

The Holy Innocents

December 28th is a day observed throughout the Catholic world as the **Feast of the Holy Innocents**. Those first innocents were the precious children in Bethlehem, under the age of two, slaughtered by Herod in his attempt to murder the “newborn King of the Jews” sought by the Magi. We are horrified by the destruction of these little children, too young to even know the God for whom they died. Their killing results in the poignant song of requiem that counterpoints the otherwise joyous carols of the Christmas season. Among the Sisters of the Holy Family, the term has another meaning, which reflects the sad and the joyful notes of the seasonal songs.



In 1944 **Sister Miriam Auxilium O'Gara, SHF** attended the National Catholic School of Social Service, part of the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. There she had long discussions with Dr. Dorothy Donley Dowd, PhD., M.D., (her Child Psychiatry professor), who had much to say about retarded children, at that time a religiously and socially neglected group in the Catholic Church. Sister felt strongly attracted to working with these disadvantaged youngsters. She also was inspired by the lectures of Dom Thomas Vernon Moore, and the work of Father Rogers at New York State Hospital, whom Sister visited and interviewed about methods and approaches to Sacramental participation among the severely handicapped.

Sister Miriam returned home to San Francisco and was busily engaged in establishing a college program affiliated with the Catholic University to give the best possible background to the Sisters of the Holy Family for their ministry of religious education. She was occupied with this endeavor for several years, but her dream of assisting the developmentally disabled to receive the sacraments and participate to their level of ability in the spiritual life of the Church never faded.

Then one Sunday afternoon in 1950, as Sister Miriam passed through the auditorium of the San Francisco Motherhouse, her attention was drawn to a small group of visitors. In amongst the group sat a mongoloid child of seven years, the niece of one of the young women who had recently entered Holy Family. Sister Miriam stopped to speak to the mother, Mrs. Devine, to ask if her child, Mary Ann, was receiving religious instructions for her First Communion. Mrs. Devine told Sister that although Mary Ann was attending Louise Lombard School for Trainable Children (about two blocks from the convent) she was receiving no religious training.

Sister Miriam asked Mrs. Devine if she wished instructions for her child and would she be willing to ask the Superior for permission to bring Mary Ann to the convent each week. Mrs. Devine was so interested that she returned the next day with the permission, and Sister Miriam volunteered to begin classes in February of 1950 for these loving, challenged children she dubbed her "holy innocents." She coined the phrase in regard to Cardinal Cushing's expression of "God's forever children," with the intention of having them discover and rejoice in their specialness and holiness. Classes began.

Sister Miriam also instructed the mothers or fathers of the children for a short time each week while an assistant teacher took the children for singing practice after the religion class. There she discovered that the parents had real problems, which needed answers, but also needed an opportunity to share and discuss common questions. This resulted in the formation of parent groups in 1953, which were later incorporated under the title of Helpers of the Holy Innocents.



[Sr. Miriam and first communion children at St. Sebastian Parish, 1959]

The parents and children of any denomination were welcomed to the meetings, where they were supported in accepting the challenge of their retarded or severely physically handicapped children. There were events planned and joyfully made real by Sister Miriam and her many volunteers: family retreats, May Day celebrations, Christmas parties, picnics, social events, and teacher training courses.

Sister Miriam said, many times afterward, when asked about how the work began:

"Mary Ann was the occasion which offered the opportunity to start the work, [but] the inspiration for the work with retarded children came from Catholic University. Our work, and I say this very sincerely, I owe to the inspiration of Father Moore, M.D. and Doctor D.D. Dowd, M.D., at Catholic University."

The work was not always appreciated. Many well-meaning persons, even pastors, told parents that the effort to make their mentally retarded children understand anything about the Eucharist or the spiritual life would be useless and impossible. Some parishes would not allow the children to attend the classes and would not supply space for such classes to be held. Sister Miriam was calm about such barriers. "The newness of the idea," she said, "...causes parish priests to be cautious about making the Sacraments available to children who, until a few years ago, were kept hidden from view."

Parents, however, hearing of the instructions being offered at the convent in San Francisco and in many local parishes, swamped Sister Miriam's office with calls. Sister Miriam had recognized a need whose time had come.

Religious classes with these children were necessarily small so that special attention could be given to each child's unique needs. Through Sister Miriam's leadership, other Holy Family Sisters responded and became extensions of the work throughout the Bay Area, in Nevada, Utah, and in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. More comfort with the concept of religious education for the retarded and severely handicapped was felt among pastors when Bishops Guilfoyle and Donohoe of San Francisco and Manning of Los Angeles became thoroughly involved in the ministry and participated as the official dispensers of the Sacraments in special ceremonies arranged for the "Holy Innocents" and their families. Through the sisters many lay people were trained to work with these special needs children. Sister John Minetta, one of Sister Miriam's most talented assistants, went to New Jersey from 1976 to 1985 to help establish the National Office for the Mentally Retarded.



[Sr. Aurora Perez with SPRED friend.]

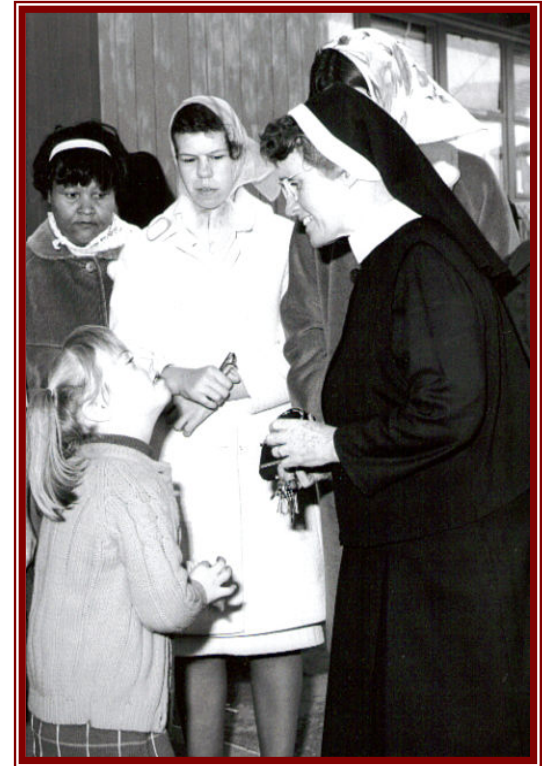
Other Sisters and laity trained for this special work by the Sisters of the Holy Family, and other leaders in the field of religious education for the developmentally challenged carry on this vital ministry today. The SPRED program of the Diocese of Oakland, directed by Sister Aurora Perez, SHF, is one very visible sign of this. Today, one can scarcely believe that the religious life of these children was ever called into question. In every way, these children, and the limited but loving adults into whom they mature, are worthy of the loving title that Sister Miriam bestowed upon them - The Holy Innocents.

OTHER SISTERS WHO HAVE WORKED WITH SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Right: Sr. Miriam with Rose Kennedy, 1968



Below: Sr. John Minetta, New Jersey 198



Above: Sr. Marian McNamee, San Francisco.



Left: Sr. Marie Deering, works with KAINOS in Redwood City, 1999.