

Sister John Mary Tierney

“All good things which exist are fruits of originality.”~ John Stuart Mill.

Before she entered the Sisters of Charity, there was never a John Mary, and there will never be another one. Sister John Mary embraces each day with grace, hope, and a unique sense of humor. Living a life full of challenges and blessings, Sister John Mary has dedicated her life’s work to furthering God’s mission through the Sisters of Charity.



Sister John Mary (who was then known as Marie Louise) was the oldest of three sisters in a close-knit Catholic family. Her father worked long hours and her mother, “a woman of many talents,” ably managed the house and also shared her love of music with the girls. Sister John Mary remembers, “We grew up singing. I always carried the melody and my sisters would harmonize.” She fondly recalls family gatherings where everyone would gather around the piano to sing and to share family stories.

As a child, Sister John Mary attended Our Lady of the Lake School in Verona, NJ, where she loved school and her teachers. “I always wanted to be a teacher. I didn’t want to play house. I would just dress my dolls and teach to them.” She looks back on an incident that occurred when she was in second grade as the very beginning of her vocation. Instead of staying home on the day when the school was moving classrooms into a new building, she discovered that she was the only second grader to arrive at school that day. She tagged along with her teacher, Sister Mary Paul, O.P., throughout the school day. She was full of questions and Sister patiently answered each one. At that time she realized she wanted to be just like Sister Mary Paul.

After graduating elementary school, Sister John Mary attended Bloomfield High School for a year. At first, public school was frightening. One big change for her was that the public school day began with prayers and reading from the Bible. In Sister John Mary’s experience as a Catholic, the Bible was read only by a priest when in church. When it was her turn to read, a Jewish classmate helped her find her passage, which was the Twenty-third Psalm. This Psalm has been an important staple in her life ever since.

After the sudden death of her father, Sister John Mary moved to Montclair, NJ and attended Immaculate Conception High School. That is where she met the Sisters of Charity. “I admired the sisters. I got to know them as friends, as women. I think my vocation grew through all of that, and I just knew I was going to be a sister.”

Working for five years after high school, Sister John Mary never gave up on her conviction that she was called to religious life. “I knew I had to do something with my life.” She entered the Sisters of Charity in March of 1948 at the age of 23. She received the name, John Mary, the first Sister of Charity with that name, as a tribute to her father and grandfather.

Like so many young sisters at the time, Sister John Mary soon found herself placed in charge of a classroom, a daunting challenge that called for on-the-job training. Her first assignment was a 4th grade classroom consisting of 21 girls and 7 boys. In 1950 after she made her first vows, she was sent to St. James in Newark where she taught 3rd grade for a year and a half. She explains, “For the first six weeks they didn’t know what I was talking about. There would be 63 blank faces! But we enjoyed each other and it worked out.”

That January she was moved up to the 7th grade. She exclaims it was the happiest time of her young life. Teaching older children allowed her to do a wider range of activities which included yearbook

and other projects within the classroom. She went on to teach the 8th grade at St. Paul of the Cross in Jersey City, where she also had the choir. She found it very rewarding to teach the children to sing the hymns as prayers.

After many years in education as an elementary school teacher, high school teacher, and school principal, Sister John Mary entered a program to become a school psychologist. She then took a position at A. Harry Moore School in Jersey City. She loved being part of the school community and enjoyed helping the children work through their disabilities. As a counselor at the school she worked with the students, teachers and the families in what she describes as “an integrated system.” Sister John Mary says in that time she prayed a lot because coming into a family’s life was serious business, even more so than as a teacher. At the same time, she also worked part-time at St. Ann’s School to teach the children church music. “It worked out beautifully.”

After five years at A. Harry Moore, Sister John Mary received a call from another sister asking if she would consider teaching at St. Mary’s High School. She was unsure about teaching high school but agreed to come in to talk about it. She chuckles, “After the talk and 23 years later I left St. Mary’s.” At St. Mary’s, Sister John Mary taught psychology and religion. She enjoyed interacting with the students, who represented a diverse mix of cultures and ethnic backgrounds.

At the age of 75, Sister John Mary believed it was time to leave the high school. When her alma mater invited her to help in their library, Sister decided it was a good way to continue her mission after she had finished her teaching career. She remained as a librarian for thirteen years.

In 2009, Sister John Mary moved to the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity. Moving at that time was hard to do. She says, “But you get through hard things. With God’s help, that’s for sure. Don’t ever think you did it by yourself, ‘cause you never do.” Life at the Motherhouse brought new challenges and opportunities for ministry. For some time, Sister John Mary volunteered as a driver. She took on the job of being in charge of the prayer board, posting names of people who want or need special prayer. “I try to keep busy. I’ve never been bored.”

One of the highlights of recent years for Sister John Mary was being the guest of honor at the 50th anniversary reunion of one of her 8th grade classes. She describes the night as fun and memorable, and she loved being able to talk with her students 50 years later and learn what they had done in their lives. She also received Christmas cards from many of her former students, and has been touched and gratified by their messages of the impact she had on their lives.

Today Sister John Mary continues to be active furthering the mission of charity. She says she only realized her age when she turned 70. Now 91, she finds peace, joy, contentment and, “a lot of dumb stuff,” but she isn’t afraid of her age. She explains she likes being happy and that she is thankful to have so many things that make her feel that way. She concludes, “It’s what you do with what you have. You decide whether you want a pink day or whether you want a gray day. And sometimes the pink goes gray and sometimes the gray goes pink.” Sharing this life lesson with a smile on her face, Sister John Mary looks forward to many more pink days ahead.

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