

JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

WOMEN IN HISTORY

Sister Virginella: Feared, Fallible, and Fervid

By John F. Veiga
Guest Columnist
December 2024

Editor's note: Following is a story by retired university professor Jack Veiga about an Erie religious sister whose impact is still felt on the lives of many.



Sister Virginella



Sister Virginella Chisholm (front row center) joins St. Andrew alumni celebrating their 30th class reunion in 1987. Sister Virginella died in 1989.

Very little is written about Sister Virginella and her life as a Catholic nun. She was born in Detroit, Michigan, in about 1901 and joined the Sisters of St. Joseph in Erie, Pennsylvania, beginning her teaching career in 1922. In 1957, she was my eighth-grade teacher and the principal of St. Andrew School on Erie's west side. Thinking back on the teachers I can recall, she was the only one who made an indelible impression on me and, I suspect, on many of my classmates, too.

Feared

Although short and slight, all feared Sister. Her black, floor-length Josephite habit — the name for a set of garments worn by nuns — and the white, heavily starched wimple that pinched her face further accentuated her stern demeanor. Her steely stare, exaggerated by thick-lensed glasses intimidated me. In third grade, my fear of her was palpable. Several times, she found me doing something wrong in the hallway and yanked my ear while commanding me to “stop running,” “stay in line,” “don't slouch,” or “tuck in your shirt.” I quickly learned to keep a watchful eye out for her, but even then, she would somehow surprise me. I feared I might lose my ear and learned she would ignore any attempts to feign pain or plead my case until I demonstrated sufficient remorse. Even if her wrath were directed at another student, I would instinctually duck my head and cover my ears when she shouted, “What's so funny, mister?”

By fifth grade, I had at least forty pounds on her, and my fear of being confronted was more about public shaming than physical harm. Her rebukes often included

a mocking quote from Sir Walter Scott, “Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.” In seventh grade, she could no longer move fast enough to grab my ear lobe, but she had an uncanny sense of timing about the influence of public embarrassment. I loathed her when she dressed me down in front of my classmates (especially girls). I think I would have preferred to have my ear ripped off.

In August 1956, on the spur of the moment, I went to see Sister to offer my help two weeks before school started. I never fully understood what my motivation was for doing so. Perhaps entering eighth grade soon and completing my last year at St. Andrew’s was on my mind. Or, maybe, because I lived around the corner from the school, I was simply looking for a way to relieve my summer boredom. When I entered Sister’s office, she was sitting at her desk reading and never looked up. After a few minutes, I asked haltingly, “Can you use some help, Sister? I can do lots of stuff if you want.” She looked up and asked, “Can you paint?” I explained that I had painted the front steps of my house, and my dad liked it. Sister stood up and said, “Good, follow me.” We walked upstairs to a fifth-grade classroom where she handed me a paintbrush and a can of white paint and told me to paint all the window ledges without making a mess. Of course, I was very careful, but it didn’t matter because no one checked my work. As I finished, on a whim, I decided to lean out a window and dab some white paint on a concrete coat –of arms below it. (I later took pleasure in pointing out that spot to others). Over the next several days, I painted, cleaned, hauled trash, and carried textbooks into classrooms. I rarely saw Sister except when I was ready for another assignment.

The day before school started, Sister asked me to come by her office when I finished. She told me that I had been very helpful and thanked me for volunteering. Then she told me, “By the way, you will be in Sister Marcella’s eighth-grade class. She’s very nice, and I know you will like her.”

I knew Sister Marcella was well-liked, but I blurted out, “Sister, I really want to be in your class.” With a faintly visible smile on her face, she replied, “Well then, I will see you tomorrow and remember, I don’t tolerate tardiness.” When I went home, I told my mom that I was going to be in Sister’s class, and she laughed, saying, “Haven’t you always told me how really mean she is? Maybe she was trying to assign you to a really nice teacher as a reward for your help?” I agreed but then explained: “I think I can learn more from Sister.” My mom smiled.

Fallible

Many of the students in my class were from blue-collar, lower- to middle-income families like mine, while some were from more wealthy families, and others were from poorer families. One wealthier classmate was one of her favorites. He was poised and articulate when called upon. To me, she was especially nice to him, praising him for correct answers and making excuses for him when he was wrong,

suggesting, “Well, that’s an easy mistake to make.” On the other hand, when I was wrong, she pointed at my desk for me to sit down.

As an altar boy, some days, I had to go to church early before Mass started and get dressed in the altar boys’ locker room. One morning, I overheard one of Sister’s favorites tell another altar boy that he was an ass. Enraged by his swearing in church, and particularly his condescending tone, I felt justified in reporting him. Filled with righteous indignation, I told Sister. After pausing for several seconds, she abruptly dismissed me, sweetly hissing, “Oh, I don’t think that’s true. You must be mistaken. He probably said asinine.” Although I felt foolish and ashamed for being a tattletale, she was clearly showing favoritism.

