

She's Sister Paulinus Oakes ...



no-nonsense
nun with
a big heart

by Gordon Cotton
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SHE WAS CHRISTENED MILDRED, BUT FOR OVER 60 YEARS SHE'S BEEN KNOWN AS SISTER PAULINUS.

"I'm Sister Paulinus Oakes," the lady in the smart business suit, accented with matching purse and heels, introduced herself. Perhaps there was a bit of disbelief, maybe a quizzical look on the other person's face, so Sister Paulinus added, "I'm an undercover nun."

If there's a stereotyped image of a nun—perhaps a shy, sweet, quiet lady in almost perpetual prayer wearing a long, black gar-

ment with a headpiece that barely shows her face—then you're way behind the times. That image went out with Vatican II.

And Sister Paulinus will tell you how glad she is of the change from the old habits—which is what they called the garb worn by the nuns—because she considered them cumbersome, a barrier to meeting and helping others, plus they were awfully hot and hard to keep clean.

"You're supposed to act like a Christian woman anyway, so why

do you have to be dressed in a distinctive way?" she surmised.

She's not tall—she said she is shorter than many of the students she taught. Her gray hair is cut short, too—no time to fool with fixing it. She wears a cross on a chain around her neck, but you realize immediately it isn't jewelry. When she talks, which is a lot, her mind races forward to the next subject so that she sometimes interrupts her own sentences. She loves to laugh, and she's a people person dedicated to helping others. If she had a favorite flower, it would have to be impatiens just because of the name.

Sister Paulinus was born here, grew up here and was educated at St. Francis Xavier Academy. She now lives in Jackson in a retirement home, "not in St. Louis with a group of sisters that pray every day. I miss that, but I want my ministry to be in Mississippi."

Vicksburg will always be home despite the fact that as a young lady she thought, "I was glad to get out of this one-horse town—but I was glad to come back!" The history, the uniqueness shared by towns up and down the river, the support of the community—"Not just the Catholic community"—for the churches and schools—"it's good to be a part of it."

She entered the world on Christmas Eve of 1931, the only child of Paul and Beatrice Adams Oakes. They had been married 13 years, but she insists there was "no chance of me being spoiled. I couldn't play one against the other."

She was christened Mildred at St. Paul Catholic Church, but her dad often called her Sugar, probably a misnomer, for she admits, "I was BAD. I was not a perfect child. I was really bad."

They lived out on South Washington Street, and she went to a small parochial school, St. Michael's, through the fourth grade. Her father, quite a handyman, made playground equipment for the school, which was staffed by nuns from the Sisters of Mercy.

The worst trouble she got into at school, she said, was when she did something bad, and the teacher sent her to the cloak room, "and she must have forgotten me. I don't know. But I got hungry, so I ate her lunch."

Later on, downtown at St. Francis, someone dared her to set off a large firecracker in the enclosed area by the boiler. Of course she took the dare, and until now they've never known who did it.

"There was no damage, but there was a lot of noise," she laughed.

Her love of sports was evident when she was just a little girl. She and her friends played ball in the middle of Central Avenue off South Washington because they had nowhere else to go and there were no cars, thus the danger was minimal.

At St. Francis she played in the courtyard right behind the Cobb House, and the older girls would use the gym at Jett. Later, when she taught at St. Aloysius, she organized tennis teams and got permission from the manager of the old Holiday Inn to use their courts.

"I've always loved sports," she said, and that has been evident in her career. She coached peewee football and track and one of her students broke a state record. She not only coached tennis, she also played it and one year they "won the district or something. Sports kept me motivated and helped me relieve tensions."

She didn't spend all of her time as a youth on the courts—she also took music, learning to play the violin.

"I wasn't good at it," she said, "but I learned when I'm on key and not on key. I played in recitals and things like that. I did learn to appreciate music. But I was never very good. But think about the audience—it was kind of painful, it was terrible, awful."

On top of that, she said, "I can't sing worth a toot."

Long before it became acceptable, or maybe fashionable, Sister Paulinus was involved personally in the ecumenical movement in Vicksburg. Her mother was Roman Catholic, so she was christened at St. Paul Catholic Church, but her father, who she thinks had been a Methodist, became an active communicant of Christ Episcopal Church. There's a stained glass in memory of him there, and she recalls he made some "cone-shaped things" to place on the ends of the pews to hold candles during Christmas services, which she attended with him.

