

Sister Mary John Minetta, SHF

April 22, 1918 -- August 31, 2010

Entered the Sisters of the Holy Family July 2, 1936

Final Profession of Vows August 8, 1941

Sitting in the Motherhouse dining room after the notice was posted that Sister John Minetta was declining in health, I heard the compliments from every side:

“She was a pioneer...”

“She was a prophet...”

“She was a wonderful sister, a great lady...”

“She was ahead of her time...”

She was, and of course she still is, all of those things, but her frail body and failing mind masked the greatness of one who was the first executive director of the National Apostolate for the Mentally Retarded and truly a pioneer in special religious education.

Sister John, born Cecilia Minetta on April 22, 1918 in Ferndale, California, died on August 31, 2010, after a long illness. The family moved to San Francisco, and as a young girl, Cecilia helped out at Holy Family Day home, where she “got a great feeling of attraction to the charism just by being around the Sisters.” She entered the community in 1936 and made her final vows on August 8, 1941.

During her early years of ministry in San Francisco, Martinez, Burlingame, San Jose and Los Angeles, Sister John moved more and more toward special religious education with developmentally disabled children. She worked with the children and with their teachers and families to welcome them into the full life of the church. She was named the supervisor of Special Education for the Los Angeles Archdiocese, and in 1969-70 served in New Jersey as the executive director of the national office of the Apostolate for the Mentally Retarded.

She returned west to Reno from 1971-75, and in 1972 was seriously injured in a hit-and-run auto accident. Her car was struck from behind and went over a guard rail and down a 150-foot cliff into a river. When she was rescued

from the sinking vehicle by passersby, she was found to have four fractured vertebrae in addition to other injuries, but her service to her beloved “Holy Innocents” was not finished yet, and she made a recovery and returned to her ministry.

From 1976-1985 she served in Jersey City, New Jersey, as Director of the Apostolate for the Mentally Retarded, after which she returned to California to work in parishes of the Archdiocese of San Francisco.

She is the author of “Christ Our Light” for developmentally disabled children, a teacher’s manual for special religious education, and “Discovering God’s Love,” a manual for teachers and a companion child’s text for religious education for the developmentally disabled. She was a well-known presenter at lectures, courses, workshops and teacher-training sessions for the developmentally disabled and other handicapped children. Sister John was also a registered social worker.

Inspired by another Holy Family pioneer, Sister Miriam Auxilium O’Gara, Sister John in turn inspired another Holy Family pioneer, Sister Aurora Perez, who is currently Director of SPRED, the special religious education office for the Diocese of Oakland. With other sisters who have also served the developmentally and physically disabled through many years, these three have been but one expression of our mission “to seek out and advocate for the poor and needy, especially families, for the Kingdom of God.”

-- *Sister Carol J. Crater, SHF*