

Sister Mary Pierre McPhee

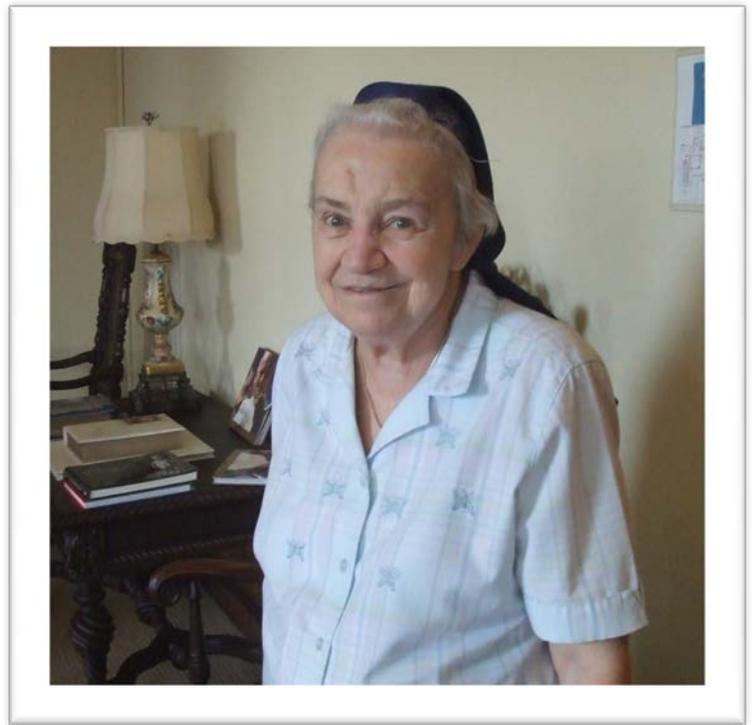
When Sister Mary Pierre McPhee is asked to reflect upon her years in ministry as a Sister of Charity, she immediately starts telling stories about the many children she taught and nurtured. She seems to remember each child with amazing clarity, adding details such as where a child sat in class, how a child had trouble pronouncing the letter “s,” or how two brothers always came to school dressed head to toe in blue. Her love for each child shines through her words, as she describes a life of humble charity and extraordinary service.

Sister Mary Pierre grew up in Roxbury, MA and was the third oldest of six children in her family. Her mother and father were Canadians and the family spent summers in Canada. Mary Pierre remembers that her parents often spoke French to each other, for example, when discussing Christmas presents in front of the children. She says, “We soon got wise to that, though, and got good at figuring out what they were saying!”

An incident that occurred when Mary Pierre was only two years old had a profound impact on her life. A family friend was holding Mary Pierre near a hot coal stove. When the woman got up suddenly, Mary Pierre fell onto the stove top and severely burned both of her tiny hands. The doctor who wrapped the terribly damaged fingers gave little hope that Mary Pierre would ever be able to use her hands properly, but Mary Pierre’s mother had great faith that God would heal her little girl. When the bandages were finally removed from her fingers after months of being wrapped, the fingers were fully restored. Sister Mary Pierre relates, “The doctor said, ‘I don’t believe this!’ but my mother said, ‘I do.’” Her mother’s great faith was a model to Mary Pierre, who continues to thank God each time she looks at her hands.

Mary Pierre was taught by Sisters of Charity at her parish school. She remembers being especially close to Sister Margaret de Sales, who would invite Mary Pierre and her friends for juice and conversation on Sunday afternoons in the Convent. Mary Pierre felt called to religious life. With her family’s blessing, she went to the Juniorate of the Sisters of Charity in Convent Station, New Jersey, for her high school years. Looking back, she says, “We had such fun there. . . even though I worked in the laundry almost every day!”

