

Switchgrass: The Story of Sr. Mary Victory

Harsh Weather

Sr. Mary Victory was a woman born to persist and to build.

Upon her birth in February of 1887, a bracing winter gripped central Texas like a fist. It pounded the barren plains and cast a pall of ice across the brittle grasslands as the newborn Mary added her infant cries to the howl of the wind. Already she intended to buck the odds and thrive.

At the time Mary was born, Valley Mills, Texas didn't tout much in the way of attractions. Only five years before her birth, a voracious tornado had consumed several of its major structures, requiring its residents to rebuild. Its modicum of fame came from a resident, Isaac Brock, who claimed to be a hundred years old, and who lived another twenty-two years after Mary's birth.

Despite the harshness and smallness of such a place, Mary Victory grew like a resilient blade of switchgrass into a tall, willowy, stern-faced young woman with a compassionate heart and a will for helping the poor and destitute. She knew she wasn't the smartest in school but worked all the harder for it, developing a dogged determination that would serve her well the rest of her days.

At twenty-four, she entered the Incarnate Word Covenant, studying nutrition at the College and, unlikely as it was, emerged as one of San Antonio's earliest dieticians. At Incarnate Word, her persistent spirit helped her bloom. Organizing a nutrition department at the Santa Rosa Infirmary, she added, through her work ethic and industry, to a community of Sisters and professionals that would help Santa Rosa one day become an entire health system for southern Texas, complete with a Nutrition Center that still serves San Antonio's children to this day.

Yet she still hadn't made her biggest mark.

In the late '30s, with the Great Depression plucking the poor of clothing, food, and health, Sr. Mary served as a beacon to those in need, always searching for ways to feed and aid them. Returning from a stint working in the Austin State Health Department, she was likely looking for a new opportunity, a way of beating back the tide of poverty that continued to affect her community and the country with all the mercilessness of a high-plains cyclone.

That opportunity came in the form of a tidy parish priest in a baggy, black suit whose clerical collar glowed white beneath a round and kindly face. A Jesuit from Our Lady of Guadalupe, Fr. Carmelo Tranchese had been working with the poor on the West Side of San Antonio since 1932. In the wake of the Depression, the Guadalupe area had gained the dubious distinction as one of the worst slums in the country. It suffered a second blow when the pecan-shelling industry refused to pay their employees, many of them residents of the Guadalupe neighborhood, a minimum wage as designated by Roosevelt's Fair Labor Standards of 1938. When faced with that hurdle, Fr. Tranchese had gone straight to the top. He invited Eleanor Roosevelt to survey the neighborhood, and afterward she helped him to secure housing for his parishioners, many of them struggling Mexican families who'd been hit hardest during the challenging economic times.

Twenty Dollars

The day Fr. Tranchese stood in the office of the Superior of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, his feet slightly pigeon-toed as he waited, it seemed nothing might come of his visit. There were no Sisters available, and it looked as if he might go away empty-handed.

But news of the project he'd come to propose spread quickly through the convent.

Fr. Tranchese had twenty dollars. He intended to use it to pay the first month's rent on an old building near his church. The building, he envisioned, would serve as a kind of community center, a place from which the allocations of their charity efforts might be distributed to the people who

needed it most.

It was a plan with little hope in a bleak and beleaguered environment. But when news of it reached the ears of Sr. Mary Victory, it sounded like just the kind of environment in which she was born to thrive. Where others might have seen only the forlorn shell of a building and a shaky dream, Sr. Mary Victory “immediately envisioned clinics.”

The partnership was struck, and Fr. Franchese left Sr. Mary to the space. That’s when something special happened. Like the switchgrass she resembled, Sr. Mary Victory flourished in the wilderness. She quickly found money for a year’s rent from the Community Chest and badgered the Mother Superior to allocate resources from the Congregation for a dining hall.

The newly minted Guadalupe Community Center emerged from a broken building and blossomed. A clinic. A nursery. A day care center. An arts and crafts studio. A cafeteria serving hot lunches. And a classroom. The center daily served as many as three hundred children whose families were still in the throes of the Great Depression.

All the while, Sr. Mary walked among them, surveying, tending, and nurturing the people. Her white whimple and habit set off her kindly, ever-vigilant eyes behind a pair of modest glasses. Her high cheekbones framed a kindly smile for the children, who slurped soup and ate meals at pint-sized tables built to their height.

In the following years, Sr. Mary secured funding for a permanent staff and an adjacent lot and even a new building, but always pressed others to be their own change, to grow themselves against all odds: “We made every effort to help these people help themselves, which is the quintessence of good social work,” she said. Volunteers took up the mantle. Families who’d been served by the Center returned the work in kind. The center grew into its own.

The switchgrass of the Texas prairies looks like a weed. It’s considered by some to be a pest, though it serves to conserve the earth, to protect wildlife, provides food for livestock, and offers a hundred different uses as a crop. It is efficient, tall, tough, and resilient, unadorned but for a slight crimson bloom, almost imperceptible, that suggests a hint of lifeblood beneath the surface, some deeply rooted wellspring of infinite resourcefulness that we can only hope to glimpse for a moment as it waves in the wind.

Fourteen years after it opened its doors, the Guadalupe Community Center continued to defy the odds—as it still does today, offering clothes, food, assistance, education, and relief to those most in need—just as Sr. Mary had envisioned. For this reason, the local newspaper dubbed her “The Fighting Sister for the Westside Poor.”

Her response to that title was as no-nonsense and direct as all the other ways in which she’d approached her life’s work: “I was indeed ready to fight for their cause,” she remarked, “and thank God I usually won out in the fight.”