

## On consecrated life

# 'I knew nothing but love at home,' nun says

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Many in the priesthood and religious life say their vocation was nurtured in their home life growing up. Mother Marcel Joseph McCanness, a member of the Little Sisters of the Poor who is superior of her community at St. Joseph's Home in Richmond, is one who would attest to this belief.

"I knew nothing but love at home," Mother Marcel told The Catholic Virginian after participating in a diocesan celebration for consecrated life for men and women of religious communities serving in the diocese.

"I entered (the Little Sisters of the Poor) in 1964, but my vocation goes back way further," Mother Marcel said. "I would say it's been a love story for me."

A native of Nashville, Tenn., Mother Marcel was the youngest of three daughters. Her mother, Marcella, was a lifelong Catholic, and her father, Joseph, was a member of the Church of Christ. When she made her final profession, she chose the names of both parents to indicate her commitment to the Lord.

"I got my love of Scripture from my daddy's side of the family," Mother Marcel said, adding that her father's uncle was a minister of the Church of Christ.

Her mother took her and her two older sisters to Christ the King Church in Nashville which was then "a little wooden church," she said. It was in the second grade that she feels she first had an awareness of what was to be a religious vocation. Her mother had taken her and her sisters to Benediction at the church Sunday afternoon, a weekly practice.

"For one split second, I was just in awe," Mother Marcel said. "I thought 'wouldn't it be beautiful and wonderful to belong to Him?' she thought. "Those words are embedded in my heart."

Her devout Catholic mother fostered in her a love for the Church.

"We used to go to Mass every day before school began," she said.

In the fourth grade she was in the Junior Praesidium of the Legion of Mary. As part of the group she went one day to the

home for the elderly operated by the Little Sisters of the Poor. She recalls being "scared to death" and was not happy after the experience.

"I said 'Lord, you can ask anything of me, but I don't ever want to go back to the Little Sisters,'" she recalls.

But the following week the Legion of Mary gave her the assignment of returning to the Little Sisters' home.

"I was so scared and I knew I couldn't get out of it," Mother Marcel said.

But what she dreaded turned out to be an eye-opening experience.

"It was just like the Lord had hit me over the head!" Mother Marcel recalls. "I had the same sense of awesomeness, beauty and holiness that I had experienced two years earlier at Benediction."

"I knew the Lord was calling me to be a 'Little Sister of the Poor.'"

The call was so strong that the young fourth grader began walking three miles from her home to the Little Sisters every day where she and others helped get the residents to the home's chapel.

"Then we'd leave for school," she said. "But during the summer we practically lived at the home."

She and other young women her age helped the Little Sisters in tasks like making beds and washing the floor.

Sister Agnes, a nun she was particularly fond of, showed her how to make hospital corners in making the beds.

"She said 'make a bed as if the Lord were to walk in this room and sleep in that bed,'" Mother Marcel said. "I never have forgotten that."

Her parents gave permission for her to enter the juniorate of the Little Sisters in Detroit during her sophomore year in high school. She and the others attended Our Lady of Mercy High School operated by the Sisters of



Mother Marcel Joseph of St. Joseph's Home, Richmond, with resident Maxine Flammia.

Mercy.

"There were 42 young girls in the juniorate and almost all of them entered," Mother Marcel said.

Her parents drove her from Nashville to Detroit and said goodbye," she said.

"My mom said to me that when they drove home, my father cried all the way home to Nashville," she said. "She didn't tell me about it until after Daddy died."

"My parents supported my vocation 100 percent. 'Eventually her father realized how much the community life meant to his

youngest daughter. He had a massive stroke and lived then a month and half at the Little Sisters' home in Nashville.

Sister Marcel Joseph entered the Little Sisters on Jan. 6, 1964.

Her first assignment after final vows was at St. Sophia's Home in Richmond.

The home on Floyd Avenue, a few blocks from the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, was to eventually close in 1976 when the new St. Joseph's Home in suburban Henrico County was completed. She came to know Catholics in Richmond by visiting local parishes on Sundays where the Little Sisters took up a second collection to have funds for the new home.

She returned to Richmond Sept. 28, 2005 as superior of St. Joseph's Home. She had been in Mobile, Ala.

"It was very special for me to come back to Richmond,"

Mother Marcel said.

The charisma of taking care of the elderly of every race, color and creed continues to be important to her.

"We don't take care of just Catholics," Mother Marcel said. "One whole half of my family is Protestant and I drew so much strength and inspiration from my mom's side of the family and my daddy's side of the family."

She exudes joy and happiness as she talks with the residents.

"I wouldn't give up my vocation for anything in the world," Mother Marcel said.

"Each day is so beautiful and you think you couldn't be any happier, but each day your heart expands with gospel joy."

Mother Marcel and other members of the community are joyful about the pending canonization of Blessed Jeanne Jugan, foundress of the Little Sisters of the Poor, to be held in Rome in September.

"The news of her canonization has been a marvelous gift of God," she said.

"Our life isn't easy, but it's a life of holiness and happiness."

"Our community has a strong community life, apostolic life and spiritual life and they all intertwine with each other."



At the recent Day of Prayer for the Consecrated Life held at St. Joseph's Home of the Little Sisters of the Poor in Richmond are, seated from left, Dominican Sister Mary Amata Mueller, Comboni Missionary Sister Yolanda Mazzocchi, Sister Andrea Marie Graham and Sister Maria Teresita Rodkey. The three Dominican Sisters are all at St. Mary Star of the Sea School in Hampton. Standing is Father Leo Gagnon, chaplain at St. Joseph's Home and a retired priest of the Diocese of Manchester, N.H. He is wearing the habit of the Third Order of St. Dominic, of which he is a member. The event featured Mass and presentations by Msgr. Mark Lane, Vicar for Clergy, and Father James Kauffmann, pastor of St. Benedict parish in Richmond.