

# Religious MILESTONES

A SPECIAL SECTION OF THE CATHOLIC SPIRIT FEBRUARY 25, 2021

## Pandemic helped new religious learn to walk with Christ

*"No storm can shake my inmost calm  
While to that refuge clinging Since  
Christ is Lord of heaven and earth  
How can I keep from singing? — from  
"How Can I Keep From Singing?"*

By Sister Anna Palka

These familiar lyrics have sung in my heart since I first heard this hymn a few years ago. "How Can I Keep From Singing" is a song about hope — a theological virtue and gift of the Holy Spirit that keeps us looking up, with "our eyes fixed on Jesus" (Heb 12:2).

On Sept. 8, 2020, I offered my life to Jesus, who is our Hope, by the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. Within St. Peter the Apostle Church in New Brunswick that day, COVID-19 was still a reality. Most pews were empty and masks were worn. Disappointment could have weighed me down, as it can easily take hold of us in this pandemic, but something greater lifted my spirit — hope in Christ and His unchanging love.

Throughout my three years of initial formation with the Sisters of Jesus Our Hope, the biggest lessons that best prepared me for a worldwide pandemic were obedience to God's will and living in hope. When I entered as a postulant, I stepped into a new way of life in this religious community. My schedule was set for me yet could change at a moment's notice depending on the needs of the day. I had to learn (and continue to learn) to enter each day anew, to receive what God had planned for me, and not cling to

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my own expectations.

March 2020 came, and our convent became more like a cloister to the outside world. We embraced what God allowed, even when we were stretched in the process. With an openness to His will, supported by our charism of hope, this time was still filled with much joy and peace because we were meeting God in the "here-and-now," not the "could-have" or "should-have-been."

Almost one year later, I am now serving full-time in our apostolate, and those of us in the mission convent have had to grow in flexibility. Multiple stretches of quarantine were not in this year's plans, especially not spending 14 days in our individual rooms after direct exposure to the virus. In those two weeks, in fact, throughout this entire year, I found I could either become frustrated by these constraints,

or accept them as God's will for me.

The hymn continues: "What though my joys and comforts die? I know my Savior liveth. What though the darkness gather round? Songs in the night he giveth." I took advantage of the silence and solitude and heeded Jesus' words, "When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret" (Mt 6:6). Grace abounded in these quiet moments with God. This was how He wanted me to encounter Him. This was where He wanted to come to me, in the reality of what He allowed.

In all of the struggle and difficulty that the pandemic brings, I am learning to walk through it all with Christ, my Hope. Hope is not an optimistic way of viewing life and finding the silver lining in COVID. Nor is it a consoling thought that says, "Things will return to normal eventually."



Jesus Our Hope Sister Anna Palka, left, and Jesus Our Hope Sister Christine Quense, Community Sister Servant, are shown after Sister Anna professed first vows at Mass at St. Peter the Apostle University and Community Church, New Brunswick, Sept. 8, 2020.

Hope is a Person who says, "I will step into your suffering and embrace it with you." I can affirm that suffering does not disappear with Jesus, but He gives it meaning, and even strength to endure it because He is risen, living, and victorious. "The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart. A fountain ever springing. All things are mine since I am his. How can I keep from singing?"



# Sister Valerie Balbach 80 Years

"It's been a wonderful life," asserted Mercy Sister Valerie Balbach, who is celebrating her 80th jubilee this year.

"The Lord has been looking after me all the time," she explained.

She noted that she has had a lot of ups and downs in her life. "With downs, I always came through fine. Up times were great," she said, adding that most of the times were up.

Born in Newark, Doris Balbach was the daughter of the late William and Celestine Balbach. Raised in Keansburg, Sister Valerie came to know the Sisters of Mercy at St. Ann School, Keansburg. After graduation, she went to Red Bank Catholic High School, which was also served by Sisters from the Mercy community. When she was a sophomore, she told her French teacher, Mercy Sister Helen Murphy, that she thought she wanted to become a religious. Sister Helen became her mentor. "She inspired me to enter the Mercy community and we became good friends," recalled Sister Valerie.

In 1941, the year she graduated from Red Bank Catholic, Sister Valerie entered the Sisters of Mercy religious order. At the time, each new postulant would be asked to take a new name. They were given books about the saints to help them choose one. Sister Valerie wanted to take her mother's

name, Celestine, but the year before another Sister took the name so she had to choose another one. She said when she read about St. Valerie, "That was it. She is a little like Mother McAuley, our foundress. She worked with the poor and helped everyone."

The year Sister Valerie joined the Mercy community, the world was in the early turmoil of World War II. "Times were hard," she said, "but those of us at Mount Saint Mary's did not know much about the war. We had no television or newspapers." The only difference the young Mercy Sisters felt was the lack of help. "We were doing a lot of work that normally people would be here to do," she said.

Sister Valerie received her habit in 1942 and pronounced her first vows in 1944. She chose as her motto, "Jesus I am all thine."

"I chose it because I was working for the Lord," she said.

Sister Valerie continued her education at Georgian Court College (now University), Lakewood, majoring in French. She

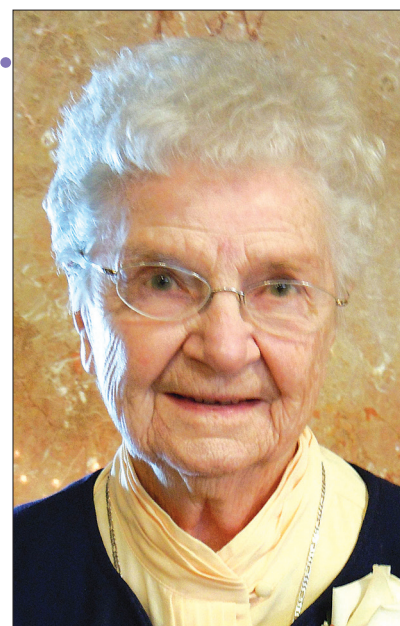
earned a master's degree in elementary education at Seton Hall University, South Orange. The young teacher then began her career in education at St. Paul School, Burlington, and Holy Spirit School, Atlantic City.

At Phillipsburg Catholic High School, her next assignment, Sister Valerie taught primarily French. In 1953, she was named principal of St. Elizabeth Elementary School, Bernardsville. She then served a total of five three-year terms as principal at St. Matthew School, Edison, and St. Paul School, Princeton, before becoming assistant administrator at St. Mary Academy, Lakewood.

