The vision of education of Catherine McAuley, the 19th century lady from Dublin, is rooted and grounded in the ideals and values of Christianity. For Catherine, the ministry of education is essentially a work of mercy. Involvement in educational endeavors is a way to carry out Jesus' challenge to love others by caring for them in their needs.

Catherine grew up in a society rampant with poverty, ignorance, sickness and unemployment. In response to the needs of her day, she developed educational opportunities from the pre-school to the adult level. Thus, she sought to empower persons, especially poor young women and children, to improve their human situation. According to Catherine's vision, education is an essential ingredient in the process of the betterment of both individuals and society.

This study looks closely at Catherine's educational vision. It provides a brief portrait of the outstanding qualities of this Irish woman that enabled her to become a prominent educator in her day. The study focuses on various people and situations that influenced Catherine's development of her vision of education and then describes educational principles and values delineated in her writings. It depicts qualities of the Christian educator that are inherent in Catherine's spirituality and discusses the social justice dimensions of her educational vision. It concludes with a brief reflection on some challenges her vision poses for the future of Christian education.

A Brief Portrait of Catherine

Catherine McAuley possessed many qualities of character that enabled her to become an excellent educator. She was a woman of keen intellect who inherited a propensity for independent thinking from her mother, Elinor. Catherine was open-minded and flexible. She readily adapted to changing circumstances. She was a woman of vision who possessed a remarkable ability to be practically oriented. Her very way of being reflected her profound commitment to Christian values.

Catherine was optimistic by nature. She was able to throw a "ray of sunshine on even the darkest hour." Her sense of humor enabled her to keep a balanced perspective in life's most difficult circumstances. Catherine's correspondence indicates that she was a talented poet. She used her excellent command of the English language and her wit to create rhyme guaranteed to bring a smile to the faces of those who read her playful verses.

Catherine was consummately human and in her humanness lies her holiness. She looked upon love as the cardinal virtue to be developed in her life. She reminded her Sisters that charity refreshes and enlivens and that love of one's neighbor is living proof of love of God. Catherine was demonstrably affectionate; she loved many dearly, including Frances Ward, her soul friend. She cared about each woman who accompanied her in her community of mercy. She reached out in love to her relatives in times of joy and sorrow. When her sister Mary died, for example, Catherine responded by going to live with her brother-in-law William and his children. Her desire was to accompany her relatives in the difficult experience of mourning the loss of their and her beloved.

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Catherine's loving nature was equally visible in the compassionate way in which she welcomed the poor into her life. She literally spent herself, i.e., her time, energy, talents and financial resources, to fulfill her dream of enabling the poor to live dignified lives. Throughout cities and villages in Ireland and England, Catherine and her Sisters became personally acquainted with many of the poor to whom they offered food, shelter, and clothing as well as educational experiences rooted in Christian principles.

A very important dimension of Catherine's humanness is her acceptance of her limitations and imperfections. Speaking to her Sisters, Catherine insisted: "Let us not be distressed that others know our faults. We all have our imperfections and shall have them until our death." In a desire to learn from her mistakes, Catherine invited a young Sister in her community to bring to her attention any of her faults or omissions of duty. Her realistic sense of her own imperfections enabled Catherine to resist dwelling on others' shortcomings.

Catherine resembles Dorothy Day inasmuch as both women spent substantial periods of each day in prayer. Like Dorothy, Catherine oftentimes rose early in the morning to eke out some time from her busy schedule to rest in God's presence. Through her experiences of prayer, Catherine learned to trust God completely. In a letter to Sister M. Angela Dunne, Catherine wrote: "Tell me all the news you have about
your school, and sick poor, and your little children. ... Put your whole confidence in God. He will never let you want necessities for yourself or your children.”

It is noteworthy that when Sisters went forth from the original Baggot St. House of Mercy to commence ministries in such cities as Tullamore, Carlow, and Cork, resources were lacking. No recruits to the Mercy community appeared in Chadsaville; the new community in Birr was financially unstable. In the midst of such circumstances, Catherine trusted profoundly in God’s providence. In this way, she lived out the counsel of her friend, Fr. Edward Armstrong, who encouraged her to place all her confidence in God.

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Catherine’s educational vision was shaped by her personal qualities of openness of mind, flexibility, affection for others, acceptance of the shadow side of self, and constancy in communing with God. Her compassionate love of the poor impelled her to provide them with practical educational experiences aimed at their self-empowerment. The Irishman Dr. Blake was correct in his assessment that Catherine was “one selected by Heaven for some great work.” The array of educational ministries she established attests to the fact that Catherine’s mission was indeed a great work of mercy.

