Leading from a Merciful Space

Young Mercy Leaders Pilgrimage
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Leadership is a topic that always seems to command attention. Each year there are dozens of new books written about it and training seminars offered – all promising the most important clues to how to become a successful as a leader. And I suppose there's some value in all this thinking and analyzing. There are some skills that one can learn in order to be a better leader – skills of communication and process. But I'm willing to bet that, when I asked you to think of a person and then a quality of leadership, you didn't think of the kind of skill that one can learn from a book. Because the most compelling leaders are not those who follow a list of rules devised by a consultant, but those who move from somewhere within and the most important determinant of one's style of leadership is motivation.

Let's look at a couple examples. Take a government leader, for instance. A president or a prime minister who has in his or her heart a desire to promote the common good of the people and who is motivated by a sense of justice leads in a very different way from one who values leadership for the power and prestige it provides. This has been so evident in our world in the past few years as country after country has rebelled against leadership that is cruel and self-serving. Or think of a company executive whose only motivation is for personal wealth. The work environment this person promotes is very different from one who is interested in the quality of the product or service that is offered and in the health and well-being of the company's employees. All of you, by reason of the fact that you are here, are leaders in your school. I invite you to think a

bit today about what name you would give to the space from which your leadership arises and what motivations live in that space.

Today, we want to look at leadership in the context of the Mercy family to which we all belong and I'm going to frame these remarks around the person of Catherine McAuley who is our first and primary exemplar. We look to her in order to understand how a person acts, how a person leads, who is motivated by the desire to make our world a more merciful space. Since we are on a journey undertaken in light of a story, I'd like to tell you some stories about her and then draw from the stories some learning about how a person acts who is leading from a space that has been hollowed out by mercy, by the experience of mercy and the desire for mercy.

First some important background. For twenty years Catherine McAuley lived with the Callaghans and we know that Catherine Callaghan was a member of the Society of Friends – a Quaker. There are two principal teachings in Quakerism – one is the importance of reading the Scriptures each day and the other is the belief that God dwells in each person. George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends said it this way, "There is that of God in every man." We might say that God lives in everyone. The Quakers had a profound belief in the dignity of each person – something Catherine had already witnessed in the way her father cared for persons who were poor and, as a young woman, she had already begun to imitate him.

For our story another significant belief among the Quakers was the equality of the sexes for, while men and women had separate worship services, the voices of the women and their leadership were just as significant as that of the men. These two characteristics made their way into Catherine's leadership style. For instance, in the early days here at Baggot Street, Catherine and the 12 women who worked with her gathered in a circle when it was time to make significant decisions and worked through them together. She could have claimed the right to make these decisions. She was the leader. It was her money that supported their common project. And yet she never placed herself above them but rather

respected the opinion of each and acknowledged the voice of God's Spirit speaking through each. As a leader she created an environment in which every member of the group felt that her contribution was significant and welcome and important to the unfolding of their future together.

This way of leading is noteworthy when you realize that Catherine was significantly older than her companions. She was in her early fifties. They were in their late teens and early twenties. They were your age. She had so much more life experience on which to draw and yet she was always willing to be guided by the new insight, the fresh energy. And she entrusted them with the future of the community in each new place they founded. When the Sisters of Mercy began to spread through Ireland and England, these young women became leaders of the new convents. And she gave them every bit responsibility and authority that went with that leadership.

Carmel Bourke, an Australian Sister of Mercy wrote a wonderful little book about Catherine called A Woman Sings of Mercy and in it she sums up well this practice of Catherine's when she says, "*She delegated authority to her sisters, freeing them to act on their own initiatives. …When she missioned them to distant places she never ceased to love and support the Sisters, at the same time enabling them to develop their own skills and initiatives, giving them freedom and trust to judge for themselves the local situations and needs. She had no desire to fashion replicas of herself, but built on the uniqueness, on the pluses and minuses of each person, and she never smothered them.*" [i]

Some good illustrations of what Carmel says are found in the story of Elizabeth Moore – one of Catherine's early companions. Elizabeth was the leader of the convent in Limerick an in 1839 she wrote to Catherine expressing her concern that Catherine might have been offended by something that had been written earlier.

