



Mother Catherine McAuley: Forerunner to the Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis* of the Second Vatican Council

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On October 28, 1965, Blessed Pope Paul VI promulgated *Gravissimum Educationis* (hereafter *GE*), the Declaration on Christian Education of the Second Vatican Council,¹ along with four other documents. This 50th anniversary year presents an occasion to look at these documents again. On the 35th anniversary, *New Blackfriars* published an article by Sister Prudence Allen, RSM, which examined the principles enunciated in *Gaudium et Spes* in comparison to the works of Mother Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Irish Sisters of Mercy.² This article makes a similar comparison, that of the principles by which Mother Catherine established a system of education in 19th century Ireland with the educational principles expressed in *GE*.

Introduction

Catherine McAuley, declared Venerable by St. John Paul II on April 9, 1990, was born in Dublin in 1778 into a Catholic family.³ Her father died when she was only five years old, however, it was sufficient time for his example to instill in her a strong Catholic faith and imbue her with a love for the poor. Her mother continued the childrens' religious and general education until the family's money ran out; about the same time her mother died. Catherine went first to a Catholic uncle, but he too ran into financial difficulties, and Catherine learned poverty first hand. She then went to Protestant relatives, where she was not allowed to practice her faith. In 1803,

¹ Vatican Council II, *Gravissimum Educationis: The Declaration on Christian Education*, 28 October 1965.

² Sr. Prudence Allen, RSM, 'Venerable Catherine McAuley and the Dignity of the Human Person,' *New Blackfriars* 83, (2002), pp. 52-72.

³ There is some question about the year of her birth, however most scholars accept 1778 as being the most likely (cf. Mary C. Sullivan, ed., *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1818-1841* [Cornwall: MPG Books, Ltd., 2004], p. 33.)

Catherine moved in with other distant relatives, the Callaghans. Mr. Callaghan was a member of the Church of England and Mrs. Callaghan was a Quaker, although neither practiced their faith. They did not want any Catholic presence in the house, but Catherine managed not to compromise her faith by her gentle spirit that diffused potential conflict. She observed the ignorance and poverty of Catholic families in the neighborhood and began her work in education by catechizing poor children, often the children of the servants of familiar rich Protestant families.⁴

In 1825, following the death of the Callaghans, both of whom embraced the Catholic faith before their deaths, Mother Catherine undertook a study of pedagogical methods. First she traveled to France to study methods for instructing large classes. There are no specific records, but it seems likely that she visited schools in the slums of Paris, perhaps run by the Sisters of Charity or the Sulpicians.⁵ Returning to Ireland, she managed to gain entrance to the Kildare Place Schools by going with Protestant friends who were unaware that she was Catholic. Her third “school” of learning was by observation at the poor schools run by the Presentation Sisters at George’s Hill while she was in her novitiate. There “she found a fully organized system of teaching, tested by long years of successful experience and designed to give a thoroughly Catholic education.”⁶ In addition, Catherine had the opportunity to practice teaching in the classroom. She profited from all three experiences and added her own ideas, which ultimately produced the vast range of educational programs offered by the Sisters of Mercy.

Subsequent to her novitiate, she and two co-workers professed vows to begin the foundation of the Sisters of Mercy on December 12, 1831 in Dublin. During the next ten years, she established ten convents in Ireland and two in England. In each new foundation, a section of the house was designated for guest housing for poor women, with a room for instructing them, and all but one had a school.

Education: the Heart of Service

For Mother Catherine, education was at the heart of service to the poor. “Intimate contact with the daily lives of the poor had convinced

⁴ Sister M. Angela Bolster, *Catherine McAuley: Venerable for Mercy* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1990), p. 14.

⁵ Sister M. Angela Bolster, *Documentary Study for the Canonisation Process for the Servant of God Catherine McAuley ... 1778-1841: Positio super Virtutibus* (Prot. No. 1296) (hereafter “*Positio*”), p. 42.

