

## **The Legacy of Mother Catherine Spalding**

**By Kay Glunk, SCN**

*“An important legacy in Kentucky will soon be preserved as a statue is raised of Mother Catherine Spalding, a woman known for her pioneer spirit, named by the Louisville Courier-Journal as the one woman among 16 “most influential people in Louisville Jefferson County history.” Her statue will be the first of a woman in a public venue in the history of the Commonwealth. The acknowledgement of her impact is long overdue, but soon Catherine Spalding will grace the public corridor on Fifth Street in front of the Cathedral of the Assumption.”*

*Catherine Spalding: A legacy worth preserving  
Dolores Delahanty, Special to The Courier-Journal,  
September 24, 2014*

Have you ever wondered what makes someone memorable, worthy of admiration? Why would someone be considered important enough to be the first woman to have a statue placed on public streets in Louisville, Kentucky? Why have other women followed in her footsteps for over 200 years expanding out to three continents of the world?

Surely, it must be more than physical attributes, wealth, athleticism, power and all those things that seem to attract even fleeting attention in today’s world.

If one examines the life history of Catherine Spalding, reads the letters she wrote, studies what others wrote of her - all speak of a certain “magnetism” that drew people to put their trust in her. She had a special “Charisma” and for Catherine it was the Charism of Charity. She accepted the call and gift God had given her and was drawn to a life of charity marked with deep prayer and a personal relationship with God that spilled over into action-oriented service. Catherine’s mission was to accomplish the Will of God as it was made know to her in her daily life.

It is possible that Catherine was drawn to the Charism of Charity because of her own early life experiences. Born into a large extended family in Charles County Maryland, Dec 23, 1793, Catherine and her immediate family left the comfort of family and friends to move to Nelson County, Kentucky when Catherine is four.

Shortly after their move, Catherine's sister Ann was born, her mother died, her father quickly remarried, then deserted the family due to the burden of many financial obligations. Catherine and Ann were sent to live with her Aunt Elizabeth and Thomas Elder and their ten children. Later, Catherine moved with her sister into the home of her cousin Clementina Elder Clark and her husband Richard. The challenges of these early years, led Catherine to put her faith in God, to value relationships with others and to be open to the changing circumstances of life.

In December of 1812, Father David, the parish priest at St. Thomas Catholic Church, initiated the beginnings for a religious community of women which became known as the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth. The first two women to join were Teresa Carrico and Betsy Wells. Catherine joined them on January 21, 1813. Three others came, and when it was time to select a leader for the group, Catherine was chosen. Trusting in God, Catherine set about with determination to face each event along the way. Her life became a blend of prayer, work, and sharing with her sisters as they reached out to those around them. Her love of God flowed out to all she encountered. In Catherine and her sisters, people encountered a spirit of prayerfulness and a welcoming presence.

Catherine was quick to identify the needs of others and creatively sought ways to respond. It wasn't long before she established Nazareth Academy to educate young women in Bardstown and Presentation Academy in Louisville. Moving about the streets of Louisville, Catherine encountered the many orphans arriving from travel on the river. Catherine gathered them and brought them to live with the Sisters. Seeing the demand for more space, Catherine sought the assistance of women throughout city to help her raise funds to build an orphanage. When cholera hit the city, Catherine and her Sisters went to the homes of the ill to provide care for the sick and the dying, and eventually established St. Joseph's Infirmary.

Catherine was an astute business woman, listening attentively to the ideas of others. She valued collaboration, and willingly reached out to others from all walks of life to engage them in her vision for education, health care and social service. With faith and confidence in the Providence of God, she willingly took risks for the benefit of others, challenged the status quo to effect change. She was known to offer a welcoming smile, a kind spirit and a generous heart to all she encountered.

An important aspect of Catherine's ministry was the welfare and development of her Sisters. She led by example, offered a stabilizing influence and an inspirational presence in the life of the community. Catherine encouraged her sisters to strengthen their spiritual life, to develop their individual gifts, and to share their life and talents to in ministry meeting the needs of the poor, the sick and the uneducated ... to be witnesses of the Charity and Love of God wherever they were and whatever task they were to undertake.

Catherine believed that God is truly present everywhere – in each person, in each circumstance of life she encountered. Through prayer and reflection she would discern, what is the loving thing to do here, right now? Then with confidence and faith she would daringly utilize all the various means at her disposal to accomplish the task that was before her and always with a gentle spirit and a loving heart.

Catherine died on March 20, 1858 at the age of 65 having expended her life in loving service for others.

Catherine Spalding's statue now stands on the sidewalk in front of the Cathedral on 5<sup>th</sup> Street in Louisville.



**For reflection:**

What of Catherine's life speaks to me? Inspires me? Challenges me?

How can I begin to respond to situations in my life by discerning what is the loving thing to do here, right now?

Where is God leading me in response to my reflection on Catherine's life?



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