Almost 50 years after becoming a religious, Sister Valerie was appointed first as an instructor and then director of student teachers at Georgian Court. She served there from 1988 until 2013. Commenting on her service at Georgian Court, Sister Valerie said the student teachers were "very young, very energetic, and well worth my time."

Reflecting on her 80 years as a Mercy religious, Sister Valerie said some of her

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best times were spent with her good friend Trinitarian Sister Bartholomew. Friends for over 50 years, Sister Valerie said she and Sister Bartholomew did a lot of traveling. "We saw the world," she said.

Sister Valerie, who lives at Mount Saint Mary, Watchung, is a member of the Gabriel Hall community and is still a vital and engaged member of the Sisters of Mercy.

"I can't do too much, but when I am not tired help out whenever I can," she said softly, adding, "I'm 98 you know."

— Joanne Ward



## Spiritual Care

Above, Bishop James F. Checchio (right) raises the paten at Mass on World Day of the Sick Feb. 11 at the Saint Peter's University Hospital chapel, New Brunswick. Above right, Bishop Checchio poses with the staff of the diocesan-sponsored hospital's 3G surgical unit. Right, Bishop Checchio blesses patient Veronica Emerson, a member of St. James the Less Parish, Jamesburg, who directs the fundraising for its religious education program and has taught it for 40 years, and is an extraordinary minister of holy Communion. Then-Pope, now St. John Paul II established the annual World Day of the Sick in 1992. In a message for this year's World Day of the Sick, Pope Francis said, "the liturgical memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Lourdes is an opportunity to devote special attention to the sick and to those who provide them with assistance and care both in healthcare institutions and within families and communities."

— Michael Castronova and Tara Smith photos





# Sister Rita McGurk 75 Years

Reflecting on her 75th jubilee as a religious, Mercy Sister Rita McGurk said, "Gratitude is the first thing that comes to my mind."

Elaborating, she talked first about her relationship with God saying she has had numerous opportunities to grow in that relationship through education, workshops, retreats and different assignments. She added that her later years in life have allowed her to feel God's presence more strongly and often. She said she is also grateful for the Sisters of Mercy. "The sisters I live with are my companions on life's journey. They are gifts with whom I share my life."

Sister Rita's vocation to religious life began when she was in the second grade. As a student at Holy Spirit Elementary School, Atlantic City, Sister Rita would go across the street to the Sisters of Mercy convent where she would take piano lessons with Mercy Sister Mary Robert.

"When I would take lessons, I saw tranquility in her life," Sister Rita recalled, "and I wanted to be like her." She noted that moments such as hearing the Mercy Sisters praying as they passed her door on the way to the chapel, also helped draw her to the religious community.

Raised in Atlantic City, Sister Rita was the fourth of nine children born to the late Joseph and Kathleen McGurk. "My family

was supportive of me my whole life. They visited me wherever I was assigned," she recalled.

After graduating from Holy Spirit High School, Atlantic City, in 1946, Sister Rita entered the Mercy novitiate in Watchung. Within two years, she received the religious habit and the name Sister Mary Christian. Her teaching assignments included Holy Cross School, Rumson; Our Lady of Victories School, Sayreville; St. Paul School, Princeton, and St. Mary Academy, Lakewood. For 10 years after completing her novitiate, she also taught piano.

During the summers, Sister Rita continued her education. She earned degrees in elementary education at Georgian Court College (now University), Lakewood, and Seton Hall University, South Orange. She then enrolled at LaSalle College (now University), Philadelphia, where she earned a master's degree in theology.

In 1971, Sister Rita was assigned to St. Mary School, South Amboy, where she taught and also chaired the sub-committee of worship. Two years later, she returned to Atlantic City as principal of Star of the Sea

"My family was supportive of me my whole life. They visited me wherever I was assigned."

Academy, where she served for three years. From 1976 to 1980, Sister Rita was assigned to Holy Spirit High School, Absecon. For the next six years, she served at Camden Catholic High School, Cherry Hill.

While Sister Rita was teaching primarily religion at this time, she was gradually being drawn to the religious education ministry in a parish setting. In 1986, she accepted her first position in the field as director of religious education at St. Pius X Parish, Cherry Hill. She then assumed a similar position at Saints Simon and Jude Parish, West Chester, Pa., where she served for eight years. As pastoral assistant at St. Ann Parish, Raritan Borough, Sister Rita completed 48 years of full-time ministry.

During her time ministering in parishes, Sister Rita served on parish liturgical committees and coordinated the religious education programs for children who attended public schools. She was responsible for adult faith development programs and at St. Pius X Parish introduced the Little Rock Scripture Study program that flourished. At St. Simon and Jude Parish she conducted the



Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults ministry. At various times in her ministry, Sister Rita also served as an advocate on the Marriage Tribunal in the Diocese of Camden and volunteered at St. Joseph School, North Plainfield.

Since 2003, Sister Rita has continued to volunteer at Mount Saint Mary Academy, Watchung, where she lives. She helps sort the mail in the Communications Center as well as for the Mount's Finance Office.

Sister Rita said she has been blessed in each of her ministries, and added, she was "gifted to choose religious life."

— Joanne Ward

# Sister Faith Moore 75 Years

Mercy Sister Faith Moore credits her God-focused service to the good sisters of Mount Saint Mary Academy, Watchung, who nurtured and formed her during her high school years.

One of nine children born to Arch and Lillian Moore, she attended St. Mary School, Plainfield, then was sent to live and study at the hilltop academic community affectionately known to all as "the Mount."

"I've loved the Mount since I was a boarding student there. I had become friendly with the postulants and novitiate," Sister Faith said. Following her graduation, she entered the community that had formed her Sept. 15, 1946, and gave her perpetual profession of vows May 15, 1952.

The new religious then earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education at Georgian Court College (now University), Lakewood, and a master's degree in reading at Seton Hall University, South Orange. She also earned a state certification in elementary education.

Sister Faith practiced her educational ministry first at St. Elizabeth School, Bernardsville, and Cathedral Grammar School, Trenton, before being assigned as founding principal of St. Frances Cabrini School, Piscataway. Subsequent

terms in Bernardsville, then St. Mary Academy, Lakewood, followed.

Sister Faith also served as elementary school education consultant for the Sisters of Mercy-staffed schools from 1978 to 1984, a position which led to a quarter-century love affair with the pre-school children of St. Ann Parish, Keansburg, a relationship she recalled with delight.

