



## Sister Anne Regina O'Leary, S.S.J. - Religion and Education

Timing, they say, is everything. For Sister Anne Regina O'Leary, S.S.J., the Lord's timing in placing her among us when He did has, in a way, given her two lifetimes of service. In the first, Margaret Ward O'Leary, who was born on Sept. 14, 1912, one of the two daughters of Daniel P. and Anna Byrne O'Leary of Wheeling's Warwood neighborhood, went to local Catholic schools, graduating from Corpus Christi Grade School and Saint Joseph Academy. Then, at age 20, she joined the order of nuns who had taught her and, as Sister Anne Regina, spent the next 32 years as hundreds of other Sisters of St. Joseph of Wheeling have spent their lives. She earned both her bachelor's degree in English and her master's degree in English and administration from Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and was a teacher and school administrator in Catholic schools in Wheeling, Weston, Fairmont, Huntington and Clarksburg.

Then came the first days of that second lifetime, the one that has required special courage as she was called to assume positions of leadership that no other woman had ever held. In 1964, she became the first principal of a co-educational Central Catholic High School, overseeing the successful merger of her all-girls alma mater, St. Joseph Academy, with the boys-only CCHS. Her time at Central coincided with the first six of her 16 years on the general council of her congregation, which like all communities of women religious was then just beginning to absorb and respond to the dramatic changes and reforms in the church spawned by the Vatican II ecumenical council.

From 1970 to 1976, Sister served as general superior of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wheeling and during that time she also was elected the second president of the United States Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph. The federation, which she headed from 1972-74, covered 24 congregations of Sisters with about 14,000 members. As federation president, she was a National Leadership Conference of Women Religious delegate to the International Union of Superiors General in Rome, where she met the pope.

When her term as superior of her order concluded, Sister Anne Regina mastered even larger challenges and tests of her leadership skills. From 1976 to 1992, she served West Virginia's Roman Catholic Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston as the first female Associate Vicar for Religious, as Director of the Office of Women and as Coordinator of Health Affairs. She had become involved nationally in health care issues when she was superior of her congregation, which operates two hospitals in West Virginia, St. Joseph's in Parkersburg and St. Francis in Charleston.

Sister was a member of the National Conference of Vicars for Religious and was an officer in the Eastern Region of the Vicars for Religious National Organization. In health affairs, she was president of the Eastern Region of Diocesan Health Affairs Coordinators. She was appointed by then-Gov. Jay Rockefeller for three years to the first West Virginia Women's Commission.

In 1974, Sister Anne Regina worked with the late Bishop Joseph Hodges to set up the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wheeling Foundation, the official retirement fund of the sisters. She continues to serve as its president and the fund has grown to over \$10 million under her leadership.

Sister Anne Regina has served on numerous boards and, in fact, was a member of the original Wheeling Hall of Fame Board, resigning in 1999. She has served on the Wheeling Hospital board and currently is a member of the Welty Board, which oversees the Good Shepherd Nursing Home and Apartments and The Welty Home. She is a member of the Wheeling Area League of Women Voters and has had articles and poems published in national English teachers' magazines and vocation and poetry publications. Awards bestowed on her have ranged from Distinguished West Virginian to having the Most Rev. Bernard Schmitt present her with the diocese's Bishop's Cross award for outstanding contributions to education.

According to Bishop Schmitt, "in nearly seven decades as a woman religious," Sister Anne Regina "has ministered to the people of God in a long and distinguished career. Her service has been exemplary and springs from her rock-like faith in God, to whom she dedicated her life at the age of 20."