



2018 Walks of Life Honoree Sister Rita Mary Harwood

As Secretariat for Parish Life and Development for the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, Sister Rita Mary Harwood helps to promote and sustain the words of the Gospel by nurturing programs and ministries throughout the 185 parishes in the diocese. She also assists the lay organizations of the diocese as well as facilitates ethnic ministries, with particular focus on

ministering to the diocese's African and Asian communities, immigrants, the incarcerated, and the gay and lesbian community.

While growing up in St. Colman Parish on Cleveland's West Side, she imagined she would become a mother with 10 children and even picked out names for some of the children. Halfway through her senior year at St. Stephen's High School, however, she felt that God was calling her to the religious life.

As one of four children of Edward and Margaret Harwood, she felt her father might object to seeing his only daughter go into the convent. But when she approached him about her desire to become a nun, he replied, "I have prayed all my life that one of my children would be called to religious life." She entered the Sisters of Notre Dame in September of 1959, three months before her father died.

Her first assignments were to teach in Catholic elementary schools. In the early 1970s, she was assigned as principal of St. Michael's School in Canton. In 1979, she was named supervisor of the elementary schools staffed by the Sisters of Notre Dame. Five years later, she was chosen as provincial superior for the Sisters of Notre Dame at a time when the order had about 600 sisters (about twice as many as there are today) serving in the dioceses of Cleveland, Youngstown, Arlington, Virginia, Washington, DC, Raleigh, North Carolina, and Tampa-St. Petersburg, Venice, and Orlando, Florida.

In 1994, she was asked to serve on a diocesan Task Force to plan the implementation of Bishop Anthony Pilla's Church in the City initiative. Pilla felt that as many Catholics moved out from urban areas, they were losing touch with the people and issues in the central cities: poverty, unemployment educational needs and housing. The following year, Pilla asked Sister Rita to help implement the Task Force's recommendations and to take on her present position of overseeing the offices and activities of the Parish Life Secretariat at the Diocese.

Although Sister Rita's last name, Harwood, is English and comes from a great-grandparent who was a member of the House of Lords, she reports that her three other grandparents were all Irish immigrants with the names of Noonan, Ryan and O'Malley. "My family came here for the same purpose that many people come to America today," she said, "to escape poverty and violence in their own country and to seek better opportunities for their children."

"Regardless of our status or orientation, we all seek a greater union with God in our lives," she said. "And that's what I strive for – to help the people of our parish communities to come to know and love God and to realize God's love for them-- and to reach out in concern for others."

2018 Walks of Life Award of the Irish American Archives Society, Cleveland OH.