"I saw the old telephone building on parish grounds, and went over there to investigate," she said of the town-owned facility. "I went over there to investigate and saw how dirty it was. I saw the children eating lunch, how dirty their little hands were, and thought, 'I have to clean this up.'"

Sister Faith, with the parish's blessing, garnered monetary grants and with good old-fashioned elbow grease not only cleaned up the building, but served as director of the new St. Ann Child Care Center for the next 25 years. "I hired teachers for the three- and four-

For her work in the Raritan Bay community, she was chosen as Grand Marshall of the town's 2017 St. Patrick's Day Parade, "riding in an open car and waving to everyone."

year-olds. We had singing and nursery rhymes, and it was wonderful," she said.

Sister Faith's work in Keansburg was not limited to the pre-school center. She volunteered at St. Ann Parish; served on the board of Project Paul, the town's nonprofit thrift store, food pantry and furniture shop, and helped deliver meals to homebound seniors. For her work in the Raritan Bay community, she was chosen as Grand Marshall of the town's 2017 St. Patrick's Day Parade, "riding in an open car and waving to everyone," she said with a laugh.

Not surprisingly, Sister Faith chose to conclude her active religious service in the place she had grown to love so many decades ago. Following a 2009 leg injury, she chose to retire to McAuley Hall Healthcare Center on the grounds of Mount Saint Mary Academy.

"After my surgery, I came to recuperate in McAuley. I am resting now. I guess I should, because I'm 92 years



old," she said.

Praising the medical staff and others at the Mount who cared for its aged residents, she added, "They are so wonderful here. I am inspired by the people up here."

Noting the general decline in novitiates and those aspiring to join religious life in general, Sister Faith issued her advice to those who may consider dedicating their lives to service in Christ.

"You'd better do it now before you forget," she said emphatically. "We need you."

— Christina Leslie

# Sister Mary Gomolka

## 70 Years

Faith-filled parents and a solid Catholic education may have lit the spark of religious life for Mary Gomolka, but it was sage advice from a priest which set in motion her lifelong love of music and decades of service as a Sister of Mercy.

Influenced by the good example of her teachers at Sacred Heart School and St. Mary High School, both in South Amboy, Sister Mary decided to become a sister when she was in the sixth grade but then “forgot about it,” until five years later.

“When I was on a retreat as a senior in high school,” Sister Mary recalled, “the priest said, ‘Pretend you are on your deathbed and your candle was burning out. What would you wish you had done? Do it now.’”

The young woman has indeed been fulfilling that wish since she entered the Sisters of Mercy Sept. 8, 1951, and was accepted by the community as a novice six months later. Reflecting on becoming a Mercy Sister, she said, “I remember thinking, ‘I came for God and I’ll stay for God.’”

Sister Mary’s first two assignments were as a teacher at Sacred Heart School, South Plainfield, then at St. Mary Academy, Lakewood.

Sister Mary continued her own edu-

cation by earning a bachelor’s degree in English at Georgian Court College (now University), Lakewood, in 1967, then a master’s degree in music at Trenton State College, Trenton, in 1973.

Sister Mary served as principal of St. James School, Woodbridge, from 1970 to 1972, before once again serving at Georgian Court from 1972 to 1975 as a music teacher.

Her arrival at Mount Saint Mary Academy, Watchung, in 1975 began a 36-year career as the school’s head of the music department before her retirement in June 2011.

Over the years, Sister Mary was recognized for her music and her ministry. She was included in “Who’s Who Among America’s Teachers” and selected as “Outstanding Educator” in the Diocese of Metuchen. The year she retired, Sister Lisa Gambacorto, directress, Mount Saint Mary Academy, had a plaque hung outside the music offices in the Mount Building

which designated that hallway the “Sister Mary Gomolka Music Corridor.”

The word “retirement” means different things to different people. In a 2014 interview with the “National Catholic Reporter,” Sister Mary recalled, “I requested ... to spend three months at Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem, participating in a renewal/study/Scripture program and to remain there as a volunteer in whatever ministry I could be helpful. Bishop William Shomali in Jerusalem directed me to work with the mentally and physically disabled children cared for by the Missionary Sisters.”

Discovering Sister Mary’s music background, the rector of the nearby seminary requested she teach the seminarians piano and voice. The religious completed her dual responsibilities until the following May when she returned to New Jersey; her skill and willingness to aid the future priests resulted in two more terms in Jerusalem.

Sister Mary officially retired to

“Any follower of the Lord has to follow him all the way: in service to others, in love and in faithfulness to the Father. Follow him to the cross and resurrection.”



Mount Saint Mary Academy, once again, in 2013. The one-time student of Madame Luisa Stojowski of the Julliard School, New York, still receives calls from surrounding parishes to play and sing at funerals.

She recently reminisced about her seven decades of service and revealed advice she might share with a young woman considering life as a religious.

“Any follower of the Lord has to follow him all the way: in service to others, in love and in faithfulness to the Father,” she said. “Follow him to the cross and resurrection.”

— Christina Leslie



**Congratulations to the following  
Sisters of Mercy  
who are celebrating their jubilees  
this year in the Diocese of Metuchen:**

- Sister Mary Valerie Balbach, RSM - 80 years
- Sister Rita McGurk, RSM- 75 years
- Sister Mary Faith Moore, RSM - 75 years
- Sister Mary Anton Frick, RSM - 70 years
- Sister Mary Gomolka, RSM - 70 years
- Sister Lee Ann Amico, RSM - 60 years
- Sister Kathleen Curnyn, RSM - 60 years
- Sister Kathleen McDonnell, RSM - 60 years
- Sister Mary Michaelita Popovice, RSM - 60 years
- Sister Judith Schubert, RSM - 60 years
- Sister Alice Swartz, RSM - 60 years
- Sister Lorraine Wolliard, RSM - 60 years
- Sister Mary Bilderback, RSM - 25 years

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**Blessed  
Sacrament  
Church**  
Martinsville, NJ

*Congratulates*  
**Sisters Ermelita Gella, SDV**  
*as she celebrates her silver jubilee*



We ask for God’s continued  
blessings as you bring  
God’s love to all of our children at the  
Little Friends of Jesus Nursery School



# Sister Lee Ann Amico 60 Years

When Mercy Sister Lee Ann Amico's parents learned that their daughter was going to enter the convent, she said her mother told her father, "Let her go and try this. She will probably only last 15 minutes." This year Sister Lee Ann is celebrating her 60th jubilee as a Mercy Sister, and during the past six decades has accomplished much more than even she could have imagined.