Catherine replied: " *Never suppose you can make me feel displeasure by giving any opinion that occurs to you."* She gives to the young Elizabeth complete freedom to offer any idea or opinion without fear of giving offense. And after extending this remarkable liberty she concludes her

letter by saying, *"I ought to say all that could animate and comfort you, for you are a credit and a comfort to me. Every week I hear all that is edifying and respectable of your Institution*." [ii] Now this was an absolutely amazing thing to say when you put it into the context of Elizabeth's story. Just one year earlier, the Sisters of Mercy had been asked to come to Limerick and establish a convent there. As was their custom, Catherine and the women with her gathered in their circle and decided that Elizabeth would be head the Limerick convent. Elizabeth, for her part, agreed to undertake this mission. As was also the custom, Catherine went with the group to help them get established. She usually stayed for 30 days at each new convent. In this case, Catherine seemed to have been considering going home early but realized that wouldn't be a wise decision for she wrote to her friend Frances Warde, "*I cannot go for a full month. No person of less experience could manage at present… As to Sister Elizabeth, with all her readiness to undertake it, we never sent forward such a faint-hearted soldier, now that she is in the field. She will do all interior and exterior work, but to meet on business, confer with the Bishop, conclude with a Sister, you might as well send the child that opens the door. I am sure this will surprise you. She gets white as death, and her eyes like fever. She is greatly liked, and when the alarms are over and a few in the House, I expect all will go on well."*[iii] In the end Catherine stayed for three months and found it difficult to leave even then.

Catherine found Elizabeth a little stiff and perhaps severe in her role as superior. You can imagine how frightened she was and her fear was preventing her from being her best self. So, when she was getting ready to finally leave, Catherine felt she had to point out some of the things that were standing in the way of Elizabeth's success as a leader. But there is great delicacy in her manner of conveying this observation. Rather that discuss it with Elizabeth in person, she enclosed it in a poem and left it for her to read after Catherine had gone. Here's what she said.

Don't let crosses vex or tease:
try to meet all with peace and ease.
Notice the faults of every day,
but often in a playful way.

And when you seriously complain,
let it be known to give you pain.
Attend to one thing at a time:
you've fifteen hours from six to nine!

Be mild and sweet in all your ways.
Now and again bestow some praise.
Avoid all solemn declaration,
all serious, close investigation.

Turn what you can into a jest -
and with few words dismiss the rest.
Keep patience ever at your side:
You'll need it for a constant guide.

Show fond affection every day,
and, above all, devoutly pray
that God may bless the charge He's given,
and make of you their guide to heaven.

The parting advise of your ever affectionate MCM.[iv]

What wonderful advise to give a young leader – be calm and peaceful and sometimes playful, focus on what you're doing at the moment, offer praise , don't take everything too seriously but, when things are indeed serious treat them with appropriate gravity, be patient and

show your affection for those you are leading. In a minute we'll see how Elizabeth responded. But first, one last example.

In October, 1840, Catherine wrote a letter to Elizabeth about some renovations which were being considered in the Limerick convent. Catherine has been there to visit and, after leaving, wrote to Elizabeth with some ideas for how it might be done. *"...I was seriously thinking of a great improvement might be made in the refectory if the wall was removed and the passage added up to the kitchen, the door of the kitchen opening into the refectory. It would make a great addition tho' it appears little now. Or if the kitchen wall was also moved … then kitchen would be large enough. If any difficulty arises from obstructing - breaking the passage through the hall, a small slice could be taken for the purpose, the pantry taken down…. Look at it with all your brains and you will soon make a great improvement. We find the kitchen opening into the refectory most convenient."* [v]

Note here that, while Catherine can see in her mind's eye exactly how the renovations could be done. She was, after all, the daughter of a builder and this was not her first renovation. But she tells Elizabeth to look at it with all her brains and she will make a great improvement. She leaves Elizabeth free to make her own decisions. She respects that authority that is hers as leader of that local community. And she knows that the way to becoming a confident decision maker is to make decisions and then to learn to deal with the consequences, be they positive or negative.

Well, how did Elizabeth do, this frightened young woman who got white as death with eyes like fever when confronted with the responsibilities of leadership? How did she do having been trusted so completely by Catherine? We already know that, one year after her rather disastrous beginning, Catherine told her that everything she did was a credit and a comfort. We learn that once she got over her initial fears, she seized her responsibilities as leader with faith and dedication. She lived in Limerick for 30 years and, during that time she established ten other Mercy convents. At her death, the obituary in the local newspaper described her as possessing " *gentleness that never wounded, firmness that never relaxed*

when duty commanded resolution, subdued ardor that ever invigorated without exciting, grand hope that was never confounded, charity that embraced every evil and individual, thoughtful providence that in all the magnitude and multiplicity of labors and projects comprehended all things and never failed in anything, and noble majesty. " [vi] All this from the young girl who was afraid to open the door.

