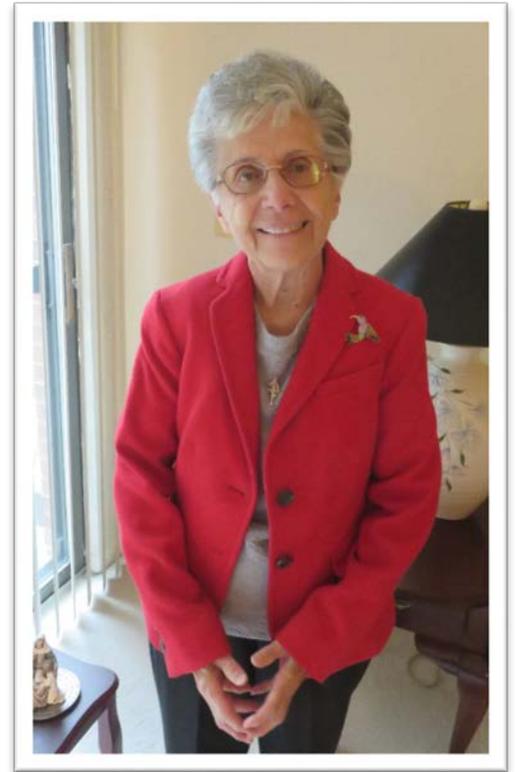


## Sister Dorothy Vespia

*All for love and charity*

When you first meet Sister Dorothy Vespia, you may be surprised to learn that she has been a Sister of Charity for more than 68 years. (No, she did not enter the convent directly from the nursery!) With the energy and outlook of someone much younger, Sister Dorothy has a gift of relating to people both young and old from all walks of life. She strives to follow the example set by her father as she lives out her vocation, always guided by love and charity.

Dorothy was the youngest of six children born to Italian immigrant parents in Jersey City. Her mother was a dedicated homemaker and devout Catholic. Dorothy's father, though not a religious man, was a model of charity who made home life happy for his family. He was an artisan who crafted shoes that he sold in his little shop in a poor neighborhood of Jersey City. Sister Dorothy remembers, "No matter who went into his shop, if they needed shoes fixed, he fixed them. If they could pay, fine, but he never asked for money." She says, "He said that there are two things that count in life: love and charity. He gave me something to live by."



Dorothy attended St. Lucy's Elementary School, where she was taught by the Sisters of Charity. She laughs when she recalls her first impression that some of the sisters at the school must be men, an idea that would seem perfectly reasonable considering that "they wore oxfords and had names like 'Joseph.' And with their caps boxed so tightly around their faces, you could only see a little hair."

Dorothy came to love and admire the sisters whom she learned were, indeed, all women. She remembers the wonderful experiences of accompanying her mother to take the sisters on shopping trips to New York. She was awed and thrilled to carry the sisters' shopping bundles into the house for them. "Little did I know that I would be part of the Sisters of Charity some day!"

When it came time for high school, the sisters from St. Lucy's encouraged Dorothy to consider the Juniorate, which was the prep school of the Sisters of Charity in Convent Station. Dorothy and her family went to see the school and agreed that everything about it was wonderful: the girls were friendly; the Directress was kind and loving; there was a lovely apple orchard; and Dorothy could attend there for free.

Dorothy's years at the Juniorate confirmed her own calling to join the Sisters of Charity. She entered the community on March 24, 1948 and was eager to begin her ministry.

Like so many other young sisters in the years following World War II, Sister Dorothy was sent out to help meet the demand for teachers in burgeoning Catholic schools. She served as an elementary teacher for 21 years at schools in Harrison, Long Branch, and Union City.

From classroom teaching, Sister Dorothy took on the challenge of serving as principal at Saint Nicholas Elementary School, a multicultural school in Passaic. She completely transformed the school, which she says was a "mess" when she arrived. The first step was enlisting the help of priest friends to paint the school and clean it from top to bottom. The next step was finding a way to address the needs of the 200 children registered at the school who spoke little or no English. Sister Dorothy went to the Passaic Board of Education and insisted that the district provide at least three ESL teachers. She set up learning centers to give students the foundation in English that would enable them to succeed in the classroom. The students thrived, and Sister Dorothy was

particularly gratified when one of the boys who had entered third grade without knowing a word of English went on to earn a Regent's Scholarship as an eighth grader.

After six years at Saint Nicholas, Sister Dorothy served for seventeen years as the Director of Religion at Star of the Sea Church in Hopatcong. Again, she rose to a challenge and grew the CCD program from about 20 children to more than 600 students at both the elementary and high school levels. She made sure that the CCD teachers were well prepared by requiring all the teachers to go through a two year training program. The CCD staff grew to 56 teachers who came to share Sister Dorothy's passion for helping young people to grow in their faith.

In recent years, Sister Dorothy's primary ministry has been helping people who are elderly and disabled. She loved her work as a pastoral minister at Mount Saint Andrew Villa in Paramus, where she lived on site at the home for 47 residents. She helped the residents get ready for daily mass, counseled them, and planned a variety of activities including special events such as hoedowns and mock weddings. Sister Dorothy says, "I did what I could to keep them from getting lonely." As part of her ministry, she always made sure to say good night to each resident.

Although Sister Dorothy decided two years ago that it was time to retire, she service in ministry has hardly slowed down. Three days a week, she negotiates a 40 minute drive in highway traffic to help a longtime priest friend who is now disabled. She also volunteers for two or three days each week at Green Briar Residential Health Facility, a former state institution that is now a home for disabled adults in Montville. Sister Dorothy leads prayer services and encourages and comforts the residents. She says, "Many of the people have been abandoned by their families and they get disappointed so many times. I can't solve all their problems, but I can listen."

Not only the residents of Green Briar, but also many neighbors in her low income apartment complex find that Sister Dorothy is a good listener. Sister Dorothy marvels, "It's amazing how many times people come to me to talk about this, that or other thing." She adds, "This apartment building is mostly Muslim, Indian and Hispanic. It has a lot of poor people, and there's always something I can do here." As one example of a simple way to make a difference, she mentioned how she has had the little boys from next door come over to eat pizza with her. "There are little things that pop up all the time that you can do. They make me feel good when they happen!"

Sister Dorothy says that she tries to make sure that she's always in service to the poor somewhere, whether that be in her primary ministries or in numerous endeavors such as organizing food and clothing drives. She says simply, "Serving the poor is what we do as sisters." Even though she lives in her own apartment, the shared dedication to a mission of love and charity binds her to all her sisters who live in community elsewhere. This unity and affection for her sisters is captured in the words of a card she received on her 60<sup>th</sup> Jubilee, which states, "Sisters, we do not see each other daily except to meet in prayer. Yet when I count my loved ones, I always find you there."

Sister Dorothy loves being part of a religious community that is out in the world doing things for others. "As long as I'm accomplishing something here, I'm happy to keep going. I pray every day that I will see things to do in the Lord's perspective, not mine. And I pray that He would shape me and mold me so that I can do these things the way He wants them done."