The only child of Gaetano and Madeline Welch Amico, Sister Lee Ann was born and raised in Trenton. She first became interested in religious life at St. James Elementary School, Trenton, which was staffed by the Religious Teachers Filippini. As a student at Cathedral High School, Trenton, she came to know the Sisters of Mercy and was inspired by their willingness to help others.

The Sisters of Mercy's down-to-earth natures also attracted Sister Lee Ann to the order. "I saw them as real people. They laughed. They were serious, but they could joke with you. They had a human touch, a humanness," she said.

In 1961, the year she graduated from Cathedral High, Sister Lee Ann joined the Mercy community, and began teaching in elementary schools including St. James, Red Bank; St. Ann, Keansburg; St. Mary, Camden; and Cathedral, Trenton.

Sister Lee Ann professed her final vows

as a Mercy Sister in 1970. The same year she received a bachelor's degree from Georgian Court University, Lakewood, where she was awarded a master's degree in 1976. From the state of New Jersey, she earned certifications in elementary education and principal, supervisor.

From 1985 to 1986, Sister Lee Ann served as assistant superintendent of schools in the Archdiocese of Newark. She then taught history and sociology at the Mount and was in charge of the Student Council.

Well respected and loved by the students, in 1989 Sister Lee Ann was named "Teacher of the Year." She recalled what an honor it was to receive the recognition since the students selected the teacher to be honored.

Sister Lee Ann's longest and one of her most challenging ministries began in 1996 when she was asked to become director of the McAuley School for Exceptional Chil-

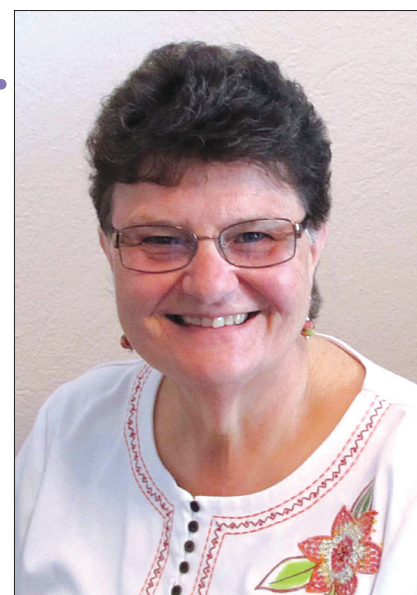
dren when it was relocated from the Mount campus in Watchung to North Plainfield. Although she had never worked with the cognitively impaired, she said in one interview "to my delight and surprise, I fell in love with it. The children taught me to be true, simple and direct — to be myself."

When the McAuley school closed in 2013, Sister Lee Ann returned to serve once again at the Mount, this time as director of Student Government and Student Center manager, positions she still holds.

One of Sister Lee Ann's tasks as Student Center Manager is to maintain one of two bulletin boards in the center. When she first saw the bulletin board, she said she felt it needed a good elementary school teacher to make it better. "I taught at a time when bulletin boards were important," she explained. On the Mount's

bulletin board, she posts quotes and sayings designed to generate thinking. She changes it each month. On Dec. 4, 2020, Sister Lee Ann's bulletin board read: "2020 Thank you for all the lessons. 2021 we are ready." The students loved the saying and on Facebook

"They [Sisters of Mercy] laughed. They were serious, but they could joke with you. They had a human touch, a humanness."



above a photo of the bulletin board it read in part, "Thank you for always inspiring us Sister Lee Ann."

Reflecting on her 60th jubilee, Sister Lee Ann said, "I think the most rewarding part as a religious has been the relationships that I have made with the people to whom I have ministered. It's the interfacing with the people of God."

As for the future, Sister Lee Ann asserted, "At this point I have enough energy to do what I am doing and God has blessed me with the health to do what I am doing, so I'll keep doing it 'til I can't."

— Joanne Ward

# Sister Kathleen Curnyn 60 Years

For the past six decades, Mercy Sister Kathleen Curnyn has served in many different ministries and as she celebrates her 60th jubilee, emphatically states, "I would do it again. I wouldn't question. I would enter the Sisters of Mercy and be of service to the people of God."

Sister Kathleen's deep faith, which led to her service, began early in life. The daughter of the late James and Sarah Curnyn, she was born and raised in Mineola, Long Island. Her parents taught her and her brother the importance of the Catholic faith. Her father attended Mass daily and as a high school senior, daily Mass became part of Sister Kathleen's life.

After graduating from Sacred Heart Academy, Hempstead, N.Y., Sister Kathleen, who said she knew from an early age that she wanted to be a religious sister, became a Sister of Mercy. "My mother didn't live to see me enter the convent but my dad was very happy that I choose this path. Sadly, he died six weeks after I entered," she recalled.

Sister Kathleen's commitment to doing the Lord's work began in the classroom. She spent 12 years teaching in elementary schools throughout the Dioceses of Metuchen and Trenton: St. Mary School, South Amboy; St. John School, Lam-

bertville; Our Lady of Victories School Sayreville; Sacred Heart of Jesus School, South Plainfield, and Holy Spirit School, Perth Amboy. She also served at St. James School, Red Bank, and St. Ann School, Keansburg.

Continuing her education, Sister Kathleen earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Georgian Court College (now University), Lakewood, and in 1972 received a master's degree from Seton Hall University, South Orange, to become a media specialist. She also has certification in school administration from Seton Hall University and Georgian Court College, and a master's degree in pastoral studies from Loyola University, Chicago.

It was in 1972, too, that Sister Kathleen was appointed principal of St. Ann School, Keansburg, a position she held until 1980 when she returned to teaching, and four

years later was named Assistant Superintendent of Schools in the Newark Diocese and then Regional Supervisor of schools in the Brooklyn Diocese's School's Office.

For the next 18 years, from 1990 to 2008, Sister Kathleen served as principal of St. Matthew School, Edison. She stayed at the school two additional years serving at its librarian. Then she became involved with a new and unexpected ministry, Project Paul.

Reflecting on the experience she said, "I loved all of the work I was involved with but thinking back when I went to Project Paul in 2010 it was the right place to be. I liked the interactions with the marginally poor. We worked in a very impoverished community, but they are wonderful people. Working with the poor in Keansburg was the most significant part of my life."

While working at Project Paul three days a week, Sister Kathleen spent two days a week as the librarian at Sacred Heart School, South Amboy.