⁶ Roland Burke Savage, S.J., *Catherine McAuley: The First Sister of Mercy* (Dublin: Gill, 1949), p. 267.

her that their poverty and their failings were due more often to ignorance than to malice.”⁷ She believed that “no work of charity can be more productive of good to society or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women.”⁸ She followed up her conviction by offering early nineteenth century Ireland an unparalleled vision of education. This vision of education was evident in Ireland for the next 150 years.

As background, the year of Mother Catherine’s birth, 1778, was also the year of the first of a series of government acts which gradually removed the most blatant injustices of the penal code. However, the people to whom Mother Catherine and her Sisters were reaching out in the early and mid-nineteenth century were still devastated by the effects of more than a hundred years of severe poverty and forced ignorance. Mother Catherine developed her educational philosophy as Ireland was just emerging from the harsh penal code under which Catholics were brutally oppressed. Catholics had been prohibited from participation in the civic life of their country: they could not serve in the armed forces, in government positions, or on juries; they were restricted in the development of industry and trade, especially those concerning printing or the manufacture of arms; they were sometimes stripped of their property and inheritance; and they were forbidden to open schools, to teach in one, to use tutors or even to send children outside the country to study. The only education permitted for Catholics was in Protestant schools which were strongly oriented towards converting their Catholic students.⁹

It was into this setting that Mother Catherine contributed her exceptional educational vision. Her promotion of catechetics, religious education, evangelization, and schools for the poor made a significant contribution towards overcoming the heavy proselytization by Protestants. Furthermore, she initiated new structures of education: pension schools for the middle class; vocational schools; adult education; and teacher training schools. All of these new structures were later adopted by other religious congregations and even by the government educational system.

A little more than a century after Mother Catherine’s death, on October 28, 1965, the Second Vatican Council presented its Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis*. As the world moved toward its third millennium after the Incarnation of Christ, the Church, instituted to announce the mystery of salvation to the whole world, wished to fulfill more completely her obligation to promote

⁷ Ibid., p. 267.

⁸ *The Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy*, 1841, Ch. 2, n. 5, (<https://ia700805.us.archive.org/22/items/ruleconstitution00sist/ruleconstitution00sist.pdf>, cited 8 June 2015. See p. 75 for the *recognitio* of the Holy See in 1841 for correct date.)

⁹ *Positio*, p. 3.

educational projects. *GE* is a short document which “promulgates some fundamental principles concerning Christian education, especially in regard to schools.”¹⁰

This paper proposes to demonstrate that more than a century before the drafting of *GE*, Mother Catherine was promoting the same educational principles advanced by the Second Vatican Council. The structure of this article will follow that of *GE*, which is made up of twelve sections, and will offer a comparison of the wisdom of the Council Fathers to that of Mother Catherine.

Education is of Paramount Importance in the Life of Man
(*GE*, Preface)

The Council Fathers began the document by emphasizing the importance of education, in order that all might “become more conscious of their own dignity and responsibility [and] eager to take an ever more active role in social life.” The Church “is under an obligation to promote the whole life of man, including his life in this world insofar as it is related to his heavenly vocation; she therefore has a part to play in the development and extension of education.”

Mother Catherine McAuley placed education as the primary means of promoting the common good of society and the benefit of the poor, and she described it as a great work of charity. She observed that teaching was “the same duty that engaged Jesus Christ on earth”¹¹ and was therefore a worthy occupation for anyone striving to follow in His footsteps. For her, education was a critical means of serving God’s people so that they might progress in their spiritual lives while becoming better prepared to be good citizens of the earthly society.

All People Have a Right to Education (GE, 1)

The principle enunciated by the Council Fathers in the first section was that “all men of whatever race, condition or age, in virtue of their dignity as human persons, have an inalienable right to education.” Although Mother Catherine developed her educational programs primarily for Catholic girls and women, she was thereby serving the two categories of people systematically excluded from educational opportunities. In each of her foundations except Cork, a poor school

¹⁰ *GE*, Preface.

