

Sister Regina Bernard McCartney



These days, Sister Regina Bernard McCartney's presence is evident in the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth in the same way it was felt in the eight schools and parishes where she ministered. Wherever she goes, Sister Regina brings music, kindness, and a gentle reflection of God's love and goodness.

Sister Regina grew up in Plainfield, New Jersey, about a block away from St. Mary's School. Her parents were devout Catholics who made sure that each of the four children received a Catholic education. Sister Regina describes herself as a shy child who loved to draw and make clothes for paper dolls. She laughs, "I was good at it and I thought maybe I'd be a clothes designer!"

That idea was put aside when Sister Regina learned about the Sisters of Charity's Juniorate, the boarding school for girls who were considering a religious vocation. She says, "I remember it vividly. I was in the 8th grade at St. Mary's School when the Director of the Juniorate came and spoke to us. The experience was saying to me, 'This is for you.'" Her parents were utterly surprised that their shy daughter would want to leave home, but they gave their consent with the assurance that she could always return if she wasn't happy. Sister Regina says that she was determined to disprove her naysaying older brother, Joe, who told her she would surely be back home in three weeks.

Sister Regina indeed proved her brother wrong as she went on to thrive at the Juniorate. One of the best things about the experience, in addition to all that nurtured her spiritual growth, was the chance to continue her piano studies through weekly lessons with Sister Agnes Grace. The lessons were especially challenging because there were two pianos in the lesson room and she was required to keep pace as her teacher played along with her.

After four years at the Juniorate, Sister Regina entered the Sisters of Charity in March of 1947. With her call to religious life, she continued her family's heritage of religious vocations. The extended family included two bishops, three priests, a second Sister of Charity, and Sister Ita Ford, a Maryknoll Sister who was martyred in El Salvador.

Following the completion of her novitiate, Sister Regina was assigned to teach the fifth grade at Holy Rosary School in Elizabeth. A distinction of this first teaching position was that one of her students was Mary Ann Katlack, who went on to become a Sister of Charity. (Sister Regina affirms that Mary Ann was very bright!) The early years of teaching were especially demanding because Sister Regina not only managed a full teaching load but also took classes at the College of Saint Elizabeth on Saturdays and during the summers to complete the requirements for a BS in Elementary Education.

Through 65 years of teaching, Sister Regina ministered in eight different parishes and also served one year as the music supervisor for Catholic schools in Hudson and Bergen counties. Her longest stays were her 15 years at St. Vincent Martyr School in Madison and 33 years at Our Lady of Sorrows in South Orange. Early in her teaching ministry, Sister Regina taught mainly fifth or sixth grade. In later years, she devoted more and more time to teaching music, though she continued to teach other subjects. She especially loved teaching penmanship and delighted in seeing dramatic improvement in her students' handwriting.

While teaching at St. Matthew's School in Ridgefield, Sister Regina was grateful to be given the opportunity to study music during three summers at Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart in Purchase, NY. She says, "Everything about the school was great, and I learned so much about liturgical music and methods for teaching classroom music!" Sister Regina later completed the requirements for an MA in Music Education from Jersey City State College.

With her advanced training and her passion for music, Sister Regina always found a way to share the gift of music with her students, even when she was not teaching music as a separate subject. She enjoyed leading school choirs, directing school musicals and performances, and preparing students to sing for school liturgies. She also said "yes" whenever asked to play the organ for school or parish liturgies and she regularly served as cantor and leader of song.

As a pioneer in cross-curricular teaching methods, Sister Regina recognized that music helps children to learn subjects across the board. She reinforced her religion lessons through song, often incorporating songs that she composed herself. She wrote over 20 songs, including "To the Ends of The Earth," which was published. She says, "I composed songs that

were relevant to the children. I could see how much they enjoyed the melodies and the words.” She gives an example from part of a song she wrote about Jesus calling the apostles.

