

Religious Sisters Who Changed the World



Christopher News Notes

“She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.”

—Proverbs 31:20

CALLLED BY GOD TO SERVE THE NEEDY, religious sisters are the backbone of efforts across the globe that set out to improve the lives of the less fortunate. These women work in churches, hospitals, and food pantries. They help refugees, comfort children dying from AIDS and other illnesses, and advocate for us all to become better stewards of God’s creation.

The institution of nuns, who devote themselves to various religious orders, dates back to the first ages of the Church. Each congregation calls for Sisters to profess vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, to live a common life, and to be engaged in ministering to the needs of society. And while the image of a religious sister has changed over time, from one of cloistered women in full habit to working women in societal clothing, the heart of their ministry has never changed. Armed with the power of maternal love and deep faith, religious sisters are changing the world for the better.

The Mother Teresa of Pakistan

It's funny how God's plans work for us. What might start as an aggravating delay can lead to a much bigger purpose in our lives. That's how it was for Sister Ruth Pfau, FCM.

Born in 1929, Ruth Pfau was a German physician and religious sister with the Society of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary. In the early 1960s, the Society sent her to work in India, but visa hang-ups forced her to stop in Karachi, a city along the coast of Pakistan. It was during her stay that Sister Pfau first encountered leprosy (now known as Hansen's disease), a debilitating condition which causes skin lesions and nerve damage—and which resulted in patients being shunned by society. She became determined to stay in Pakistan to help fight the disease.

Sister Pfau went on to tackle the country's leprosy problem head-on, going out to caves and cattle pens to rescue disfigured and distraught children, who had been abandoned by their parents because they feared they were contagious. In an interview with the *BBC* in 2010, Sister Pfau said that she focused not just on healing patients, but fighting the stigma placed on these poor, displaced, and marginalized people: "The most important thing is that we give them their dignity back."

Sister Pfau contributed to the establishment of 157 leprosy clinics across Pakistan that treated over 56,000 people. In partnership with the Pakistani government, she also developed the

During the 1980s, Véronique, a young French woman with Down syndrome, felt called to become a nun, but no religious order would accept her because of her condition. Then, she met a woman named Line, who grew determined to help her fulfill her vocation. Though it took many years and much support, the two ladies created a new community for women with Down syndrome, called the Little Sisters Disciples of the Lamb. As reported by *Vatican News*, the order currently has 10 Sisters, eight of whom have Down syndrome.

Mother Line, now the prioress, understands their deep spirituality, saying, "Their souls are not disabled! On the contrary, they are closer to the Lord, they communicate with Him more easily." Sister Véronique adds, "Thirty-four years have passed since I heard the call of Jesus...I was born with a disability called Down syndrome. I am happy. I love life...Jesus made me grow in His love."

country's National Leprosy Control Programme and extended her efforts to include treatments for blindness and tuberculosis. Thanks to her work, the World Health Organization declared in 1996 that leprosy had been controlled in Pakistan.

In 2017, Sister Pfau died at age 87. The National Commission for Justice and Peace of Pakistan's Catholic Church described her service as "nothing less than a pure manifestation of God's divine love."

Help for Incarcerated Mothers

For women in prison, the one-hour visits they get with their children are priceless. Enter Sister Teresa "Tesa" Fitzgerald, CSJ, who saw the importance of making sure incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women in New York state get the help they need to support their families. In 1986, she founded the nonprofit Hour Children. The group reports that an estimated 62 percent of women incarcerated in state prisons are mothers with children under the age of 18. That means there are more than 105,000 children with a parent in prison or jail in New York state alone.

As a result, Hour Children's services are composed of both prison and community-based support programs, such as case management, therapeutic services, adult mentoring, vocational training, child daycare, teen group facilities, a community food pantry, and thrift shops. Sister Tesa told *VocationNetwork.org's* Jo Piazza, "If we really believe in the Resurrection, then we have to

believe in second chances."