Influences on the Development of Catherine’s Educational Vision

Various people exerted an influence on the development of Catherine’s vision of education. These include her father James, the Armstrongs, and the Callaghans. Catherine’s father, who died when she was only seven years old, was a true Irish gentleman.

On Sundays, he invited poor children into the family house at Stumanstown in order to distribute food and clothing to them and instruct them in the Catholic faith. Thus, at an early age, Catherine experienced her father as a role model. He taught her that true education must take into consideration the intellectual, spiritual, psychological, and material needs of a person. Most of all, he demonstrated to her that Christianity is a “treasure to be shared with others.”

After both of her parents were deceased, Catherine lived in various situations. At the Armstrong residence, she experienced a barrage of assaults on her faith. In order to more intelligently counter objections to such beliefs as the Eucharistic presence of Christ, she became more educated in Catholic doctrine. Fr. Thomas Betagh, a scholarly cleric in Dublin, introduced her to a variety of religious texts that enriched her understanding of the Catholic tradition. In later years when Catherine taught religion, she drew upon the knowledge she gained at this time of her life.

After living with the Armstrongs, Catherine took up residency with the Callaghans, an elderly couple who had amassed a considerable fortune in India. For twenty years, she lived with them at their Coolock House. Mrs. Callaghan was a Quaker. From her, Catherine learned reverence for the dignity of each person; concern for any person in need; the intolerability of injustice; respect for the talents of women; and the value of daily reading and praying the scriptures. These learnings became an integral part of Catherine’s vision of education.

The Callaghans were very aware of their responsibility to share their wealth with both the poor they employed and the destitute in the village near Coolock. To this end, they provided Catherine with material resources to support her errands of mercy to the poor and sick in the neighborhood. She used these opportunities not only to distribute provisions to the poor but also to listen to their agonies and instruct them in the Christian faith. After the Callaghans died, Catherine began to teach at St. Mary’s Parochial Poor School on Middle Abbey St. There she fostered a spirit of self-help in the poor by teaching them homemach such as needlework and knitting.

Catherine’s Educational Principles and Values

Catherine deemed education one of the primary ministries of her religious community. The first decade of the existence of the Institute of Mercy brought phenomenal growth which included the establishment of poor, training, and pension schools. During this time Sisters of Mercy also sponsored catechetical programs for adults and established a teacher training center at the Baggot St. House.

During her novitiate year with the Presentation Sisters, Catherine was exposed to their system of Christian education. At this time, under the tutelage of these Sisters, Catherine gained experience in the classroom. Noteworthy is the fact that in the original Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy the sections which deal with education are taken almost verbatim from the Presentation Rule.

For Catherine, education is rooted in the r’s of religion, reading, writing, and arithmetic. To these basics she added education in domestic science, since she realized that this type of learning would enhance the possibility of those enrolled in Mercy schools
being able to secure gainful employment. She insisted that each school day begin with a twenty minute lesson regarding some religious topic. She also encouraged teachers to begin and end instruction in other subjects with a short prayer or a brief spiritual reading.

Catherine registered Mercy schools with the National School Board. She did so because she was convinced that exposure to national standardized examinations offered a peculiar challenge to students. Furthermore, since she realized that the number of Sisters available for teaching could not keep pace with need, she introduced the roles of teacher assistant and peer tutor into classrooms.

Catherine developed learning environments conducive to students’ self-expression and creative exploration. She sought competent instructors to staff comfortable classrooms. Convinced that effective teaching occurs through both word and example, she wrote to her confidant, Sister Mary Frances Ward: “Sister Mary Teresa White has delighted me telling of the instructions you give. Show them in your actions as much as you can.”

Professional updating was an educational value Catherine embraced. She herself modelled this principle by spending time at the Kildare St. School where she studied advances in instructional methods. She committed resources to the ongoing professional development of her teachers and administrators. For example, she encouraged teachers at her pension schools to pursue further studies in languages, mathematics, music, and painting.

As an educator, Catherine viewed herself as an animator. She sought to inspire others to accomplish their educational mission of mercy by responding, in an integral way, to the needs of those they served. To this end, she emphasized the holistic nature of the learning experience.

Catherine’s Spirituality and Qualities of the Christian Educator

In the spirituality of Catherine McAuley, it is possible to identify various qualities essential to the Christian educator. These include: a spirit of patience and humility; prayerfulness; acceptance of the cross; an attitude of mercy and love; and enthusiasm for service.

