SCN became a resident there! We know their presence blessed the place, and the whole experience said to some of us that God indeed has a sense of humor! We SCNs had better not be saying things we did not mean.

That was in 1976. Ten years later another question of hospitality arose at Nazareth Home, and this decision was not as easy or as universally received as the one recounted above. There were persons with AIDS in the area needing nursing home care. The state of Kentucky had a statute against taking people with communicable diseases into long-term care facilities, but we thought it would not be too difficult to get the law changed. The greater difficulty would be in helping people involved to change their attitudes. Some psychological fences had to be moved — among staff, other residents and their families, and the SCN community members themselves.

The decision was made that meeting this need was something a Community claiming to have a pioneer spirit and a charism of charity would do, and a broad educational effort was begun. There were strong cultural biases to overcome, but there were so many who reached out to help.

We have been blessed in this ministry through the years. Getting to know the families and friends of persons with AIDS, as well as the patients themselves, has greatly enriched our lives. There is a quiet smile on the face of the statue of Catherine Spalding outside of Nazareth Home. She seems pleased that her Sisters accepted that opportunity to, in deed, widen our circle of friends!

Across the World

Even at the time of our greatest numbers, there never seemed to be enough SCNs to meet the most pressing needs of the times. When, in 1946, some Jesuits arrived at Nazareth to request Sisters for a dispensary and catechetical work in Mokama, India, in the very poor state of Bihar, Mother and her Council said that they just did not have the Sisters to send. Legend has it that after the leaders said “no” they went to the refectory for their meal and the Jesuits went to the rectory for theirs. By the time the leaders had finished their noon meal, they knew that they had to change their decision. Around that table, the decision was made that SCNs would take a giant leap into a totally new culture! And they would take their charism of charity with them.

Anyone visiting Mokama or any of the other sites of our SCN mission in India today would have ample evidence that the charism of charity can transcend cultures. This whole reflection could have focused on the way SCNs helped move the charism across the world. At first some of the missionaries' efforts may have seemed to be an imposition of American culture, but as these women learned the ways of the indigenous culture, they opened themselves and the province to Indian ways of living and serving. As with the first SCN pioneers, they built and staffed institutions — a hospital, a nursing school, elementary and high schools — but the Sisters are always alert to the pressing needs appearing around them. They have made a firm commitment to the 80% of India's population which is poor. Village ministry has become a priority and some of our Sisters work among those who dwell in city slums.

Our Sisters went to India in 1947; in 1977 a question was placed before the Indian Province about going in mission to Nepal. Even though the needs in India are overwhelming in their magnitude, the Sisters looked at their pioneer heritage and made the decision to share their ministry among the Nepali people. From the beginning, the Sisters attempted to meet the needs of two groups: mentally disabled children and women in need of literacy training and self-development. They opened a school and a women's center.

Now I must ask what vision pulls SCNs to the future? I mentioned the 1995 General Assembly. We made a new commitment to work for justice for the poor and for women and to care for the earth. We want to do this while deepening our own spirituality and utilizing the strengths of our international identity.

We are women of Belize, Central America, India, Nepal and the United States, with women and men associates in those areas. We share a powerful vision. We believe it will launch us into a future filled with inclusivity, imagination, and risk. Joan Chittister says that "Risk is the virtue that builds the bridge between religious life now and religious life to come."⁴ I believe that we are trying to build that bridge. We could probably do it best if all communities represented here built that bridge together.

⁴ *The Fire in These Ashes*, 176.

It is paradoxical that we have the courage to walk into the future only because we are "Communities of memory." But I believe it is true, and so I will end this time of remembering with one last story. It is the story of an SCN who was a fence-mover all of her life. She was a college history teacher who volunteered to go and teach in poor minority colleges in the summer time when she was eighty years old! Ecumenism was her passion, and she had many friends among the Protestant clergy. When Sister Laurita Gibson was dying, Reverend McPherson from Bardstown had come to pray with her. The Sister present in the room asked Laurita: "Shall we ask Reverend McPherson to pray that God will take you to heaven tonight?" "No," said our Sister in a clear voice. "Ask him to pray that we may all be one." Those were Sister Laurita's last words.

The charism of charity puts focus on the whole Church, the whole world, across centuries and across cultures. We need to tell our new stories of this love and caring. We need to find the ways to take the charism of charity into our future. The sturdiest of fences can be moved by communities which go forth to meet the challenges of the Gospel with inclusivity, imagination, and willingness to risk. We can be those communities, for the love of Christ urges us on!