¹¹ Sister M. Angela Bolster, *Catherine McAuley: Prophet of Mercy* (Cork: D. and A. O’Leary, 1996), p. 28.

was opened.¹² She established pension schools,¹³ which later developed into the secondary school system, in half of her foundations. In addition, each House of Mercy provided a vocational school for women to learn, in addition to the catechism, such marketable trades as sewing, cooking, and cleaning. Women were educated in social skills such as courtesy and etiquette; these skills would assist them greatly in finding work.

Mother Catherine believed strongly that all had a right to education, and she did her best to provide it, regardless of financial status. She found means of financial support for the various institutions. For example, in operating the poor schools and Houses of Mercy, she depended greatly on benefactors, while in the pension schools, a fee was charged. However, for those girls who would be unable to attend the pension schools for financial reasons, the fee was waived because Mother Catherine was convinced that no one should be denied education due to lack of means.

Section 1 of *Gravissimum Educationis* describes true education as being “directed towards the formation of the human person in view of his final end and the good of that society to which he belongs.” Mother Catherine described, with a phrase now enshrined in Mercy tradition, her educational goal for the children she served as being “to fit [them] for earth without unfitting them for heaven.”¹⁴

Christians Have a Right to Christian Education (GE, 2)

The second paragraph of *GE* states that Christians have a right to a Christian education. In the case of Mother Catherine, this principle must be modified to state that Catholics have a right to a Catholic education, since a major work of the first Sisters of Mercy was to counteract the government-subsidized proselytizing of Catholic children in the Protestant schools.

Her investigation of various educational systems, techniques and practices led Mother Catherine to the Kildare Place Schools, formed by Protestant proselytizing societies and heavily subsidized by the

¹² No poor school was opened in Cork in order not to compete with the Presentation Sisters who already operated poor schools there and had no other apostolate (*Positio*, p. 716).

¹³ Pension schools were boarding schools in which a fee, or pension, was charged to cover the costs, thus restricting entrance to the wealthy. One of Mother Catherine’s innovations was to open pension schools which were day schools instead of boarding schools, thus making them available to middle class girls because of the significantly lower cost. Cf. Mother Austin Carroll, *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy, Vol. I: Ireland* (New York: Catholic Publication Society Co., 1881), p. 151.

¹⁴ *Venerable for Mercy*, p. 7.

government. The Kildare Place Schools welcomed Catholic children in order to convert them.

Although observation of the Kildare Place Schools was useful to Mother Catherine because of their high quality of education, she was appalled at the unconcealed efforts to detach Catholic children from their faith. In 1832, as Mother Catherine was beginning her new religious order, Daniel O’Connell denounced these injustices in Parliament: “I shall oppose every attempt to interfere with the religious education of Catholic children The grossest oppression has been practiced in compelling Catholic parents, under penalty of starvation, to send their children to the Kildare Place Schools.”¹⁵ Mother Catherine was determined to found schools to reinforce the faith of the children and their families. The school program placed religious education at the heart of the school day so that children were immersed in a thoroughly Catholic atmosphere.

The Obligation, Especially of Parents, to Provide Education
(GE, 3)

Having stated that Christians have a right to a Christian education, in paragraph three, the Council Declaration indicates three parties who are responsible for providing this education: the family, the government, and the Church. First of all are the parents, who have the gravest obligation for the education of their children and are therefore to be acknowledged as being “primarily and principally responsible for their education.” The family should be able to depend on society to assist them in the process, however, the government of early 19th century Ireland offered nothing appropriate for Catholic children and would not for some time into the future.

The third party responsible for education is the Church, which has a special role to play in ensuring that the lives of children might be inspired by the spirit of Christ. Mother Catherine played an instrumental role in the creation of a Catholic school system that would help the Church fulfill this obligation.