Currently, she is serving as a lector at Our Lady of Mount Virgin, Middlesex and volunteers with the All-African Confer-

"Follow your dreams and ask for advice. You will find the right spot for you. I have kept myself very active and this has been a wonderful experience for me."



ence, Sister to Sister. Located in the United States, this agency is comprised of a group of religious who help support Sisters in middle Africa. "We help the Sisters in Africa by providing finances for them to get their education. I have been involved with them for three years," said Sister Kathleen.

When asked about advice for those seeking a vocation in the religious life Sister Kathleen said, "Follow your dreams and ask for advice. You will find the right spot for you. I have kept myself very active and this has been a wonderful experience for me."

— Karen Corpora



# Sister Martha Garzon

60 Years

To Christian Charity Sister Mary Martha Garzon, religion is not taught, it is caught from our families and others in our lives. Sister Mary Martha's family impressed upon her from an early age the importance of prayer and keeping a devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and for that, she could not be more grateful.

Sister Mary Martha, who lives at St. Cecilia Parish, Iselin, was born in Colombia and immigrated to New York City as a small child with her family. She attended St. John Chrysostom School and Immaculate Conception School, where she had her first experiences with the Sisters of Christian Charity that taught there.

The Sisters were a wonderful early example for Sister Mary Martha of a consecrated life, but perhaps the most influential person in her decision to seek a vocation was her grandmother, whom she lived with.

"She was very religious, always took me to church, and taught me prayers. My grandmother always prayed that one of us would enter religious life, and I was the blessed one," stated Sister Mary Martha.

Sister Mary Martha said her first

vows in August 1963, and describes the formation process as joyful, but challenging. "Like everything in life, you have your joys and sorrows, your ups and downs. Training was hard, but it was done with kindness and to firm us up for the future," she explained, remembering how the "happy group" prayed the rosary and went to church together.

"Devotions had been important to my family, and this was a natural continuation when I entered the convent. It was a good foundation that grandmom gave me," she added.

Her grandmother also gave her another gift: an affinity for working with older people. "I was raised by my grandmother, so I grew up with older people and enjoyed working with them," she said. Sister Mary Martha touched the lives of many individuals while working at a nursing home in New York and the Home for the Blind of the City of New York. Reflecting on that experience she stated, "It was wonderful to work with the blind and disabled, and to see how happy they were despite their challenges. I really enjoyed those years working there before entering the convent."

Sister Mary Martha took her final

vows in August 1969, and has loved serving the Church and the faithful ever since. She served in the Diocese of Paterson for more than 30 years, including 12 at St. Mary Parish, Dover, and 19 at St. Cecilia Parish, Rockaway, where she was blessed to be a pastoral associate, visiting patients in the hospital, attending funerals, and comforting the mourning.

She also relished assisting the director of the religious education program and teaching: "I just love those little kids. They were so eager to learn."

Today, Sister Mary Martha serves St. Cecilia's by doing various tasks for the parish. "I'm a jack of all trades, and the master of none," she laughs. "I love to be challenged and learn new things."

In addition to her religious work, Sister Mary Martha enjoys gardening. She said, "It brings me close to God. When I start digging in the earth, I forget about everything else and just focus on preparing the earth for the plants to grow. I sometimes run into rocks, and I say, 'Yes, Lord, this is like my life — rocks and pebbles that are resisting you need to be removed.'"

"My garden becomes like a prayer for me."



She also sings, knits, crochets, and puts her sewing skills to work by making masks for donation.

Throughout her 60 years of religious life, Sister Mary Martha has learned that the most important thing to do in tough times is to persevere through prayer. She states, "Pray, pray, and pray — even when you don't feel like it. It's very important. We do more by example than by preaching."

— Kaylynn Ebner

# Sister Kathleen McDonnell

60 Years

"Amen, Alleluia" was the motto Sister Kathleen McDonnell chose to guide her life when she entered the Sisters of Mercy six decades ago. "Amen means saying 'yes,' to whatever God wants and Alleluia means be happy about it," she explained.

For Sister Kathleen, her "Amen" led her to traditional ministries including teaching and serving as a school principal. More recently, it meant she headed the school store at Mount Saint Mary Academy, Watchung, and now serves as director of the Mount's Snack Shack.

As for her "Alleluia," "I've been happy," said Sister Kathleen reflecting on her 60th jubilee. "I feel that my life has been enriched by the experiences I had, even though some were a little tough. I've always been enriched by the students, regardless of their age level, and the faculty with whom I came in contact."

Born in Perth Amboy, Sister Kathleen was one of six children of John and Kathryn Conran McDonnell. She, her three brothers and two sisters were raised in Port Reading. While attending St. Joseph Elementary School, Carteret, she was taught by the Servite Sisters. At St. Mary High School, Perth Amboy, she came to know the Sisters of Mercy. Inspired by the spiritual example of the Mercy Sisters, who staffed St. Mary's, Sister Kathleen joined their religious community in 1960 when she graduated

from the high school.

As a young religious, Sister Kathleen furthered her education at Georgian Court College (now University), Lakewood, where she earned a bachelor's degree in education. During this time, she also began teaching. She served at St. Joseph School, North Plainfield; St. John School, Collingswood, and Sacred Heart School, South Plainfield.

She then became principal of St. Mary Elementary School, South Amboy, where she ministered for nine years. While teaching, she also earned a master's degree in math education at Central Connecticut College (now Central Connecticut State University), New Britain.

Sister Kathleen's next assignment began with her teaching at St. Joseph Elementary School. After two years, the principal became ill and had to leave and Sister Kathleen was named to replace her. She then was tasked with merging St. Joseph and St. Mary Schools, both in Bound Brook. The new school was appropriately named Holy Family Academy. It was while Sister Kathleen was serving in Bound Brook that she received the Diocese of Metuchen's Educator of the Year award for her longstanding achievements, en-

thusiasm and positive attitude.

In the early 1990s, Sister Kathleen was asked to become head of technology at the Mount. It was a time, she said, when most people did not know much about technology.

"I worked with the Mount's faculty until they learned basic technological skills" she said.

She then taught religion to sophomores at the Mount and headed the Student Council. For around the next six years, she was director of the School Store.

About seven years ago, Mercy Sister Lisa D. Gambacorto, directress of the Mount, had a new request for Sister Kathleen. She asked her to head a Snack Shack she was going to establish. Sister Lisa knew Sister Kathleen, a certified food handler, sold snacks from the Student Council office in the St. Joseph building. Sister Lisa wanted a place where students could socialize, work together and of course grab a snack. She discussed her idea with Sister Kathleen, who said, "Amen" to her new position.