Spirit of Patience and Humility

According to the vision of Catherine McAuley, patience is a trait of the Christian educator. A playful verse that she wrote for Mother M. Elizabeth reads: “Keep patience ever at your side. You’ll want it for a constant guide.” According to Catherine, it is imperative that the Christian educator maintain a calm and persevering manner in the midst of agitating situations.

Catherine describes humility as possessing self-knowledge, which includes the realization of one’s inability to do even the smallest thing without the aid of both God and others. According to Catherine, one who teaches should not seek to “excite applause, to be noticed, or to be particularly distinguished in that office.” Rather, the humble educator places her/his academic labors in God’s hands and rejoices in whatever good is able to be accomplished in and through these endeavors. Likewise, when difficulties, setbacks, and failures occur, the educator remains undisturbed at the deepest level. This is true since, as Catherine indicates, one’s center is God from whom all originates and to whom all ultimately returns.

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Prayerfulness

In Catherine’s spirituality, prayer is essential to the life of the Christian educator. To be genuine, the work of the educator must be rooted in an ever deepening communion with God, the source of one’s generosity and courage in carrying out the tasks of this profession. For Catherine, teaching is an act of prayer and praise of God. To teach is to express in word and deed what one cherishes in the inner recesses of one’s being, i.e., that God is Love and that the life of one who abides in God must overflow with love. The work of the Christian educator is meant to be a potent expression of the love of God and others.

Acceptance of the Cross

The Christian educator accepts the cross in ministerial experience. Referring to the cross of trials or opposition, Catherine perceptively notes that “Some great things which God designs to accomplish would be too much joy without a dash of bitterness in the cup.” Her reflection directly applies to the educator who experiences diminishments such as misunderstandings, inability to respond to the needs of some students, overwork, or lack of appropriate remuneration for professional services rendered. Through acceptance of suffering in whatever form it takes, the Christian educator follows Jesus who bore the cross of apparent defeat which paradoxically brought forth the glory of the resurrection. Like Jesus, the Christian educator believes that the bitterness in the cup will be transformed into the wine of new life.
Attitude of Mercy and Love

The Christian educator reflects the compassion of God. She or he chooses in freedom to respond to others’ needs in a merciful, loving way. The educator whose ministry expresses the mercy of God “receives the ungrateful again and again and is never weary of pardoning them.”39 In Catherine’s words, the “proof of love is deed.”40 The Christian educator regards students and colleagues with affection and reverence and, in this way, manifests what Catherine calls the “unction of charity.”

By fostering the full flowering of the gifts and talents of both students and colleagues, the educator demonstrates the empowering nature of love. She/he offers to and receives from others support and encouragement in the light and dark moments, joys and sorrows, accomplishments and failures that are integral to the human journey. By embracing the shadow side of self, the Christian educator is able to accept others’ weaknesses and limitations and, thereby, extend Catherine’s legacy of charity in the here and now.

Enthusiasm for Service

The Christian educator seeks to carry out ordinary responsibilities in an extraordinary way. She/he takes seriously Catherine’s belief that “There is nothing of greater consequence than the perfect discharge of our ordinary duties.”41 The educator remembers Catherine’s counsel that a person engage in each work as if it were the only one she/he has to perform.42 For, according to Catherine, by taking small steps that lead to important strides in the ministry of education, one gives glory to God.

Social Justice Dimensions of Catherine’s Educational Vision

Through her abiding respect, love, and concern for the neediest of her day, Catherine demonstrated her commitment to the social justice dimensions of the Christian educational vision. She understood that to be merciful is to act justly by being in solidarity with the poor. She realized that to live mercy is to seek and find Jesus in the faces of the starving, homeless, sick, uneducated, and unemployed and to extend practical, active love to them. Her statement, “The poor need help today, not next week,”43 conveys the urgency she felt for the neediest. For Catherine, loving the poor meant empowering them, especially through education, to become the architects of their own future.

During her youth, Catherine personally experienced destitution when she lived with the Conways.

There were days when those of the household had almost nothing to eat, and there came at last nights when they had but the floor on which to sleep. ... Frequently after an entire day spent without food, they had nothing but a little bread at night.44

Later in her life, as the first Sister of Mercy, Catherine consciously chose to identify closely with the poor. By adopting a simple lifestyle, she entered into solidarity with them. Her room at the Baggot St. House of Mercy was small and sparsely furnished. She wore second-hand clothing and ill-fitting shoes. Oftentimes, when there were visitors in the convent where she was staying, Catherine slept in an old chair. Whenever possible, she chose the least costly mode of transportation for her travels.