There is no doubt that Mother Catherine appreciated the right of parents to educate their children and believed that instruction should be linked to the lives of the students. Although education was the major apostolate of the Sisters of Mercy, numerous other works of mercy were carried out by all the Sisters, among which the visitations of families held an important place. The teaching Sisters participated

¹⁵ T. Corcoran, *Some Lists of Catholic Lay Teachers and their Illegal Schools in Later Penal Times* (Dublin, 1932), p. 54, cited in *Positio*, pp. 712-713. See speech of May 21, 1832 on Ministerial Plan of Education, https://archive.org/stream/speechespublicle01ocon/speechespublicle01ocon_djvu.txt (cited August 20, 2015).

in these visitations and developed relationships with the parents of their students. These family visitations enabled the Sisters to adapt their teaching to the immediate needs of their students. It has been said that “the Parent-Teacher Associations of today were born in Baggot Street [the location of the first House of Mercy] in 1827, thanks to the educational and pastoral vision of Mother Catherine.”¹⁶

Catechesis is Chief Among Means (GE, 4)

Paragraph 4 of *GE* notes that while the Church makes use of any educational methods which are of service, “it relies especially on those which are essentially its own. Chief among these is catechetical instruction, which illumines and strengthens the faith, develops a life in harmony with the spirit of Christ, stimulates a conscious and fervent participation in the liturgical mystery and encourages men to take an active part in the apostolate.”

This statement could be called the nucleus of the educational philosophy of Mother Catherine, who began her teaching career by gathering local children for catechetical lessons. In 1823, she was invited by Rev. Joseph Nugent to teach religion in the poor school in his parish on Middle Abbey Street. She supplied, in addition to instruction, food and clothing for the students, knowing that children who are hungry or cold would find it difficult to focus on their lessons.

Mother Catherine taught her Sisters that secular learning was always subservient to spiritual learning. She stated that “although a Religious possessed a knowledge of all the sciences which have ever been known to man, and was distinguished for sense, prudence, and elegance so as to gain the admiration of everyone, yet if she has not studied Jesus Christ and formed her mind on His example, she is as nothing in His eyes, and wants all in wanting the Science of the Saints.”¹⁷

Although she developed different types of schools, all were centered on religious education, which permeated each lesson. Religious instruction, although short, began the day, and the central truth taught in that lesson was repeated and linked to other subjects throughout the day. The purpose “was to accustom the pupils to associate their ordinary work with their religion and to train them to a sense of

¹⁶ *Positio*, pp. 715-6.

¹⁷ Mother Catherine McAuley, Sisters of Mercy of St. Joseph’s Convent, St. Louis, ed., *Familiar Instructions*. (St. Louis: Sisters of Mercy, 1888), 132. This book is a collection of notes taken by various Sisters of Mercy at conferences and other talks given by Mother Catherine to her Sisters.

justice towards God as well as towards neighbour.”¹⁸ The effort was reinforced by short prayers and occasional spiritual readings at the beginning and end of each class.

Schools are of Outstanding Importance Among Educational Institutions (GE, 5)

“Among the various organs of education the school is of outstanding importance”, states paragraph 5 of the Declaration. The importance of education is obvious in the western society of today which enjoys a sufficient number of schools for all children. The statement might be more appreciated in a culture where schools are a rarity, such as in 19th century Ireland or in many less-developed parts of the world today. Mother Catherine saw schools as an essential part of her mission and established at least one school in every foundation. Although she incorporated a number of other less structured forms of education into the apostolate of the religious community, schools remained foundational.

Mother Catherine’s support for schools can be seen in her emphasis on secular subjects. The basic curriculum of these schools was permeated by the Catholic faith, with religious education classes being central to the school, yet Mother Catherine emphasized the value of secular subjects, perhaps more than most educators of girls in that era. She demanded a solid intellectual formation of her students, and expected the same of herself and her Sisters.

