

## Sister Thomas Mary Salerno

“Serving the Lord with gladness”

As Sister Thomas Mary Salerno recounts her remarkable life and wide ranging ministries, it becomes quickly apparent that any attempt to capture her story in a few short paragraphs will certainly fall short. Her story spans more than eight decades. It is defined by her loving acceptance of and unreserved service to the people she meets in ministry, whether a precocious child, a troubled teen, a desperately poor elderly woman, or an African sister adjusting to religious life in the United States. The stories she tells are often humorous, sometimes poignant, and sometimes even painful. Throughout her years as a Sister of Charity, she has been impelled by a desire to serve the Lord with gladness, and the journey has been marked by joy, peace, and a faith that grows ever deeper through the years.



Sister Thomas Mary was born in Newark, New Jersey, the second of four children in a caring and devout family. Her father proudly served as an usher in Sacred Heart Cathedral parish for 40 years and her mother was very active in the church at the local level as well as the national level. In recognition of her work for the church, Sister Thomas’s mother was awarded the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice medal from Pope John XXIII, the same honor Sister Thomas later received from Pope John Paul II.

As a young girl, Sister Thomas attended Sacred Heart Cathedral School and was taught by Sisters of Charity. She believes, “This is where the roots of my vocation were first planted. I thought these Sisters were the happiest people in the world and I wished I could be like them.”

Although the early seeds of a vocation may have been planted, Sister Thomas recalls that what she really wanted to do was become a journalist, which sounded very exciting. It wasn’t until she was deeply moved by reading about Elizabeth Ann Seton and her courageous life that she thought, “She did such extraordinary things with her life, and I wanted to do extraordinary things in my life, just as she did.”

Over the following year, the idea that she might indeed be called to religious life became more and more persistent. “I decided to dedicate all of Lent my senior year to see if I had a vocation. My prayer became a plea, ‘don’t let this happen,’ because I really wanted to be a journalist. But by Holy Thursday, I petitioned to enter the Sisters of Charity. That’s how sure I was.”

Sister Thomas Mary entered the Sisters of Charity on September 8, 1946. She was 17 years old and, at first, she missed her family terribly. “I thought everyone was so quiet that they didn’t seem real.” She laughs, “Solitude didn’t mean a thing to me then!” Sister Thomas was later relieved to discover that other novices felt the same way and she looks back on a very happy novitiate.

As a novice, Sister Thomas was delighted to begin her first mission teaching first grade at St. Patrick’s School in Jersey City. She had just turned 18 years old. “I was sure that I would be the good, happy nun. I thought I was God’s gift to these children.” She quickly learned that controlling a classroom of 70 first graders was a daunting task. “I’ll never forget when little, blue-eyed Billy O’Keefe tugged at my cape, and reminded me, ‘Sister, when the kids are bad you’re ‘apposed to yell!’” With the kind help of an experienced sister mentor, Sister Thomas soon learned how to control the class, and she loved the children and her ministry as their teacher.

In 1958, Sister Thomas Mary was inspired by the message while on retreat, “Don’t put any ties on God.” She decided to volunteer to serve at the Sisters of Charity’s mission school in the Virgin Islands. Full of missionary zeal, she began teaching in the high school, acting as guidance counselor, and visiting people who were sick or imprisoned. She remembers that shortly after she arrived in the Virgin Islands, she begged to accompany another sister who regularly visited and attended to a particular elderly woman. Although the more experienced sister cautioned Sister Thomas that she was not ready for this yet, Sister Thomas was confident and eager to help. “I walked in, and it was like culture shock. It was a hovel, and the smells were terrible. I couldn’t bring myself to sit down, and I thought, what kind of a missionary am I?” Before long, Sister Thomas worked through her discomfort and soon found herself visiting and cleaning for the woman every week. It was a great learning and growing experience for Sister Thomas, and she loved her years in the Virgin Islands, serving there for two five year periods with a year in between teaching Latin and directing the Glee Club at Saint Vincent Academy in Newark. One of the special joys of her time in the Virgin Islands was directing the high school plays and leading the glee club there. Years later when she was invited back for a visit, she was touched to discover that her former students still remembered the songs she had taught them.

