Catherine McAuley founded her ministry and then a religious congregation at a time of tectonic societal and cultural shift. Many parts of the world were rapidly moving from an agrarian to an industrial economy, workers were leaving the country for the city, and deplorable living conditions rendered many persons (particularly women and children) vulnerable to sickness, poverty and exploitation. More than 50 years before the Church’s magisterium articulated a formal social teaching, Catherine was living the scriptural command to “Go and do likewise”—feeding the hungry, tending the sick and educating those in need of learning. Is it any wonder that Sisters of Mercy claim that a passion for social justice is in our DNA? Moreover, Catherine established religious foundations, granting each one sufficient autonomy to assess and address the needs of the people in their specific locale. Having formed and mentored the sisters, she enabled them to maximize their own creativity at the service of the common good.
The Elements of Catholic Social Tradition

Those engaged in the multitudes of ministries of the Church sometimes speak almost facilely about the Church’s social teaching without fully acknowledging the richness, complexity and scope of our tradition, or recognizing and celebrating their own place within it. The Catholic Social Tradition (see diagram below) is comprised of three integrally-related parts: social teaching, social thought and social practice. Each element continually informs, challenges and shapes the others.

Catholic social teaching originates from the magisterium or teaching authority of the Church; that is, the pope and the bishops in communion with the pontiff. John Paul II, in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, described this teaching as the “accurate formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence” (41). Rooting their work first in sacred scripture, the pope and bishops draw upon the Church’s theological tradition as well as upon its rich and varied pastoral expertise to address complex and difficult realities.

Catholic social thought, multidisciplinary in nature, is the work of philosophers, theologians, economists, political scientists and educators bringing their knowledge and analysis to bear upon the complex realities of our day. This process is ongoing in universities (particularly but not exclusively Catholic universities) and within social service and health care ministries.

Social teaching and thought can have little impact upon our society without the daily, heroic actions of individuals and organizations ministering with and for the Church throughout the world. Catholic social practice, or praxis, takes place anywhere a committed individual labors to educate, comfort, guide or lead others in the name of Jesus Christ. Historically, dynamic individuals and movements have emerged within the Church to address the specific needs of what Pope Francis calls “God’s holy people.”

Similar to Catherine’s response to the challenges of the Industrial Revolution, Dorothy Day, inspired by social activist Peter Maurin, started the Catholic Worker Movement in the midst of the Great Depression to provide food, clothing, shelter and, most important of all, dignity to the many persons who were unemployed and poor.

Again, after World War II, when thousands of men, women and children were displaced, Catholic Relief Services, an international humanitarian agency of the Church, stepped in to relocate and reestablish individuals and families needing homes, medical care and education.

Later, in the vibrant after-glow of the Second Vatican Council, young teenaged lay women and men gathered in a small chapel in Rome’s Trastevere neighborhood to pray. Today, the Sant’Egidio Community (as they became known), numbering over 60,000 members, commits itself to prayer, communicating the gospel, dialogue, ecumenism and solidarity with the poor. In each age, the Spirit inspires generous women and men who recognize that those who suffer are their sisters and brothers.

Where are We?

Like Catherine McAuley before us, Mercy sisters, companions, associates and Mercy Volunteer Corps members continually engage in the arenas of social thought and social practice. Catherine, while neither a theologian nor a solicitor, nonetheless exercised her considerable influence and connections to engage in dialogue with both ecclesial and civic leaders of her time, improving the plight of those who were in need. Today her followers are attorneys, physicians, psychologists, advocates, theologians, social analysts, educators, pastoral associates and any profession that reaches out to those at the peripheries.

Those who are busy about the work to which they are called can often overlook the important interplay between and among the three elements of the Church’s social tradition. Conciliar documents and papal encyclicals do not emerge in a vacuum; they build upon the work of the broader church. An example illus-
Attentiveness to those at the coal face arises from the most fundamental of all social principles—the inherent dignity of each person. It recognizes that work changes people; that it can enhance or suppress the individual's dignity. John Paul II, in *Centesimus Annus* (1991), noted that “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of lower order... but rather, should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity ... with a view to the common good.” The Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace, in its 2012 document, “The Vocation of the Business Leader,” asserted that subsidiarity “recognizes that in human societies, smaller communities exist within larger ones ... (subsidiarity) insists that the freedom and input of those closest to the effects to be felt should not be arbitrarily disregarded.” Subsidiarity, it asserts, “fosters initiative, innovation, creativity and a sense of shared responsibility.” This practice is exactly what Catherine implemented when she granted each new foundation the autonomy that was needed to meet needs at a local level.

**Conclusion**

The contemporary follower of Catherine McAuley has much to learn from the Church’s rich social tradition. We must be rooted in prayer, honor our ministerial experience, speak and act for justice and engage in ongoing dialogue with co-workers as well as Church and civic leaders. While involved primarily in social practice, one must honor the deep personal experience that accompanies ministering with and for the poor and needy. Honoring experience demands prayer, reflection and dialogue in order to ground one’s ministry. Advocacy and social action on behalf of those at the margins of society influence us who are engaged in social thought and social teaching. Dialogue with others is an integral part of the contemporary asceticism of social justice.

As the Institute moves forward toward one leadership team and one center of authority, leadership and membership have an opportunity to live out the principle of subsidiarity through ongoing conversation and mutual dialogue. Mercy demands “staying at the table” on behalf of those who are not represented or whose voices are not heard. Each one is even more obligated to creatively maximize opportunities to speak to and hear the voices of those at the “coal face.”

Pope Benedict, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), warned that “As society becomes even more globalized, it makes us neighbors, but does not make us brothers [or sisters] ... This [relationship] originates in a transcendent vocation from God the Father, who loved us first, teaching us through the Son what … charity is” (19). Pope Benedict’s words echo Catherine McAuley’s nineteenth-century retreat instructions: “Our charity must be in our hearts and from our hearts, and a charity such as Jesus Christ practiced while on earth.”

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