In the poor schools, the children learned reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, grammar, and home crafts.¹⁹ In the pension schools, among the subjects were Latin and French, English and Irish, history, geography, mathematics, book-keeping, art and basic science. Optional subjects included music, elocution, and physical education. The foresight of this program may be seen by the fact that in 1871, government schools were classified as “superior schools” if they taught one foreign language. The Mercy pension schools were teaching two foreign languages already in the 1830’s.²⁰ This illustrates Mother Catherine’s insistence on high standards, even in the first few years of the existence of the schools.

Mother Catherine was among the first Catholic educators to apply to enter the National School System, introduced in 1831. Opinions about the benefits of Catholic institutions belonging to the National System were split among the Bishops, leading eventually to a declaration from Rome that each Bishop could decide for his own Diocese

¹⁸ *Positio*, p. 716.

¹⁹ *Savage*, p. 268.

²⁰ *Positio*, p. 725.

whether to apply to the National System.²¹ Mother Catherine argued in favor of participating in the National School System because of the challenge of permeating the System with Gospel values, the advantage of a uniform course of study for the whole country, and the examinations, which motivate pupils to study more diligently. Meeting national standards also served to counter critics who said that schools operated by the Church were inferior. Moreover, membership in the System included annual funding. In 1834, an application was submitted for the Baggot Street School; after undergoing rigorous inspection, the membership was granted in late 1839.²²

*Parents Have the Right to Choose the School for their Children
(GE, 6)*

Following their declaration that schools are of primary significance to education, the Council Fathers stated in paragraph 6 that parents have the right to choose the school which their children attend, urging the governments of the world to fulfill their responsibility to provide schools for all children. This was a special emphasis of Pope John Paul II, who frequently called on governments to provide funding for the education of all children regardless of the type of school the parents choose.²³

Mother Catherine was impelled to establish schools for Catholic children in order that their parents not be forced to send their children to Protestant schools. As she conducted her research, she went to Kildare Place with a hidden motive, that of discovering the names and addresses of the Catholic children, so that she could speak with their parents about removing them from Kildare Place and placing them in the Baggot Street School.

In Mother Catherine's day, there was no possibility of the government promoting Catholic education. Catholics were grateful if they were allowed to have any Catholic education at all. But history has brought about a change: today the Irish government pays a large portion of the costs of building and operating Catholic schools.²⁴

²¹ *Positio*, p. 721.

²² *Positio*, p. 721-722.

²³ See, for example, *Address to the Staff and the Students of Saint Andrew's College of Education*, Glasgow, June 1, 1982, n. 2; *Discorso all'Organizzazione delle Nazioni Unite per l'Educazione, la Scienza e la Cultura* (UNESCO), Paris, June 2, 1980, n. 18; *Address to the Students, Teachers and Administrators of Rome's Schools*, February 13, 1999, nn. 2-4 (available at <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>, cited August 14, 2015.)

²⁴ Citizens Information Board, http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/primary_and_post_primary_education/going_to_primary_school/ownership_of_primary_schools.html, cited 8 June 2015.

Pastoral Care for Catholic Children in Non-Catholic Schools
(GE, 7)

Both the Church and parents are responsible for ensuring that children who attend non-Catholic schools receive pastoral care (GE, 7), and especially to ensure that they are taught Christian doctrine and receive spiritual assistance. Pastoral care was an essential part of Mother Catherine's educational program, although in the beginning, she taught children who did not go to school at all. She began her teaching career during her years at Coolock House with the Callaghans (1803 - 1822); she gathered neighborhood children for catechesis and the household servants for prayer and instruction. These practices developed out of her observation of the plight of the poor and their need to know their faith.

The Council Fathers, in speaking about pastoral care in non-Catholic schools generally meant government-run schools which are more or less neutral towards the faith. In early 18th century Ireland, however, the schools operated or supported by the government were manifestly anti-Catholic. For Mother Catherine then, pastoral care for children in non-Catholic schools was a grave need, necessitating the establishment of Catholic schools.

