



In Loving Memory

Sister M. Fides Bourgeois

Sister M. Fides Bourgeois, 90, died on Friday, July 13, 2018. She was the first of three daughters born to Hector and Mary (Ledet) Bourgeois in Ponchatoula, Louisiana, and given the name, Catherine Marie.

The Bourgeois family moved to New Orleans before Catherine started school and only when she was ready for fourth grade, did they return to Ponchatoula.

Wikipedia informs us, “Ponchatoula is the strawberry capital of the world.” Sister Fides told of an unusual school year she experienced on account of that fame. “Because children were needed to help with the strawberry harvest, the school vacation was when the strawberries ripened in the spring. Then we went back to school in the summer to assure for us the nine months of learning. We had some different teachers in the summer session.”

All Catherine’s teachers at St. Joseph School in Ponchatoula, and later when she was a boarder at St. Mary of the Pines in Chatawa, Mississippi, were School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Sister Fides recalled, “Ever since I was little, I wanted to be a sister.” Her admiration for the sisters who taught her and their example for her only strengthened her longing. She reminisced about some in particular, “It was of the special influence of Sister Arilda and Sister Clarissa. They lived their faith. They were always interested in what I was doing. I looked up to them as examples of ideal religious.” So it was easy discernment for Catherine when on graduation from St. Mary of the Pines, she would choose to enter the SSND candidature at Sancta Maria in Ripa, St. Louis. Her parents readily gave their consent.

Catherine continued her education at Notre Dame College in St. Louis. During her second year as a candidate, she had a practice teaching experience in the primary grades of two St. Louis schools.

Catherine received the SSND habit and the name Mary Fides in 1947. She described the novitiate as “a year of practice of all I learned so that I could become a good religious.”

Sister Fides professed her vows in 1948. Since her profession and until her retirement, she taught only in Louisiana, teaching all the subjects to children and youth ages six to 16 in metropolitan New Orleans, in Lake Charles and in Baton Rouge. Sister Fides was a quiet, seemingly simple, person. Her response on being asked to describe special moments in her many decades of teaching, “There have been so many — the smiles, the looks of accomplishment, the hugs — it just makes you feel so good that you made a difference.” And make a difference, she did.

Baton Rouge was a long lay-over on Sister Fides’ journey. Except for a four-year respite at Redeemer High School in New Orleans, she lived in Baton Rouge. In community with her faithful companion, Sister Carla Marie Candella, she lived for almost 30 years! Together they taught in the Redemptorist school complex.

Birth
December 4, 1927

Baptism
December 11, 1927

Profession
July 29, 1948

Death
July 13, 2018

Burial
St. Mary of the Pines
Cemetery

*Precious and blessed is
the death of the faithful
before God... for
they die in union with
their dear Jesus, in the
grace of God, in peace.*

Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger
Foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame
Letter 11, September 10, 1831

continued

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**School Sisters
of Notre Dame**
Central Pacific Province

Transforming the world
through education

In the 90s, Sister Fides was one of two teachers recognized as outstanding in the field of Catholic education. The acknowledgment in this award reads, “Sister Fides’ dedication is observable in her lesson planning, in the appearance of her classroom, and in her ability to motivate her students to work and, to give them confidence in themselves.”

Sister Fides recalled, “I enjoyed working in every grade and with the different age levels. But first graders have always had a certain appeal. And I especially enjoyed working with the special children.”

Sister Fides was in her 60s — beyond the usual teaching retirement age — when Sister Michaeline, superintendent of the diocesan schools, suggested that she become certified in special education. For three summers, Sister Fides traveled to Southeastern University in Hammond, Louisiana, to take the required classes and was certified.

Thirteen years later, the special education coordinator for the diocese spoke on Sister Fides’ retirement, “I wish I could clone her.” She added, “With her extraordinary patience and exemplary teaching skills, she opened the world of reading for these students. She opened a different world to the children to whom she taught religion.”

During the early part of this century, Sister Fides and Sister Carla Marie were active in the programs of St. Joseph Cathedral Parish in Baton Rouge. In 2007, Sister Fides received the Bishop’s Day Award with this testimony, “You have been a long and faithful servant of Jesus Christ in the parish, in the way you have served Him in others and entered into the unique spirit that is the Cathedral Parish. The people and I recognize in you an extraordinary person.”

In 2012, Sister Fides and Sister Carla Marie retired to St. Mary of the Pines. Sister Fides, this dedicated, quiet, patient, unassuming, prayerful and outstanding person, continued to display these qualities as she joined the Chatawa community. She showed her dedication in so many ways: helping to keep the dining room tidy and supplied, responding to the needs of any she could help, assisting in the library, regularly attending all community prayer and events, serving in liturgies and being an educator.

Leisure time found Sister Fides with a book in her hand. She loved to read just as she loved to share her ability to read. Until just a few weeks before her death, she assisted in the library. She guided others to “just the right book.” When a child needed individual help, a parent would bring him to her for tutoring. With three other community members, she taught struggling readers several afternoons a week at Osyka Elementary School. Two years ago, physical challenges limited this activity. Within the last year, Sister Fides’ diminishment brought further limitations. She did look forward to celebrating her 70-year Jubilee, and she rejoiced in being able to participate with her community and her family in the celebration! Six days later, in the early morning hours, she went peacefully to God.

We know her joy was full as she met the Author of the Book she loved to read and to teach.

By Sister MarieClare Powell, SSND