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By

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Presented by Sister Judith Gomila, M.S.C.

WHOM SHALL I SEND?

How proud we are of Saint Brother Andre! This little man, who was so caring of his fellow humankind, imitated his model St. Joseph. Who would have thought that so much good would have happened because he loved so much? It must have been so tiring, so monotonous, so downright exhausting for him to answer the door all day and continue this style of life. Now he has been canonized Saint with a big capital letter S.

What about other normal followers of Christ allowing themselves to be lead in ways they never dreamed? There are so many men and women who are ordinary saints. They are not canonized with a Capital S, but they are striving also to help with love and caring their brothers and sisters.

One such person was Dorothy Day, a woman who went to prison trying to help those who needed aid in serving others. She, too, has inspired many others to bear the cross of Christ. Maybe some day she, too, will be called Saint with a capital S.

This brings this paper to our main subject , Sr. Clarita Bourque, a Marianite of Holy Cross. So what has she done, and is still doing, allowing herself to be lead by Christ to help her brothers and sisters?

Born in Algiers, no not Africa. This Algiers is on the West Bank: again, do not think of all the News concerning the conflicts in the West Bank. This Algiers is right across the Mississippi River at the base of Canal Street in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Sr. Clarita was born to Anthony Clifford Bourque and Clare Lauman on the fifteenth day of September in 1931. The infant was Baptized in the imposing Church structure of Holy Name of Mary Parish conducted by the Marist Priests. Rev. J. Lawrence Gerrets, S.M. performed the ceremony on September 27, 1931.

The infant, Alice Clare, was the only child of this union. Sister Clarita enjoyed the life of her father until his death in 1969, and that of her mother until her death in 1992. Many a Marianite knew and enjoyed the company of Sister Clarita's mother

and her aunt Rita. (Did you notice where Sister must have gotten her name?)

As a student of the Parochial School, Holy Name Mary, from the fourth grade through the Sophomore Class in high school, Alice Clare met many a Marianite of Holy Cross for they conducted the school from its beginning. During these school years Alice Clare must have become acquainted with the routine of the Marianites who would walk to the Ferry every Saturday morning to catch the Ferry to cross the Mississippi; catch the street car to ride to Loyola University of the South for Saturday classes. After classes were over, the process was reversed as the Sisters returned to Holy Name of Mary. It was Mother Mary Xavier Haggerty, MSC, Provincial who initiated and insisted that the Marianites be well educated individuals.

The usual procedure in those days was for Postulants to take College Courses, the Novices to study Community History and Vows, and the Young Sisters to return to college until degrees were achieved.

It was August 28, 1949 that Alice Clare entered the Marianite Novitiate and started this process. On the date of the Reception of the Holy Habit Alice Clare received the name Sister Mary Clarita. Even in later years when some of the Religious reverted to their Baptismal names Sister Clarita held on to her Religious name, and that is how everyone knows her today.

In 1951 Sister Clarita made her First Profession of Vows as a Marianite of Holy Cross. Her teaching career began and continued in Primary, Elementary, and High Schools. In 1964 Sister went to Fordham University to study Political Science. Teaching at Our Lady of Holy Cross College followed. Then an intermission came when she was Provincial Secretary from 1969 to 1971.

In 1976 she joined the staff of HOPE HOUSE, her first adventure into putting justice into practice. Three years before, a 1973 Proposal for Hope House, Inc., located at 916 St. Andrew Street in New Orleans, was duly printed to give those who were to bring it to fruition a hands-on document to guide their way.

Sister Lory Schaff, a Sister of Mercy who had been ministering to the people of the St. Thomas Project in New Orleans, called together a group of seven individuals, religious and lay, among whom was Sister Clarita, to address the problems of the people she served.

