



## Sister Anita Constance

Wherever I am  
I am meant to be.  
For you are there, my God,  
And that is enough.

from  
*Night Vision: Praying Through Change*  
Sr. Anita Constance, S.C.

The words of Sister Anita Constance that are printed above aptly reflect a life of faith, trust, and service. Sister Anita lives each day with the assurance that God is with her that day and will continue to be with her each day to come. Her faith is an ever present source of strength as she follows in the footsteps of St. Vincent de Paul and gives without reservation to the people of God.

Sister Anita's call to religious life came very early. She was first inspired by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, who ran a camp that her older brother attended each summer. Her own vocation became clear when she came to know Sister Jean Cordis, who taught her in the eighth grade at Epiphany School. "I just appreciated who she was, and that was it! I knew that I was to be a Sister of Charity."

Following eighth grade, Sister Anita enrolled in the Juniorate of the Sisters of Charity as a member of the last class to enter that preparatory school. The school closed at the end of her freshman year and she completed high school at St. Cecelia's in Englewood. Still sure of her calling, she entered the Sisters of Charity in September following graduation.

Like so many other young sisters who entered in the 1960's, Sister Anita found that her first assigned ministry was in the classroom. She taught for one year at St. Peter's Elementary School in New Brunswick and then served for five years at St. Joseph School in West Milford. She says, "I loved teaching and the kids were great. But I also knew there was something more that I wanted to do."

The realization of what more Sister Anita could do in ministry began to be revealed to her when she attended a Cursillo retreat. Cursillo is a worldwide lay ecclesiastical movement. The three day Cursillo retreats help men and women come to know Jesus Christ and to experience the reality of His love and friendship. Sister Anita says, "I was so impressed by the women and their lives and I just wanted to be a part of that. I started to feel something, some call." When the Paterson office of the Cursillo movement posted an opening for an Administrative Assistant, Sister Anita eagerly applied for and accepted that position. She organized retreats and also served as a team member on several weekends.

After five years working for Cursillo, Sister Anita recognized a call to parish ministry. "It was about 1978 and I felt that a Sister had a lot to give in a parish besides teaching." Sister Anita took her resume door to door to about 20 parishes until she received a "yes" from Msgr. Joe Gallo at Blessed Sacrament in Paterson. She says, "It was a great beginning experience. I did home visits, lots of outreach, and I did some preaching."

Sister Anita continued her pastoral ministry at St. Joseph Church in West Milford, Sacred Heart Church in Dover, and St. Therese Church in Succasunna. "I just had a lot of chutzpah," she laughs. "I strongly believed in women having a role that was complementary to the male priests." In her preaching, she offered a woman's approach to the scriptures and she was gratified to know that her perspective was appreciated by male clergy.

During her years in pastoral ministry, Sister Anita was increasingly called upon to provide pastoral counseling. Her interest in counseling and her desire to reach out to people seeking healing and direction led her to study at Fordham University, where she earned an MS in Religious Studies with a concentration in pastoral counseling and spiritual direction. She says, "I believe that people heal through the intervention of a professional in combination with the grace

of God.” Her studies also kindled a desire to offer faith guidance through writing. Over the years, she has written and published five books and for ten years served as editor of the Paulist Press publication, *Living the Days of Lent*.

Following her studies at Fordham, Sister Anita spent 15 happy years serving as Director of Pastoral Care at Saint Anne Villa. She marvels as she recalls how many times God used her to minister to the elderly sisters in simple and ordinary ways, just by putting her in a position to help when they needed it. “I’d go by a Sister’s room and something would make me stop and go in. And I would find that she needed a drink that was out of reach or she needed a hug. I would leave the room and say, ‘Wow, God took me there for her,’ and it meant a lot.”

After ministering at Saint Anne Villa, Sister Anita went on to serve as Director of Xavier Center. While she managed the Sisters of Charity’s retreat program, she also continued going out to parishes to offer presentations on prayer and spirituality.

When Xavier Center closed its doors in 2011, the closing prompted Sister Anita to take the next step in her ministerial journey by starting her own ministry of the Word. Today she provides individual spiritual direction and offers about 25 different group retreats. “I give retreats wherever I am asked: for parishes, for sisters, for men, for women, for people with addictions and for people who seek renewal and healing.”

Of all the retreats, Sister Anita’s very favorite is the Matt Talbot retreat offered separately to men and to women who are recovering from alcohol addiction. This retreat brings recovering alcoholics together to share in prayer and reflection and help them find a spiritual path to healing. Retreat leaders are usually recovering alcoholics themselves, but an exception was made for Sister Anita. She recalls, “The first one I did was with a priest. There were 120 guys. I loved it and they helped me discover yet another gift from God.” She adds, “I will never say no to a Matt Talbot retreat because I receive so much from their faith and their honesty.” Sister Anita helps the men and women on retreat to surrender their burdens to God and, through prayer, to forgive themselves and others. She remembers one man who finally found peace after a troubled relationship with his father. “He told me, ‘Sister, you saved my life.’” She reflects, “You hear things like that and you know that God is working. It’s very humbling.”

To Sister Anita, each retreat is “a learning experience, a faith experience, and a graced experience.” She gives of herself completely and exhaustively, filling up each retreat with one-on-one encounters between group sessions. She would consider doing no less. “If they ask me to come, I’m going to give them myself, my whole self.” Her retreat ministry follows the example of St. Vincent de Paul, who went out to the people of his day and strove to meet their needs. She says, “It gives me energy to know that what I do connects me with Vincent.”

Sister Anita’s continuing ministries are nourished by prayer, including occasional precious overnights devoted to quiet prayer. She says, “I know that I can’t feed others if I don’t feed myself.” She also draws strength from the friendship and love offered by members of the Sisters of Charity community.

Sister Anita sums up her ministry today by saying, “I just go with the flow.” Although these words may be simply a casual expression for some, they truly characterize Sister Anita’s vital ministry and her humble willingness to let God work through her day by day. Every morning she asks God “to show me the way that day.” Impelled by the living flow of the Holy Spirit, she continues to say “yes” as she shares the God-life and offers comfort, direction and healing to God’s people.