

## Mary Ludmilla McCarran - Sister Mary Mercy

### At a Glance:

**Born:** Aug. 31, 1906, in Salt Lake City, Utah

**Died:** March 25, 1966, in Washington, D.C.

**Race/nationality:** Caucasian/American

**Maiden Name:** McCarran

**Major fields of work:** religion, teaching, art, music, writing



Mary McCarran  
Photo credit:  
*Reno Evening Gazette*

---

### Catholic nun, daughter of U.S. Senator, became international art expert

Mary McCarran was awakened from a deep sleep one morning at the end of her freshman year at the College of the Holy Names by a voice telling her “you must enter today.”

While no mysterious voice had actually spoken, she recognized the sensation of hearing a voice, having felt it before during her childhood, advising her to make certain decisions in life. This time, she knew exactly what the imagined voice wanted her to do.

“For some time, I had felt the inevitability of entering the convent,” Mary, who became Sister Mary Mercy, told her biographer Ruth Montgomery in the book, *Once There Was a Nun: Mary McCarran’s Years as Sister Mary Mercy*. “I could no more question the unspoken command I had just received than I could doubt the infinite wisdom of God.”

She entered the convent in 1925 with the avowed purpose of learning “to love God more,” she said in the book.

On that day, Mary McCarran entered the Order of the Holy Names and spent 32 years as a nun teaching and studying. But those years are only part of the story of this daughter of U.S. Sen. Patrick McCarran (D- Nev.)

Mary was born Aug. 31, 1906, in Salt Lake City, Utah, where her parents, Patrick and Harriet, were vacationing. Her father was an attorney in Tonopah at the time. The family, which included Mary, her older sister Margaret, younger sisters Norine and Sylvia Patricia, and brother Samuel, moved to Reno in 1920.

Mary attended public schools in Carson City and Reno, then entered high school at Holy Names Convent School in Oakland, Calif. Her sister Margaret also attended Holy Names and entered the convent before Mary. After graduation, Mary entered the University of Nevada, but the College of the Holy Names offered her a scholarship.

Harriet McCarran objected to the move, Mary explained in *Once There Was a Nun*, but Patrick McCarran said it was her choice, and Mary chose Holy Names.

On the morning that Mary heard the command “you must enter today,” her mother was with her in Oakland, and she said she would never give her daughter permission to enter the convent. But Mary’s father approved.

Mary’s college friend Collette Travers told Harriet, “God has called Mary, and it is in her heart to respond,” Mary recalled in the biography.

That same afternoon, Mary entered the novitiate at the convent. She became Sister Mary Mercy, taking her final vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience five and a half years later, she said in the biography.

Over the next few decades, Sister Mary Mercy taught in several Catholic elementary and high schools, where she specialized in art and music. She also taught voice at the primary, secondary and college levels. She headed the art departments at St. Andrew’s high school in Pasadena, Calif., and at the College of Holy Names.

Sister Mary Mercy also continued to travel and study art and music during those years, in both the U.S. and Europe. She earned her master’s degree in art from Catholic University, the *Nevada State Journal* noted.

Senator McCarran died Sept. 28, 1954, after speaking at a Hawthorne, Nev., event. Sister Mary Mercy was studying at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore at the time of her father’s death. She was in the U.S. Senate gallery when her father was eulogized in the Senate on Nov. 9, 1954, according to the *Reno Evening Gazette*.



After 32 years in the Holy Names order, Sister Mary Mercy petitioned to leave the order to care for her mother, and her request was granted. She left the order in 1957.

In 1960, she was living in Washington D.C. where she was an art teacher, writer, and musician. She specialized in the study of the art of the Italian primitives and had received a certificate of merit from the Pius XII School of Advanced Study in Florence, Italy, where she had studied under various art experts.

That same year, Mary wrote *The Life of Mary in Legend and Art*, a compilation of photo reproductions of art depicting the mother of Jesus.

Later, in the U.S. she wrote her doctoral dissertation at Johns Hopkins on 13<sup>th</sup> century Italian artist Duccio di Buoninsegna's painting Nativity Panel, according to the *Reno Evening Gazette*. She also participated in a project of re-dating eight ancient Greek statues in the Clark Collection of the Corcoran Museum of Art in Washington D.C. One of her own paintings was displayed at Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

In 1962, Ruth Montgomery published *Once There was a Nun* about Mary, stressing Mary's talent in art and music. The book, on which Mary collaborated, was chosen as a book of the month selection of the Catholic Literary Foundation.

Mary spent three years working as a stock broker, but over the years she also created art and lectured on the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in art, setting up a studio in her Washington D.C. home.

In November 1965, the *Reno Evening Gazette* reported that Mary was ill with cancer at Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, D.C. She underwent surgery and afterward was in a coma, according to her brother Dr. Sam McCarran, the *Reno Evening Gazette* reported on Nov. 27, 1965. She came out of the coma but remained in critical condition.

Mary McCarran died on March 25, 1966. Her funeral was held in Reno at St. Thomas Aquinas Cathedral, and she was buried at Mountain View Cemetery.

**Researched by Patti Bernard and written by Susan Skorupa Mullen**

**Posted on May 3, 2021**

---

#### **Sources of Information:**

"Late Pat McCarran's Daughter to Lecture on Art in East." *Reno Evening Gazette* (Reno, Nevada), April 7, 1962, p. 6.

"Mary McCarran Dies; Rites Slated Wednesday." *Nevada State Journal* (Reno, Nevada), March 26, 1966, p. 15.

"Mary McCarran Is the Author Of New Book." *Reno Evening Gazette* (Reno, Nevada), December 30, 1960, p9.

"Mary McCarran Leaves hospital in Washington." *Reno Evening Gazette* (Reno, Nevada), December 8, 1965, p. 31.

"Miss McCarran Cancer Victim." *Reno Evening Gazette* (Reno, Nevada), March 25, 1966, p. 1.

Montgomery, Ruth. *Once There Was a Nun: Mary McCarran's Years as Sister Mary Mercy*, New York, New York, Avon Books, 1962. Print.

"Seriously Ill with Cancer." *Reno Evening Gazette* (Reno, Nevada), November 27, 1965, p.9.