

## Sister Elizabeth Harnett



When asked how long she has been a Sister of Charity, ninety-three year old Sister Elizabeth Harnett laughs and says, “My whole life!” After speaking with Sister Elizabeth, it becomes clear that she was hardly exaggerating about being a sister all her life. From a very early age, Sister Elizabeth committed her life to Jesus. Her commitment and enthusiasm continues undiminished as she still devotes every day to following Him and trying to do good.

Born in 1920, Elizabeth grew up near Boston as the second oldest of five children. She attended public school and was enrolled in Sunday school to receive her religious education. She immediately loved it and her Sunday school teacher, who was a Sister of Charity.

Not long after she started going to Sunday school, six year old Elizabeth had an experience that profoundly affected the course of her life. She was out on the street jumping rope with friends when a neighbor clapped her hands from her third floor window to get the girls’ attention. The neighbor asked if someone could go shopping for her and Elizabeth volunteered to come up. Inside the neighbor’s apartment, Elizabeth was amazed to find a bookcase full of books. “I asked, ‘Could I look at your books?’ and when she said yes, I started taking out the books and looking at them all. I pulled out a First Communion book that had belonged to one of her children and I saw a picture of Jesus walking with his disciples. Underneath the picture there was one line in large type and it said, ‘And Jesus went about doing good.’ I kept going back to that picture, and that picture stayed with me the rest of my life.”

Young Elizabeth thought deeply about how she could be a follower of Jesus and do good. On the day of her First Communion, she told God in prayer that she was still thinking about doing good, but she didn’t know how or when it was going to happen. “Then God spoke to me, and He said, ‘Give me yourself.’” Elizabeth answered, “Yes,” trusting that God would tell her what He wanted her to do when the time comes.

God’s plan for Elizabeth started to take shape after Elizabeth, then age eleven, traveled to New Jersey to visit the Convent of the Sisters of Saint Elizabeth, where an older neighbor girl was taking her vows. Elizabeth decided to follow in her neighbor’s footsteps. After she graduated from eighth grade, Elizabeth convinced her parents to allow her to enter St. Vincent Juniorate, the high school for girls interested in joining the Sisters of Charity. “I don’t think my mother wanted me to go, but my father said that if it’s going to make her happy, then let her go.”

Elizabeth completed high school as a boarding student at St. Vincent Juniorate and then continued on as a postulant and novice. She took her final vows as a Sister of Charity in 1939. She took the name, Sister

Bernadette Maria, though years later when Sisters were given the option to return to their birth names, she decided to be known as Sister Elizabeth. “I loved that name, Elizabeth. In Hebrew it means ‘House of God.’”

Sister Elizabeth, or Sister Bernadette Maria as she was known then, was sent out to teach in schools in Jersey City and later in Newark. She taught for a total of thirty years, including six years when she volunteered as part of a special program to integrate blind students into her classroom.

After thirty years of teaching in New Jersey, Sister Elizabeth returned to the Boston area. Over the next forty years, she served in a variety of ministries. She was a classroom teacher and a house mother to multi-handicapped teens. She also ministered to the sick at a hospital for the chronically ill and was a companion to the elderly. As she describes her various ministries, Sister Elizabeth fondly recalls many of the people who were so special to her, recounting humorous incidents and conversations with amazing clarity. She adopts a spot-on Irish accent to recount the words of an old woman who, when given the choice of companions, told her son, “I think I’ll take the nun.”

Sister Elizabeth remained very active in the Boston area until a fall in 2009 brought her back to New Jersey to recuperate at Saint Anne Villa. Her recovery took her from a wheelchair to a walker to a cane. Today she prefers to use a wheeled walker “so I can go faster.” She takes advantage of the activities offered at Saint Anne Villa and goes on frequent outings, including a recent trip to go apple picking. In a way, returning to Saint Anne Villa brings Sister Elizabeth full circle, for she remembers singing for and visiting with the older Sisters at the Villa when she was a young student at St. Vincent Juniorate.

Sister Elizabeth still centers her life on the picture and the words that made such an impression on her when she was six: *And Jesus went about doing good*. “I don’t get out like I used to, but I still try my darnedest to do good where I am.” She adds, “I have so much to be thankful for!”

Sister Elizabeth remains faithful to her commitment to follow Jesus by doing good. She ministers to others through words of encouragement and gentle humor, acts of kindness, and prayer. Long ago, she gave her life to God, and she marvels that God has always been with her, seemingly always one step ahead with a new opportunity or challenge.

Sister Elizabeth’s absolute trust and positive spirit continues to uplift and inspire others. There is no doubt that she will continue to go about doing good wherever God leads.