

Sisters of St. Francis

of Mary Immaculate

“Some people come into our lives and quickly go. Some stay for a while and leave footprints on our heart, and we are never, ever the same.” Flavia Weedn

Leaving footprints in our world epitomizes the life of Sister Vivian Whitehead who began her 95 year journey on August 14, 1927, on the southeast side of Chicago. The firstborn, she was welcomed into the world by her parents Margaret (Kersten) and Fred Whitehead. Siblings followed; Annette Leah Nordmark (deceased) and Larry (Betty) Whitehead. As years went on, numerous nieces and nephews arrived, becoming part of the joy of her life.

St. Dorothy Grade School and Loretto Academy Woodlawn in Chicago, set the foundation for her formal future education. She earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Biology, graduating Cum Laude, from the College of St. Francis (now University of St. Francis) where she met the Joliet Franciscans in the classroom. Inspired by the Sisters and the Franciscan charism, she entered the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate on September 2, 1947, her junior year at the College of St. Francis. Upon entering the novitiate August 12, 1950, she was given the name Sister Michelyn. Her formal education concluded at St. Bonaventure University in New York, where she received a Ph.D. in biology. Always the learner, she continued studying in areas such as theology, criminology, canon law, governance and counseling, social justice, and a variety of other areas that would prepare her, feed her ministry, light a fire in her soul, and eventually lead her down the path to Will County Adult Detention Facility and Appalachia.

How does one even begin to capture a journey and spirit of 74 years of ministry, service, leadership and love that epitomize the life of Sister Vivian Whitehead? “How can you hold a moonbeam in your hand?” *Sound of Music*

Her journey began in the classroom, teaching biology at St. Mary High School in Columbus, Ohio, St. Francis Academy (now Joliet Catholic Academy) and the College of St. Francis (now University of St. Francis). Having been elected to the position of Councilor/Coordinator of the Sisters in 1968, she left the College of St. Francis, for congregation administration, but her classroom experiences helped to sow the seeds that eventually launched into a life dedicated to educating in non-traditional settings.

Her journey then took her to the University of Notre Dame ministering as a hall rector. During her three years at the University of Notre Dame, she participated in a Criminal Justice course which impelled her to return to Joliet in 1979, with a vision of ministering to the incarcerated. Realizing that lack of education holds people down; the incarcerated, the poor, those with no resources or availability of options, education became her passion as she saw her role was “to walk with people...to do what I can to make a difference.”

Alleluia!



Sister Vivian Whitehead, OSF

With the blessing of the Congregation, she established the Center for Correctional Concerns in the Will County Adult Detention Facility, becoming its first Executive Director. After conducting a survey in the facility, it was found that 70% of the residents did not have a high school diploma. And so she began the GED Program saying, “I wanted to address the cycle of crime, which has a lot to do with lack of education.” Sister Vivian worked with public defenders, investigators, police agencies, judges, lawyers as well as families of the incarcerated. She described her most meaningful moments in ministry as her time in the Will County Detention Facility. “I learned to understand their struggle and let go of false myths that surround prisoners.” However, once again, the congregation recognized her leadership and vision and in 1988, elected her President of the Congregation which necessitated her departure from her loved jail ministry.

After serving one term as President, she began a “pilgrimage” that would eventually lead her to Appalachia. Her first stop was a 6 week stay in Kenya, Africa, where she lived with native African Sisters, shared life with the Maasai tribe as well as with people in the slums of Nairobi. Next came a retreat in Assisi, where she immersed herself in the life and spirit of Francis and Clare, followed by a “pilgrimage” through the South of the United States to experience the ministry of women religious who minister in rural areas of poverty. After a 6,000 mile journey, her heart led her to the hollers of Kentucky, where she worked primarily in the Adult Education Program with “mountain moms” and family literacy; people caught “in the cycle of illiteracy-unemployment-poverty.” She ministered in David, living in a house “nestled on a hillside in a former booming coal mining town” and encouraged people “to reach for New Beginnings in their lives.” Leaving David, after 6 dedicated years, she hoped that many of the Mountain Moms “have realized a little more about their dignity as persons.”

Returning to Joliet in 1999, she “went back to jail” and Pod F became her “ministry home.” She wrote, “this ministry touched me at the core of my faith and gives me truly a sense of powerlessness.” Often telling people with a smile that “yes, I’m still in jail”, she continued ministering to the incarcerated

Sister Vivian Whitehead, OSF
August 14, 1927—Eternal Life December 3, 2022

women until a month before her passing! Leaving the jail and the women whom she loved, was perhaps one of the most difficult times in her life.

The world recognized the footprints she was making and the accolades, awards, recognitions are numerous. A jail guard was heard to have said "She's a great lady, a very great lady" but she simply saw her role was "to walk with people...to do what I can to make a difference." Embarrassed to be recognized and singled out, she knew that ultimately she was only God's instrument. Her last award was in 2019 when the Will County Bar Association honored her for 40 years of service to the Center for Correctional Concerns. The Award was presented by the President of the Bar and Chief Justice of Will County, with commendations from the Mayor of Joliet and the State Senator and State Representative.

Deeply loving the Congregation and the Sisters, she was a consummate community sister, having the ability, grace and love to make everyone feel special and loved. Possessing a positive outlook that allowed her to never dwell on the negative, she was a woman of hope and vision, a woman of deep spirituality, a woman who saw and understood the realities of the poor of Appalachia and the incarcerated, a woman who committed her life to throwing pebbles in the pond of life to make a difference, a woman who has left deep footprints in the lives of so many,

"Some people come into our life as blessings. Some come into your life as Lessons." *Mother Teresa*

Sister Vivian, you left footprints in our world and in our hearts. You came into our lives as a blessing and taught us so much by your very life and person.

May your spirit of acceptance, love and care continue to live within us - we who are left behind and so very grateful for having been a small part of the life of so great a woman religious, confidant and loyal friend. Until we meet again. May you be resting in the arms of Jesus!

<i>Born:</i>	August 14, 1927
<i>Parents:</i>	Fred Whitehead and Margaret (Kersten) Whitehead
<i>Postulancy:</i>	September 2, 1947
<i>Novitiate:</i>	August 12, 1948
<i>First Profession:</i>	August 12, 1950
<i>Final Profession:</i>	August 13, 1953
<i>Entered New Life:</i>	December 3, 2022

Ministry History

1950-1952	Teacher: St. Mary, Columbus, Ohio
1952-1962	Teacher: St. Francis Academy, Joliet, Illinois
1962-1965	Graduate Study: St. Bonaventure University, New York, New York
1965-1968	Teacher: College of St. Francis, Joliet, Illinois
1968-1976	Congregation Administration: Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate, Joliet, Illinois
1976-1979	Pastoral Minister: University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana
1979-1988	Founder and Director: Center for Correctional Concerns, Joliet, Illinois
1988-1992	President: Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate, Joliet, Illinois
1992-1998	Adult Education and Family Literacy Teacher: The David Project, David, Kentucky
1999-2022	Educator: Center for Correctional Concerns, Joliet, Illinois

<i>Interment:</i>	Section 8, Lot 329, 1B, Resurrection Cemetery, Romeoville, Illinois
<i>Predeceased by:</i>	Her parents Fred Whitehead and Margaret (Kersten) Whitehead, her sister Annette Leah Nordmark and her niece Susie Nordmark
<i>Survived by:</i>	Her brother Larry (Betty) Whitehead, brother-in-law Don Nordmark, and many nieces and nephews.

Rest in Peace, Sister Vivian!