Hope House, Inc. ... "is a response to the Christian message as perceived by the membership." 1 These members agreed to live and work in the area to provide opportunities for the residents of the area to better their living conditions and to secure their rights. ... "we strive to be a Gospel people, a visible sign of the Christian Community." 2

In planning their work a pledge was made that ... "every service we engage in will be directed towards confirming the dignity of the individual involved. Every contact we make will be aimed at heightening the person's awareness of the power each possesses as persons." 3

The Sunday Times-Picayune Dixie Section of the local newspaper, in an article entitled " Hope is Where the Heart is," 4 lists the four Sisters who are responsible for the success of Hope House: Sister Lory Schaff, R.S.C., Sister Teresina Fulghum, R.S.M., Sister Cathy Parent, C.D.P. and Hope House Coordinator Sister Clarita Bourque, M.S.C. Notice who was chosen as Coordinator. The article said that Sister Clarita ... "has one of the toughest jobs. She works in the area of the Criminal Justice system."

Citing the fact that ... "the worst thing about being poor is having no power," 5

Sister Clarita describes some of what she does.

" I try to get them (the poor) through the system. I explain what going to court is like, I try to get them a lawyer, I get information for them. One poor lady, for example, didn't know how to find out when her son was getting out of prison." 6

To be fair Sister also said,

" The police have a difficult job, too. The big problem: teenage boys who have no trade or anything to do. We need to re-assess the educational system because the schools are not meeting the needs of the neighborhood." 7

Once an elderly lady who had been evicted from her apartment, was with Sister waiting

in Court for their turn to come. She turned to Sister and said, "Well, Sister, the Lord never gives you more than you can bear." This woman had just recently lost a son to a drug overdose.

What Faith! Seeing such Faith and resignation must be one of the factors in helping Sister Clarita do her work. Another day, a lady looked out at the golden rain trees that were in bloom and said aloud, "There ain't no poor people on a day like today."

Lifestyle, a publication of February 9, 1982 attests to the fact that initial proposal has resulted in an active, successful project.

"The Hope House Learning Center, situated in a building provided by Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, is an adult learning Center opened last fall (1981) to give area residents an opportunity to continue in the basics in education—essentially the three R's." 8

Thirty-two years after its establishment Hope House is still an effective organization working for the poor. Besides adult education classes, financial assistance with rents, utilities, etc., assistance with legal matters, a pre-school for children of the area and community organizing, Hope House offers a food bank and various other services. While at Hope House Sister Clarita was "appointed by Mayor Ernest Morial to the Housing Authority of New Orleans Board of Commissioners." 8A

After Hope House Sister Clarita went to Washington, D.C. to spend some time at Network. Three years previously she had begun a chapter of NETWORK in New Orleans.

AMERICA volume 203 No.11, October 25, 2010 has the article Truth and Power

in which the author states:

“I work for Network, a faith-based lobby in Washington, D.C., that engages in advocacy to influence national legislation. The organization mandate is to raise the voice of Catholic social teaching to the leaders who shape the country’s laws and direction.” 9

Thus, since its inception in 1971, Network is a lobby in Washington, D.C. for the poor and dispossessed. It is the only registered Catholic social justice lobby in the United States.

A grass roots organization, it is directed by the Washington, D.C. Staff and concentrates on a multi-issue approach to legislation. It is concerned with all peoples, but especially the poor and oppressed.

Network is a social justice lobbying group. Its activities are in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as organizing, lobbying, publishing, yet its style tries to reflect both social justice and feminist values like cooperation and mutuality in office management. Network showed its growth by initiating the publication of NETWORK Quarterly in 1978.

In all its works Network attempts to improve office management by making sure the feminist values of cooperation and mutuality are present and operative.

Network also works for “ careful organization, maximum cooperation and effective planning.” Network uses fundraising and promotion activities to bring about

the successful completion of its goals.

Returning home after serving at Network, Sister Clarita resumed work at Hope House until she was elected as part of the Marianite Provincial administration. This service was from 1983-1986.

In late 1986 Sister Clarita started to work at the Incarnate Word Center. Once a flourishing Parochial School with Marianites as teachers, changes in society and the neighborhoods brought about a drastic change to the work of the school building. The sturdy brick structure was soon changed into a place of social services where those in need could come for food and clothing.

What type services might be found at Incarnate Word? First, an Early Learning Program to develop learning skills in reading, language skills and math.

