

The Legacy of the National Christ Child

By: Patricia Myler

Mary Virginia Merrick founded our beloved Christ Child Society to serve children in need and our Society has been doing that uninterrupted for over 133 years. Under her leadership, she grew the organization from one city to 38 different cities around the U.S. before her death in 1955. Today, her legacy continues as our Society currently has 5,500 members in 45 chapters in 17 states and continues to expand.



Mary was born on November 2, 1866, the second of eight children to prominent Washingtonians, Richard and Nannie Merrick. As a teenager, she suffered a fall that left her crippled and in constant pain. She was only able to sit up with the support of a heavy metal brace for the rest of her life. Yet at the age of 18, when Mary lost both of her parents to illness within 15 days of each other, she became responsible for the care and education of six of her underage siblings. It was during this difficult period in her life that she also began formalizing the organization of the Society that she envisioned would serve children in need.



The Society grew from personal acts of charity such as the creation of a single layette of handmade baby clothing for an infant expected at Christmas. Later the Society provided Christmas gifts for 17 poor children. While the members of her original group consisted mostly of her family and friends, her group of volunteers quickly grew, as did the work. In the early

years of the Society she sent her zealous members out into the community to visit the poor to discover other needs, beyond what the Society was already providing. These volunteers were known as “Friendly Visitors” and after reporting the needs back to her, she formulated the plans to meet those needs, all from her bed!

She prepared a printed annual report detailing the work of the new Society as early as 1890. That first report gave the mission of the Society as two-fold: “To clothe children under the age of twelve years whose parents were unable to do so,” and “to give the little ones a Happy Christmas.” She quickly established herself and the Society as leaders in community service and volunteerism in the Washington area and later, nationwide.

By 1909, Chapters were being formed in other cities, and she saw the need to form these Chapters into a national organization that would share the same mission and bylaws—the National Christ Child Society. The national by-laws at the time stated that the National Society’s purpose was “To improve by useful instruction and charitable relief the needs of children” and “To stimulate the work of the affiliated Society’s to greater efficiency and usefulness in serving needy children without distinction of race, creed or color”.

In recognition for her extraordinary works of charity on behalf of children, she was named a “Servant of God” by the Catholic Church in 2003. A tribunal in the Archdiocese of Washington was established in 2011 and it is close to completing the



study of her life of heroic virtue as a step on the road to possible Sainthood. Sainthood is only conferred on those unique individuals whose lives are determined to be exemplary and holy, for the purpose of inspiring others to pursue virtuous, holy and charitable lives.

Today our Society is a living testimony to the work Mary Virginia Merrick began so long ago. During her lifetime, and in her death, she has inspired thousands of women and men to serve children and families through personal service in their communities. Our Society members remain faithful to Mary’s early vision of personal service to those in need. We live by her words “Nothing is ever too much to do for a child”.