

Sister Mary Celine Laskey



Reflecting on her journey as a Sister of Charity, Sister Mary Celine Laskey affirms, “I think my gift from God is hospitality and friendship for the unloved.” Sister Celine has been sharing that gift as a Sister of Charity for more than 65 years, reaching out with love and compassion to children, adolescents and adults, especially those who have been unloved and neglected.

Sister Celine started life as Clare-Anne Laskey, a beloved daughter in a close knit Catholic family in Roxbury, Massachusetts. As a student at Notre Dame Academy, she greatly admired her music teacher, who was a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur. Upon graduation from high school, Clare-Anne fully intended to join the Sisters of Notre Dame. With her trunk already packed and her farewell party behind her, she had an experience that changed the course of her life. On that day, while visiting Mass General Hospital’s basement clinic for the poor, Clare-Anne was unexpectedly called upon by a surgeon to hold the hand of someone going through a difficult procedure. “Looking back on it today, I know it was a religious experience. In my mind and heart, I heard a voice say, ‘This is where I want you, where you can hold the hand.’”

Instead of joining the Sisters of Notre Dame, Clare-Anne’s quest to live out the life to which God had called her led her to the Sisters of Charity. She entered on September 8, 1947, with her trunk still containing the habit of the Sisters of Notre Dame. She took the name Sister Mary Celine, reflecting her devotion to Mary and in honor of her sister, Celine, who died as an infant.

As a 19 year old newly-vowed Sister, Sister Celine’s first assignment was to work at Saint Mary’s Residence for Children in Newark, New Jersey. Naïve and idealistic, she soon faced a life of hard work and great need. “I thought I would be dressing up little girls and putting little ribbons in their hair.” Instead, she found herself dealing with ringworm, head lice, and the challenge of stretching meager resources. Nonetheless, Sister Celine says, “I loved every minute of living there.” She worked hard to do her very best for the children, teaching double grades, leading music and recreation, and working with volunteers to offer a variety of enrichment activities, including Irish dance complete with authentic costumes.

Sister Celine ministered at Saint Mary's from 1949-1959. She reflects that "it gave me an exorbitant sense of what is right and just for human beings. I was being etched into the person I am today."

As Sister Celine's journey continued, she worked as a teacher at St. Augustine's school for four years and then returned to Saint Mary's as an administrator until 1969. Looking for an opportunity to continue in the field of direct care for young people who had been neglected, she moved on to serve as a house mother for adolescents in a group home in Elizabeth. Sister Celine's loving acceptance of these young women broke through the shunning and suspicion with which they treated her when she first arrived, and she gradually earned their trust.

Following her work with the young women in Elizabeth, Sister Celine served as a house mother for eight children at St. Agatha's Home in West Haverstraw, New York. With the children, she befriended a severely disabled boy, Robert, who was a patient at nearby Helen Hayes Hospital. When Robert left the hospital for Letchworth Village Developmental Center, Sister Celine followed. "He led me. He was very pivotal in my life." Sister Celine started volunteering as the organist for the Letchworth Village Choir of about 60 disabled adults. She went on to work full time at Letchworth from 1980-83.

After Sister Celine's mother had a stroke, Sister Celine moved back to Boston to be near her. There, while serving as administrator at a pre-retirement center for Sisters of Charity, she realized one of her long time goals of studying music therapy so that she would be able to bring music therapy as a gift to a L'Arche community, an inclusive community of faith and friendship where people with and without intellectual disabilities share gifts together. As with Moses who saw the promised land but was denied entrance, Sister Celine has never had the opportunity to serve in a L'Arche community, but she says "I live L'Arche in my heart each day."

Sister Celine loves using music therapy as she has continued to be a friend to the lonely and neglected, ministering in group homes and also at Saint Anne Villa. Now 83 years old, she shares her gift twice a week at North Jersey Developmental Center in Totowa. There, she is a very special friend to a disabled woman named Pat. "She is very disabled and also very, very wonderful." Sister Celine is delighted that "Pat is finally beginning to trust life enough to tell us who she is. She is nonverbal but she is communicating." Sister Celine connects with Pat through music, and notes that Pat loves "parade music, chimes, drums, and the Beatles." The staff of the Developmental Center has been amazed at the transformation in Pat, who once refused touch but now embraces Sister Celine with affection and joy.

As Sister Celine looks back on her life's journey, she is thankful for all the people who led her along the way. "People are sent to guide you. There is no haphazard meeting. There's always someone there to wave you on. Thanks be to God!" So thankful for those who were pivotal in her life, Sister Celine in turn hopes "that along the way, I was able to support the journey, especially through music, but also by being a friend. There just aren't enough friends around."

True to her calling and thankful for all that God has given her, Sister Celine has been a faithful friend to so many others. As long as she is able, Sister Celine will continue to hold a hand, share a song, and lift a spirit. Thanks be to God!