

Nancy Bircher

Nancy Bircher was born in Cool Valley in north Saint Louis, the oldest of five children. Her dad was William Johnson and her mom was Delores. She describes her childhood as wonderful. Both sets of grandparents and other relatives were within three blocks. Her family was very religious on both sides. One side of her family was very Catholic and the other side was Southern Baptist. She would go to 8:00 a.m. Mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe, which was in both Cool Valley and Ferguson, and then 10:00 services at a Baptist church in Ferguson. She went to the Baptist Vacation Bible School.

Miracle

At nine years old she knew she wanted to be Catholic. She had her first miracle through the intercession of the Blessed Mother. Her dad was in the hospital. Her grandmother who was watching the children got a phone call and got very quiet. She told Nancy in the kitchen, "Dad will not make it. You can't cry. You have to do something."

Her dad had a heart attack at age 31. There were no stents or open heart surgery then. Nancy, her grandmother, and the other children knelt down and prayed the rosary in another room. They prayed for him every day after that and he got stronger and stronger. He lived to be 69.

Start of Teaching

Nancy went to Our Lady of Perpetual Help High School for four years. It was a Franciscan Aspiranture that ran the boarding school for girls that wanted to become nuns. It turns out she wanted to be a teacher and not a nun. She had thought she had to be a nun in order to be a teacher.

She went to Florissant Valley and then to UMSL. There's where she met her husband, David. He was active in the Legion of Mary at Saint Sebastian. He got Nancy a teaching job at Saint Sebastian when she was just 21. She got her teaching degree after that, specializing in grades 7 – 12. However, since she was only 21, Father said that they would start her in the third grade and bring her up a grade each year. She ended up teaching the same students from third grade through eighth grade. She was able to teach 51 students at one time because they were great kids.

Growth of Saint Charles

David was drafted into the Vietnam War in 1971, shortly after they were married in 1969. When he came back in 1973, they moved to Saint Charles. Even though they stayed in the same house for two years, they were assigned to three different parishes because Saint Charles was growing so fast. They started at Saint Joseph in Cottleville where they had the priest bless their house. They then found out that they were on the border of Saint Joseph and Saint Robert and should actually be in Saint Robert; they lived in Harvester. Then they were assigned to Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. There was no church yet so Masses were held in the Saint Andrews Cinema. If they had stayed another four months, they would have been assigned to their fourth parish, Saint Joachim and Ann. Keep in mind that they only lived in their house for two years.

They were tired of changing parishes so in 1975, they moved closer to Saint Charles and received permission to join Saint Peter. (The Archdiocese was stricter back then about living in the parish boundary.) One reason they wanted to join Saint Peter is because it's so beautiful and historic.

Church Tours

How did Nancy become the church tour guide for 50 years as of April 2025? The tour includes the history of the church, the stained-glass windows, the symbols, the statues, the sanctuary, the altar, the altar stone, and the things from the Old and New Testament.

It was a Holy Year in 1975 and Saint Peter was designated as a pilgrim church for all of Saint Charles. At that time, it was the largest church west of the Mississippi. She was still teaching at Saint Sebastian with 45 kids in one class but there were another 45 kids in another classroom. She asked Father Christian Martin if she could bring the 90 children to Saint Peter to get a Plenary Indulgence. He was magnanimous.

Father also asked Nancy, "Why not give a tour?" She wasn't too sure about that. He gave her an 8x10 folded over paper which had some notes about when the church was built and about when Saint Peter got the statues.

This led Nancy to do her own research, using the [Book of Catholic Symbols](#). Since she had taught religion and been in the convent, she knew the saints and the sacramental symbols. She researched and got the background of things she did know but for which she wanted more information.

What surprised her the most was how she realized Saint Peter Church was set up to be a religion book for catechism. The stained-glass windows were made for people who couldn't read. People could understand the Catholic faith by looking at the windows from left to right.