"My daddy always taught me my prayers when I was a little girl," she said, but he also taught her something else. "He said, 'You Catholics feel like nobody else can go to Heaven. Get that out of your system. Don't look down your snoot at anybody else.' There was a lot of narrowness in those days."

Mr. Oakes' daughter listened, for it has never been unusual to see her visiting other churches and calling upon the sick from any faith. She was a pacesetter in the ecumenical movement.

Becoming a nun, she said, was a decision she made partially because of the wonderful teachers—nuns—she had at St. Francis.

"I thought hmmm, I might want to grow up to be a missionary somewhere," she recalled. "You know how that goes. Then somebody came and spoke to us and said, 'You know, this—Mississippi—is missionary territory.' I thought, well, maybe I'll do that. So I did. That'll be OK. I never did think of a lifetime of teaching school."

In 1949 Mildred Oakes graduated from high school and soon went off to St. Louis, where she entered the order of the Sisters of Mercy and enrolled

at Webster College and then Loyola where she earned a bachelor of arts degree.

She also took a new name when she took her vows, and as she was a communicant of St. Paul's and her father was named Paul, the choice was a natural one. She would have chosen one more feminine, like Paula or Paulene, but those names were already taken. In later years she could have gone back to her baptismal name, but she had been Paulinus too long and she thought, "Don't fight it."

As a nun, she took a vow of poverty, of chastity and of obedience, and the Sisters of Mercy have an additional vow, which is service to the poor, the sick and the uneducated, "all of which I take very seriously," she said.

That promise—or the scripture reference to it, which is found in Matthew—is included in the City Front floodwall mural depicting the Sisters of Mercy. The scripture reads, "Whatsoever you do to the least of my people, that you do unto me." The Biblical notation is on a food basket carried by one of the nuns in the painting.

After Sister Paulinus took her vows and graduated from college, she returned to Vicksburg for a short time.

She had not really planned a life in education, but soon she was off to Biloxi, teaching for and later becoming principal at a girls' high school.

"We're going to play ball," the nun announced to the girls gathered on the volleyball court at the Catholic high school in Biloxi, and years later Virginia Boudreaux, who was a student at the time, vividly recalled the scene: the nun reached down, grabbed the bottom of her ground-sweeping skirt, tucked it in her belt and the game began.

After a few years at Biloxi and enduring the horrors and rebuilding after Hurricane Camille in 1969, she was sent to Jackson for a while. She heard they were looking for a principal at a school in Oklahoma City, and by then rules had been relaxed a bit so that nuns had some choices of where they would go, or as Sister Paulinus said, "I kind of called the shots."

The Oklahoma school was a mixture of people and was a "wonderful experience." She had her work cut out for her—the previous principal had been weak (never let that be said of Sister Paulinus!), and their sports program was a disaster. Things shaped up really well, though, and she even got a Green Bay Packer to volunteer as coach, which ended the no-win tradition.

During her teaching years she was at St. Peter and St. Joseph in Jackson, at Mount St. Mary, at St. Al and at St. Vincent de Paul in New Orleans. After a year at St. Al, she was named principal of her alma mater, St. Francis, in 1977.

"I thought I had died and gone to Heaven," she said, for a number of reasons, but one was, "I had the world's greatest secretary, Marye Lou Lee."

The principals who had preceded her, she said were quiet and well-organized, "and I came in flamboyant. I'm messy, but I know where everything is. My desk is just a total mess, but I could depend on Marye Lou. She could run the school. I loved her, but I think she was aghast at me. But it was so easy here. There were no disciplinary problems. The teachers were so wonderful—they really didn't even need a principal."

Among the changes she made at St. Francis was the Montessori program for the kindergarten.

Some episodes she looks back on bring a ready laugh. She recalled the time someone broke into the school. She didn't realize it then, but checks were removed from the middle of the checkbook, so they weren't missed, and much later several hundred dollars worth of whiskey was bought with them, but Sister Paulinus said she just thought, "Roboski (the cafeteria manager) is making a heck of a lot of fruit cakes this Christmas."

Another incident occurred the day a call came from the Vatican, and her first thought was, "Oh, my God, the pope's caught up with me—I'm in bad trouble." The situation was that an Italian official had come here to work at Waterways Experiment Station and had enrolled his two children at St. Francis. Seems the woman with him wasn't his wife, and his wife was looking for him with help from the Vatican.

"I told Marye Lou, if the police came, to hide those kids in a back room," Sister Paulinus said.