I'd be willing to bet that Elizabeth's great success was possible, partly at least, because Catherine showed how completely she believed in her and created the context in which Elizabeth could come to believe in herself. All early evidence to the contrary, Catherine trusted that the decision to make Elizabeth leader was the right one and Elizabeth responded to that trust with courage and energy. Carmel Burke, in the quote I read earlier, said that Catherine knew the pluses and minuses in each person. She had confidence that, given the right amount of support and encouragement, the pluses would win out. With Elizabeth Moore we find in Catherine a leader who was patient and empowering ; who did not easily give up on someone but who created the circumstances in which the young leader could thrive.

A second story. Another of the young sisters in the early days of the community was Clare Augustine Moore. You have all met Clare Augustine, in a way, for you have seen her magnificent art works in Catherine's house. In addition to the work of visitation that all the sisters did, Clare was given the responsibility to illuminate, to decorate, the documents of the community and it's those documents you saw in the Heritage Room. Now Catherine, who had asked Clare to undertake this task, didn't seem to appreciate the painstaking intricacy of designing and creating such beautiful documents. We know this because she sometimes expressed her frustration in letters to her good friend Frances Warde. In one letter Catherine wrote, "*Indeed, you can have no idea how little work she does in a week, As to a day's work, it is laughable to look at. She will show me 3 leaves, saying 'I finished these today.' 3 rose or lilly* [*sic] leaves.*"[vii] So Clare would be working away at her painting and Catherine would come in and out to see how much she was getting done. But the interesting thing about

this is that Clare Augustine said about these frequent visits, "Mother Catherine loved to watch me work." Whatever impatience or irritation Catherine was feeling at what she considered terribly slow work, Clare received it as interest and delight.

There's an important lesson about leadership here. Catherine may have been bubbling over with impatience at what she considered the slowness of Clare's process, she may not have appreciated the laboriousness of it, but she never let Clare see that. Catherine understood, I think, that just because she didn't have an appreciation for the process that didn't mean that it wouldn't, ultimately, bring the desired results. And we know that she didn't allow her feelings to deter Clare's creativity because Catherine saw to it that she had the very best materials with which to work – fine paper and fine paints. It was because of that generosity of spirit and of purse that we have these treasures today. Sometimes the leader needs to provide the necessary environment and materials, put their personal feelings and preferences aside and then get out of the way.

At other times a leader is called to shape the mood around a certain event of set of circumstances. Take, for instance the story of Mary Ann Doyle. Mary Ann was among the sisters who nursed the cholera victims at the Townsend Street Depot. She suffered from an inflammation of her knees caused by crawling from cot to cot while caring for the victims. To lighten her suffering Catherine wrote this poem.

Dear Sister Doyle accept from me
For your poor suffering martyrs
A laurel wreath to crown each knee
In place of former garters.

Since fatal choler appeared
You've scarce been seen to stand
Nor danger to yourself e'er feared
When death o'erspread the land.

While on your knees from bed to bed
You quickly moved about
It did not enter in your head
That knees could e'er wear out.

You've hurt the marrow to the bone
Imploring aid and pity
And every cardinal in Rome would say
You saved the city.

Now that the story of your fame
in annals may be seen
We'll given each wounded knee a name –
Cholera and Cholerine.[viii]

Another example of this gift for softening a harsh circumstance comes with the story of the foundation in Birr. Birr is in the center of Ireland where the winters are cold and damp and the Sisters of Mercy were asked to establish a convent there in December of 1840. Catherine wrote a number of letters back to the community here in Dublin describing how they were getting on. From these letters we learn that, on their first day in the town, Catherine walked through the snow to visit an elderly couple who had recently lost their son. She got her habit wet up to the knees and couldn't put it on again for the next two weeks because it wouldn't dry. She jokes about one of the sisters breaking her tooth trying to eat her oatmeal and about not being able to cut the butter unless they put a hot turf under it to melt it a little. The conditions, in other words, were very difficult and unhealthy. And yet, it is in the letters from Birr that we find the most exuberant exclamations – "Hurrah for foundations! They made the old young and the young merry."[ix] And "Dance every evening!"[x] This

last exclamation may make it sound like they were having a good old time. I think it is more likely that they danced to warm themselves up before going to bed between cold, damp sheets.