The Role of Catholic Schools in Human and Cultural Formation
(GE, 8)

The Declaration (n. 8) declares that Catholic schools "are no less zealous than other schools in the promotion of culture and in the human formation of young people . . . however, it is the special function of the Catholic school to develop in the school community an atmosphere animated by a spirit of liberty and charity based on the Gospel." The promotion of culture was central to Mother Catherine's style of education, whether at the level of her poorest students or her most highly educated Sisters. For the children and young women who came from less cultured backgrounds, she focussed on kindness, politeness, good manners, a sense of responsibility, discipline, cleanliness, and order.²⁵ The pension schools emphasized the necessity of social graces, and offered instruction in music, art, and languages. In addition to this cultural and human formation, Sisters of Mercy schools were permeated by the atmosphere of Gospel liberty and charity called for by the Second Vatican Council.²⁶ The schools were

²⁵ Savage, p. 268; *Positio*, p. 717.

²⁶ For example, see numerous sections of *Dignitas Humanae*; GE, 8, *Lumen Gentium*, 37, 39-43.

founded for the purpose of offering high quality human formation integrated with the principles of Catholic doctrine.

Teachers (GE, 8)

Section 8 of *GE* also includes the Council Fathers' thoughts on teachers, who are encouraged to remember that "it depends chiefly on them whether the Catholic school achieves its purpose." The teachers in the Sisters of Mercy schools were primarily religious Sisters. What was expected of them was outlined in the First Rule of the Congregation and developed further in the Foundress' *Familiar Instructions*.²⁷ The Rule states that "the Sisters . . . shall undertake the charge with all charity and humility, purity of intention and confidence in God and . . . shall cheerfully accept all of the labour and fatigue of it. Before the Sisters enter school they shall raise their hearts to God and to the Queen of Heaven, recommending themselves and the children to their care and protection . . ." ²⁸

In addition to this spiritual preparation, Mother Catherine encouraged her Sisters "to continue their studies in languages, mathematics, music and painting. She insisted on careful preparation of classwork, and was always ready to listen to suggestions to improve method or presentation."²⁹

Alternative Education (GE, 9)

GE paragraph 9 notes that, while most Catholic schools should follow the prototype for all schools, there is a need for alternative education. The Council Fathers stated that "while one may not neglect primary and intermediate schools, which provide the basis of education, one should attach considerable importance to those establishments which are particularly necessary nowadays, such as: professional and technical colleges, institutes for adult education and for the promotion of social work, . . . and training colleges for teachers of religion and of other branches of education." In addition, it exhorts all the faithful "to spare no sacrifice in helping Catholic schools to become increasingly effective, especially in caring for the poor, those who are without the help and affection of family, and those who do not have the Faith."

The exhortation to care for the poor, the marginalized, and those without faith is one which Mother Catherine obviously took to heart. In addition to establishing schools for the poor, Mother Catherine

²⁷ *Familiar Instructions*, Ch. 2, pp. 8-15.

²⁸ *The Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy*, Ch. 2, nos. 1-2.

²⁹ Savage, pp. 269-270.

included as part of the life of the sisters, visitation of the sick and of families. Through pastoral care, many were drawn back to the Faith or to the Faith through the loving kindness of the sisters.

Vocational education. In the field of vocational or technical education, the idea for training young girls originated in 1823 during Mother Catherine's work at the Middle Abbey Street Poor School. There she observed first-hand the ignorance of rudimentary sanitation and of basic skills like cooking and cleaning. Her concern for women led to integration of the material and cultural aspects of life with the women's spiritual advancement. At the Houses of Mercy, the women received a general education for life, especially in simple cooking, taking care of the home, manners and etiquette in order to prepare them for responsible adulthood so that they might become good mothers and wives, able to provide their families with a healthy, peaceful and faith-filled atmosphere. In addition, they were taught marketable skills such as dressmaking, crocheting, weaving, laundering, and cooking. Thus, although she did not establish schools or colleges for this, the Houses of Mercy provided a type vocational education.

