

Sister Marie Russo

Charity Nourished by Prayer

Whether teaching English to foreign missionaries, leading a tai chi class at Josephine's Place, offering private counseling, or facilitating a women's spirituality group at her parish, it seems as if Sister Marie Russo is always on the go in a ministry of charity. Energized by a full schedule of diverse ministries, Sister Marie is invariably calm, soft spoken, and gracious. To Sister Marie, ministries of charity are nourished by prayer. She relies upon and cherishes her prayer time as she seeks to live each day close to God.



Sister Marie Russo was born and raised in Newark, New Jersey. She was the oldest of three children, and her close-knit extended family included grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins who lived in the same neighborhood. Faith and prayer were integral to family life, and Marie often prayed novenas with her aunt.

Marie's faith deepened when she was a student at Saint Vincent Academy and became active in the Sodality group. She remembers, "The Sister who led Sodality helped me to get to know God and also to know how much Sisters can do for young people. I started to want to be in the community and be like them. I learned to meditate and I prayed every day." Sodality also ignited Marie's passion for social justice. The group not only talked about social justice issues, but also followed through with resolutions and plans for action.

As high school graduation neared, Marie knew in her heart that she was called to be a Sister of Charity. At that time, however, Marie's mother was not ready to give up her dream of one day seeing Marie walk down the aisle as a bride. At her mother's request, Marie agreed to wait a year before entering and attended Montclair State College. Marie's father confided, "I'm very happy that you want to be a Sister of Charity but I can't tell your mother because I have to live with her the rest of my life!"

When the year was completed and her promise fulfilled, Marie entered the Sisters of Charity on August 20, 1959. Her family supported her decision, and she was grateful for the encouragement and counsel of friends.

Sister Marie's first teaching assignment was to teach high school French at Bayley-Ellard High School in Madison, NJ. She taught for a total of 33 years, with later positions at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Hoboken, the Academy of Saint Elizabeth, and Marylawn of the Oranges. Her teaching of French was enhanced by a Masters Degree she earned during summer studies at McGill University in Montreal.

In addition to teaching languages, Sister Marie also taught religion and led student groups in mission and ministry. Sister Marie says, "I loved teaching about social justice and helping the students become involved with social justice issues." She facilitated student service projects, including working at soup kitchens and doing kindnesses for the elderly sisters living at Saint Anne Villa. She also worked with students in peer ministry, preparing high school girls to lead retreats for their classmates.

Throughout this period, Sister Marie's own faith continued to grow through the many opportunities afforded to her by the Sisters of Charity. "They wanted us to keep going on to study and grow. We always had

conferences that taught us about the love of God and service and prayer. I could never have learned that at the time unless I was a Sister of Charity.”

Sister Marie’s desire to work more with students one-on-one led her to earn a Masters Degree in counseling from Seton Hall University. While continuing to teach languages at Marylawn of the Oranges, Sister Marie also served as a counselor in the guidance department, working with freshmen and sophomores. “I felt that I was able to connect with the students and help them.”

Although Sister Marie was gratified by her role as a school counselor, she felt called to work directly with the poor. Sister Marie asked for and received permission to pursue a degree in social work to enable her to continue her journey in ministry. In 1998, she earned a Masters Degree from Rutgers School of Social Work and went on to serve for 16 years as a clinical social worker at the Mental Health Clinic of St. Joseph Regional Medical Center in Paterson, NJ. “God calls us to work with the poor. As a counselor and therapist, I could serve people who could never find someone to talk to about their problems and I could help them see how valuable they really were.” Many of the participants in Sister Marie’s therapy groups were Spanish-speaking women. “It was a wonderful experience and I was privileged to be with them. We talked about God. We talked about life. We talked about their problems and solutions.”

Beginning in 2013, Sister Marie has continued her counseling ministry through a private practice in counseling and social work on Mondays and Tuesdays. She has also used her gift for working with people one-on-one in a different way as a Spiritual Director certified in the Archdiocese of Newark. Serving as a spiritual director has been very rewarding to Sister Marie, and her own faith has also been nourished by the many workshops she has attended and the connections she has made through prayer with other spiritual directors.

Sister Marie started and continues to lead a women’s faith sharing and prayer group at Our Lady of the Valley Church in Orange, NJ, where she is also a Eucharistic Minister and member of the church choir. In addition, she has taken on the role of “the social justice person in the church.” Sister Marie seeks to raise awareness of social justice issues and motivate people to take action. She says, “Justice is a constitutive element of the gospel. You can’t preach the gospel unless you see Jesus in others and help them to improve their lives.”

The list of Sister Marie’s ministries goes on and on. At Josephine’s Place, she leads women in tai chi, something she has been practicing for about 20 years. “We do relaxation exercises and the women really enjoy it. The tai chi strengthens bones, improves balance, and helps them see how they can help themselves.”

Perhaps most rewarding to Sister Marie is her work teaching English as a Second Language to international religious women at Assumption College for Sisters. “I feel that it’s really a ministry to missionaries. These sisters come from Africa, Vietnam and El Salvador, and they will go back to be heads of communities or schools or hospitals, helping the poor in their own countries. It’s now my third year being with them, and it’s really a privilege for me. They’re so open to learning, and they’re so holy.”

Whatever Sister Marie does in ministry always relates back to the foundation provided by prayer. Sister Marie says, “I need to spend my time in prayer every day. I enjoy praying the office, praying the rosary, going to daily Mass, having quiet prayer. I really find if there is a day or two where I miss, I’m not the same and I’m not as close to God as I would like to be.” Sister Marie also cherishes the time she spends once a month with a group of sisters in contemplative prayer.

Sister Marie feels blessed by the friendship of her sisters in the community who encourage and support her on her journey in ministry. She is grateful to be part of a community so committed to being open and responsive to changing needs. Although it was wonderful in the past to have great numbers of sisters in the community, Sister Marie believes that the influence of the Sisters of Charity in the world is greater today than ever before. She says, “So many people respond to our dedication to the poor and our love of God.”

The prospect of continuing to serve God's people energizes Sister Marie as she moves forward in her ministries rooted in prayer. "The Sisters of Charity have always tried to be faithful servants, and I know we will continue to serve God's people. Wonderful things are happening, and I have hope that whatever happens in the future will be what God wants."