

June 2018

Dear Friends,

A well-known and especially inspirational prayer comes from the writings of St. Teresa of Avila: *“Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world... Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world... Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”*

Sister Mary Acerbi, featured in this month’s vocation story, was inspired to begin a new ministry direction while she was working at a school for exceptional children in Freeport, Illinois. It was a decision that became life changing for Mary, one that would lead her to Project Reflect in Nashville, Tennessee, founded by another School Sister of St. Francis, Sister Sandra Smithson.

Years ago, Sister Sandra saw the great need for a school dedicated to the education of high risk children. For Sister Mary, Project Reflect became a wonderful opportunity for her to continue the journey that she had begun at St. Francis School in Freeport in a number of different ways. She would begin her ministry of working with high-risk children there. In her words, *“God is so alive in our work.”*

Through her ministry and Franciscan heart, surely Sister Mary radiates the love and light of Christ to all those with whom she comes into contact. She *lives* the beautiful words of St. Teresa each day. Thank you, Sister Mary, for all that you do and for all that you are. May you continue sharing your gifts, your talents, and your joy as you minister and assist others to *“fly like a bird”!*

Sister Beth Ann Baricevich, OSF  
Vocation Minister

## The Marvels of a Franciscan Heart

By Sister Ruth Hoerig

As a freshman at St. Joseph High School in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Mary Acerbi was inspired by the sisters who taught her to consider a religious vocation herself. She entered the convent at the start of her sophomore year and was received into the School Sisters of St. Francis in 1962.

After a four-year stint at Pius XI High School in Milwaukee, and several more years at the congregation’s retirement homes in Milwaukee and Rockford, Illinois, Mary began working at St. Francis School for Exceptional Children in Freeport, Illinois. While working in their food service program, she also helped out in the classroom and felt at home working with special needs children. It inspired her to seek a new ministry direction in education.

*“Our staff were the children’s hands, feet, mouths, eyes – everything,”* Sister Mary recalls. *“To see their smiles changed me forever. One day on the last day of school, I was saying goodbye to the children when one of the boys walked up to me, gave me a big hug and said, ‘Sister Mary, I cried and fought a lot, but now I can fly like a bird.’”*

In 1997, Mary moved to Nashville, Tennessee, to work for Project Reflect, a nonprofit Christian organization that works with high-risk children in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. As a charter school, it provides an entire program for the children, including food, clothing and other life necessities. Mary organizes the distribution of un-served food from local restaurants, and along with volunteers, arranges meals at the school.

*“I was amazed to learn what a little extra love and care can do for these children,”* she said. *“God is so alive in our work.”*

There is no doubt that Sister Mary had found her calling. The joy she radiates in reaching out to the least, the lonely and the lost beams through her laughing eyes and broad smile. Inspired by St. Mother Teresa, and bolstered by her Franciscan community, her joy, humility, and simplicity reveal a genuine Franciscan heart.

*“God has been so very generous to me,”* she said. *“As I look back on the past 55 years, I realize how much I value being a religious. We are a community – a team – one body. I learned that what we do together we can’t do by ourselves alone. By relying on God and supporting each other, we are able to achieve marvels.”*

