



Flood! Rochester,
Minnesota,
July 5-6, 1978.



CHAPTER NINE



COMPASSION

“Values are caught, not taught.”

— Sister Generose Gervais

THE RAIN BEGAN AT 5:53 P.M. ON WEDNESDAY, JULY 5. NEARLY SEVEN inches fell in the next eight hours, inundating one-fourth of the city, causing \$60 million in damage and claiming five lives. The flood of 1978 was the worst natural disaster to strike Rochester, Minnesota, since the tornado of 1883, which inspired the founding of Saint Marys Hospital.

By this time, Saint Marys was the largest private hospital in the United States. Filled with patients and staff, it also welcomed people who sought shelter from the storm and its aftermath. Fortunately, the hospital’s chief administrator, Sister Generose Gervais, was equal to the crisis. She spent that night and the days that followed managing the hospital — not from her office, but by walking the halls and, as needed, by mopping the floor.

The comfort and compassion that Sister Generose demonstrated were indicative of her hands-on commitment and spirit of servant lead-

Sister
Generose,
left, reviewed
construction
plans with
Sister Mary
Brigh Cassidy.



ership, which have inspired generations of patients and colleagues alike. She received a Papal commendation ... served as the first woman director of the Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis ... and was one of two women in her Master's in Health Administration Program at the University of Minnesota (earning straight A's), but she equally enjoyed talking about the crops, her beloved Minnesota Twins baseball team or activities on the sprawling Saint Marys campus.

Sister Generose grew up in southwestern Minnesota during the Dust Bowl years of the Great Depression on a farm with no electricity or running water. She entered the Franciscan congregation at age 18 and taught school during World War II. She earned a degree in home economics and entered Saint Marys Hospital as a dietetics intern. Soon she was tapped to serve as co-director of the Saint Marys School of Practical Nursing, followed by service as superior of the Saint Marys convent and assistant to Sister Mary Brigh Cassidy, the hospital's chief administrator.

In 1971, she became the fifth Franciscan Sister to lead the hospital. "Her insistence on economy and accountability kept Saint Marys financially strong during an era in which rising costs drained the coffers of

Bread & Butter Pickles

1 gal. cucumbers, fresh
 washed, sliced thin, shaken down
 4 cups onions, sliced & cut in pieces
 1 green pepper, sliced into strips and
 cut in pieces
 1 sweet red pepper, sliced into
 strips and cut in pieces
 1/2 c. pickling salt

Crushed ice
 5c. white sugar
 5c. cider vinegar
 2 tbsp. mustard seed
 2 tsp. celery seed
 1 1/2 tsp. turmeric
 1 1/2 tsp. ground cloves

Mix cucumbers, onions, peppers and salt. Cover with crushed ice. Cover with towel; let stand 3 hours. Remove any ice and drain in colander. Put vinegar, sugar and spices in large bottle and place over high heat and stir. When sugar is dissolved, add cucumber mixture and stir. Boiling quickly to full rolling boil, stirring carefully often enough to cook evenly. Push immediately into hot sterilized jars and seal. (Do not overcook.) Makes 7 to 8 pints.

Sister Generose

many hospitals.”

Indeed, these were years of expansion. The Mary Brigh Building, dedicated in 1980, was the largest hospital project in Minnesota’s history to date. “She was as comfortable with the complexity of blueprints as she was with canning fruit,” noted a colleague who worked closely with her. “She knew every corner of the hospital and how each space could best be used.”

The bankers and lawyers who were evaluating the issuance of bonds for the construction project asked to review Saint Marys’ contract with Mayo Clinic. “We don’t have a contract,” Sister Generose replied. “They couldn’t believe it,” she later recalled. They asked,

Sister
 Generose
 shared a
 favorite recipe.



St. Francis
of Assisi —
statue at
Saint Marys.

“What do you do when you have a problem?” Sister Generose explained: “Those who are concerned with the problem get together, discuss possible solutions, choose what seems best and set about doing it.” They commented: “This has to be the greatest living example of trust in the world, for two organizations of such size and complexity to work together like this.” For Sister Generose, however, this relationship is a natural extension of the handshake and mutual trust between Dr. William Worrall Mayo and Mother Alfred Moes in the 19th century.

At Mayo Clinic, one of the most frequently quoted aphorisms of Sister Generose is “No money, no mission.” But, she was quick to add, there is an equally important corollary: “No mission, no need for money.” For Sister Generose, in fact, mission came first.

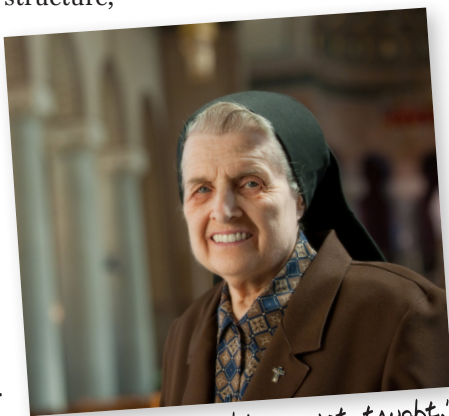
One of her most significant contributions to that mission is the Poverello Foundation, whose purpose is “to ease the burden for patients who need financial support for the care they received at Saint Marys Hospital.” The foundation is named for Saint Francis of Assisi, who was known as “Il Poverello” or “the little poor man.” While the Poverello Foundation provides important financial support, Sister Generose believed that its enduring impact is

*Sister Generose
often met with
Mayo Clinic employees.*

the sense of hope and renewal that recipients experience.

Sister Generose was the last Franciscan to serve as chief administrator of Saint Marys Hospital. In 1986, Saint Marys, Rochester Methodist Hospital and Mayo Clinic formalized their relationship by establishing a single governance structure, “a trusteeship for health.” Continuing this momentum, in 2013, the two hospitals united into a single legal entity called Mayo Clinic Hospital — Rochester. To honor the hospital’s heritage, its two geographic locations retain the historic names of Saint Marys Campus and Methodist Campus.

Dr. Charlie said his father “never really did retire,” and, like Dr. William Worrall Mayo, the same may be said of Sister Generose who remained active at Saint Marys until her death in 2016. She was one of the most sought-after speakers at Mayo Clinic, often address-



“Values are caught — not taught.”



Selling preserves to
raise funds for the
Poverello Foundation.

ing employees who were born after she stepped down as executive director of Saint Marys in 1985.

Sister Generose was pleased to accept these invitations, but she deftly turned attention away from herself. “Values are caught, not taught” was one of her frequent maxims, and she reminded colleagues of what a beggar said to Saint Francis many years ago: “Be sure thou art as good as the people believe thee to be, for they have great faith in thee.”

Bringing that message home to her audience, she gently urged: “Be sure you are as good as the people think you are, for they have great faith in you — and you are *Mayo Clinic*.”

ENDNOTES

- Page 65: Description of the flood comes from the National Weather Service Forecast Office, La Crosse, Wisconsin. Online report: *Summer of 1978: Flash Floods No. 2, July 5-8, 1978: Austin and Rochester, MN*.
- Pages 66-70: Summary of background, education and ministry of Sister Generose Gervais is included in **Whelan, Volume Two**, p. 175-178. The founding and mission of the Poverello Foundation is covered in **Whelan, Volume Two**, pp. 218-219.
- Pages 69-70: *A Conversation with Sister Generose: January 30 and February 11, 2014*. Mayo Clinic Archives. Videotaped interview.
- Page 70: Sister Generose paraphrased the beggar’s admonition to St. Francis. *Ibid*.



CHECK YOUR COMPASS

COMPASSION

Provide the best care, treating patients and family members with sensitivity and empathy.
