

Sister Rose Marie O'Brien, SC

If you spend any time in conversation with Sister Rose Marie O'Brien, you are likely to notice how often she says, "Thanks be to God." To Sister Rose, these words are not a verbal habit or a comforting platitude, but a fundamental affirmation of the faith that guides and defines her life as a Sister of Charity: God is present. God is good. Thanks be to God.

As a child, Sister Rose received the faith that now sustains her as a precious gift from her parents. Sister Rose's mother was born and raised in Ireland. Her father grew up in Morristown, New Jersey. Both parents were devout Catholics who lived the faith and shared it with their eight children. It was her mother who taught her always to say, "Thanks be to God," simple words of gratitude in response to God's abundant blessings.



Sister Rose was named after her mother's aunt who had emigrated from Ireland to enter the New York Sisters of Charity. She says, "My great aunt looked just like Mother Seton. As time went on, it felt very special that I had been named after her." As the sixth-born of eight children, she always knew that her five older brothers and sisters would look out for her and she in turn looked out for her two younger siblings.

Sister Rose attended Bayley School, thereby further strengthening her connection with Mother Seton. Sister Rose remembers, "The faith became so strong that the call from God to give my life within the congregation of the Sisters of Charity was quite natural and normal. I don't think anyone thought otherwise, actually."

At age thirteen, Sister Rose entered the Sisters of Charity Preparatory School, also known as the Juniorate. She thoroughly enjoyed her teenage years at the school and grew to become even more certain that God was calling her to vowed life as a Sister of Charity. She entered the Sisters of Charity in March of 1956 and eagerly took up her new life in the novitiate.

While still completing her college education during weekends and summer breaks, Sister Rose set out on her first mission in 1959. For four years, she served as a first grade teacher at Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Ridgewood, New Jersey. This first teaching experience was followed by four years at Our Lady Star of the Sea in Long Branch. Sister Rose greatly enjoyed both of these tenures, where her students thrived with the encouragement of the nurturing and energetic young Sister.

In 1966, Sister Rose was asked to move to Fort Lee, New Jersey, to fill a vacancy and teach third grade in Holy Trinity Elementary School. Little did she then realize that she was beginning a stay of more than fifty years at Holy Trinity, where she was to make a lasting impression upon the parish and the lives of generations of families.

The years at Holy Trinity were filled with activity and purpose. Sister Rose's gracious influence and can-do spirit soon extended from the third grade classroom to more and more aspects of the school and the parish.

By the mid-1970s, the demographics of the Fort Lee community were changing as fewer children attended Catholic schools and more opted for public schools. Holy Trinity School became part of the interparochial system and Sister Rose moved from classroom teaching to direct her energies to religious education. She says,

“I really wanted to focus on what was most important and teaching religion seemed to be most important as a Sister of Charity.”

Religious education seemed naturally to lead to involvement with the RCIA program and from there, to virtually every other facet of parish life. Sister Rose says, “I had the privilege of being very much a part of every mass, every infant baptism, and every funeral—pretty much everything!”

Throughout her years at Holy Trinity, Sister Rose enjoyed a special connection with youth and young adults. “It was really fun because I kind of shared their lives and their enthusiasm.”

One of the many ways Sister Rose connected with young people was through sports. She has always enjoyed tennis and her enthusiasm for the sport inspired some of her students to take up the game. One student even went on to become a professional tennis player. Sister Rose also gamely filled in to play baseball when there were not enough girls to field the coed youth group team. She accompanied youth on trips to Bear Mountain, chaperoned dances, and engaged with young people around the pool table in the church hall. All the while, she appreciated that “the impression that a teacher and really any adult makes on the lives of young people is so strong. It was hopefully always positive.”

To Sister Rose, sharing the faith with children and young people is a cherished opportunity. “It is precious and fragile and demands a keen awareness of your responsibility to have a positive faith-filled influence.” She adds that if all children had such an influence in their lives, “it would be a world that would better give glory to God.”

In 2019, Sister Rose retired from Holy Trinity. Her retirement was marked by a huge parish party to celebrate her years of service to the parish and her loving ministry to so many families. Sister Rose moved back to the Sisters of Charity Motherhouse, where she greeted the new chapter in her life with characteristic joy and gratitude.

No matter where she has served, Sister Rose has always been thankful to be a Sister of Charity. She often reflects on the charism given through St. Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, and particularly through Mother Seton. “We are thoroughly Americans, faith-filled Americans.” She especially values the congregation’s openness and willingness to take on new challenges. “If someone needs to be taught, we go in there and teach. Nothing is out of our concern and no need is something we don’t want to fill.”

The spirit-filled charism of the consecrated Sisters of Charity is magnified through “the marvelous number” of Seton Associates. Sister Rose has no doubt whatsoever that this charism will continue.

“God wants this charism to continue. He wants it to prevail in our world and He is getting it done.”

Thanks be to God!