The Christ Child Society’s founder is Mary Virginia Merrick. Many founders of

organizations are lost in the pages of history, but Mary’s name is still invoked and

remembered at each meeting of the Christ Child Society, nearly 70 years after

her death. Why? Because she was a remarkable, forward thinking force of

nature, worth learning about and emulating.

Part 1 of Mary’s early life

Mary Virginia Merrick was born in Washington, DC the year after the Civil War

ended, in 1866. The second of eight children, she would have been expected to

follow a typical path of privileged young women of her day. Her family,

particularly her father, was very committed to the teachings of the Catholic

Church, and Mary was a willing learner. To many, she was an old soul, and she

embraced the spirituality of the church at a young age. She asked many

precocious questions, and felt a call to holiness. Although described as a normal

child, private European nannies and tutors who emphasized Catholic traditions

and spirituality also educated her, and heavily influenced her way of thinking. At

the age of eight, she one day told her father she wanted to join the convent of the

Sisters of Charity. Even then, she was keeping her focus on the Christ Child.

Right after Mary’s eleventh birthday, she describes in her diary a conversion

experience while she was walking in the fields of her family’s summer home. In

the middle of a wheat field, she so strongly felt the presence of God, that she

wholly committed her life to Him then and there.

By the time of her first communion at age thirteen, she was inspired by reading

about St. Agnes, and again told her parents she wanted to commit herself to

living the life of a nun. She was strictly told she was too young, and would have

to wait until she was much older to make that decision.

Not to be deterred, Mary focused on ways she could help others in need. The

problem was, she didn’t actually know anyone in need! She asked her teacher,

Madame Burr, for help. Madame Burr referred her a Miss Whittier, who belonged

to the Aloysius Relief Society, one of very few charities at that time. The charity

sewed clothes for the poor. When Mary found out, she was disappointed

because she wanted to go out and work with the poor in person, instead of

sewing.

However, Mary took a garment home and completed it, and returned it to Miss

Whittier. As she continued sewing, her commitment grew, and she wrote about it

in her diary:

“It is so easy to stifle these budding desires to serve, and even the smallest is worth

nurturing, for they must be born of love, and may be fanned into a great fire to warm

many.” MVM

By the time she was fourteen she had even influenced her mother to join another

benevolent organization, and Mary was able to accompany her to meet with

people who needed help. Through many visits, Mary became convinced that the

she was “meeting Christ” through giving to others in this way.

Mary was living a full and active life, when one day, at the age of fourteen, she

fell backwards from a window of the playhouse at her parent’s summer home,

landing on her spine. It was a serious fall, but she was able to walk back home

with her siblings. However, as days went by, her back continued to cause pain.

Her parents took her to specialists and consulted doctors all over the East coast

for three years. Nothing could heal her deteriorating condition.

By the time she was seventeen, it was determined that she had contracted spinal

tuberculosis, known as Potts disease. It attacked her spine and her legs, until

she was completely paralyzed and could not sit up. She also continued to be in a

great deal of chronic pain.

In her diary, Mary writes of great suffering and endurance:

“Suffering had grown familiar to me. It was not longer a strange face. There was, in my soul

nothing heroic, no great élan of acceptance of my cross. My attitude of soul, as far as I can recall

was one of endurance. I recall that for years I woke every morning to the realization of pain, of

suffering. It was impossible to get away from it, by day or night, and I suffered it. That was all.”

MVM

Through her suffering, Mary began to empathize even more with the

disadvantaged. She felt she began to understand their plight even more fully.

Many, maybe most, who faced this situation would have given up at this point.

She was destined to lie completely flat the rest of her life. She was fortunate to

have a family who could provide for her every need. She could simply choose to

lie there, endure constant pain, feel sorry for herself, and accomplish nothing.

But, she refused to take that path.

Much of this article was taken from In Service of the Christ Child by Harry Rissetto. Used with gracious permission.

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