One thing she didn't understand was why the stained-glass windows were set up as Luke, Matthew, Mark, and John. Normally, they're listed as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Nativity window is on the east side of the church in the transept. Matthew is on one side because he taught Jews, which are represented by the shepherds. Luke taught the Gentiles, and this is represented by the Wise Men. On the west side in the transept is the Resurrection window with Mark and John on either side. Both of them stressed that Jesus is God. Nothing shows this more than the Resurrection. The Nativity window and the Resurrection window represent the beginning and end of Jesus' earthly life.

Nancy's favorite part of the tour is the beautiful presentation of the Holy Trinity on the altar. There is God the Father, then the dove representing the Holy Spirit, then the Crucifix of Jesus. It means so much to her. It's hardly in any other churches.

One fifth grade boy on a tour asked about the phoenix. He said he had been waiting his entire life to find out what it was, which meant other people probably also wondered. According to the Saint Peter Church Tour guide pamphlet, "According to legend, the large bird lived to be 500 years old, but set its nest on fire and was consumed by the flames. The phoenix's return to life has become a symbol representing the resurrection of Christ." This pamphlet was put together by Marilyn Armour and Mr. Lange.

Other people also remark that they always wondered about what saint a particular statue represented. They say, "Oh my goodness."

The main high marble altar has 17 relics, with three from the apostles. Martyr relics are used because, "Upon martyrs' blood that the church grew." These are the relics of the holy apostles and martyrs: Saint Andrew, Saint James the Lesser, Saint Simeon, Saint Jude Thaddeus, Saint Barnabas, Saint Lawrence, Saint Sebastian, Saint Clement, Saint Justin, Saint Aurelius, Saint Charles, Saint Simplicius, Saint Constantine, Saint Amatus, Saint Innocentia, Saint Barbara, and Saint Odelia.

The altar stone in the main altar has the relics of martyrs but they don't know who. They always thought the altar stone came from the high altar but when the new altar was put in, they found out it came from the Saint Joseph altar. Our church has a splinter from the True Cross.

An interesting fact about the big, beautiful, high marble altar is that the whole altar has been consecrated down to the dirt foundation. It can't be removed. If it's removed, it loses the consecration.

Sometimes she only gives tours once or twice per year but sometimes she's giving then seven or eight times per year. During the 175th anniversary of Saint Peter Church, she's giving monthly tours. She has given tours to the students and teachers of the school, Boy Scouts, youth groups, PSR, Ladies' Sodality, Main Street, DePaul Hospital, etc.

She gave a tour to Presbyterians who were touring churches in Saint Charles. Our church was the only church that gave a tour. They were very impressed. An old man stated, "You and I love that same person." They insisted on giving money for the tour. Nancy doesn't take money for tours, but the Presbyterians insisted. She donated the money to Saint Vincent dePaul.

One side note regarding Father Wilmes. He was the pastor for 50 years. He went to Rome in 1912 to represent Saint Charles when they were starting the procedures to make Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne a saint. While he was there, the parishioners collected \$6,700 as a surprise, an immense amount of money back then. He used the money for the stained-glass windows in the sanctuary and transept. He was still left with \$3,000 which he used to fresco the church.

Nancy sometimes includes a tour of the chapel. Ginny Travis, the former parish administrative assistant, picked out the windows and helped get the chapel decorated.

For a few months, Nancy and David compared Saint Peter Church to other churches. Every week they would go to a different church. One All Saints Day they went to Lake of the Ozarks. They made a mini pilgrimage and stopped at every church and shrine along the way.

Nancy stated, "It's been such a joy to give tours all these years." She's thankful Father Martin took the time with Nancy to get her started.

Teaching at Saint Peter from 1986 - 2001

Nancy stayed home with her children for nine years when they were younger. She previously had taught at Saint Sebastian but she started teaching at Saint Peter in 1986, where she taught for 15 years. She mostly taught eighth grade, sixth and seventh, and some fifth grade.

The teachers worked very well together and worked as a team. They always had monthly meetings for the junior high teachers as well as for the primary school teachers. Everyone brought great ideas.