Although Sister Thomas would have been happy to remain in the Virgin Islands, she returned to New Jersey in 1969 and joined the staff of Mother Seton High School in Clark as guidance counselor, as well as English and religion teacher. She loved working with the students one-on-one. She guided students through the college application process and also helped them deal with a host of personal and family issues. She says, “You would never know what kinds of problems the students were carrying around. Being a guidance counselor was a bit like being a confessor.”

After several years at Mother Seton, Sister Thomas Mary sought a new challenge and went to work for the Archdiocese of Newark. Her first position with the Archdiocese was in the Office of Personnel in Ministry, where she guided policy making that affected ministerial personnel. Sister Thomas also took on the task of meeting with and collecting information about all the foreign born adjunct priests in the archdiocese. She laughs, “To this day, Cardinal McCarrick calls me the ‘Empress of India.’”

In 1986, then Archbishop McCarrick appointed Sister Thomas Mary the first female Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Newark. This position brought significant new responsibilities, as well as opportunities to interact with local, national and world church leaders. Sister Thomas met Pope John Paul II when he traveled to the United States in 1995 and she was honored to read at the mass that Pope John Paul II celebrated at Giant’s Stadium. A picture on the wall of Sister Thomas’s office captures the moment when Pope John Paul II placed his hands on Sister Thomas’s shoulders, looked into her eyes, and said, “God bless you.” Archbishop McCarrick is seen smiling fondly in the background.

Sister Thomas Mary also had the opportunity to meet Mother Teresa on two occasions when Mother Teresa came to the soup kitchen that her order established in the South Bronx. Sister Thomas says, “When Mother Teresa touched my hands, I felt something very special. Her holiness came through, loud and clear.”

Some of Sister Thomas’s best stories from her years as Chancellor come from her work with a group of religious sisters from Africa. She found housing for these sisters in a convent in Newark and taught them a host of practical skills needed for life in America, such as negotiating the local Shop Rite and using bank ATMs. She also helped to supplement the sisters’ religious formation and teach them about what it means to be a vowed religious. Almost assuming the role of mother, she encouraged the African sisters while also setting expectations and limitations appropriate to their life as religious sisters. The African sisters adored Sister Thomas, once surprising her with an elaborate celebration at which they dubbed her “Sweet Mother.”

In 2002, Sister Thomas left her position as Chancellor to become the Director of the Sisters of Charity’s Maris Stella Conference and Retreat Center in Harvey Cedars, New Jersey. She decided to live at Maris Stella year round and soon became an integral part of the coastal community, working hard to improve the physical

facilities at Maris Stella and bring more and more people to programs and retreats. “I made so many friends there. It was a very exciting time!”

For the past five years, Sister Thomas Mary has used her people skills to raise funds for the congregation through the Office of Development. With her many years of ministry in so many different places, she has a vast network of friends and is singularly adept at making new friends as she generates support for the Sisters of Charity and their ministries. Many people would agree that “you just can’t say no to Sister Thomas Mary,” to the great benefit of the Sisters of Charity’s fundraising efforts.

In Sister Thomas’s high school yearbook, her picture was accompanied by the words, “Sustained by her soul’s purpose burning clear.” At the time, Sister Thomas says she hated this sentiment that was attached to her. “It made me seem like a nerd!” The words now seem prophetic, as Sister Thomas continues to be sustained by the purpose inherent in her vocation.

Sister Thomas Mary affirms that in her many years of ministry, she never had a single doubt about her vocation. “Even when I am frustrated or lonely, there is always an inner peace. It’s really the virtues of faith and hope and charity. I say without any reservation that I have always been happy as a religious sister. I remember the happy sisters who taught me in grammar school, and I have made it my own kind of motto to serve the Lord with gladness.” She continues, “I thank God for my vocation every day.”

Sister Thomas reflects, “The lived experiences I have had make my relationship with God much more real and much more meaningful.” Her faith has matured from a faith that was directed inward, what she describes as “God and me,” to a faith that is joyfully directed outward through service to others. “Your relationship to God is manifested by the way you accept people where they are and by your service to them.”

Especially at turning points in her life when she might have chosen a different path, Sister Thomas Mary looks back and sees God’s hand and God’s goodness. “As you get older, you can look back and see that it’s almost as if God put his stamp on your life. This gives me hope for the future.” She concludes, “I know that He will always be with me.”