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3221 S. Lake Dr., St. Francis, WI 53235-3799

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Dear Friend,

Her eyes are the first thing one notices about Sister Renee Costanzo. Warm with compassion, sparkling with humor, bright with intelligence, there is no doubt of her rich Italian origins.

Sister Renee was raised in Chicago, Illinois. She attended the local grade school and a Catholic high school. While in high school, she became a member of the Franciscan Third Order and fell in love with Franciscan spirituality. She determined to become a Franciscan sister, but the only congregation she knew refused her because of “my blood.” A startling response until she explained that they had determined to accept only young women of Slavic or Anglo origin. Italians did not qualify.

However, a high school friend had a brother in St. Coletta of Illinois, a residential school for those with developmental disabilities. It was run by the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi. She visited there with her friend and subsequently entered that congregation. On making her vows, she received the name Marie de Lourdes. After Vatican II, she returned to her baptismal name. From the vantage point of retirement, becoming a vowed religious was the beginning of a rich and varied life.



Following the customary pattern, Sister Renee attended Cardinal Stritch College for an undergraduate degree in biology. After making her vows, she taught upper grades and high school for a brief period. She was then sent to the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. These were challenging and exciting years that fed the young scholar's love of learning.



Through her teaching, Sr. Renee instilled a love of life.



After receiving a master of science degree in 1971, Sister Renee wrote: “I looked forward to being able to instill a love of life in young adults through the teaching of biology.” She went on to indicate the intimate linkage between her academic knowledge and her spirituality: “The theme of God’s goodness to us through all the works of creation was paramount to the charism of Francis of Assisi.

“I saw biology teaching as an extension of the *Canticle of the Sun* in which Francis wrote of Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Fire, Sister Water, Mother Earth. All the natural world’s tiny little creatures were not only a part of my life as a Franciscan, but also a part of my teaching curriculum.”

Sister Renee enthusiastically brought that love of life to her teaching, “turning on” many young people to a deeper understanding, appreciation, and love of the mysteries of other forms of life. After six years, she returned to the University of Illinois for a doctorate in biology and then went back to Cardinal Stritch.

By that time, the college had begun a nursing program. Sister Renee became so involved in the program that, prior to her retirement, she was teaching only the nursing students. They remember the creative and innovative methods she used to get across difficult concepts, concepts they had to understand when faced with life and death situations in their work.

Ever the scholar, Sister Renee looked to other ways to help the students. One was simply the design of courses to be more interesting, more practical, and more helpful. Another was to teach them how to study the sciences, to realize that “memorizing little facts not integrated into a whole would not help them to see the broad picture” necessary for understanding and true knowledge. Her own knowledge continued to

grow through research for articles she wrote, and for the various workshops and talks she was invited to present.

All of this changed in 1988 when the administration of the congregation asked her to leave the classroom and become the director of the Associate Program for the congregation. This was a dramatic change in everything she had done until then – except for the Franciscan aspect.

The Associate Program involved working with lay women and men who wished to become affiliated with the congregation and the sisters who sponsored them. Her experience in curriculum planning helped here.

In time, she became director of Mission and Ministry, a responsibility akin to personnel work with sisters who wished to change their ministry in some way or to change its locale. While the college students were starting their life-work, many of the sisters were concluding theirs. With typical thoroughness, Sister Renee attended workshops to learn more about the aging person and retirement issues so that she could better assist these sisters.

She studied about Franciscanism in greater depth sharing that information and her own enthusiasm with sisters who consulted her. As part of that, she led annual pilgrimages to Assisi for several years, deepening her own love for Francis and Clare.

No longer on a teaching schedule, Renee was able to attend meetings of the Franciscan Federation, a national organization of 84 congregations of Franciscan men and women. Of course, she became actively involved and was soon elected chairperson of one of the region. This placed her on the national board of directors where her sphere of influence broadened.



(Above) Sr. Renee participates in Ministry Day at St. Coletta's of Illinois in 1993.

(Below) She is pictured in her office as Director of Mission and Ministry in the late 1980s.



Another change occurred when her health began to deteriorate. Bringing all her experiences together, Renee returned to school to learn more about the Medical Assistance Graduate Program. She subsequently worked in this field in Madison, Wisconsin, until health again demanded a lesser schedule.

Through all of this, Renee was a model for aging gracefully, of remaining deeply interested in her loves – of Franciscanism, of all forms of life and their interactions while letting go gradually of more active involvement.

It is wonderful that Renee and our other retired sisters have extraordinary friends like you to support them in these retirement years! Your prayers are precious to them, and your financial support comforting. And they enjoy hearing from friends, and you are that indeed.

In St. Francis,

Marita Maschmann of

PS: Confidence and faith are part of their lives, and the sisters pray for you with gratitude, knowing you will respond with financial support and prayers. May blessings follow you always.



During her ministry visit to Parajito Mesa in April of 1998, Sr. Renee (upper right) helps children plant seeds.

Below, she participates in La Fiesta.