Following her years in the Juniorate, Mary Pierre entered the Sisters of Charity on April 2, 1950. She took classes to earn her college degree from the College of Saint Elizabeth and was sent to teach the first grade at St. Mary School in Salem, MA. The class size of 56 children was unimaginably large by today’s standards. Because there was no playground or cafeteria, all activities had to be in the classroom. Sister Mary Pierre often faced the additional challenge of being called upon to preside not only over her own classroom, but also the adjoining first grade classroom, whose teacher missed a large portion of the school year due to illness. Sister Mary Pierre faced the challenge with calm and good humor. She remembers, “The children were so good! I just had to stand in the doorway, and they would settle down. I would get one class going with their seat work, and then go over and teach the other class. They would all go home and tell their parents, ‘Sister said this,’ or ‘Sister said that.’”



Sister Mary Pierre remembers winning the respect and admiration of one little girl who previously had nothing good to say about school and would let everyone know how much she hated it in no uncertain terms. Another little girl had fallen asleep during class, and instead of berating the child for falling asleep, Sister Mary Pierre gently put a shawl over the sleeping girl's shoulders and asked the rest of the class to be quiet. The previously disaffected child witnessed Sister Mary Pierre's compassion with disbelief and after that was an entirely different child in class.

The school in Salem was located right on the water and was near a submarine base. On nice days, Sister Mary Pierre would take the children outside to eat their lunches and they would often be greeted by the sailors. "They'd say, 'Bring the children over and we will show you the submarine,' and I'd say, wearing the full habit, 'There's no way we're climbing into that submarine!'"

Sister Mary Pierre spent 29 happy years at St. Mary School in Salem until the school was condemned and forced to shut down. Sister Mary Pierre was then sent to teach first grade at St. Mary Elementary School in Jersey City. When her father lost both kidneys, Sister Mary Pierre got permission to move back to Massachusetts to be closer to help her parents. She lived at the Convent in Newton Center, MA and taught in a Montessori School. A couple years later she returned to New Jersey to teach first grade at Corpus Christi School in Hasbrouck Heights.

After so many years teaching first grade, Sister Mary Pierre took on a new ministry when she moved to St. Louis to work with children with special needs at a residential school operated by the Sisters of Notre Dame. Some of the students had Down syndrome, some suffered from seizure disorders, and many suffered the continuing effects of physical and emotional abuses.

Sister Mary Pierre unreservedly loved each of the children in her care. "They were all such beautiful children!" She tells of the day when she heard one little boy, who had come from an abusive home and had never uttered a word, suddenly start singing "Jingle Bells." She recalls holding one little girl close to her for twenty minutes until her seizure passed. Another time, she remembers coaxing a child off a swing in the far playground to take shelter in the school after gun shots were heard in the surrounding neighborhood. She also remembers installing little lamps over the beds of children who had been abused and were petrified of the night.

Sister Mary Pierre helped the children learn important skills and become independent. She remembers taking the older children to stores to teach them how to buy things and get change. At holidays, some of the children would fly home, and Sister Mary Pierre would board the airplanes with them. She laughs, "I taught them that TWA stood for 'Travel With Angels.' The pilots and stewardesses loved that!"

Sadly, after working with the children in St. Louis for ten years, Sister Mary Pierre learned that the school would be closed. Sister Mary Pierre returned to the Montessori School in Massachusetts, and then came back to New Jersey to live and work at Xavier Center on the campus of the College of Saint Elizabeth. She enjoyed the work and interacting with the people who attended programs and retreats. "When some of the men heard me talk, they said, 'You're not from around here. But are you a Yankees fan?' I said, 'No, Red Sox!' After that they made a game of hiding this little Red Sox guy I had. Once I found him in the cookie jar!"

Today, Sister Mary Pierre lives in the Convent in the Motherhouse. She works five days a week as the receptionist at Saint Anne Villa, greeting guests and assisting visitors to the skilled care nursing facility. On Thursdays, she works at the front desk until noon and then drives a van to take a group of sisters from assisted living out shopping.

Sister Mary Pierre believes that it is important to stay busy and do all that she can to help others. "I have always worked hard, and I want to keep going." Sister Mary Pierre says that "charity is giving without needing to get anything back." She concludes simply, "Charity is what you live."