

Sister Barbara Gnecco

Serving the poor through the lens of justice



Anyone who knows Sister Barbara Gnecco is likely to agree that she is not shy about standing up for justice. In almost 60 years of ministry as a Sister of Charity, Sister Barbara has not just talked about justice, but she has lived it. Through a wide range of ministries, Sister Barbara has given of herself without reservation to make life better for others, serving the poor, the vulnerable, the mentally ill and the hungry, and being a force for justice in the ordinary encounters of daily life.

Sister Barbara grew up in Ridgefield Park, New Jersey. She was the oldest of three children in a family committed to faith and service. Barbara witnessed service to others through the example of her parents, who were especially devoted to helping veterans. “I would see them go to the Veterans’ Hospital to give parties to the fellows who were bedridden. My parents did things for others because they wanted to, and they did them joyfully.”

In her early elementary years, Barbara attended public school and received her Sunday School education from the Sisters of Charity. She says, “I had wonderful experiences with the Sisters of Charity in my formative years. I had Sister Mary Thaddeus for First Communion preparation, and I thought she was THE best person in the world!”

Barbara’s admiration for and attraction to the Sisters of Charity grew as she transferred to St. Francis School in 6th grade and considered where she would go for high school. Already convinced that she was called to religious life, she persuaded her parents to let her attend the Juniorate of the Sisters of Charity, which was the boarding school in Convent Station for girls who were interested in exploring a religious vocation. She recalls the day her parents dropped her off to begin at the Juniorate, the first step in her journey to religious life. Her father, who knew what it was like to be away from home, encouraged her not to give in to any feelings of homesickness. Sister Barbara says, “I don’t think I really ever looked back. I knew this was what I should be doing.”

Barbara thrived on life at the Juniorate, enjoying the company of other teenage girls while growing in faith through communal prayer and the structure of each day. She entered the novitiate of the Sisters of Charity in March of her senior year, studied elementary education at the College of Saint Elizabeth, and was sent out on her first mission to teach first grade at Our Lady of Grace School in Hoboken.

After a few years of teaching elementary school, Sister Barbara’s path in ministry diverged from the educational path followed by many sisters. Although she loved teaching and being with children, she found that she never really enjoyed the task of classroom discipline and she began to seek a ministry where she could work with children outside the classroom. She was delighted to have the opportunity to serve as a house parent at Mt. St. Joseph’s Home for Children. “It was entirely different from the classroom. You could show you were a little more human, because you were really stepping in to do parenting for kids who needed you.”

Sister Barbara seemed to have a gift for stepping in to help people who needed her, and in the ensuing years she helped children, youth, and adults in wide ranging ministries. One of these ministries was helping Sister Maureen Malone start up Anchor House, a shelter for runaway youth in Trenton. For almost four years, Sister Barbara was known to the Anchor House teens as “Mom,” giving a loving and safe home to the teens who desperately needed shelter and the stability offered by caring adults.

Another one of Sister Barbara’s ministries was serving as Director of Eva’s Kitchen, which provided meals to the poor and homeless people of Paterson, New Jersey. Sister Barbara later directed the dietary service program for

the Seton Center at St. Mary's Hospital, which provided a day program for the chronically mentally ill. In this position, she worked directly with the people enrolled in the program, leading them in preparing and setting out the food served for the morning snack and for lunch. To Sister Barbara, helping people who are mentally ill is a natural expression of the Sisters of Charity's mission to help the poor. She says, "No one is poorer than someone who is mentally ill and cannot function on her own."

Wherever she has served, Sister Barbara has always given fully and without reservation, treating people with respect, good humor, non-judgmental acceptance, and love. She lets people know that she furthers the mission of the Sisters of Charity, who have always been committed to serving the poor. On more than one occasion, she has seen that when people come to appreciate the mission of the Sisters of Charity, they also become impelled to do more for others, thereby testifying to the powerful impact of the mission of boundless charity.

For the past 12 years, Sister Barbara has been grateful to be part of the ministry provided to the people of the Paterson community by St. Joseph's Hospital, which was founded by and is still sponsored by the Sisters of Charity. "At St. Joseph's, it has always been true that no one is turned away. The care of the patient--the person--comes first. It has always been an understood thing in the City of Paterson: if you need care, just go to St. Joseph's. It is a beautiful legacy." She is especially proud that all communiqués from the hospital include a line at the bottom stating, "Sponsored by the Sisters of Charity."

After participating in the hospital's Transition in Ministry program, Sister Barbara now enjoys doing support work for St. Joseph's Hospital's Maintenance Department. She processes work orders and helps the hospital meet requirements for preventive maintenance. In this role, she is not shy about putting in her "two cents" to make sure that St. Joseph's remains true to its legacy of service to the poor. Committed to justice both at an institutional and a personal level, Sister Barbara is also not afraid to speak up to support, encourage, or sometimes cajole her co-workers. As an example, she offers, "If someone is supposed to hand in paperwork, I tell him, get it done! Do what you're supposed to do! You have a responsibility not just to this job, but to your family. I think this is really a justice issue as well." She laughs, "I give the guys a friendly big sister kind of thing. They take it from me, maybe because I'm 'Sister' and maybe the gray hair has something to do with it!"

She reflects, "Over the years, it's been confirmed more and more that I really belong where I am, as a Sister of Charity." She draws strength from community living: praying with sisters, eating with them, doing things for them, and doing things with them.

Sister Barbara is grateful and proud to be part of a community with such a history of serving the poor through the lens of justice. She says that it is important to let people know "who I am and **why** I am;" the commitments to serve the poor and stand for justice are at the core of Sister Barbara's being. The continuing ministry of her life's service stands as a living witness to the power of charity to bring hope and healing to people in need.