Then, the by-product of the Early Learning Program – Day Care for the children while the parents work.

Then, an enclosed playground with equipment necessary for the development of muscular skills.

Then, the services of permanent teachers.

Then, a Family Assistance Program whose assistance includes paying rent and utilities bills.

Then, a developing tutorial program to solidify early learning skills.

Then, to implementation of the federal commodity supplemental food program

Food for Families.

This listing gives proof that the work at Incarnate Word is varied and beneficial.

It was during this time that she became a charter member of the Pax Christi New Orleans chapter.

In 1987 Sister Clarita, called “the driving force” behind the project, met with representatives of Area Churches on the West Bank of Algiers, Louisiana to discuss together the problem of finding shelter for homeless families on the West Bank. Included were the Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Episcopalians, and the United Churches of Christ. This group established the project that became known as the House of Ruth.

The House of Ruth initiated by this group of Church representatives is unique because it was started by this small group of religious and lay people of local churches and placed people in “homes of their own” rather than in homeless shelters.

It is also unique in that its services are confined to serve those with a need for shelter, i.e. homeless families within the Westbank Community of New Orleans.

It is not unique in that among the services offered by the House of Ruth are payment of rent for a four to six month period while the heads of the household are assisted in securing employment that leads to independent living conditions.

House of Ruth also offers Daycare and Adult Education for those in the Program. Edging towards its Silver Jubilee of inauguration House of Ruth has provided services for 2,000 plus families who enjoy living in their “private”homes. House of Ruth is a

nonprofit organization which operates with three full-time staffers on Newton Street in Algiers, Louisiana. When Hurricane Katrina wrecked havoc in New Orleans, House of Ruth extended its services not only to Algerians but to “anyone” who needed help as long as their facilities were open.

On December 12, 1987 in the WESTBANK newspaper Sandra Barbier wrote:

“Aid offered for homeless in Algiers. The project has \$16,000 a \$10,000 grant from the Marianites, \$5,000 from the Marist Community, \$1,000 from an anonymous donor.” 10

The following year in an article called the Church Bulletin, Rosalie Atkinson wrote: “Sister Clarita meets with the families at least once a week for job and budget counseling. Bus tokens are provided for transportation to job interviews, to laundromats, to the grocery and medical appointments. At the end of three months the family usually is able to take over the rent and will have some savings.” 11

The Sunday, February 7, 1988 Algiers Picayune had a lengthy article, House of Ruth gets family out of van. Sandra Barbier of the West Bank bureau wrote the article about the family of six who were helped by the House of Ruth created by Sister Clarita Bourque. 12

Sunday, September 16, 1990 proved that the House of Ruth was functioning well by the article written by Cindy Montgomery, “House of Ruth gives hope. Project puts roofs over heads.” 13

The Sunday June 23, 1991 article by Judi Russell of the West Bank “House

of Ruth director leaves,” not only showed that Sister Clarita was off to another adventure but it gave credit to Sister as to how the House of Ruth was functioning so financially worry free. “Bourque has proved her grant writing skills while she’s been at the House of Ruth. Recently the program received a \$44,000 grant. The program appeals to grant organizations because it is a grassroots organization begun by people in the area”, she said. 14

With the House of Ruth functioning well, Sister Clarita, Executive Director, became aware of the need for further assistance for unaccompanied women who could not be properly served in the House of Ruth. Thus she moved forward to found yet another place of refuge and help.

First quartered in the building the Marianites once used as a novitiate, and later as part of the Holy Angels High School building, Lindy’s Place, as the new project was called, moved to larger quarters in a renovated school building on the east bank of the Mississippi River.

In New Orleans when the name Lindy is heard New Orleanians immediately think of Lindy Boggs, wife of Senator Hale Boggs whose body has never been found after his plane crashed in Alaska.. Mrs. Boggs completed her husband’s term and went on to win the position on her own. After her Washington, D.C. days she was our ambassador to the Vatican. Lindy Boggs is a great New Orleans Lady loved by many.

