

**Mary Ellen Doyle, SCN, *Pioneer Spirit: Catherine Spalding, Sister of Charity of Nazareth*, The University Press of Kentucky, Kentucky, 2006. ISBN-13: 978-0-8131-2395-0 (hardcover), pp. xvi + 286**

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'In the cold, possibly the snow, of January 21, 1813, a woman just turned nineteen crossed on horseback the empty fields at Poplar Neck near the Salt River and Bardstown, Kentucky... Nothing else was nearby but another log structure, a few outlying cabins, and stripped winter trees' (p. 1). With this evocative description of the bleak and bare landscape in which the story of Catherine Spalding's religious life commences, Doyle begins her account of the life of the first Mother Superior of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth (SCN); a story which, as the book's title suggests, takes place in the frontier country of nineteenth-century America, amongst the pioneers.

Spalding was born in 1793, into a family in which '[f]aith and the freedom to practice it, fortune and slavery to maintain it' were 'the contradictory elements' of their heritage (p. 3). Catherine's disrupted and itinerant early life was marked by the death of her mother, and the changing fortunes of her father, which eventually led him to abandon his children into the care of the extended family, and then vanish. Catherine grew up in a staunchly Catholic community, and became one of the first women to answer the call to form a new religious community based on the ideals of St Vincent de Paul.

Spalding was elected to leadership of the SCN at the startlingly young age of nineteen, and Doyle shows how this woman's life was shaped by the formation of her community, as surely as the community itself was shaped by Spalding. This is not a hagiographical account, but Doyle, herself an SCN sister, is clearly a great admirer of Spalding, and this is evident throughout the book. Spalding herself left behind very few journal entries, and only a portion of her extensive correspondence remains. This leaves inevitable holes, both in factual detail, and in the assessment of Spalding's character and spirituality. Stories passed down through the community are of obvious value, but Doyle is clearly aware of alterations that the early sisters' sense of veneration of Spalding can produce, and handles these nuggets from the oral tradition with an appropriate degree of gentle scepticism. Despite these drawbacks, Doyle succeeds in creating a rounded and satisfying portrait of Spalding: a woman passionately devoted to her work and her faith, loyal to her community and full of compassion for the poor. She also emerges as a woman who faced many struggles in her religious life, and met them with a fortitude that was only occasionally tempered by irritation, sarcasm and anger.

The SCN's involvement with the slave trade has clearly been a difficult issue for Doyle to deal with. She handles it with sensitivity, refusing to avoid the subject, and attempting to examine the reasons which led to the women's complicity with the slave trade. She resists the temptation to exonerate the sisters, but is at pains to stress their humane treatment of their "servants", quoting correspondence which mentions the slaves in an interested and caring manner, and recounting stories of their involvement in community life. A point of high drama is a murder committed by one of the slaves, and the compassionate response of the nuns in the face of this tragedy.

Doyle enjoys the moments of excitement in Spalding's story: the murder, a runaway nun, a schism in the community; but equal weight is given to less dramatic but enormously important facets of Spalding's life. There are some extremely tender descriptions of her work with orphans, many of whom considered her to be their mother, calling her "Mumsie" and sleeping in her room.

Spalding's is a story of strong female relationships. Mother of her community for a significant portion of her life, Spalding lived her life among women, and her story is inextricably bound up with those of her companions. Doyle brings to the fore the deep and lasting friendships that Spalding formed with her sisters, and figures such as Claudia Elliott, Ellen O'Connell, Columba Carroll, and Frances and Harriet Gardiner emerge as the women with whom Spalding shared hugely important friendships.

Equally important to the development of the community were the relationships between the sisters and the bishops who guided them. Spalding was obviously a shrewd negotiator, and while this is evident in the accounts of her financial dealings and her relationships with lay people in the local community, nowhere is this clearer than in the descriptions of her interactions with the bishops. In common with most communities formed during the nineteenth century, the SCNs found in their bishops a source of support, along with many reasons for irritation. Relying largely on Spalding's letters, Doyle demonstrates the wit, skill and rhetoric that Spalding employed when differences of opinion arose. Doyle also allows the reader to see the affectionate and familial feelings that existed between the bishops and the sisters, particularly in the case of Bishop David.

The “pioneer” aspect of Spalding’s story is fascinating. For her, building a community meant not only gathering suitable women together, but also creating a place in which to live and work. Doyle paints a vivid picture of the hardships endured by the early sisters, and their fortitude in the face of freezing cold, inhospitable living conditions, hard physical work, and an unvarying diet of ‘corn bread, middling... and sage tea’ (p. 31). The early sisters spread out and undertook work at great distances from each other, often having to create living quarters and a chapel when they arrived. Doyle has had to reconstruct the history of a community whose early records are often scant and unreliable, given the illiteracy of many members and their more pressing concerns of creating shelter and setting to work. Her account of Spalding’s life is extremely readable, weaving together information from a range of archival sources, and attempting to fill in the gaps without imposing her preferred version of events too heavily onto Spalding’s story. This is an engaging and enlightening account of the life of a woman working at the frontiers of faith.