

**The Idea of a Mercy University: A Conversation  
between Catherine McAuley and John Henry Newman**

**Maureen Scott, RSM CMHE Board Member**

**The idea of a Mercy University took root in me as a student and later as an administrator at St. Xavier University, Chicago. Values that were so effectively modeled for me can be captured by the terms “liberal learning” and “compassionate service.” In this context I want to focus on two figures: John Henry Newman and Catherine McAuley. Newman is credited with founding the modern Catholic University and its idea of liberal education, while McAuley founded the Sisters of Mercy and its tradition of compassionate service. Newman’s classic, The Idea of a University, eloquently described the primacy of the cultivation of the intellect in liberal education while McAuley’s writings were more concerned with matters of the heart. How these two traditions collide-and they do collide-is the framework for what I want to say today.**

**I am taking some historical license since Newman and McAuley probably never met. She lived in Ireland between 1778 and 1841 with brief periods of time spent in England overseeing new foundations. Newman lived in England between 1801 and 1890, spending some time establishing the Catholic University in Dublin, Ireland. I am also taking a bit of poetic license, borrowing from Scott Appleby’s notion that “the metaphor of the Catholic**

**University is conversation". So, try to hear with me a dialogue between these two figures and not just the obvious polemics.**

**Newman canonized the idea of the liberal arts and sciences as "knowledge for its own sake." As an Anglican priest and don at the male-only Oxford University, he disdained the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham, casting aside vocational training as alien to the university. Later as a convert to Catholicism and an ordained Roman Catholic priest, he responded to an invitation from the Archbishop to found the Catholic University in Dublin, where he defended the position of theology as "the center of universal knowledge". But perhaps most enduring is his description of the moral character of the university community in its modeling of the gentleman as "one who never inflicts pain". To quote him further, "It is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid equitable dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life: these are the connatural qualities of a large knowledge; they are the objects of the university." Faculty meetings must have been a later development.**

**Catherine McAuley was born to Catholic parents who died quite young leaving her education in the hands of Protestant relatives. Both were families of means, but from them she learned "a tender love for the poor." The strain of preserving her**

**Catholic faith and maintaining her family loyalties was unbearable at times but paid off handsomely with an inheritance that she used to establish the first house of Mercy. Catherine tipped the scales of justice toward women and children who had been so brutalized by the penal laws in Ireland. The ease with which she could negotiate religious barriers in her country resulted in achieving national status and thus educational excellence in her schools for girls. Similarly, her Protestant roots cautioned her against legalism and rigid orthodoxy, making her institutions stand out as vibrant, even a bit permissive. To quote from her instructions, “be ever ready to praise, to encourage, to stimulate, but slow to censure and still more slow to condemn.”**

**I would now like to explore three central Newman points and McAuley counterpoints. The position espoused in Newman’s subordination of professional studies, his hierarchical ordering of theology as “the science of the sciences”, and the philosophy of conduct in his embodiment of the gentleman would probably get Catherine’s dander up. She would contend that one could not rescue a woman from the grimy streets of Dublin with poetry alone. She and her sisters were all about building a foundation for a productive life even if it meant a for-profit laundry. McAuley was a woman of keen intellect and refined sensibilities. So, the liberal arts and sciences tradition would have enormous appeal, but this would be tempered by pragmatic concerns. Furthermore,**

**Newman's maxim of knowledge for its own sake would remind Catherine of the contemplative life in many monastic orders which she set aside in preference for the life of action chosen for her "walking sisters." I think she might have provoked John Henry with something like "Don't just sit there, do something!" In my research, I discovered a richly symbolic story that on her death bed, Catherine asked one of her sisters to burn a parcel that she herself had wrapped in plain paper and twine. It contained her boots. One is reminded of Moses, his sandals, and the burning bush.**

**Catherine McAuley would probably frown upon Newman's hierarchical placement of theology as the science of the sciences in his university curriculum as it suggested a male-dominated enterprise protected by a priestly caste. Catherine and her followers never saw themselves as defenders of the faith, but as channels of God's love. Teaching was inspiration not indoctrination. The many power struggles that Catherine experienced with the clergy troubled her greatly but from these trials emerged a deeply feminist consciousness. There is something prophetic here in terms of modern standpoint theory hewn from the lives of these oppressed women that she dedicated herself and her followers to serve. To be fair though, some of Catherine's best friends were priests.**

**Newman's exhortation for the University to become the crucible for producing a gentleman would prod Catherine to say this does not go far enough. Never inflicting pain is a noble goal but alleviating pain and ministering to those who are suffering are far more difficult burdens to assume. Again we are struck by Catherine's preference for action, for doing some good rather than avoiding some evil. She might even go so far as to ask John Cardinal Newman where his university-bred gentlemen were, since it looked like there was a heap of pain all around her.**

**How might we reach a rapprochement of Newman's and McAuley's ideas? Both characters rode the shuttle between Protestantism and Catholicism which brought them scorn and respect in equal measure. I think this straddling of traditions makes a Mercy University a place which fosters lively debate. Both of them were infuriatingly inconsistent on some essential matters. Newman opened the way to a creative re-working of his ideal of liberal education in his description of the usefulness of such programs as engineering and medicine. Even if he hadn't recapitulated, the proclivity of Mercy higher education to favor teaching, nursing, and human services within a liberal studies curriculum would have had its own momentum. In fact, St. Xavier College was incorporated in 1846, six years before the founding of the Catholic University in Dublin. On the subject of inconsistency, Catherine realistically assessed the rigors of**

**teaching, nursing and ministering to the suffering poor when she warned her sisters against harsh fasting and penitential rituals. She was anything but merciful to herself in this regard and this probably shortened her life. I think this focus on the hard work of Mercy is what makes her colleges and universities unique. This is not meant to be an easy life! Both John Henry Newman and Catherine McAuley experienced heart-breaking disappointments and monumental victories. Eleven years after McAuley died, Newman was poised for the ride of his life as the first rector of the Catholic University in Ireland only to see it flounder and eventually fail. Subsequently Kingsley's character assassination and attack on Newman's faith brought him to his knees in his poignant memoir, Apologia Pro Vita Sua. While Catherine's works flourished, she and her compatriots would grieve over and over again with the loss of so many of their young members to disease as they reached their new frontiers. For both Catherine and John, these crippling disappointments and losses would mark them with the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And for us, a Mercy University is first and foremost a redeemed and sacred place.**

**Finally, both Catherine McAuley and John Henry Newman viewed education as the centerpiece to their Christian humanism. Whether it be the "imperial intellect" of Newman's university bringing all knowledge to bear upon the human project**

**or the fragile and tentative steps taken in becoming a free person in Catherine's school for distressed women, the work is essentially the same: to practice what we teach.**

**Yes, the laser sharp intellect of Newman and the compassionate tender pity of Catherine do characterize this Mercy University. This makes all of us the beneficiaries of their extravagant gifts of knowledge and action, wisdom and courage, insight and imagination. What more could we want from a University?**

**Let me close with two sparkling images as a kind of denouement in the words of our central figures themselves. John "preferred to yield to the stream and direct the current which he could not stop, of science, literature, art, and fashion and to sweeten and to sanctify what God had made very good and man had spoiled." In a similar vein, Catherine noted "how quietly the great God does all his mighty works! Darkness is spread over us and light breaks in again and there is no noise of drawing curtains and closing shutters." And so, Good night, John. Good night, Catherine.**

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