"I've always been enriched by the students, regardless of their age level, and the faculty with whom I came in contact."



When she took charge of the Snack Shack, Sister Kathleen began working part time and still does. Under her leadership, the Snack Shack has become very popular with the students. As one individual wrote on Facebook, "I was amazed at how many girls were there!... One thing for sure. Sister Kathleen loves our girls and the girls love her and the Snack Shack!!"

In October 2019, another post on Facebook read, "Overwhelmingly, when prompted through an Instagram question about what makes the space [Snack Shack] so special, students responded: 'Sister Kathleen!'"

— Joanne Ward



# Sister Michaelita Popovice

## 60 Years

Thankful. Grateful. Blessed.

These three eloquent words encapsulate what Sister Michaelita Popovice's 60 years as a religious in the Sisters of Mercy order mean to her.

"I use that [phrase] a lot," she said. "It's true."

Eschewing retirement, for the last 30 years Sister Michaelita devotes five days a week to her job as program director for Catholic Charities, Diocese of Metuchen, in Phillipsburg, where she oversees operations and helps disadvantaged households meet basic necessities with food and clothing. A certified social worker, she is enthusiastic about her role, which typically involves volunteer recruitment, writing grants, setting budgets, attending virtual meetings, seeing clients, and discussing with Warren County officials how to help the homeless.

"To be able to work with the poor," she said, "I'm very privileged to do that. I don't call it work, I call it a ministry. I just feel people need help today, and if I can just listen to them it makes a difference — not just the food I give, but just listening to them and having an interest in their lives, then I'm doing God's work."

She referenced this quote from Catherine McAuley, foundress of the order, which sums up her ministry: "There are three things the poor prize

more highly than gold, though they cost the donor nothing; among these are the kind word, the gentle, compassionate look, and the patient hearing of their sorrows."

Sister Michaelita's efforts have been recognized locally and through the diocese with the Champions for Catholic Charities Award (2016), the Humanitarian Award from the Phillipsburg Chamber of Commerce (2013), the Partners in Charity Award from the Catholic Charities Solidarity Team (2011), and the Phillipsburg Rotary Excellence in Service Award (2010).

She humbly mentions that the awards are inclusive of others on her team.

"The idea that the work that myself and my colleagues have been doing at our place is recognized, that it's a valuable part of the community, that's what I feel that people should know," she said, "That Catholic Charities is out there and we are making lives better for people."

While growing up in Alpha, she attended nearby Saints Philip & James

"It's a life that has made me happy, and the idea of service in the Church is something that is definitely needed in the world today. In all my 60 years, I've been happy as a religious."

School, Phillipsburg. The Sisters of Mercy taught in every grade and had a profound influence on her. After graduation, she worked two years in a bank, but then decided to enter the convent. During her religious formation she attended Georgian Court College (now University), Lakewood, and Seton Hall University, South Orange, and earned two history degrees. She became a social studies teacher and later served as principal at her childhood alma mater for 13 years.

Her spare time revolves around talking politics and current events with friends, reading, and spending time with her nieces and grand-nieces and nephews. With health on her side, she still has "the enthusiasm, the motivation" to continue in her ministry until her eventual retirement enjoying the mountainous surroundings of Mount Saint Mary House of Prayer, Watchung.

"If they could give me a chair on the porch, I could sit outside and relax, maybe read. That would be my thing," she says about the future she envisions,



but not without bringing her favorite door sign along: I like to take naps.

For those curious about taking the same apostolic path, she notes that today the vocation is one in which candidates can make their own decisions regarding field of work. In contrast, during her discernment in the 1960s, teaching was the required ministry of all candidates when becoming a woman religious.

"It's a life that has made me happy, and the idea of service in the Church is something that is definitely needed in the world today," she said. "In all my 60 years, I've been happy as a religious. I would encourage people to consider it. We're needed in today's world."

— Debra Stevko Miller

# Sister Lucia Spinelli

## 60 Years

Although she does not speak English fluently, language has never been a barrier for Vocationist Sister Lucia Spinelli, who speaks fluently with her heart. Sister Lucia, of Blessed Sacrament Parish, Martinsville, is marking her 60th anniversary in consecrated life and has much to reflect on during her journey thus far.

Born and raised in Faeto-Forgia, Italy, Sister Lucia was raised in a strict Italian lifestyle ruled by her father. When she realized she was interested in pursuing a life serving God, she sought out the help of the spiritual director at her parish home parish in Italy. He guided her to meet the Vocationist Sisters because he knew them well. Since the Vocationist Sisters lived in her town, it was not long before she, too, knew them well.

While joining the Vocationist Sisters was an easy decision for Sister Lucia to make, it was not met with the support of her father, who had other plans for his daughter.

"At first my father opposed my decision. For fear of consequences, my

whole family followed him. But later, he allowed me to join the Sisters and everything was well," she said.

She went on to profess her perpetual vows in 1969, in Pianura, Naples, Italy, thankfully, with the full support of her family.

Although she did not attend school and gain formal training in order to become a Vocationist Sister, she points to her upbringing as providing a rock-solid foundation for this formation.

"I had no difficulties transitioning to this life because my parents raised me with discipline and work. I was already used to a similar lifestyle," she said.

For most people, a move to another country where they do not speak the native language fluently would cause anxiety. So, when Sister Lucia moved from Italy to the United

"I had no difficulties transitioning to this life because my parents raised me with discipline and work. I was already used to a similar lifestyle."

States having less than fluent English-speaking skills, she realized what she would be facing. But, while she needs help to communicate with anyone who

does not speak Italian, she does not view this as a negative because she is happy to be in the United States.

During her 60 years in consecrated life, Sister Lucia says she has greatly enjoyed offering her daily prayers. Each day, she prays for vocations in the Church and for those who have asked for her intervention in praying for them.

"My prayers have helped many people in many different situations," she said.

In addition, her ability to serve God's people extends beyond prayer and into the kitchen — after all, she is Italian.

"I am happy to be able to help



children eat better by preparing daily healthy and delicious meals. Parents are grateful for my homemade food," stated Sister Lucia.

As a Vocationist, Sister Lucia hopes to continue guiding other women to follow in her path, just as she was guided to follow others before her.

"Do not be afraid because to follow Jesus into religious life is the best choice," she said.

— Stacey Daly



# Sister Alice Swartz 60 Years

As she celebrates her 60th jubilee this year, Sister Alice Swartz praises God for her life as a Sister of Mercy. "It has always been and continues to be full of blessings, challenges, and grace," she said.