The Mission Statement for Lindy's Place reads: "Lindy's place endeavors to assist homeless unaccompanied women in their attempts to break the cycle of homelessness, unemployment, and poverty by empowering them to become emotionally and economically self-sufficient, so that they may become contributing members of society." 15

At this facility two programs under the auspices of Catholic Charities, which assists older homeless women and families, are also conducted.

Goodwill industries also uses the facilities to conduct a cooking school on the first floor and provides three meals a day for residents. This facility makes it easier for Lindy's Place to have its Vision Statement realized: "At Lindy's Place, our vision is to provide supportive services that foster stability and inspire self-reliance for homeless and unaccompanied women." 16 That the vision is being seen is testified by these quotes from some who have been there: "During my time here I have learned a new way to live." "Lindy's Place has given me dignity, respect, and hope." "The staff helped me physically and emotionally." "I am living in a supportive environment while I rebuild my life. I've received job training and made many wonderful friends." 17

In 1992 some seventy to eighty organizations in New Orleans, that dealt with aiding the homeless, banded together to profit by resources that would be given to a well organized unit rather than a struggling one.

This plan for Unity was "a real sign of hope for the homeless in our community.

It is visionary, yet practical, comprehensive, yet realistic; system-oriented, yet sensitive to the needs of the homeless", 18 a project that grew to be the organization called UNITY for the Homeless.

With Unity "a new era has begun as all sectors of our community have joined hands to tackle the difficult issues of homelessness in the Crescent City." The Crescent City being New Orleans.

When funds up in the millions are available to Unity, Sister Clarita's projects – Hope House, House of Ruth, Lindy's Place – all profit by receiving a share of the bounty.

A publication Unity for the Homeless comes out annually so all concerned can check on what their organizations have gained by being a part of Unity during the past year.

Sister Clarita has been a staff member of Unity serving as Executive Assistant. She worked for Unity from 2000 to 2005.

2005 brought to Hurricane Katrina which destroyed the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. Since 1849, that's 162 years, the Marianites had settled in the area known as Bywater which is a part of the Ninth Ward.

A group of ten Marianites, determined to return to work in this area and help the people return to rebuild their lives, approached the Marianite administration with this idea. The response was \$25,000 as seed money as commissioned Sister Clarita Bourque, M.S.C. to be coordinator.

Such a combination meant activity and objectives:

- (1) provide financial assistance to area residents
- (2) gather the community together by sponsoring events and reuniting the Senior Citizens of the area whose meeting place had been destroyed
- (3) to become involved with groups attempting to rebuild the city.

Activities that brought these objectives to reality included: providing rental, mortgage and utility payments, assistance in procuring food, clothing, transportation, sponsoring events that brought the residents together for fellowship and goodwill, collaborating with other agencies, individual and groups that were seeking the same goals of revitalizing and rebuilding New Orleans. 19

The initial money from the Marianites was augmented by Catholic Charities USA, Conrad Hilton fund for Sisters, Eastern Province of Holy Cross Brothers, Sisters of Charity Foundation, LCWR Region V, New Orleans Artists Against Hunger , and Homelessness, various Church groups and individuals.

With such initial help is it no wonder that Bywater Project has been functioning successfully for the past five years, and has assisted 800 families in the area.

Thus have you been given a glimpse of the life of Sister Clarita Bourque, M.S.C., as she answers a call to care for the poor and homeless. She starts one work, and once this is established , a new one is seen. Then off she goes to care for that need.

We have seen her working in Hope House, Network, House of Ruth, Lindy's

Place, and the Marianite Bywater Project. Is another ministry beginning to show its need? Time will tell. If this happens, Sister Clarita will be listening to the Lord, and if she hears Him asking, "Whom shall I send?", she will answer, "Here I am, Lord. send me."

