

175 SISTER PROFILES: Sister Mary Clarissa Conlan

Sister Joan Holmberg

Like many of our “New York” Sisters, Sister Clarissa was a Massachusetts native. She entered the Congregation from St. Peter Parish in Dorchester in July 1900. Following her profession, she ministered 22 years in Nova Scotia.

In early 1924, the Bishop of Brooklyn asked Mother Berchmans for Sisters to open a school in Our Lady of Angels Parish. That began S. Clarissa’s life as a “New Yorker!”

On August 21st of that year, she arrived in Brooklyn accompanied by five “young Sisters.” As principal with her strong background in educational administration, she



Sister Mary Clarissa Conlan



CELEBRATING

175

YEARS OF JOYFUL WITNESS

1849 - 2024



**Sister Mary Clarissa (right)
Tenth Conference of Mother Seton's Daughters, St. Joseph Central House,
Emmitsburg, MD, 1953**

soon had OLA known as one of the premier educational facilities in the diocese and her accomplishments did not go unrecognized.

Very quickly S. Clarissa became a force in the diocese. Collaborating with the diocesan superintendent of schools, she helped shape the diocesan

curriculum and develop what many called the "Brooklyn Bible," a handbook for diocesan teachers and administrators.

Over the next several decades, S. Clarissa delighted in welcoming more of our "young Sisters" to the diocese. Many came immediately following their profession and began



Sister Mary Clarissa

their teaching career under her careful guidance and supervision. She also ensured that their education continued. On Saturday mornings and throughout the summer, Sisters wearing their cloaks and gloves and carrying briefcases headed off to Fordham, St. John's or Manhattan College to complete work on their degrees.

Soon the "High Hats"—a playful reference to the configuration

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of our coifs and veils—took on the reputation as being the best teachers in the diocese!

As time passed many of these Sisters continued to minister in the NY area, often for decades, while others moved to other areas of the Congregation, yet practically all offered thanks for beginning their careers and community lives in New York.

As more and more Sisters came to New York, a period of expansion

began.

S. Clarissa, in her role as Community Supervisor, oversaw the opening of elementary schools in both New York and New Jersey. In 1937, the Bishop of Brooklyn appealed to S. Clarissa to open a much-needed Catholic high school on Long Island. After the purchase of four bungalows on five acres of land in Patchogue, Seton Hall High School opened with an enrollment of 17 students.

The 1956 General Chapter called for a restructuring of the Congregation. In that year, S. Clarissa became the first Provincial Superior of the NY Province.

A tiny energetic woman with a deep raspy voice, she was known to have a listening and compassionate heart.

One of her final achievements was the 1962 opening of Bishop Reilly, a



**Sisters Mary Clarissa, Marie Clotilde Douglas and Mother Stella Maria Reiser
Seton Hall, Patchogue, NY**

large diocesan high school staffed by our Sisters.

The year 1962 also marked the end of S. Clarissa's term. The province held her farewell party at OLA. Her only request was that "the Sisters enjoy themselves."

She lived at Wellesley only one year before her declining health brought her to the Motherhouse. Born in August 1881, she died in February 1981 at the age of 99 and as the oldest member of the Congregation.

After her death, her caregivers remarked that she never forgot her “New York girls!”