

Sister Jacqueline Burns

As Sister Jacqueline Burns matter-of-factly describes her life in ministry as a Sister of Charity, it becomes easy to understand why she is so respected and appreciated by people both inside and outside the Sisters of Charity community. Although she could have never foreseen where her devotion to the mission of charity would take her, she continues today on a path she first resolved to follow at a very early age. She marvels at how God has blessed her throughout her life and allowed her to serve Him as she lives the mission.

Jacqueline Burns was born in Kearney, New Jersey in 1927. She was the oldest of three daughters and her mother taught her to read even before Jacqueline was enrolled in school. As an entering kindergartner at St. Cecilia Elementary School, Jacqueline encountered Sisters of Charity for the first time and was immediately drawn to them. She recalls, “My teacher was Sister Agnes de Lourdes, a woman of such grace, and I loved her. I remember how she would play the piano and how the pastor would come in and sit on a wicker rocking chair while the students would sing. I found the whole environment entrancing.” Jacqueline observed the sisters go out into the parish community after school to visit the sick and help families in need. She says, “Though I didn’t tell anyone at the time, I knew within a month of starting school that when I grew up, I would be a Sister of Charity!”

When Jacqueline was a freshman at St. Cecelia High School, her favorite teacher, Sr. Rita Margaret, recognized the vocation that had taken root in Jacqueline years earlier. “She called my mother to come to the convent to talk with her, and, of course, my mother thought that I was in some kind of trouble!” Instead, Sr. Rita told Mrs. Burns, “I think that your daughter has a vocation to the Sisters of Charity.” Jacqueline confirmed that since kindergarten, she had considered nothing else.

Jacqueline finished her high school years, enjoying many activities and always being the organizer who brought students together and made everyone feel welcome. Jacqueline looked forward to being a teacher as a Sister of Charity. She also wanted to be involved in meaningful projects that would build community.

Along with four other girls from her high school class, Jacqueline entered the Sisters of Charity on the March entrance date following high school graduation. Jacqueline took the name, Sister Francois, by which she was known until the congregation was given the privilege of returning to their baptismal names in 1970.

As a novice, Jacqueline was excited to be sent to teach second grade at Our Lady of Grace School in Hoboken. She had a class of 64 students, arranged in the classroom with eight rows of eight. She remembers one student who stood out on the very first day of class and who proved to be particularly bright and helpful. “On the first day, she told me her name was Marianne Sullivan, and something in me said, ‘She’s it!’” Marianne followed her young teacher to become a Sister of Charity a few years later. Sister Jacqueline raves, “Marianne was extraordinary when she was in second grade, and she was an extraordinary Sister of Charity!”

With great joy, Sister Jacqueline took her vows and was missioned to teach at St. Michael’s School in Newark. She started her assignment by again teaching second grade with a class of 64 students. She faced the challenges of teaching with enthusiasm and resolve, even managing calmly to lead her class outside for an early recess one morning when she found a mouse scurrying about in her scrap basket.



Sister Jacqueline served at St. Michael's from 1948 to 1957 and she taught not only the second grade, but also the third, sixth, seventh and eighth grades. During this time, Sister Jacqueline developed serious gall bladder trouble. She endured great pain for almost a year until finally she was taken to St. Joseph Hospital in Paterson for emergency surgery. "The doctor told me that my gall bladder was in such poor condition when he removed it that it was about 30 seconds away from breaking, which would have killed me."

After a long period of rehabilitation, Sister Jacqueline returned to St. Michael's and was later assigned to teach at St. John's Cathedral High School in Paterson. During this time, she spent summers studying at Catholic University of America, earning a M.A. in History in 1963, followed by a Summer Fulbright Scholarship to study in Paris in 1964. She then returned to Catholic University full time to earn a PhD in History.

In 1967, Sister Jacqueline joined the faculty of the College of Saint Elizabeth, where she quickly moved from Assistant Professor of History, to Assistant Dean of Studies, to Dean of Studies. She loved working with students and got great satisfaction from helping them to realize their potential as future leaders.

In 1981, after much prayer, Sister Jacqueline agreed to submit her name as a candidate for the President of the College. She served as President from 1981-1997. Sister Jacqueline led through coalition and inclusion. "My leadership style is to build a team, a group. No good leader acts alone. It has to be 'ours.'" The faculty responded enthusiastically to Sister Jacqueline's leadership and the College flourished.

As College President, Sister Jacqueline worked to bring diversity to the student body and to build community among the students. She also managed to lead the College out of financial difficulties, substantially increased the College's visibility and presence as a leading Catholic institution of higher learning, and instituted the President's Council as an invaluable source of support.

Sister Jacqueline retired from her position as College President in 1997 to devote her energies to new ministries. While serving in leadership for the Sisters of Charity, Sister Jacqueline was appointed the founding chair of St. Joseph's Healthcare System in 2000. Working closely with the current CEO and President, she spearheaded the integration of a regional medical center, a community hospital, a children's hospital, a nursing home and a visiting health service into the region's leading Catholic healthcare system, a system that remains faithful to its founding mission of providing quality healthcare with a special concern for poor and underserved people. Today, Sister Jacqueline continues as a consultant to the CEO of St. Joseph's Healthcare System and an active member of the Peer Review Board and the Embracing Excellence Committee.

Though her work in ministry has led her to serve in ways she could never have imagined in her early days as a second grade teacher, Sister Jacqueline's dedication to the mission of the Sisters of Charity has remained constant throughout her journey. Sister Jacqueline is grateful for the many opportunities God has given her to further the mission of charity. She says with conviction, "I know that the mission is alive," and then adds, "and it makes me smile!"