REFERENCES

- #1 "is a response -- Grant Proposal 1973 Hope House, Inc. pg. 1
- #2 ibid
- #3 ibid
- #4 The Sunday Times-Picayune DIXIE New Orleans September 24, 1978
pg.1
- #5 ibid
- #6 ibid, pg. 32
- #7 ibid, pg. 32
- #8 Lifestyle, section of the States Item
- #8A ibid
- #9 America, vol. 203, No. 11, October 25, 2010
- #10 Westbank Newspaper, December 12, 1987
- #'s 11-14 <http://www.lindysplace.org>
- #15 Westbank Newspaper December 12, 1987
- #16 ibid (Ministry needs support to help homeless)
- #17 ibid (House of Ruth gets family out of van)
- #18 Unity, 1996. Annual Report page 5
- #19 Marianite Report to the Congregation – July 2001 - 2007

Lagniappe: *the word entered English from French Louisiana. It means "something given or obtained gratuitously or by way of good measure.*

Sr. Mary David Hecker accurately chronicled the ministry of this quiet, unassuming activist with a heart for the poor and needy. You might also recognize between the lines I've already read, Sr. Clarita is a well-balanced feminist. She heralds the cause of women locally, across the U.S. and around the world. She is untiring in her efforts to empower wives, widows, teens, grannies, lesbians, young adult singles and her own Marianite Sisters to trust the spirit within and to be the "hope of change" so needed in this ever-changing world. In the 1980's she founded WOMANFEST, a monthly gathering of women from across the city who met to celebrate their womanhood.

As a Marianite her own appreciation of and relationship to our Blessed Mother has grown over the years. Engage her in talking about Mary and you will hear a strong, theologically stimulating vision of living faith as she speaks of Myriam, woman rooted in her Jewish culture. The friendship between the devoted Mary of history and this dedicated woman for all women, is tangible.

Like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Sr. Clarita, a spiritual woman, is a drum major for justice and the band of women and men that follows her lead have accomplished and continue to promote the human dignity of the female of the species in their own self-awareness and appreciation. "We unite with Mary who stood at the foot of the cross and we imitate her in her union with her crucified Son. We participate in the redemptive mission of Christ by accepting the crosses in our own lives and by demonstrating a true spirit of compassion for all those who suffer." MSC Constitution, Article 3

Clarita keeps a cheerful countenance and a positive attitude. It was Winston Churchill who said, "A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty." Whether it's her approach to living community life or bringing a major issue before the City Council, Clarita is undaunted, downright tenacious, (you didn't hear me say stubborn) in the face of difficulty! In the year 2000, Our Lady of Holy Cross College awarded her an honorary doctorate in Human Services, in recognition of her work among the poor and homeless of New Orleans.

Are those images – drum major/band – still in your head? This history of Sr. Clarita Bourque would not be complete if we did not mention that her blood runs purple, green and gold. Yes, it's true! Among the Marianites she is the undisputed Queen of Carnival. When the parades begin two weeks before Mardi Gras, rain or shine, you'll find her on the neutral ground at Washington and St. Charles Avenues every night and on weekends, yelling "Throw me something, Mister." With the same keen awareness that responds to the needy, she can recall at a moment's notice, for your convenience, the parade route, the Krewe's theme, the number of floats and the best of the bands to be performing ... all before you have had a chance to take a breath.

Truthfully, Clarita takes pride in all things Noo Awlins! She loves the people and culture of the city from the banks of the Mississippi to Lake Pontchartrain and everything in between. The historic homes, the multicultural history, traditions like Mardi Gras, St. Joseph Day altars, St. Patrick's Day parades, cemetery tours, the French Quarter ...

music, arts, food, the politics – weeeell, maybe NOT the politics! The fact is she gives a delightful and enlightening tour of the city – all for a Café de Monde cup of coffee and beignets, of course. Should she run into a spontaneous New Orleans parade while touring, fear not, Clarita keeps a folding chair in the trunk of her car.

If you will permit me one more addition to these pages, I confess to be an admirer of Sr. Clarita Bourque since the mid-60's when I returned home from studies. As one recently back from Fordham, she took me under her wing. "Pace yourself in this time of re-entry" was her sage advice.

Since those days we have worked on many creative projects – from orange and red construction paper table decorations to mark the feast of Pentecost – to promoting Way of the Cross, Way of Justice, a three-mile walk through the Central Business District of New Orleans which relates Christ's sufferings on the way to Calvary with the sufferings of our sisters and brother who struggle for justice throughout the world – to being co-editors of *The Marianite*, the quarterly magazine of the Congregation.

