

Sister Marilyn Thie

The many women who are the Sisters of Charity bring a variety of gifts to the community and the mission of boundless charity. Some bring the gift of healing as they compassionately meet physical and spiritual needs. Some bring the gift of teaching as they nurture children and spark the love of learning. The list of gifts goes on and on: faith, discernment, leadership, advocacy, servanthood, art, music, and so many others.

Perhaps chief among the gifts contributed by Sister Marilyn Thie is the gift of an extraordinary intellect. Shared most notably during her 37 years on the faculty at Colgate University, Sister Marilyn's intellect challenged students to think deeply about questions of theology and philosophy as she opened their eyes to issues of social justice and prepared them to go out and make a difference.



Sister Marilyn grew up in the Northwest New Jersey community of Pompton Lakes (a town that actually has only one lake). She was the oldest of four children in the family and loved to return home from grade school at St. Anthony School or later at St. Mary's to share the days' lessons with her siblings. She remembers being impressed by the nuns who seemed young and vibrant.

By the time she was in sixth grade, Marilyn started to recognize her own call to religious life. This awareness persisted during the busy years when she attended her small, public high school. Her summers during these years were filled with teaching swimming and then lifeguarding. She says, "What I liked most was teaching the police safety tips for scuba diving!"

Following graduation from high school, Marilyn received a scholarship to study at Caldwell College. She says, "I was dating a guy pretty seriously at that time but the call to religious life kept haunting me." She considered entering the Dominicans, but then she explored the Sisters of Charity, a community she knew through her aunt. The Sisters of Charity seemed to offer a freedom to grow and to realize whatever future God inspired in her. She entered the Sisters of Charity in 1961 after two years at Caldwell.

Sister Marilyn was one of 68 women in her entering band. She quickly bonded with those postulants who, like herself, had already attended college and lived away from home. This group attended classes together at the College of Saint Elizabeth. Sister Marilyn developed a reputation for leading review sessions before the college exams. She says, "It was probably pure luck, but I got really good at coming up with questions that would usually show up in the exams." She adds, "The people in our group were smart and very inquisitive. We enjoyed learning. I think that experience also confirmed that I liked teaching."

Sister Marilyn had her first experience as a classroom teacher when she was sent to teach 7th and 8th grade English at Assumption School in Morristown. Having yet had no college education courses, she "stumbled through" with the help of more experienced teachers and learned to enjoy the surprises that came with being a new teacher. She laughs when she recalls that one of the most vivid memories from her days at Assumption was not from when she was teaching her own classes, but when she was called upon to fill in for a second grade teacher. "I remember there was a little boy sitting in the front row taking off his shoes and socks and cleaning his toes!" Though she had a lot to learn as a teacher, she enjoyed immediate success in one important school role: running the monthly hot dog sales. "I could do that well, as opposed to really knowing how to teach!"

Sister Marilyn's teaching skills continued to grow during two years teaching high school English at Marylawn of the Oranges. During this time, Sister Marilyn enjoyed convent life with the other sisters, who were very kind to her. She remembers being very grateful to her mother for supplying big jars of peanut butter to supplement the convent food prepared by someone "who wasn't a very good cook."

In 1967, the Sisters of Charity leadership asked Sister Marilyn to continue her education and pursue a doctorate in English. Sister Marilyn says, "I knew that what really interested me was ideas, so I suggested philosophy instead of English." Sister Marilyn was given permission to study philosophy and was accepted into Georgetown University's PhD program.

Studying at Georgetown was a wonderful opportunity for Sister Marilyn and she made the most of it. She worked hard to excel in the classroom after coming to Georgetown with almost no background in the history of philosophy. She says, "I wound up specializing in the philosophy of religion and viewed philosophy as a way of understanding what lies behind theology." After completing the rigorous coursework, she wrote her thesis on the philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead.

The Georgetown experience not only nurtured Sister Marilyn's intellect, but it also nurtured her passion for social justice and equality. She participated in protests against the Vietnam War and became increasingly active as an advocate for social change. She developed an interest in Latin American liberation theology and also embraced post Vatican II changes in the Church.

Throughout her years at Georgetown, Sister Marilyn maintained close ties with the sisters in New Jersey and spent considerable time traveling back and forth to serve as the Director of Junior Professed while simultaneously working on her thesis. At the request of the General Superior, she agreed to be one of the first sisters in the community to adopt the practice of wearing regular clothes instead of a habit.

After she was awarded her PhD in 1974, Sister Marilyn accepted a position on the faculty at Colgate University, where she served as a beloved and highly respected professor until 2011. She was one of eight women hired to join the Colgate faculty in 1974, a year that was dubbed Colgate's "year of the woman" not only because of the women who joined the faculty but also because 1974 was the first year that women graduated from what had previously been an all-male institution.

Sister Marilyn shared her passion for ideas and for justice through teaching courses and leading seminars in philosophy and theology, including courses that fulfilled core requirements in the University's General Education program. Her scholarship explored contemporary theologians and feminist theorists in philosophy, and she helped found, taught in and twice directed The Women's Studies program. One of the awards that Sister Marilyn received for her teaching through the years sums up her impact on the Colgate community by noting that "her commitment to social, economic, and gender justice, and her willingness to speak truth to power, have continuously renewed her own pedagogy and shaped Colgate itself."

One of Sister Marilyn's greatest contributions during her tenure at Colgate was founding and directing the Latin American study abroad program. The impetus for this program grew out of Sister Marilyn's experiences when she volunteered in South America during summers and semester breaks. She offered several week long retreats with Sister Peggy O'Neill, initially in Chile and then in Peru and Bolivia. She and Sister Peggy often stayed a few weeks longer, gaining entrance into the world of impoverished women through the Missionary Sisters who ministered with these local women.

Sister Marilyn wanted her students to see the world beyond their comfortable campus; she hoped to instill in them a fire for social justice that would compel them for the rest of their lives. The semester long Latin

American study abroad program, which took students into impoverished areas of Mexico and Central America and included time living with host families, had that impact. Sister Marilyn says, “The students in that program were totally changed, at least for some time.” Many went on to work for organizations dedicated to social justice or teach in inner city schools after they left Colgate.

Sister Marilyn says that after 37 years at Colgate, “I felt that I had done everything there I wanted to do.” She left the University in 2011 and moved back to New Jersey to take on a new challenge as the Assistant General Superior of the Congregation. She has enjoyed serving on the leadership team for the past eight years. “The best thing about being Assistant General Superior is being part of the Council. We get along and work well together.” She has appreciated the opportunity to build close relationships with sisters at the Motherhouse and other sisters. She has also been gratified to serve as Chair of the Board of Trustees of St. Joseph Health, a longtime Sisters of Charity sponsored institution.

Because Congregational bylaws limit leadership to two four-year terms, Sister Marilyn will move on to a new chapter in her own continuing mission of charity as of July 1, 2019. When asked what that new chapter will be, Sister Marilyn laughs and says, “I have no idea! I’ll rest first, but I’ll know it when it comes.”

Sister Marilyn only prays that her next ministry will fire in her the same enthusiasm that has always motivated her life’s work as a Sister of Charity. And with the optimism and faith that has always sustained her, she has no doubt that God has just such a ministry in store for her.