*Simon and his brother, Andrew
Were fishing in the Sea of Galilee
When all at once they saw a man
It was Jesus saying, “Come, follow me.”*

Another example of the cross-curricular use of music was her direction of a musical called “The Case of the Missing Parts of Speech,” which helped her students to learn grammar. Sister Regina also recognized that music could help students expand their vocabulary. When preparing students to sing at school Masses, she always stopped to make sure that they understood any words that might be unfamiliar. “I’d say, ‘Besides learning the hymns, you’re learning new words!’”

Sister Regina often took her students to share their music outside of school. For 47 consecutive years, her choirs sang Christmas music for the Sisters at Saint Anne Villa. Her choirs also performed at the annual Christmas tree lightings in Madison, South Orange and Maplewood and at a special Christmas event at the South Orange Performing Arts Center. Students gained self-confidence from performing in public and conscientiously heeded Sister’s admonition that when they were out in public, they were not representing only themselves but also their entire school.

With her calm demeanor, creative approach, and attention to fundamentals, Sister Regina epitomized the best of a traditional Catholic school teacher – the one you will always remember because you knew that she cared about you and she expected your very best. One can only imagine how many children went home from school and quoted something that Sister Regina had taught during the day, giving immediate authority to the words that followed by beginning them with “Sister says.”

Through her many years of ministering to children, Sister Regina’s personal spiritual life was nourished by being part of the faith community of the Sisters of Charity. She was also deeply grateful to her family for the opportunity to make several pilgrimages, including travels to the Vatican, Assisi, Fatima and Our Lady of Knock. These pilgrimages had a profound impact on Sister Regina and deepened her own faith that she in turn shared with her students.

Sister Regina was an integral part of the faith life and worship in each of the parishes and schools where she served and her impact continues to be felt in these communities years later. Among the spiritual legacy attributable to Sister Regina are the practice of sending the Pilgrim Statue of Our Lady home to families of students at Saint Vincent Martyr School and every student’s enrollment in the Brown Scapular at Our Lady of Sorrows School. Many students will also remember forever their experiences with Sister Regina in the Saint Dominic Savio Club which she started at Our Lady of Sorrows. She recalls, “We had all kinds of activities that helped the children learn about and imitate a young saint.”

Sister Regina got a glimpse of just how much her students appreciated her when she retired from Our Lady of Sorrows School six years ago. “The children went overboard. The notes and letters they wrote just overwhelmed me!” She was particularly touched by the tribute she received from an 8th grade boy who had been somewhat of a handful during music class. “One sentence he wrote stays in my mind. It was, ‘Sister, you will never know the impact you have made on this school.’ It was such a shock coming from him and it just made me so happy!”

Although Sister Regina misses spending her days with children, she continues to share her music and her gifts as a teacher. “Right now I’m just delighted that I’m the organist for the Motherhouse.” Along with Sister Connie Tanski, she plans music for Sunday Masses and feast days. “Sister Connie plays her guitar and I play the organ. We have a small choir and all the sisters join in. It’s wonderful!”

She enjoys giving tours to people who come to visit the Shrine of Blessed Miriam Teresa. Ever the teacher, she loves to educate visitors about Blessed Miriam Teresa and the extraordinary spirituality she evidenced in her short life. Sister Regina also offers her own beautiful penmanship to inscribe the names of donors in a leather-bound Blessed Miriam Teresa commemorative book. She feels privileged to have been asked to compose a hymn in honor of Blessed Miriam Teresa. “When Miriam Teresa is canonized, I hope that the hymn can be used by just changing *Blessed* to *Saint*!”

Whether she is doing something with music, the Blessed Miriam Teresa League, or one of the many volunteer activities that go on at the Motherhouse, Sister Regina looks forward to the gifts of each new day. With a smile and a little shake of her head, she says, “There is never a dull moment.”

Sister Regina feels privileged to be a Sister of Charity and to have the opportunity to carry on the charism of St. Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, Mother Seton, and the foundress, Mother Mary Xavier Mehegan. She says, “I just enjoy very much the fact that, in my later years now, the Lord has given me the health and strength for another ministry.”

She reflects, “As I look back, I’m very grateful that the Lord gave me the gift of music and that I was able to use it in many ways. I had a lot of happiness and joy as a result of it.” And after just a slight pause, “And I’m still using that gift. Thank God!”