



Sister Mary Culhane

Sister Mary Culhane likes to say, "If you don't laugh and have fun, you might as well forget it!" Whether out with friends, in the classroom, or in daily interactions with other sisters, Sister Mary has always known how to have fun. Throughout her years in ministry, Sister Mary's joy has lifted all those around her and her compassion and determination have made life better for people in need.

Born prematurely, Sister Mary exhibited a determined nature from the very beginning of her life. She defied the doctors who did not expect her to survive and her health and strength was an answer to her mother's prayers. She says, "I think my mother dedicated me to the Blessed Virgin. I wasn't supposed to live."

Shortly after Mary's birth, the family moved from the Bronx to Teaneck, New Jersey, to give Mary and her brother the benefits of clean air and suburban living. Mary attended Saint Anastasia School, where the Sisters of Charity nurtured the faith modeled by Mary's parents at home. Mary's mother was especially devout and she later became very active in the cause for the canonization of Sister Miriam Teresa.

Mary came to know the Sisters of Charity even more when she attended St. Cecilia High School. She says, "I met some beautiful women there and the love of God was definitely implanted in that school." She admits that as a high school student, she was far more interested in having fun than in her studies. "I had my car, my friends, my proms . . . I think all my wild oats were sown in high school!"

At the same time that Mary was reveling in a spirited social life, she became aware of a deep desire to become a Sister of Charity. She was particularly inspired by one of the sisters, Sister Ellen Maureen McIntyre. "Sister Ellen Maureen was a very holy woman. She was very quiet, prayerful, demure, polished and elegant. None of those adjectives would fit me!"

Much to the surprise of those who only knew her by social reputation, Mary entered the Sisters of Charity a year after graduating from high school. She was impelled by the call to holiness, which is still the core of her vocation today. She says, "I have tried to live by that first goal of being holy, and here I am today, 61 years later. I never regretted it."

Like so many sisters who entered at a time of booming Catholic School enrollment, Sister Mary soon found herself missioned in the ministry of education. She resisted plans made for her to

pursue graduate studies in mathematics, a subject that she never enjoyed, and instead secured her admission to Montclair State where she earned a Masters Degree in Fine Art. She recalls a funny experience from her first pottery classes. "The first day I arrived in the class wearing a full habit. We were all assigned a potter's wheel, and when it started spinning, the clay was all over everything. So the next week I went to class in a pair of jeans and a T shirt. The man sitting next to me said, 'Thank God you're here, 'cause last week I had to sit next to a nun!'"

Of all the places where Sister Mary served, the place where she touched the most lives and left the most enduring legacy of love and laughter was undoubtedly Don Bosco Prep in Ramsey, New Jersey. Sister Mary taught art at this all boy's high school from 1982 through 2013. She says, "There were 800 young men at the school and I loved every minute of it." Although she was careful always to maintain control in the classroom, "there were times when the laughter and the fun were unbelievable." Her teaching was guided by her strongly held principle that "when you learn with pleasure, you never forget."

Sister Mary's ministry was never simply about having fun in the classroom. She felt called to help boys struggling with a variety of challenges, whether academic problems, health issues, legal trouble, difficult situations at home, or any of the consequences teenagers might face as the result of making bad decisions. School administrators directed boys who were struggling to see Sister Mary and the boys themselves knew that they could seek her out and count on her always to be there for them. She says, "I was like a mother to these kids. Nothing they said would faze me." When Sister Mary retired from Don Bosco, a plaque was put up in the school in lasting recognition of the profound impact she had on so many young lives.

During most of the years that Sister Mary was at Don Bosco, she not only gave exhaustively of herself at school, but then went home to essentially a second full time job as caregiver for her aging father. Although her father suffered from a succession of debilitating illnesses, he lived to the age of 101. She says, "Being a caretaker was an experience that I never asked for. But I came to see people in need." She adds, "I believe now, 'once a caretaker, always a caretaker.'" Until almost the very end of his life, Sister Mary's father enjoyed the company of friends and neighbors. "He was a people lover, and I am, too. I got that from my father."

Especially because she lived with her aging father for so many years instead of in a convent with other sisters, Sister Mary deeply appreciated how much it meant to be part of a community. She says, "When I stayed home as a caregiver, I longed for community. To me, you either spiral in to a deeper and deeper spirituality or you spiral out and leave the community. I spiraled in."

For the past four and a half years, Sister Mary has lived in community with sisters in the Motherhouse. She says, "We have a beautiful group of women on the 4th floor who pray together. The support is tremendous." Her volunteer activities have included teaching art classes at Saint Vincent Martyr School, working with immigrants at Passaic Neighborhood Center for Women, and ordering and dispensing prescription drugs for the sisters.

While living at the Motherhouse and throughout her religious life, Sister Mary is guided by the call to see Christ in each person. She acknowledges that it is sometimes difficult to witness suffering and the diminishment of some of the elderly sisters, but she trusts, "That's all part of God's plan. Our numbers may be going down, but diminishment and sickness give birth to a new group of people who are called to the charism of charity."

With the same confident spirit shared by so many other sisters, she affirms, "Times have changed, but the spirit of charity is alive and well." She celebrates knowing that God is calling a larger circle of men and women to the charism of charity. "The circle grows and grows and continues to spiral outward. Charity never, never dies out!"