

Mother Catherine Spalding

1793-1858

In 1813, when no education for girls, no private health care, and no organized social services existed on the Kentucky frontier, Catherine Spalding, aged 19, was elected leader of six women forming a new religious community, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth. On January 6, 2003, the Louisville Courier-Journal named her the one woman among 16 "most influential people in Louisville/Jefferson County history."

The following was written by Mary Ellen Doyle, SCN, author of the book "Pioneer Spirit: Catherine Spalding, Sister of Charity of Nazareth."



Catherine Spalding was born in Charles County, MD; her parents brought her at about age four to a pioneer Catholic enclave in Nelson County, Kentucky. There, her mother soon died; her father incurred heavy debts and deserted both financial obligations and family. Her aunt and uncle, Thomas and Elizabeth Spalding Elder, raised the five Spalding children with 10 children of their own. At 16, Catherine went to live with her cousins, Richard and Clementina Elder Clark, for three years until she joined the newly founded Sisters of Charity of Nazareth (SCN).

As a founding leader, Catherine helped establish a school on the St. Thomas Farm in Nelson County. The community and school grew through years of labor and poverty, and in 1822, moved to a larger property at present-day Nazareth, Kentucky, near Bardstown.

In 1831, Catherine and three Sisters opened Presentation Academy in the basement of St. Louis Church in the rough river city of Louisville, serving children of both prosperous merchants and the so-called "levee rats." The next year, when cholera struck the city, the Sisters volunteered to nurse the sick poor and gathered orphans into their own small house behind the church. Twenty-five children moved from there to the house that Catherine and the women of Louisville raised money to build.

Within three years, river boats and urban disease had brought enough orphans to require purchase of a large building, the St. Vincent Orphanage that lasted Catherine's lifetime. It had a long wing in which she could complete the triad of services by opening St. Vincent Infirmary. Presentation Academy moved out of the church basement into houses on Fifth Street until 1893. It won such loyalty that it remains in 2010 as the oldest school in Louisville.

From 1838 on, Catherine served two more terms in leadership. As Mother, she strengthened and formed the spirit of the growing community, despite continued poverty and many deaths from the pervasive "consumption" of the era. She successfully defended the congregation's independent identity when Bishop Flaget wished to merge it with the Sisters of Charity in Maryland, knowing that the Sisters did not wish it and that a distant administration would hinder the mission, already expanding to other parts of Kentucky. She led the separate establishment of St. Joseph Infirmary so the orphanage could expand, and in 1854-55, she directed construction of the church and new academy at Nazareth. Although it has new uses, it still stands as her heritage.

Interim periods out of office allowed Catherine to return to Louisville to her beloved orphans, more numerous as immigrants from Ireland and Germany arrived in the 1840s. As superior of the orphanage—"the only place on earth to which my heart clings"—she accepted, loved, and nurtured hundreds of children; directed Sisters and lay assistants; and collaborated with all sorts of professional men and their wives who became her friends, best supporters and fund-raisers at the annual Orphans' Fair. On the streets of Louisville, she became a recognized figure, either visiting businesses to beg for the orphans or attending to the poor in their homes. It was said that "you are our only refuge...Every orphan in the city claims you as their mother."

One such errand to a destitute family occasioned Catherine Spalding's final illness. She contracted pneumonia and died on March 20, 1858. Her spirit lives in her Sisters, international now in membership and in ministries of education, care of the sick, impoverished, and orphan, and advocacy for social justice, in five nations of North and Central America, Asia, and Africa. The decisive word is, "If Mother Catherine were here, she would go."

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