

Mercy Sister Felicitas Powers, former archdiocesan archivist, dies at 89

Religious Sister of Mercy Felicitas Powers, former archivist of the Baltimore Archdiocese, died April 8. She was 89.

She was given the title of vice chancellor while serving as archdiocesan archivist in the 1980s, according to Sister Rosalie Murphy, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur and former archbishop's delegate for religious.

Baltimore priests and religious praised the Religious Sister of Mercy for her archival work.

"She steeped herself in U.S. church history. In a way she was a walking encyclopedia on topics related to the evolution of the church in this country," Sister Rosalie wrote in an e-mail to The Catholic Review. "She was pleased to be identified with the historic archives and was zealous in her efforts to ensure that the documents were protected for future generations."

Father Paul Thomas, who met Sister Felicitas while working at the Catholic Center, said she began organizing the archives in the "best possible way" as soon as she took the job.

When Sister Felicitas left the Baltimore area, Father Thomas succeeded her as archivist.

"She was a good mentor, pointing out exactly how to do things and how best to help

people,” Father Thomas said.

Sister Felicitas was also influential in the life of Father Michael Roach, pastor of St. Bartholomew in Manchester.

“When she became the archivist, we just clicked,” Father Roach said. “She was very much my mentor. She sprung my interest in oral history, which I’ve been teaching for 32 years.”

Sister Felicitas also served as archivist of the Diocese of Savannah, Ga. As an archivist-consultant, she gave archival workshops for religious orders in Australia and New Zealand, according to Sister Paula Diann Marlin, the Mercy Sisters’ Baltimore archivist, now based in North Carolina. Sister Felicitas was one of three sisters from across the world to help plan the Mercy Heritage Centre in Dublin, Ireland, according to Sister Paula Diann. She did a great deal of work in archiving Mercy history.

“I don’t think she ever lost her love for wanting to see things done well, as far as archives go,” she said.

The Society of American Archivists awarded Sister Felicitas with the Claude Lane Award for outstanding religious archivist in 1979; she was the first member of a religious community to receive the award, according to Sister Paula Diann.

Sister Felicitas also served as a provincial counselor for the Baltimore Province of the Sisters of Mercy from 1970 to 1973. In Bethesda, she served as archivist for a union of Mercy Sisters from 1973 to 1980, Sister Paula Diann said.

Before becoming an archivist, Sister Felicitas spent about 30 years as an educator in schools in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Georgia.

In Baltimore, Sister Felicitas taught at St. Bernard School, Mount St. Agnes College and Loyola College in Maryland, Sister Paula Diann said. She also served as principal of Mercy High School.

Mercy Sister Barbara Wheeley, who was a young teacher at Mercy High School when Sister Felicitas was principal, praised Sister Felicitas' efforts to archive Mercy history and generate inspiration and enthusiasm through sharing Mercy stories.

"Sister Felicitas was highly respected in the Mercy community, especially in her ministry of educating so many of us to the value of archives and the proper way to maintain them," said Sister Barbara, who was the president of the Mercy Baltimore regional community for eight years before it merged with three other Mercy communities to form the South Central Community. "I think her gifts as an archivist were outstanding. That was the perfect ministry for her."

Paul McMullen contributed to this article.