Her love for her Catholic faith came through her devout parents, her beloved brother and his family, as well as aunts, uncles and cousins, especially those who chose priesthood or religious life. "I recall very early in life, my great aunt, a devoted lay woman, taking me to Vespers in our parish church. The prayers were in Latin. I faked it, but I was awed by her example and holiness," Sister Alice reflected.

In the late 1950s, her family moved from Carbondale, Pa., to Plainfield, where she completed her elementary school education at St. Mary School. She described the parish's pastor, Msgr. Harold V. Colgan, founder of the Blue Army, as one of the great influences in her life.

At Mount Saint Mary Academy in Plainfield (now Watchung), Sister Alice was drawn to religious life by the deep spirituality, prayer life and professionalism exhibited by her teachers, the Sisters of Mercy. After graduating from the Mount in 1961, she entered the religious community the same year. Once she completed her novitiate and profession of first vows in 1964, Sister Alice was assigned in her ministerial life to vari-

ous educational roles. She taught in three middle schools — St. Matthew's, Edison; St. Paul's, Princeton, and Holy Cross, Rumson. Later, her ministry led her to Holy Spirit High School, Absecon; Notre Dame High School, Lawrenceville; Mount Saint Mary Academy and Union Catholic High School, Scotch Plains.

She credits the staffs at those schools for being exceptional mentors.

"I loved those 26 years of teaching and administration because of the students and colleagues who helped me to grow personally and professionally," she said.

For eight years, Sister Alice served as pastoral associate at St. Anthony of Padua Parish, Port Reading; and St. Augustine of Canterbury, Kendall Park. Reflecting on that time, she said, "I loved participating in the celebration of parish liturgies and many other parish and school events."

She commended Father Robert G. Lynam, pastor of St. Augustine of Canterbury Parish, for his balanced approach to spirituality, parish life, ministry, community

building and administration.

Sister Alice earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English at Georgian Court College (now Univeristy), Lakewood, and master's degrees in Biblical Studies at Providence College (R.I.); Jewish/Christian Studies at Seton Hall University, South Orange; and in philosophy at Drew University, Madison. After completing a doctorate in liturgy at Drew University, she began her college teaching career at the College of Saint Elizabeth (now University), Morristown, where she is in her 22nd year of service. Her ministry at Drew includes serving as department chair and assistant professor of Religious Studies and Theology.

Sister Alice has also traveled extensively. Her most favorite ventures were the summers she spent in Israel, which included studying at Hebrew University and attending the Sixth International Conference on Holocaust and Education at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem; and an exceptional sabbatical year in Rome where she lectured and studied at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas

"I recall, very early in life, my great aunt, a devoted lay woman, taking me to Vespers in our parish church. The prayers were in Latin. I faked it, but I was awed by her example and holiness."



Aquinas – Angelicum.

Sister Alice said that her vocation as a Sister of Mercy has been blessed, especially in living and working with the Mercy Sisters. She has loved and cherished more than the years in her own community, in sisters from many other religious communities, with priests and religious brothers, and with all the people of God.

As for what advice she would give to a young woman considering a vocation as a religious, Sister Alice said, "I would advise her to get to know the religious community, their lives and their works."

"Then I would add, 'Follow your heart!'"

# Sister Lorraine Wolliard 60 Years

In 1961, when Sister Lorraine Wolliard entered the Sisters of Mercy, John F. Kennedy was in his inaugural year as the United States' first Catholic president, noted author Ernest Hemmingway died, and actor Dolores Hart starred as St. Clare in the film "Francis of Assisi."

Shortly after, Hart left the glamor of Hollywood at age 24 to become a Benedictine nun. A little bit of her story might have rubbed off on Sister Lorraine. That's because Sister Lorraine, who is celebrating 60 years of religious life, was 27 when she entered the Sisters of Mercy after about a decade working and enjoying some of the pleasant experiences of a young, single woman.

Raised in Trenton, Sister Lorraine had considered becoming a nun when she was young, but her family had other ideas.

"I always wanted to enter," said Sister Lorraine. "When I graduated high school, my father took me to the interview with the mother superior."

After the meeting, her father told his daughter, the oldest of four children, "Nobody knows what they want at 18 years old. You go home and think about it."

"In those days, you listened. I listened to my father," said Sister Lorraine

during a telephone interview from her home at Mount Saint Mary Academy, Watchung.

Sister Lorraine spent her next 10 years in office roles, first with the New Jersey Department of the Treasury and later at the Mercer County Courthouse in Trenton, where she assisted the executive director of the New Jersey Association of Freeholders. In her spare time, she kept active.

"I use to belong to the USO," Sister Lorraine recalled, rattling off military bases where she attended dances. "I didn't sit home. I had a good life, but I knew this wasn't what I wanted."

The recurring thought of entering religious life convinced her to act upon it. She joined the Sisters of Mercy when she was about 10 years older than others who entered.

"I found it very interesting and difficult ... in many ways because you know how 18-year-olds are," Sister Lorraine said.

"I was 27. It's funny: They used to call me mom because I was so old," she added with a laugh.

Sister Lorraine had hoped to continue working in an office for the Sisters of Mercy, but her superiors, in need of teachers to meet an expanding Catholic school enrollment, had other plans.

Sister Lorraine had earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education at Georgian Court College (now University), Lakewood, and a master's degree in reading at Glassboro State College, now Rowan University.

She spent virtually her entire professional career teaching elementary students, predominantly first-graders, at three schools in the Trenton and later the Metuchen dioceses, including the former St. Joseph School in North Plainfield. She shifted from a career in business to education.

"I loved teaching and I loved the primary grades," she said. "I still keep in touch with many children I taught in first grade."

Sister Lorraine took a sabbatical in 1995. In 1997, she was diagnosed with two benign brain tumors.

Since 1998, Sister Lorraine has been at Mount Saint Mary, where she returned to office work, eventually becoming director of the McAuley Prayer Guild. She has called upon her secretarial skills and a networking ability for people who seek prayers.

In many ways, Sister Lorraine might say, her prayers were answered, particularly about pursuing a religious vocation.

"Just think about it, and keep it in



mind throughout the period," Sister Lorraine said of her advice to young women who consider the call.

"I don't know how to say this — things just happen in your life that you really have no control over. The one who is in control will lead you, eventually. That's how I feel. God has control over your life, and you just have to accept things as they go along. You know?"

When Sister Lorraine entered religious life, her motto was: "Jesus I come to do your will." It has guided her throughout her life as she placed God and his Son first.