Over the years, she had gotten her master's in theology and also had a master's in administration and earned a degree to qualify her as a chaplain. She went to work at the Mississippi State Hospital at Whitfield, setting up a program to administer GED tests, worked in the Marian Hill drug dependency clinic and Mercy Hospital from 1987 to 1993 before taking the chaplaincy at Our Lady of the Lake in Baton Rouge. In 1994 she returned to Jackson, working with Catholic Charities, starting a halfway house, Born Free, for women and the Isaiah House for men. From 1996 to the present she's been working at St. Dominic in Jackson as chaplain in the behavioral health and chemical dependency units.

She also did some college teaching—"I taught at Hinds forever"—holding forth in classes on American literature and English composition. She's a Faulkner fan, loves the writings of James Weldon Johnson and the poetry of Vachel Lindsey, a Missourian who never had a job but who penned such classics as "General William Booth Upon Entering

Heaven" and "The Congo," its rhythm and cadence appealing and motivating students, though it is politically incorrect today.

Sister Paulinus has been described as creative, innovative and energetic, and she said, "I like things looking a little bit different. I think the world could be run very different." She looks for innovative ways to approach problems and likes a challenge. Life has never been in a rut; she always has a lot of projects.

Among those projects are researching and writing books, her favorite being the editing of Sister Ignatious Sumner's journal; she was one of the original Sisters of Mercy who came to Vicksburg in 1860. Her accounts of the work of the Sisters, tending the wounded from both sides, tell of many harrowing experiences. Another one she wrote was a history of the Sisters of Mercy in the Southern states. She was told what had to be in it, and parts of the book she said are "as boring as the dickens."

She now works 20 hours a week and is on five boards. She is involved with mission work in Mound Bayou and has served in other towns including Woodville, Shaw and Indianola. She assists the Gleaners, who distribute food to the needy, and she secured sewing machines to teach people to make their own clothing.

In working with those in need, she often advises them that their faith in God and their hope for things to get better keeps them going, "for God does answer prayers, though He answers 'NO' a lot of times. But you can look back and see some blessings you got in life when He said 'YES.' It's hard to understand that sometimes, but don't give up hope."

In counseling she has to be sometimes brutally frank. After a few sessions with one client, Sister Paulinus summed it up with, "She still likes me, sort of."

When she thinks of all she's done, Sister Paulinus said, "I could be 106 years old!"

Now that she's semi-retired, she has time for such things as gardening and fishing—she has the time but not the patience.

"I have no patience," she said. She sees no joy in watching a tomato plant grow—she wants the edible fruit immediately.

"My mother loved flowers and my daddy loved vegetables," she said, and after her mother's death she told her father, "You don't have to fool with any more flowers. Just make it all vegetables. If you want to put bell peppers and onions in the front yard.... well, you don't have to feel guilty about it. Do what you want to."

She loves a well-kept yard, "if somebody else keeps it. I have no patience whatsoever with that kind of stuff, but I like it. I like what I see."

She feels almost as strongly about fishing. Her dad could spend hours at Long Lake and maybe not catch anything. She likes to fish—for about half an hour—"but if I don't catch anything, I'm going home."

She confesses that she does have a little window box, "but you wouldn't believe what I have in it—two Poinsettias from last Christmas that are still green. And a little mint to put in my tea. I have to have something green or I'd go nuts."

She's from a family with a history of longevity. Her father died at 93 and was playing golf the week before his passing. She has an aunt who is 102, and Sister Paulinus said she hopes to keep on going "until I konk out, and then Charles Riles will come get me and take me to Cedar Hill. But I've been disgustingly healthy, thank God."

She's slowed down a bit—not much—and will never quit because, "You don't retire from being a Christian woman, do you? I hope not."

"I've really had no regrets," she said, suiting up her years. "I like what I'm doing. Yeah, it would have been nice to have had children and grandchildren, but I don't regret that too much, especially when I look around and see divorce and all that kind of thing. A life commitment is a longtime thing, man. I wouldn't want to be a caretaker for some old guy," and she reflected on the life of a friend who had married three times, always an old man, "and I thought, 'Dear God, she could take that money and take a nice cruise somewhere or go some place.'"

In her Bible she has a poem tucked away, written by Emily Dickinson, which expresses her philosophy:

*If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life from aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.*

Sister Paulinus has done those things. Maybe that's why, she said, "I've liked what I've done."

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