

Christine Webber, RSCJ  
October 16, 1912-July 1, 2007

Chris Webber was a twin with her sister Charlotte, born to a family of five girls and two boys, children of Charles A. Webber and Clare Swearingen in Brooklyn, New York. At the time of their marriage, Mr. Webber was fifty and Mrs. Webber twenty-six, but they fell madly in love with each other and lived with their family in a large four-story house with a large front yard. Chris remembered her mother as snobbish enough to discourage her children from playing with their neighbors who were mostly "shanty Irish." Chris was born with congenital sclera-corneal dermoids on both eyes. Those on the left eye were small and insignificant, but those on the right eye were larger. She had twenty-one operations on her eyes, the first when she was three weeks old. This prevented her beginning school until she was eight years old, but her mother taught her to read at home. She attended St. Francis Xavier Academy with her siblings, a long trolley car ride away. After high school Chris attended a secretarial school for a year and then took a job in the personnel department of the Brooklyn Public Library. After five years there, she left for a better job at Foster Wheeling Corporation, an engineering company.

At this time, she joined a Catholic Action group at St. Peter's Church on Barclay Street. She attended daily Mass, but felt that she needed more spiritual structure in her life. During confession, a Dominican priest asked her if she had thought of entering the convent. She was thirty-five by this time, and replied that she was too old and also had to support her mother. Almost under his breath, she said, he muttered "It's not impossible." All the way home on the subway, she kept hearing these words, and by the time she reached home, she had made the decision to enter religious life, but in which congregation, she did not know. She was concerned about her mother, who was at the moment visiting one of her daughters in Charlottesville, Virginia. When they talked, her mother confided that she would like to move in with the daughter in Virginia, and at the same time, Chris confided her religious vocation, so it all worked out beautifully.

Chris still did not know to which order, however. She was given an illustrated directory of religious orders in New York State. The Society was not among them. She could not picture herself wearing any of the habits that she saw in the directory. Then she received a call from the secretary who organized Catholic Action in the parish. When she said she would not be there next year because she was entering the convent, the secretary, Toto Clarke, invited her to talk to Rev. Mother Mulqueen at 91<sup>st</sup> St. Even though Chris' mother had attended Eden Hall, she felt that her own educational background would be insufficient. She was accepted, however, and entered at Kenwood on January 12, 1949. She took the habit there on August 15 of the same year and made first vows on August 15, 1951. Even as a postulant, she had been working in accounting with Mother Hamilton. After first vows, she assisted in the transfer of Manhattanville to Purchase, New York, then went back to Kenwood as assistant treasurer and dépenrière.

She went to probation in September, 1956. While the other American probanists went by boat, she was sent to accompany another young religious to France by plane. She had never flown before and had to overcome her fear in order to do it. She was professed in Rome on February 9, 1957 and returned to Kenwood, again to work in the treasury with Mother Hamilton. In 1965 she became Treasurer at Buffalo until Nottingham School merged with Nichols School in 1972. Meanwhile she was sent in 1968 to the University of Nebraska in Omaha for a short course of two weeks for college business managers. Her next position in 1972 was at Greenwich giving assistance to Nance O'Neil, Provincial Treasurer.

While she was at the Provincial House at Greenwich, a proposal was submitted to the province asking for five volunteers to work with the poor in New York City. Chris felt called to respond and was one of the members of the new 49<sup>th</sup> Street community in “Hell’s Kitchen” in September, 1975. She worked in east Harlem with Elizabeth Cavanaugh at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel School. A year later, when the school merged with Holy Rosary, she joined the staff of Covenant House. She intended to be a volunteer, but the founder, Fr. Bruce Ritter, put her on the payroll. She insisted that she did not want to do bookkeeping, but counseling of the runaway kids who came there. In this capacity, her kind, open, and reflective manner was her special gift. For part of that time, she worked in the Mother-Child unit, assessing the needs of residents and their possibilities. She worked at Covenant House for seventeen years and it was the best time of her life. She remained at 49<sup>th</sup> Street for another eight years beyond that time. For the full twenty-five years there, she was Community Treasurer.

In 1982, she suffered a fractured hip as a result of some rough play by one of the boys at Covenant House. The doctor recommended swimming as therapy, so for the next eighteen years, she enjoyed water aerobics at a health club and turned this into an apostolate by listening to lonely fellow participants. During these years she was able to spend quality time with her sisters and other family members in Florida and Martha’s Vineyard. After open heart surgery in March, 2000, she retired to Pax Christi community at Kenwood. Two years later, there was a celebration there for the 90<sup>th</sup> birthday of Chris and her twin sister Charlotte. Chris was acclaimed “an angel in Hell’s Kitchen,” a pioneer who was the first to volunteer for 49<sup>th</sup> Street, first to volunteer at Covenant House, and first to move from Pax Christi at Kenwood to the new infirmary arrangement at Teresian House.

Chris’ great heart and generous spirit were the hallmark of her life.