— Anthony Salamone



# Sister Marie Colette Martelli 50 Years

For Sister Marie Colette Martelli of Blessed Pauline Convent, Monroe Township, it is hard to remember a time when the Sisters of Christian Charity were not a part of her life. Once teachers and mentors, and now family sharing a life in Christ, the Sisters of Christian Charity have played a critical role in shaping who she is today.

When she was six years old, Sister Marie Colette immigrated with her family from Italy to Jersey City. She attended public grade school and took religious education classes at her local church, where she had her first interactions with the Sisters of Christian Charity as teachers. "I loved to stay after class and help straighten up the classrooms and just sort of be in their presence," Sister Marie Colette said.

When it came time to enroll in high school, she asked her father for permission to attend the Academy of St. Aloysius in Jersey City. "He allowed it, which was great of him to put out the money because I knew that times were hard," she recalls.

As a high school junior and senior, her connections to the Sisters of Christian Charity continued when she volunteered to teach religion with them and she was invited to attend what turned out to be a life-changing retreat to their

Motherhouse in Mendham.

"It was there that I got to know them better — hear their stories, watch them pray and interact — and I realized I wanted to become a sister or at least learn more about it," she stated.

Though she volunteered on inner-city projects with a variety of communities, she always felt an incredibly strong connection to the Sisters of Christian Charity. "I was deeply touched by their spiritual life, their interaction with each other, and the kindness and joy I saw on the retreat to the Motherhouse. They seemed so happy — and still are today," she said.

After graduating from high school and after her first year at Jersey City State College, she entered the Sisters of Christian Charity in 1969 and completed her postulancy and novitiate years. Though surprised, her father was very supportive. "He gave me his blessing and said he'd always be there for me," said Sister Marie Colette.

Sister Marie Colette professed her first vows in 1973 and final vows in 1979

"I'm constantly reaching out to people — listening to them, talking with them, giving them a hug — and it goes a long way."

with her father and family in attendance. "He just was so proud of me. You could just see the glow in his eyes," she recalled.

He would also be proud of his daughter's many years of dedication to Christ, the Church, and several parish communities. She completed her bachelor's degree at Felician University, Lodi-Rutherford, and went on for a master's of education in administration. Sister Marie Colette taught for 15 years and served as a school administrator for 17 years in various grade schools in New York, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina.

One memorable assignment before she started teaching was spending four years in Rome assisting German tourist and Italian retreat groups. While Sister Marie Colette knew Italian, it was hard to assist the German tourists so she learned the language from another sister.

With both this challenge and those faced as a school administrator, Sister Marie Colette felt the Lord's helping hand at work: "When people speak about challenges, they often say it weakens or



threatens vocations. But for me, it made me much stronger and wiser."

Today, Sister Marie Colette is pastoral associate at the Nativity of Our Lord Parish, Monroe Township, and loves her work there, whether it's helping the homebound, serving the poor, or assisting the bereaved.

"I'm constantly reaching out to people — listening to them, talking with them, giving them a hug — and it goes a long way," she said. "At this point in time, it's exactly where the Lord wants me to be."

— Kaylynn Ebner

# Sister Ermelita Gella 25 Years

Despite many obstacles, when Vocationist Sister Ermelita Gella, felt like she heard Jesus say, "When are you going to say yes to me?" she was ready to consecrate herself to Him and this year is celebrating her 25th jubilee as a religious.

On Dec. 8, 1996 she took her first vows in Italy to become a Vocationist Sister.

The daughter of the late Cristupo Gella and Amelita Legaspi Gella, Sister Ermelita was born and raised in the Philippines. From a very young age she remembers longing to become a religious sister. She was inspired by a religious at her parish who was always happy. "I wondered what it would be like to be in the convent. I wanted to experience the peace and joy that she had in life," she said.

While deciding which religious order to join, Sister Ermelita learned that the Vocationist Sisters were in her diocese and close to her home. Her mom encouraged her to talk to them and see what they were all about. Sister Ermelita was hesitant because the sisters spoke mainly Italian and she did not know the language. Despite the challenge, when the sisters invited her to spend a week to see what living in the convent was like she decided to go.

"That week experience with the sisters made my longing grow deeper," Sister Ermelita said. She came home after that week to discern her vocation. "I was excited but I

was afraid of the unknown. I kept praying, 'Jesus, if this is what you want for me let me know.'

"I felt like he was saying, 'When are you going to say yes to me?'"

Sister Ermelita was 19 when she entered the Vocationist community Aug. 15, 1993, the feast of the Assumption. She asked the Blessed Mother to guide her on her journey. She became a postulant Oct. 2, 1993, and in 1994 she moved to Italy for formation.

"I struggled to learn Italian. There was no social media so how would I stay in touch with my mom? I wanted to go but I was torn," she recalled. She believes her mom's prayers and support were what helped her persevere.

On March 13, 1997, Sister Ermelita arrived in the United States, where more sisters were needed. "Coming here was culture shock for me. It was very far away. I was very attached to my mom and worried about how to keep in touch with her," she said.

"I was so blessed that our Mother General allowed me to take my perpetual

"I was so blessed that our Mother General allowed me to take my perpetual vows in front of my family and friends."

vows in front of my family and friends," said Sister Ermelita, who made them in the Philippines July 13, 2003.

Sister Ermelita serves as the director of Little Friends of Jesus School, Martinsville. The school serves preschool and kindergarten students. She and the sisters live at Blessed Sacrament Convent, Martinsville.

Well-prepared for a career in education, Sister Ermelita completed two years of a secretarial program at the College of Saint Joseph, Philippines. She earned an associate's degree at Assumption College for Sisters, Mendham; and a bachelor's degree in theology at Saint Elizabeth University, Convent Station, where she also earned her teaching certification.

Her biggest challenge in religious life, Sister Ermelita noted, is being in an international community. "There is a need to embrace the diversity and the culture that each of the sisters bring and accepting different personalities within the convent," she explained.

"My advice to anyone seeking a vocation to the religious life is to visit a convent to see what life is like. Prayer is really im-



portant, too. You need a special connection and relationship with Our Father.

"Also, seek out guidance from a priest, your family and people you trust. It is important to have their support. It makes everything easier."

Reflecting on the future she added, "The challenges and the hardship I encounter through ministry are necessary. I think through them my faith grows deeper. I love my vocation and I am looking forward to many years with God's grace. I want to remain faithful and be closer to him. His grace, mercy and love are working in me."

— Karen Corpora