What we see in these tales is a leader who, in the midst of harsh circumstances, works at creating fun and who knows that a little nonsense can go a long way when everything is conspiring to dampen one's spirits.

One final story has to do with the manner in which Catherine created and nurtured relationships. We saw how she fostered an atmosphere of respect and trust among the women who came to share in her life and work, an atmosphere of friendship and loving playfulness. Once she had sent these young women to foundations in Ireland and England she kept these relationships strong and fresh in two ways. First of all, she visited them – travelling by coach and canal boat to encourage and help them. Secondly, she wrote letters and she used these missives not only to renew her own relationships but to keep them all connected to one another. So to the sisters in Tullamore, she wrote news of Galway and to Limerick she wrote the news of Charleville. She created webs of relationship, very much like we saw being created on this stage on Wednesday – webs of interest and concern and sisterhood. The fact that her efforts were appreciated and imitated is seen in a comment from Bishop Brown of Cork who said "It is impossible for the Order Sisters of Mercy should fail, where there is such unity and such affectionate interest is maintained as brings then one hundred miles to encourage and aid one another."[xi]

From all of these examples we discover that Catherine is a leader:

-who enabled her companions and fostered an awareness of the importance of the contribution made by each;

-who delegated authority and responsibility but who was always ready to lend a wise ear and a supportive presence;

- who was patient and encouraging with the unfolding of a new leader's skills, who didn't give up on them;

-who knew when to be playful and when to be serious;

-who respected the decisions and talents of others even when she didn't understand them.

On Tuesday, in my first break out session, an amazing thing happened. Sister Ailsa McKinnon was leading the session on the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy. She distributed to us a little card which listed them and then offered a little reflection on what they meant. Listen to these explanations of the Spiritual Works of Mercy: Be a good listener and help others to know how good they are; share you advise and experience gently; challenge the things you know are wrong and let others know there are better choices; give others and yourself room to make a mistake. I thought they sounded amazingly like Catherine's leadership qualities. Leadership from a merciful space as a Work of Mercy is perhaps a thought worth pursuing.

All these attributes that I have highlights from the life of Catherine are useful qualities in a leader but we still haven't gotten to the most important one - which is that she loved those she led and she drew them into the sphere, not only of her love, but of her motivation. For all that she did was fueled by God's Mercy as she had experienced it and from a desire to see that Mercy revealed more and more in our world. There was an ever widening space in her named Mercy which overflowed on 19 century Ireland and continues to overflow on us.

For Catherine, the witness of her father's compassion for the poor, the experience of 20 years in a Quaker household, her suffering over the sufferings of those around her – all these and many other experiences in her life opened up and shaped the space from which she led.

All of us who are part of the Mercy family are encouraged to let our own lives teach us; to pay attention to the events which shape us in particular ways and to the kind of space these events are carving out in us. We are urged to look into that space and to name the motivations which reside there - those things which make us the unique leader that each of us is. Hopefully, one of our motivations is the desire to see Mercy revealed more and more in our world. Hopefully, we can reach into that space and

draw from it the energy and courage, compassion and playfulness, patience and trust, respect and love we need to be wise, effective and caring leaders. Hopefully, all of us will seize the challenge presented by our tradition and by our aching world to lead from a merciful space.

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[i] Carmel Bourke. A Woman Sings of Mercy, (Sydney, E.J. Dwyer, 1987) p. 68.

[ii] Mary Ignatia Neumann, ed. Letters of Catherine McAuley 1827 – 1841, (Baltimore, Helicon, 1969) p. 165 and 167.

[iii] Ibid. p. 140.

[iv] Archives, Mercy International Centre.

[v] Neumann, op.cit. p. 241.

[vi] Austin Carroll. Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy, Vol. 1, (New York, The Catholic Publication Society Co., 1881) p. 357-58.

[vii] Neumann, op. cit. p. 311-12.

[viii] Archives, Mercy International Centre.

[ix] Neumann, op.cit. p. 289.

[x] Ibid. p. 293.

[xi] Ibid. p. 331-322.