In addition to founding Hour Children, Sister Tesa also became a licensed foster parent and watched over many children whose mothers were incarcerated. She took these children on frequent visits to their mothers, making sure to keep the connection between parent and child strong until the day when they could reunite outside prison walls.

Sister Thea's Mission of Inclusion

The 1960s were a time of great reckoning for the United States, and the Civil Rights Movement served as a starting point in the fight for equality and justice among African Americans. Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA, heralded a bellwether for this movement of inclusion within the Catholic Church.

Born in Mississippi in 1937, Thea was raised by her parents in a Methodist household. It wasn't until the age of nine that she started exploring Catholicism, converting that same year. At 15, she felt called to the sisterhood and joined the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Sister Thea said that her conversion to the faith was rooted in what she witnessed: that the Catholic Church acted on its faith, and that Catholics were called to love, care for, and help one another, especially those in need.

After the changes of the Second Vatican Council, Sister Thea dove deeper into her African American religious heritage. Her newly sparked desire

encouraged her to become an evangelizer, teacher, writer, and singer, sharing the joy of the Gospel and her rich cultural heritage throughout the nation. Among other initiatives, she was a founding faculty member of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans.

Sister Thea did her best to promote diversity, saying, "Can you see yourself in a Church where there are people who are black, where there are people who are white, where there are people who are brown, where there are people of Asian heritage and people of Australian heritage and people of Native heritage? Where we all come together really being ourselves and sharing our sorrows and our joys, sharing our goals and our determinations? How rich we would be!"

In 1990, Sister Thea died of breast cancer, but her legacy and philosophy live on. As she said, "I think the difference between me and some people is that I'm content to do my little bit. Sometimes people think they have to do big things in order to make change. But if each one would light a candle, we'd have a tremendous light."

Clean Water Initiative Changes Lives

In the early 2000s, Sister Lorraine Lauter, OSU, journeyed on a medical mission trip to Honduras. On a stroll through town with the local priest, he pointed to a home and revealed that the family's two-year-old daughter had just died from drinking dirty water. Shocked by this devastating news, a

fire was lit inside Sister Lorraine. What started as a dream to help the people of Honduras obtain clean water became a global nonprofit called Water With Blessings. Co-founded by Sister Lorraine, Arnie LeMay, and Jim Burris, the organization equips mothers in remote, underserved communities with a water filtration system.

Each Water Woman, as they're called, is provided with a Sawyer PointONE filter system, which functions much like kidney dialysis does to filter out impurities in the water. Each woman is then in charge of supplying four families in her community with clean, drinkable water. Since its launch, Water With Blessings has trained over 100,000 Water Women in over 45 countries across Africa, Asia, and South America.

During an interview with The Christophers, Sister Lorraine explained, "Dirty water causes...a lot of daily disease for people that compromises their ability to earn a living, to provide for their families, to go to school successfully. I think there's nothing more important you can do if you want to help a community change and thrive than start with cleaning up the water."

Working with the women in these communities has strengthened Sister Lorraine's own spiritual life. She said, "When we take these mission trips, we're going to people who have great material poverty, and we're sharing a very small amount of what we have to alleviate that material poverty. In return, they are sharing with us from their spiritual wealth. Often, we do not recognize that as a church in the United States, we have to struggle with a lot of spiritual poverty ourselves. Ironically, our material wealth is something that threatens our spiritual well-being more than we realize. When we're awake to that, God can work in our lives. Then we can receive abundantly from the spiritual wealth of those whom we are serving."



**"It's better to light one candle
than to curse the darkness."**

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President: Mary Ellen Robinson
Editor-in-Chief: Tony Rossi

The Christophers

5 Hanover Square, New York, NY 10004
212-759-4050, ext. 241

mail@christophers.org • www.christophers.org

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*"I alone cannot change the world,
but I can cast a stone across the waters
to create many ripples."*

—Mother Teresa