Catherine utilized her entire inheritance from the Callaghans to benefit the poor. When the Baggot St. House opened, she found a child on the city sidewalk. This little girl’s “parents had just died of fever and the heartless landlord had evicted the child... from the dingy cellar they had-called home.”45 Catherine’s instinctive response was to take the child home with her. There she bathed and fed this orphan who became the first orphan to receive hospitality in the new House of Mercy.

Catherine was a visionary who dreamed of improving the social conditions of the neediest of her day.

Catherine’s dream of doing justice through mercy quickly spread from her Baggot St. foundation to various places in Ireland and England. She always responded to immediate needs for food, shelter, and clothing. At the same time, she sought to effect systemic change by providing educational opportunities for the poor. Her first classrooms were in the Baggot St. House of Mercy. As years progressed, schools sponsored by her religious community sprang up in different locations. The purpose of these educational endeavors was to meet the ongoing needs of the poor and middle class.

Catherine was a visionary who dreamed of improving the social conditions of the neediest of her day. To achieve this end, she sought to build bridges between the uneducated and educated, the unskilled and skilled, the poor and rich. In Carlow, Tullamore, Charleville, and Cork, Ireland, she saw the establishment of secondary level pension schools. In these institutions, Sisters of Mercy and their collaborators educated middle-class students regarding their responsibility to respond to the needs of less fortunate brothers and sisters.

At first, Catherine and the small group of women attracted to living out her vision of mercy met with disdain because they took to the streets where they ministered to the poorest of the poor. In the midst of opposition, Catherine and her Sisters continued to extend God’s healing mercy to those who lived in
slum areas in Ireland. Thus, these first Sisters of Mercy demonstrated that no obstacle could hinder their seeking justice and mercy for God’s anawim or poor.

Catherine’s Educational Vision: Challenges for the 21st Century

Carrying Catherine’s educational vision into the future involves finding creative ways to embody her dream. Those committed to extending her educational mission into the twenty-first century must explore innovative ways to meet learning needs. Educators must offer instructional experiences to the unskilled and unemployed that will enhance their chances for a positive economic future. Perhaps there will be more mobile educational units in the future in order to make learning opportunities more accessible to the poor.

Through the use of more and more sophisticated telecommunication systems, members of educational institutions will be able to travel the electronic superhighway in unprecedented ways in the future. This will enable learning communities to respond more effectively and compassionately to the various needs of people at local, state, national, and international levels in the world community. Additionally, many will engage in foreign language learning at an accelerated pace through the use of computer technology equipped with visual, audio, and interactive capacities. This will enhance communication among various ethnic groupings and, thus, contribute to a greater appreciation of multiculturalism.

Service learning through volunteer commitments will be able to be integrated into all levels of the curriculum. This will enable Catherine’s bridge building activity to continue in the present, since it will link persons of differing economic and educational backgrounds. It will also provide a mechanism for those being educated to extend the works of mercy to others in very meaningful ways.

Central to Catherine’s educational vision is its religious dimensions. Those who carry her vision forward into the future must seek ways to communicate the richness of the Christian tradition in cultures in which the ethics of love faces such obstacles as self-centered individualism, materialism, and the devastating effects of violence and crime. In the midst of this situation, Catherine’s prophetic message of mercy and justice is as relevant as it was in her own day. Catherine McAuley stands among those who endeavor to carry her educational vision into the twenty-first century. Her spirituality and timeless pedagogical principles provide wisdom and courage to all who seek to share the educational dream she shaped and implemented in her own century. May the grace of God and the empowerment of Catherine enable all who minister as Christian educators to embody her dream in vital forms in the new millennium.

Endnotes

2. Ibid., 12.
3. Ibid., 46 quoting Catherine McAuley.
4. Sister M. Angela Bolster, Catherine McAuley in Her Own Words (Dublin: Dublin Diocesan Office for Causes, 1978), 50.
6. See Bolster, Catherine McAuley in His Own Words, 24.
7. See Savage, Catherine McAuley: The First Sister of Mercy, 103 quoting Catherine McAuley.
8. Ibid., 7.
10. Ibid., 26.
16. Ibid., 158.
18. Bolster, 18, quoting Catherine McAuley.
19. Retreat Instructions, 147.
22. See Retreat Instructions, 91.
25. Bourke, 43.