In contrast, Sister often showed intolerance. In one memorable example, a classmate wore glasses that made him resemble a string puppet named Dilly Dally from a popular TV show called “Howdy Doody.” If anyone teased him by calling him Dilly Dally, he made it very clear that he resented that nickname. Once, when Sister asked him a question, he stood up and explained his answer. Unsatisfied by the answer, Sister quickly gestured for him to sit down. Ignoring her gesture, he remained standing, trying to further explain his answer. Sister snapped and shouted, “Listen Dilly Dally, or whatever they call you, you’re wrong.” While some classmates giggled or smirked, outraged, he shouted, “Don’t call me that! My mother told me no one is allowed to call me that!” and sat down. Although Sister quickly dismissed his outburst and moved on, many of us admired his bravery.

When a congenial, somewhat overweight girl accidentally stepped on Sister’s foot in front of the class, Sister shrieked in pain, “You fat pig (or slob)!” While many classmates gasped or giggled, this girl was obviously embarrassed, angry, and hurt, covering her red face as she sat down. Realizing the hurtfulness of her remark, Sister tried to quickly explain it away by suggesting that “it’s all right, because fat people are more jovial and good-natured.” While that seemed to diffuse the situation on the surface, it didn’t help my classmate, and it didn’t help me. Being overweight myself, I was horrified by the way this girl was treated. Yes, I’m sure that Sister felt some sharp pain in her foot and reacted without thinking. However, I felt an apology was in order, not an attribution about jovial fat people. I also thought about how my dad would make me feel when he jokingly called me “mister four by four, four feet high and four feet wide.” Then he’d tease, “If you fell down, you would rock yourself to sleep.” I tolerated my dad kidding as we had similar statures and several larger relatives, but I did wonder if Sister saw me the same way. I’m sure the girl did not feel the least bit jovial or good-natured, nor would I.

One of our class assignments was to draw an Erie landmark in preparation for an open house for parents. Sister emphasized that it should be something recognizable. I decided to draw Perry Square at State Street and North Park Row, which many people routinely passed. The park had a water fountain near French

Street that shot streams of water into the air. At the base of the fountain, several colored lights were timed to go off and on, continually changing the color of the water streams. While the fountain was iconic, I drew a picture of the bandstand area at the edge of the park, facing west, which I noticed every time I rode my bike past the park. Under the bandstand were several garbage cans mounted on bicycle wheels with push brooms sticking up. While the bandstand and garbage cans were plainly visible, a first-time passerby at night would likely notice the fountain first. I wanted to call attention to something that most locals would routinely notice. When I turned in my finished drawing, Sister remarked that she wanted pictures of landmarks, like the water fountain, and not silly drawings of bandstands and garbage cans.

Nevertheless, all the drawings were posted above the blackboards around the classroom for the open house. On the night of the open house, I was one of the volunteers to help parents find the right classrooms. I was in the back of my classroom when a well-dressed, obviously wealthy woman was walking with Sister, chatting about the drawings. When they came to my drawing, the woman exclaimed, "Oh my, isn't that interesting?" and Sister responded, sarcastically, "Yes, but I wanted students to draw landmarks." The woman replied, "Oh no, I think this drawing captured something we see all the time but rarely notice. It's very unique." Sister reluctantly nodded in agreement. When the drawing was returned, the original grade of "C" was erased, and the final grade was a "B." I believe this woman's critique influenced Sister. I understood then why my mom and dad got angry when the church published a bulletin listing the amounts of each parishioner donation. This made my parents' donations seem paltry compared to wealthier and perhaps more influential donors.

Fervid

Sister's remarks could also be encouraging and motivating. As a teacher, she cared deeply about learning, graded accordingly, and tried to be a role model for nuns. If you didn't do your homework, you prayed she wouldn't ask you a question. In my case, I struggled doing a math problem for homework the way she had taught us and decided to try a different approach, hoping she wouldn't call on me. After several other students offered incorrect answers and were told to sit down, Sister called on me. I stood up and haltingly told her I couldn't solve the problem using the method she taught us. I explained that I came up with the answer using a different approach. When I told her my answer, she was very pleased and asked me to come up to the front of the room and explain to the class how I arrived at my answer.

Although I was uncomfortable in front of the class, I explained how I measured the various pieces of the problem from the homework worksheet and then tried separate ways of combining them until I was fairly sure I had the right answer. Before I sat down, Sister said, "John's approach was very creative. I encourage

more of you to think about other ways to find solutions.” Of course, I was very proud of myself because she said, I was very creative, and that meant a lot to me. I carried that “thinking-outside-the-box” view of myself for my entire teaching and research career.

Sister also encouraged compassion for the less fortunate. I always felt sympathy for one girl who was obviously poor and shy. She was rather plain looking, with crooked teeth, and often came to class ill-kempt or disheveled. In the winter, she wore a long, very worn, probably fake, fur coat. A couple of different boys put her coat on when Sister was out of the room (she was in her office making announcements) and began clowning around. While swinging from the top of the classroom doorway, they behaved like monkeys, making sounds and gestures. Some students laughed, but to me, it was a cruel way to taunt and embarrass the girl. I was very angry, but to my regret, I never stood up and challenged them. I took this regret to heart, and on several occasions, I stood up for myself or others, whether it might be to challenge a bully or to speak truth to power.

