



**Birth**  
September 20, 1938

**Baptism**  
October 2, 1938

**Profession**  
July 31, 1958

**Death**  
February 23, 2021

**Burial**  
Chatawa Cemetery,  
Chatawa, Mississippi

*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

## *In Loving Memory*

### Sister Thomasette Pittari

Thomas and Josephine (Klevorn) Pittari welcomed their first born on September 20, 1938, in New Orleans, Louisiana. At her baptism in St. Alphonsus Church, she was given her mother's name, Josephine Marie. The family grew to three daughters and a son and lived in close proximity to the family's restaurant.

Josephine began first grade at Our Lady of Good Counsel School in New Orleans, where she first met the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND). Still in the primary grades, she transferred to Our Lady of Lourdes School in Slidell, Louisiana. Then it was back to Our Lady of Good Counsel where she graduated in 1952. During the last years of grade school, she wondered if God might be calling her to religious life. As she finished the first semester at St. Stephen High School, taught by the Daughters of Charity, she felt she should test her call to religious life by attending high school as an aspirant to the School Sisters of Notre Dame in St. Louis. Following graduation, she became a candidate at Sancta Maria in Ripa on January 22, 1956.

When Josephine was accepted into the congregation as a novice on July 30, 1957, she received the name, Mary Thomasette. She professed first vows on July 31, 1958, and final vows on July 30, 1964. She completed study for a B.A. with major and minor in Latin and Spanish, at the former Notre Dame College, St. Louis in 1960.

During the next 10 years, Sister Thomasette taught children in the elementary grades at Immaculate Conception School, Marrero, Louisiana; St. Gregory School, Tyler, Texas; and St. Gerard School, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Following these assignments, her ability in languages would be needed. At the SSND boarding school, St. Mary of the Pines, Chatawa, Mississippi, Sister Thomasette taught Latin and Spanish to the area students and the many borders from Latin America.

Fortified with this teaching and interpreting experience and with the closing of St. Mary of the Pines as a school, Sister Thomasette was ready for her next venture. A timely call went out from the Archdiocese of New Orleans for someone who spoke Spanish to be an English teacher and interpreter. A dramatic influx of Spanish speaking immigrants to this port city during the Cuban revolution crisis accelerated a need for more intentional care of Spanish speakers. For the next 10 years Sister Thomasette assisted in the Latin American Apostolate of the Archdiocese: teaching English, acting as interpreter, and assisting families in their resettlement. It gave her satisfaction to know the unique service she could be to those in need.

It was another kind of Cuban exodus that brought about Sister Thomasette's invitation to her next ministry. This time it was for a Spanish-speaking, Catholic presence in a soon-to-be opened federal prison in the Louisiana Lake Charles Diocese.

By 1987, the part-time diocesan ministry evolved to a full-time staff chaplaincy in the federal prison system. Sister Thomasette described this ministry as

*continued*

# In Loving Memory



religious counseling, assisting with the Catholic liturgies and providing for the needs of all religion groups in the prison population. Within the year, the prison was populated by nearly a thousand people from the Cuban Mariel boatlift. Some were there just for placement in American society. That was until the 1987 press release announcing the State Department's deportation of 1,000 Cubans. This greatly upset the Oakdale Cuban population. The hostage-taking, prison-burning stand-off that followed was a world-wide news event. Sister Thomasette related her quickly adapted routine, "My 16-hour-day involvement at this time entailed providing religious support for families of the hostages and for staff. I was also translator for the hospitalized inmates and injured staff... During the eight-day standoff, I came to realize that the federal prison system was family; we supported each other." Months later the prison returned to near-normal.

"At that time, I came to an even greater appreciation of the family I had in the SSND community. I was awed by the long list Sister Ancilla made of those sisters who called about my well-being during the tragedy at Oakdale. Since beginning this prison ministry, I had lived with Sister Ancilla Marie Roussel and Sister Harold Schwerman in a convent about 40 miles from Oakdale." Sister Thomasette had several subsequent Federal Prison chaplaincy assignments in Texarkana, Texas; Fort Worth, Texas and Coleman, Florida. In the last named, she was a member of an Eastern Province community of SSND. It was always so supporting to her to find an SSND convent community to call home. It was at the prison in Bryan, Texas in 2007, that Sister Thomasette fulfilled her full federal retirement years.

After official "retirement," Sister Thomasette returned for five years to full-time teaching in the former New Iberia, Louisiana Progressive Education Program administered by the SSND. Her own progressive retirement led her next to tutoring children in the Holy Ghost School in Houston, Texas. Then she became a prayerful presence first at Sancta Maria in Ripa in St. Louis and in 2017, at St. Mary of the Pines in Chatawa, Mississippi.

In her more vigorous years, Sister Thomasette was a long-distance runner participating in a number of marathons – even running in the early 1980s Mardi Gras Marathon that tracked the 26-mile stretch across the Causeway. In quieter times, she was an avid crossword puzzle doer.

Sister Thomasette was among the first of the sisters from Chatawa to move to St. Anthony's Gardens in Covington, Louisiana in 2019. The community she loved watched and prayed with her as she ran that last lap to attain that prize she always sought. Sister Thomasette died peacefully early Tuesday morning, February 23, 2021, at St. Anthony's Gardens, in Covington, Louisiana. Sister Thomasette was preceded in death by her parents and her sister, Rosalie Martinez. She is survived by her sister, Mrs. Marie Borim of Riverdale, Georgia, and her brother Thomas of Pearl River, Louisiana.

Visitation and Prayer was on Tuesday, March 2, 2021, at Most Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Covington, Louisiana. This was followed by the Eucharistic celebration with Reverend Rodney Bourg, pastor, as celebrant. Burial was in the School Sisters of Notre Dame Cemetery in Chatawa, Mississippi.

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*By Sister MarieClare Powell, SSND*