



# Humanitarian Award

Sister Mary Felice, DOC, MD '90

**S**ister Mary Felice, DOC, MD '90, is an internist and medical director of St. Vincent the Servant General Reference Hospital in Lukolela, Democratic Republic of Congo, where she has dedicated her life to serving the poorest of the poor in one of the world's most challenging medical environments. As both physician and medical director, she oversees a hospital that serves a health district spanning 8,700 square miles with a population of 192,288 people.

A native of the Binghamton, New York area, Sister Mary's path to missionary work was far from conventional. After graduating with a degree in biology from SUNY Binghamton, it was during a gap year before medical school, that an encounter with a visiting priest during a parish mission sparked her calling to religious life. "The priest made such an impression on me," she recalls. "I think that he was very given to God and that I could see God's presence in him quite clearly."

That experience led Sister Mary to simultaneously pursue medical training and explore religious orders. She chose internal medicine as her specialty, believing it would provide the most valuable foundation for missionary work. As a third-year student at Upstate, she selected the Binghamton track specifically to rotate at Lourdes Hospital, operated by the Daughters of Charity. There, she developed a mentoring relationship with Sister Margaret Tuley, the hospital administrator, who arranged

rotations at other Daughters of Charity facilities.

Following her internal medicine residency at the University of Rochester, where she lived with the Daughters of Charity sisters, Sister Mary formally joined the religious order. She became the group's only sister in the United States who was also a physician at that time. After completing her postulant year in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and 18 months in seminary, she worked domestically for the required 10 years—five years in Bridgeport at St. Vincent's Hospital in the outreach department while helping run a youth group for inner city children, followed by five years as a hospitalist in Troy, New York.

In 2006, Sister Mary was accepted to go to the Missionary Center at the Daughters of Charity Motherhouse in France, where she studied French and tropical medicine in preparation for international mission work. She was then assigned to the Democratic Republic of Congo, one of Africa's most populous and poorest countries, where

nearly three in four people live on less than \$1.90 per day.

Sister Mary spent five years in Mbandaka, helping establish the Daughters of Charity's DREAM program, which provides comprehensive HIV care with a focus on preventing mother-to-child transmission. Since 2013, she has served in Lukolela, a remote town on the Congo River, 118 miles from the nearest city. Many patients arrive from far by boat or taxis motorcycle,



When time permits, Sister Mary enjoys cooking for the sisters in their wood-fired oven.

often presenting in advanced stages of illness due to delays caused by distance, cost, or reliance on traditional measures.

At St. Vincent the Servant General Reference Hospital, Sister Mary treats conditions endemic to the region: malaria, typhoid, tuberculosis, HIV, filariasis, trypanosomiasis, amebiasis, and malnutrition. The hospital is equipped for basic surgeries including appendectomies, hernia repairs, cesarean sections, and numerous bowel operations for typhoid-related perforations. Sister Mary performs ultrasound examinations, the only imaging method available.

The 130-bed hospital operates with minimal resources—no air conditioning, solar energy, and basic equipment. During surgeries, a manual foot pump provides suction since electric suction is unavailable. Family members are required to stay with patients to provide hygiene, food, and laundry services, often sleeping on floors. Despite these constraints, the facility recorded 9,141 patient visits, 3,556 hospitalizations, 801 major surgeries, and 123 cesarean sections in 2024 alone.

Under Sister Mary's leadership, the hospital has undergone significant improvements. She spearheaded construction of a new stabilization and intensive care building in 2019, replacing overcrowded conditions where "during peak malaria seasons there might be two or three children per bed, many in a coma or

needing a transfusion." A separate isolation building with four rooms and psychiatric facilities was completed the following year. Through grants and fundraising, the hospital was able to replace its emergency room in 2022 and the internal medicine building in 2024.

In January 2025, construction began on a new isolation building because of lack of space during epidemic outbreaks. The hospital has managed multiple epidemics during Sister Mary's tenure, including cholera, measles, monkeypox, and polio outbreaks. Located at least eight hours by river from the nearest city, supply shortages of IV fluids or disinfectants can prove fatal.

Despite the many challenges, Sister Mary finds deep satisfaction in her calling: "The charisma of our

community is the service of Christ who is present in the poor. We are close to the poor, and I feel that makes us closer to Him," she says.

Operating as part of a ten-sister community that also runs a local school and social services, Sister Mary's days are filled with patient rounds, administrative meetings, medical education, grant writing, and infectious disease reporting. Despite the demands, she maintains perspective. "Although medical care here is simple, it is amazing how many lives can be saved by focusing on what is essential for a particular population," she says.



Sister Mary conducting internal medicine rounds