In the late spring, we had our eighth-grade dance. Despite some square dance lessons, I was hardly prepared to ask a girl to dance. Of course, some of the more popular boys and girls were dancing, but the rest of us just stood around in the gym and hoped the misery would end soon. While the music was playing, Sister walked up to me and compassionately whispered, “Would you please ask that poor girl to dance?” It was the same girl who I didn’t stand up for. I nodded yes and walked across the floor to where the girls stood. I asked her to dance with me, and she agreed. (That was the first time I had ever asked a girl to dance.) While we danced, I don’t think we uttered a word, partially because we were trying so hard to look like we knew how to dance. When we finished, she smiled at me, and I bowed slightly, just like our square dance instructor had taught us. I thought some of the boys might tease me, either about who I chose to dance with or because I was dancing so awkwardly. I was prepared to stand my ground if they did. No one said a word. I’d like to think many of my classmates learned something that day.

After graduation, I don’t think I could have articulated how I felt about Sister. Often, from an eighth-grader’s perspective, what you learned was not as important as whether a teacher liked you. Sister was not a student favorite, in fact, at our class’ 30-year reunion, I overheard a few classmates expressing some disdain. It was probably a good thing for Sister that students didn’t evaluate teachers then. In retrospect, I came to fully appreciate the impact she had on me. While Sister was certainly fallible, the lessons I learned influenced my life and my career choices. More importantly, Sister’s lessons, some intentional and some not, have stayed with me. In effect, Sister helped me learn who I was as a person and who I wanted to be. When my undergraduate students asked who my favorite teacher was, I would always tell them about Sister Virginella. On eighth-grade graduation day, Sister gave me a big smile and handed me a medal for perfect

attendance. From that day on, I was always early and never tardy. I will always owe Sister a debt of gratitude, as do many of my classmates.

Public Gratitude

Others certainly did appreciate her, as the Olean Times Herald reported in 1981, noting that Sister Virginella became the 30th recipient of the Bradford Exchange Club Golden Deed Award and was the subject of a congratulatory motion from the Pennsylvania Senate. “Her selection was based on nominations from the community with testimonials from Bradford, Johnsonburg, and Erie. Sister was at St. Bernard School in Bradford, PA. Later she became supervisor of board students at Villa Maria Academy in Erie and then was assigned as a teacher to Holy Rosary School in Johnsonburg where she was on the faculty for 17 years. She was principal and a teacher at Sacred Heart School in Erie for four years and principal and teacher at St. Andrew School in Erie for 12 years. She returned to Bradford for 20 more years of service as principal of St. Bernard School and later as administrative assistant to Bradford Central Christian High School. Sister retired from her post in 1979 and resided at the Villa Maria Mother House in Erie, handling purchasing and tutoring.” (Olean Times Herald, May 14, 1981.)

Appendix

As an aside, because my mother saved my report cards, I was able to compare my grades in seven subject areas from fifth to eighth grade. I think Sister’s impact on me during those years validates my belief that I did learn more from her.

| Subject | Fifth Grade | Sixth Grade | Seventh Grade | Eighth Grade |
|------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| Arithmetic | C- | B- | B | A- |
| Spelling | A | A | A | A+ |
| Geography | C | D- | B- | A- |
| History | D | D | B- | A- |
| Civics | C | n/a | B | B |
| Science | B+ | *B- | B+ | A |

*My sixth-grade teacher wrote on my report card: “John is a good worker if he wants to work; but he likes to play **all** the time.”

| Subject | Fifth Grade | Sixth Grade | Seventh Grade | Eighth Grade |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| Conduct | C- | D | D- | A- |
| Effort | C+ | B- | A- | A |
| Courtesy | C+ | B- | A- | A |
| Neatness | B | C- | A | A |
| Homework | C | C+ | A- | A |
| Days Absent | 4+ days | 0 | 5+ days | 0 |
| Times Tardy | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John F. Veiga is a University of Connecticut Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor Emeritus.

[Subscribe to JES Publications
Emails!](#)

[Support JES | Donate](#)

In Case You Missed It

[The Wider World | Foreign States Meddled in 2024 U.S. Election](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Diane Chido**

[Truth in Love | Glaude and His 'Masterpiece' in Spotlight Friday](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker**

[Be Well | Cold Hands May Mean More Than Warm Heart](#) written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

[Classic Book Notes | The American Way of Christmas \(Part Two\): Christmas Presents and Christmas Trees](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

[On the Waterfront | From Erie's Downtown YMCA to Port Dover: The Mysterious Strong Vincent Kid from the Steamships](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

Jefferson Educational Society | jeserie.org