You can't miss the versatility of this slight of body, strong-in-values woman religious in our Holy Cross family. The multiple qualities of her gentle personality and resilient character intersect as beautifully as her favorite classic New York Times crossword puzzle. She keeps you speculating, interacting, pondering and producing.

Adapting the words of Mother Mary of the Seven Dolors, Sr. Clarita Bourque "seeks God in all her actions, seeks herself in nothing, puts her confidence neither in her accomplishments or the impression she makes ..." She remains open and attentive. "Here I am, send me."

WHOM SHALL I SEND?

Sr. Clarita Bourque, MSC



Let's get together ... and change the world!



I'm waiting for the parade.

The Tomboy...



...and the Lady!



Her dad, mom, Sr. Laura and her Aunt Rita.



HOPE HOUSE



A Coffee House for the homeless



Don Everard, Executive Director, and Clarita
in conversation with two customers.

**On the
porch of
HOPE
HOUSE**



NETWORK Rally
Washington, DC, 1979

NETWORK
A Grassroots Network - People's Movement



... a program for homeless families



...with Sheila Williams, Executive Director



The Adult Learning Center, House of Ruth



The building that now houses LINDY'S PLACE was once a public elementary school.

**Lindy Boggs at
the Open House
for Lindy's Place**



**Lindy Boggs, Clarita and the women
of Lindy's Place at a fundraiser.**



The Library and Recreation Room



Not every nun has a boutique of her own!!!



The residents learn computer skills.



...shared bedroom space



Every new resident attends a prayer service on the Woman at the Well.

The jar in the foreground holds the hopes and dreams of each woman.



Clarita in the Marianite Bywater Project Office at Holy Angels. The project has assisted 750 families since Katrina.



...Pottery Class

...Monthly meetings, luncheons, and home visiting

The Bywater Project hosts Senior Citizens...



The Project sponsors an annual Awards Night...



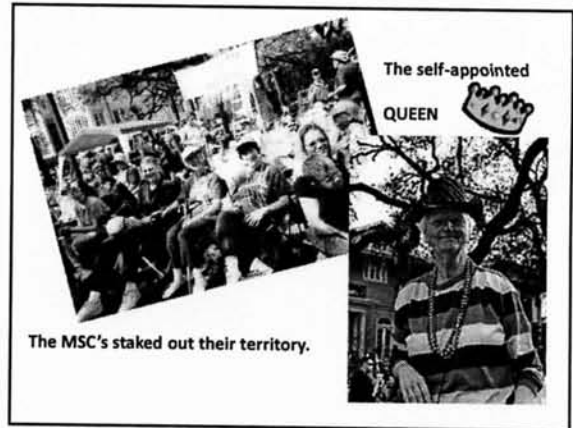
...to honor individuals and groups who have made a difference in the Bywater neighborhood.



This Women's Prayer Group has been meeting for the past 13 years.

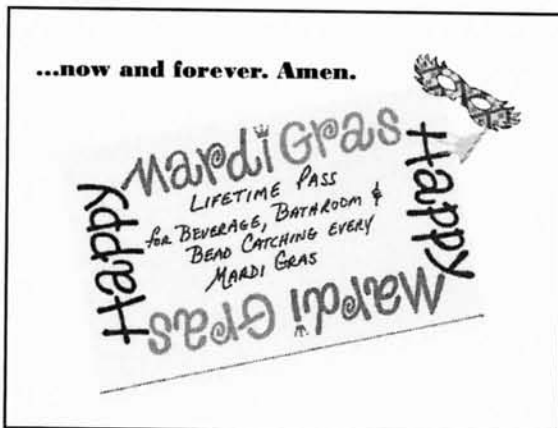


Mardi Gras revelers waiting for the next parade...



The self-appointed QUEEN

The MSC's staked out their territory.





The Marianites sponsor Station 13 each year at the Way of the Cross.

