

Sister Connie Tanski

Choosing a Life of Charity

Some Sisters of Charity go through their entire religious lives without ever questioning their vocation. Sister Connie Tanski is not one of them. When she struggles with doubts and questions, she trusts that she will find the answers she needs through prayer. And for Sister Connie, the answer time and time again is to choose a life of charity.



Connie was born in Morristown, New Jersey, at All Souls Hospital, which was then sponsored by the Sisters of Charity. She attended public grade school before enrolling in Bayley Ellard High School. Confident and politically aware at an early age, she remembers walking off the elementary school campus on her own during lunch one day so that she could see Robert Kennedy, who was campaigning nearby for his brother. “There were people greeting him, and I put out my hand and he shook it. I was all excited about that and then I went back to school.” She laughs, “I don’t know how I got away with it!”

Although Connie considered a religious vocation from as early as the sixth grade, she enjoyed dating in high school. She says, “I could see myself married and having children but I could also see myself as a Sister of Charity.” Her connection with the Sisters of Charity grew during the time her father worked for the College of Saint Elizabeth and the Motherhouse as a baker. (In fact, working for the Sisters of Charity has become a family affair with her brother, Hank, now driving the sisters who reside at Saint Anne Villa.)

Following high school graduation, Connie attended Merrimack College in Massachusetts while she continued to discern the path of her life. She especially loved her studies in English and literature, where a professor recognized her potential and moved her into the honors classes. “I told her I was a slow reader, but she encouraged me” – the same kind of encouragement that Sister Connie has given to so many of her own students through the years.

After one year at Merrimack, Connie entered the Sisters of Charity in 1968. She completed her undergraduate studies at the College of Saint Elizabeth and was eager to begin her ministry as a teacher where she would be needed most. This ministry began at Saint Vincent Academy in Newark, a school to which she returned years later. After four rewarding years teaching high school English at Saint Vincent Academy, Sister Connie was grateful for the opportunity to earn a Masters Degree in English and American Literature at Washington University in St. Louis.

After hearing another sister speak, Sister Connie became increasingly interested in the church in Latin America. The Congregation encouraged her to follow this interest by first seeking a ministry on the US – Mexico border. She went to Brownsville, Texas, to live with the Incarnate Word Sisters there and teach high school religion and English. She also ministered to the women who were being held in the Los Fresnos detention center, helping them with their immediate needs and leading religious services on Sundays.

While in Texas, one of the sisters who lived with Sister Connie connected her with a priest who was building a church in a poor area of Mexico City. The priest arranged for Sister Connie to spend Easter holidays and a month each summer with a family in Mexico City. Through these visits, Sister Connie not only improved her Spanish, but she also developed a deep and lasting friendship with the family. She has maintained close ties with this family and visited them in Mexico City most recently earlier this summer.

After five years in Texas, Sister Connie returned to New Jersey. Her decision to leave Texas, in large part due to her desire to be nearer to her ailing parents, was difficult. The words spoken to her by a priest when she questioned her decision have stuck with her and continue to be a personal mantra: "It doesn't matter whether you were right or wrong. What matters is your relationship with God!"

Sister Connie taught English and religion at St. Mary's School in Jersey City for eight years before returning to the faculty of Saint Vincent Academy, where she has remained for the past 21 years. She loves the students and is committed to helping them grow not only through learning in the classroom, but also through learning by service in the community. She says, "Our girls know that we are an academic institution, but service is a strong component of being a full human being." Sister Connie revels in sparking her students' interest in literature and creative writing and helping them develop the skills they need to succeed in college. She is also deeply involved with the Senior Retreat, a powerful weekend experience for all the girls and those who share the weekend with them.

No profile of Sister Connie would be complete without mentioning two of her passions: social justice and music. Sister Connie has never been afraid to act and to speak for social justice. She has made her voice heard by participating in several protest marches through the years. As a novice, she was reluctantly given permission to participate in a Washington, DC march against the Vietnam War. She laughs when she recalls, "Mother Josephine said, 'She can go, but we're not going to bail her out if she gets arrested!'" A particularly rewarding experience of working for social justice was serving as a United States Citizen Observer to monitor the 1994 general elections in El Salvador.

Music is an integral part of Sister Connie and how she worships God and relates to the world. She began accordion lessons in the 3rd grade and still pulls out her accordion from time to time to entertain sisters or "jam" with friends. As a young sister, she taught herself how to play the guitar. With her guitar and her singing, she has led the music for worship wherever she has served. Sister Connie says, "Music is a way for me to caress the world. I hope my music helps others to pray, because it helps me to pray."

Sharing her gift of music is one way that Sister Connie maintains close bonds with the other sisters in the community. She says, "I am a strong believer in living in community in the place where you live." For the past 22 years, Sister Connie has lived in the Sisters of Charity Motherhouse. She enjoys living with the other sisters and is very grateful for their friendship and support. Now one of the youngest sisters living in the Motherhouse, she considers helping the older sisters to be part of her ministry. She says, "I help them, and they help me a lot, too."

Sister Connie draws strength and receives affirmation of her religious vocation through an annual seven or eight day retreat. It is always a silent retreat, a time to quiet herself and face herself and her relationship with God. Sister Connie knows that questioning will always be part of her journey toward a deeper union with God. "When I spend time deeply in prayer, I always choose the same thing: to continue in religious life as a Sister of Charity."