

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER MARY RICHARD RIXNER August 25, 1929–June 7, 2018



Before, Sister Mary Richard entered the community, the application form asked, “Describe reaction of parents upon learning that you planned to become a Sister of Charity. Succinctly but accurately, Betty Rixner wrote, “Shocked by it all but pleased.” Later, after she had entered, she used to say, “I’m still trying it.” That was almost 67 years ago, so I guess it worked!

Elizabeth Jane Rixner was born on August 25, 1929 in Wilkinsburg, where she lived her whole life before entering the community. She was one of six daughters and two sons born to Alphonse and Sarah Glenn Rixner. Betty went to Saint James Elementary School and Wilkinsburg High School. This is why we heard last night that she again met the Sisters of Charity when her younger sisters offered their big sister Betty as a driver when they needed one. At the time, Betty was working for Westinghouse Electric as a keypunch operator.

As a Sister of Charity, Sister Mary Richard’s career was like that of hundreds of our Sisters. From 1954 until 1991, she served in the ministry of education. Ten of those years, she spent in the seventh and eighth grades; for 27 years, Sister Mary Richard was principal in Irwin, and in Ajo, Chandler, and Scottsdale, Arizona. After retiring from Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Scottsdale, Sister Mary Richard spent thirteen years as an instructor in GED with the Phoenix Job Corps working with trainees from sixteen to twenty-four years of age.

Sixty-seven years is a long time to do anything. So let me share with you this evening some of the details both from early in Sister's life and from the last years in her ministry.

In 1964, Sister Mary Richard began a five-year term as Principal, Sister Servant, and eighth grade teacher at Immaculate Conception School in Ajo. During those years, she also received her M.A. in Elementary Education from Arizona State University. In her letters to Mother Claudia at that time, we get a picture of what it was like in a desert mining town fifty years ago. Sister Mary Richard wrote; "Our copper mine strike is six months old today, and according to the papers there seems to be some hope that the companies and unions are being pressure into it. I hope so. For the past two months, Father Cahalane has been paying us full salary. I understand the Bishop told him he would have to make up what he hasn't paid. It looks like he has decided not to get too far behind. Actually, he has the money. Our people are trying to show him that they want this school, so they are using their small union checks to pay tuition. We have been averaging \$1,000 a month coming in for tuition. This is very good. I just wanted you to know that we are being taken care of quite adequately. The Sisters are all well and working hard. Some of them have been here for years and are looking forward to a trip home this summer. We are getting our garden ready for spring. Come see it. Take care of yourself."

In another letter, she mentions the benefactors Al and Mildred Arnold, who were responsible for the building of the new school road. Once the road went through the legal process of being given to the county, the county would blacktop it. "This is the type of work," writes Sr. Mary Richard, "that makes Ajo interesting. Where else do Sisters have to help organize and build roads?" In a later letter, she celebrates the fact that the strike is finally over—and that the pastor still isn't interested in the school. "He's like a brick wall."

Many years later, at the end of her teaching ministry and on a quite different note, Sister Mary Richard was employed full-time with the Phoenix Job Corps. The students were from ages 16-24, quite different from grades one to eight. “In 1997-98,” she writes, “we obtained 179 GED’s which was an all-time record for the Center. She closes her report by answering the question about how long she expected to remain in this ministry. “As long as I am able—hopefully for five years, since my health is good.” She actually stayed for thirteen.

So, the happy memories of one Sister of Charity, and of ours, too. Thank you for being a generous, fun-loving, and faithful one of us for all these years, Richard. We loved you.

Funeral Liturgy Reflection

Sister Gertrude Foley

June 11, 2018