Teacher training. Regarding teacher training colleges, although not a college in the strict sense, the Baggot Street School was supplying teachers to other schools by 1836, as can be attested by a letter from Bishop Michael Blake. He referred a request for a teacher to Mother Catherine, obviously presuming that she would be able to supply someone.³⁰ The system developed by Mother Catherine was to invite promising pupils who wished to become tutors or governesses to attend training courses and to practice teaching in the poor schools.

In 1860, the Sisters of Mercy began a private training college. In 1877, the College became officially known as the *Sedes Sapientiae*, the first teacher training school in Ireland for women.³¹ A second school was opened by the Sisters of Mercy in 1893 in Limerick and these two remained the only teacher training colleges for women in Ireland, educating both lay students and Sisters, including those from other religious institutes. In 1975, the two colleges became constituent colleges of the National University of Ireland, and were no longer under the auspices of the Sisters of Mercy. Thus, although Mother Catherine did not found a teacher training college herself, the sisters who followed her extended her vision and did so.

³⁰ Letter from Michael Blake, in Sister M. Angela Bolster, R.S.M., ed., *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley* (Stoke-on-Trent, England: Webberly, ltd., 1989), p. 20.

³¹ *Positio*, p. 720.

Higher Education (n. 10) and the Sacred Sciences (GE, 11)

The next two segments of *GE*, numbers 10 and 11, stress the importance of higher education and ecclesiastical faculties. Mother Catherine did not develop programs of higher education; she had only just begun what was to become the secondary school system. In fact, such colleges were not permitted to Catholics at the time. However, as the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy grew and higher education became more developed, her daughters founded dozens of colleges, especially in the United States, over the next 150 years. The charism of the Sisters of Mercy grew to provide for these needs when in the future, the Church and society was ready for that type of institution.

Collaboration Between Schools (GE, 12)

The Declaration ends with an exhortation for collaboration and coordination between Catholic schools at various levels (diocesan, national, international). Because the first Catholic schools in Ireland began at the end of the nineteenth century as the penal laws were being slowly repealed, all schools were in their initial foundational phases, and probably not in a position to be involved with outside organizations or other schools. However, that this cooperation was part of Mother Catherine's fundamental attitude can be seen through the tremendous amount of sharing that went on within her own institute, with Sisters transferred to ensure that the needs of each foundation were met; by the provision of teachers for schools run by other institutes; by her generous response to Bishops and priests requesting the assistance of her Sisters, and by her decision not to open a poor school in Cork because of the earlier Presentation Sisters schools.³²

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that Mother Catherine McAuley lived beyond her own period of history, working according to an extraordinary vision for the educational needs of her people. Sister M. Angela Bolster, R.S.M. attributes the secret of her success to the "spiritual orientation of her work and in the fact that she showed herself open to new ideas; that she was ready to adapt and assimilate; willing to learn from the experience of older contemporaries and anxious to

³² *Positio*, p. 716, footnote 34.

share that experience with others . . . Her comprehensive policy of education was unrestricted by time or place or style.”³³

It has been demonstrated that Mother Catherine’s educational philosophy was remarkably similar to that pronounced by the Council Fathers in *GE* more than 100 years later. She knew that education is fundamental to the mission of the Church to bring the Gospel to all the world. She believed strongly that all people have a right to education according to their own faith and she supported parents in their grave obligation to educate their children. She established schools at different levels according to need, always centered on catechesis and religious education while simultaneously employing advanced pedagogical methods. She also developed alternative systems of adult and vocational education for those who had diverse needs, and all her work was accomplished in collaboration and cooperation with teachers, parents, students, bishops, priests, and other religious.

There is thus a remarkable correspondence of Mother Catherine’s thought with that of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. Yet, in one sense, it is not so remarkable. After all, the fundamental principles for Catholic education were laid out 2000 years by the Founder of the Church, the Great Teacher, Jesus Christ, a fact that Mother Catherine never forgot.

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³³ *Positio*, p. 727.