



## Sister Patricia Godri

*Living the Gospel, wherever it leads*

When Sister Patricia Godri entered the Sisters of Charity, she never could have imagined where her journey in ministry would take her. Following the imperative to give food, drink, and clothes to sisters and brothers in need, Sister Pat has lived the Gospel with courage, determination, and humility. Her ministry has made a profound difference in the lives of people she has served, especially the immigrant community in Carthage, Mississippi.

Sister Pat was born in Passaic, New Jersey. She attended St. Stephen's School in Passaic and Holy

Cross Elementary School in Mountain View before entering DePaul High School, where she was taught by the Sisters of Charity. She says, "From an early age, I always knew that God was inviting me to something special." She entered the Sisters of Charity in September, 1961, one of an unusually large group from her high school class who went into religious life.

Sister Pat studied elementary education at the College of Saint Elizabeth and looked forward to teaching children about God. Her first teaching assignment was at St. Aloysius School in Newark. She devoted her full energies to teach the children and meet their needs, and she was particularly touched by the plight of the families who had emigrated from Cuba to escape oppression. "A little girl in class had witnessed the death of her brother, who was shot as the family fled Cuba in a rowboat. I knew that I wanted to help families who had experienced such unbelievable things."

After five years teaching early elementary students at St. Aloysius, Sister Pat went on to teach at St. Patrick School in Newark. Her next assignment was at St. Thomas School in Bloomfield, where she enjoyed teaching students in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. While in Bloomfield, she decided to pursue the opportunity to become a Director of Religious Education. Through summer studies at La Salle University, Sister Pat earned a Masters Degree in Theology.

Sister Pat began her ministry as a Director of Religious Education at St. Mary's in Paterson. Here, she first experienced a parish in which the regular life of the church was conducted in two languages. At that time, she relied on an interpreter to help her minister to the Spanish speaking people.

From St. Mary's, Sister Pat went on to serve as a Director of Religious Education at St. Catherine's in Mountain Lakes and Resurrection Parish in Randolph. She was particularly energized by the huge religious education program at Resurrection Parish, in which she coordinated the efforts of over 100 volunteers. "We had five classes in each grade level. The program was called *Growing in the Spirit*, and you literally felt as if you were growing in the Spirit as we celebrated with the children day after day."

Sister Pat's journey in ministry continued as she served as a pastoral associate at Assumption Church in Morristown. She worked with people of all ages, including senior citizens and young adults. She also did hospital visitations and managed the church office. During this time, she was thankful for the encouragement and guidance of Fr. Martin Rauscher, who was a "tremendous mentor" to her.

While still serving at Assumption Church, Sister Pat became increasingly aware of the critical needs in parishes that have no resident priest. She decided to apply to serve as a resident pastoral minister at St. Anne's Church

in Carthage, Mississippi, a parish that particularly attracted her because the parishioners included Choctaw Indians.

Following an interview at which she was offered the position, Sister Pat began her new life in Mississippi in 1994. When she arrived, the parish had only about 40 members. The area was very rural and the biggest employer was a large chicken processing plant.

About a year after Sister Pat's arrival, the area began to experience an influx of workers and their families from Mexico and Guatemala. Fathers brought brothers and older sons. Wives and children followed, and the St. Anne parish community grew.

Sister Pat worked to meet the needs of the growing parish while managing the Church's financial concerns and creatively finding ways to effect essential repairs. She recognized and gathered resources to meet the basic needs of the newly arriving families, helping them adjust to life in the United States. She recalls, "So many things were new to them. Even windows were new to people who had lived in adobe houses." A "Nearly New" resale shop connected with the church helped to satisfy basic clothing needs. "When the new immigrants came in, family members would tell them about the shop, and I just left them alone and told them they could take anything they wanted."

During her years at St. Anne's, Sister Pat was repeatedly called upon to deal with emergency situations, including Hurricane Katrina. Although the Carthage area was spared the devastation suffered by the Gulf Coast, the Church became a makeshift shelter for people who sought refuge during the storm. "Different people brought food. It reminded me of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. We used half-burnt candles to light the Church." As the storm raged outside, a woman played the piano and her husband led people in singing to keep everyone calm.

Sister Pat will never forget a different kind of crisis she faced one day when immigration officials in helicopters and swarms of police in cars converged upon the cluster of trailers that housed many of the Hispanic workers. "A woman called me and said her husband was out there with their baby. She was frantic and she asked me to try to find their baby." Sister Pat bravely drove into the scene and found the shaken husband holding the baby. She was able to bring them back to the Church and later reunite the family.

Sister Pat valued the close friendships she made at St. Anne's and she greatly admired and respected the people who worked so hard to forge new lives in the United States. The people brought a great prayerfulness and vibrancy to the faith life of the Church, and three separate musical bands enriched the worship services. As the years passed, new immigrant families arrived from the Philippines and Vietnam, bringing the number of church parishioners to 1200. At one point, six different languages were spoken in the parish.

After more than 20 years in Mississippi, Sister Pat returned to New Jersey earlier this year to live in community with the Sisters of Charity in the Motherhouse. She is still in constant contact with the people of St. Anne's and is gratified to know that volunteer parish ministers have stepped forward to continue the programs that she started. A long time animal lover, Sister Pat now enjoys volunteering at St. Hubert's Animal Welfare Center. In this work, she continues the kind of service she engaged in for ten years as the coordinator of an animal rescue center in Mississippi that found homes for over 500 dogs from 2005 to 2015.

As Sister Pat reflects on her ministries, she says that she has always been guided by the directives of Jesus: give food to those who are hungry, give drink to those who are thirsty, help your sisters and brothers. Her journey from a teacher to a pastoral minister taught her that "it's not always simple to give a drink to someone who is thirsty. You run into red tape and just have to break through it."

The assurance that God is with her gives Sister Pat the courage to address new challenges. “There have been so many instances where I might have just said, ‘I don’t want to get involved in this.’ Yet, each day I go forward as I pray, ‘How do you want it to go today, God? Be with me for every step.’”