When Nancy returned to teaching, she noticed that there was a lack of good manners by the kids in Saint Peter Grade School. The teachers worked together on this; they decided to fix this situation. They decided to make cards called "Caught Being Good" cards. Kids would receive a card if they were "Caught Being Good." Mrs. Sims made a big gold kettle and coins. Every week, Miss Steinhoff, now Mrs. Wehmeier, would pull out two names per homeroom. Each student's name would be put on the coin and put in the hallway for "Caught Being Good." At the end of the month, the student's name was put in the school newsletter. At the end of the quarter, kids could turn the cards into store coupons. Even if they just had one card, they could get candy, like tootsie rolls. The kids received a no homework pass for 20 coupons. (This did not include projects.) For 25 coupons, the kids could receive a free recess or movie days.

Almost immediately the kids were better. They were almost surprised if they got a "Caught Being Good" card because it became such a habit to behave well.

One of the fun things she liked to do with the children was to put them in costumes and have them act out the gospel during the homily. For example, on the Feast of Saint Nicholas, an eighth grader played Saint Nick with an alb, miter, and staff. Father Peet gave "Saint Nick" an old ornate cope, which is the vestment used to carry the monstrance. Saint Nick had a part in the Mass. Afterwards, Saint Nick and elves would go around the school building telling stories, and giving oranges and candy canes to the children, which were provided by the Home and School Association. Then they would go to the rectory. Father Bromschwig started giving \$5 to each kid that visited the rectory. Nancy didn't want the kids to get money and told Father she wouldn't bring the children over if he gave them money. Father said, "Don't you dare do that."

With fewer priests, the school Mass schedule changed from daily Mass to three Masses per week; one for primary, one for junior high, and one all school Mass. This happened after Father Peet left.

Nancy described the teachers at Saint Peter Grade School as wonderful with children. She was so proud of this parish, the school, and the teachers. The adults were respected and they could have fun with the kids. She had a wonderful experience every day. The teachers were good friends and they still meet monthly. She was surprised to get a paycheck because she enjoyed teaching here so much.

Descriptions of teachers

(Read about Marcella Boerding in a later section.)

Nancy was very proud of the school and teachers and composed a letter to describe them. The following is from Nancy:

Mrs. Elek was the Disney teacher (3rd grade). Her entire classroom was decorated like a Disney Wonderland. She had a Roman Mickey stuffed animal that went “a roamin” all year with students, relatives, and friends. They would take pictures of Mickey in front of all the places that they visited, and send a letter and pictures to the students. Mickey traveled to countries on five continents. These letters and pictures would be hung on a big bulletin board and Mrs. Elek would use these to teach Geography.

Mrs. Hertweger (4th grade teacher). She was always so full of positive energy. She encouraged her students to be creative writers. She told them not to worry about spelling and punctuation – just start with a catchy title and then let your story flow. Her students loved to write. They kept story notebooks.

Mrs. Harting (5th grade teacher). Mrs. Harting taught her students to harness the creative writing that they learned in 4th grade, and to polish it up to get ready for publishing. She taught them to be proud of good penmanship, correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation. When their compositions were picture perfect, she would hang them in the hall for all to read.

Mrs. Lanteigne (Primary teacher) brought the STEM Program to Saint Peter School.

Mrs. Sims (8th grade teacher) started an accelerated reader program.

Nancy wrote that there were so many great teachers – too many to name.

Miss Wussler (1st grade) won The Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching. It was presented to her at a ceremony by the Superintendent of Schools. She also received the “Teacher of the Year Award.”

Many of Saint Peter’s teachers received nominations for “Teacher of the Year” with nominations coming from both principals and students. Teachers received nominations for Religious Educator of the Year. Teachers also had articles published in Catholic magazines. Saint Peter School was designated as a “Blue Ribbon School.” This meant that the U.S. Department of Education recognized the school for its academic excellence.

Nancy wrote that there are probably many more awards won by teachers, but these are the ones she remembers.

Teaching about the Holocaust and World War II

Nancy's dad, William Johnson, was in the Battle of the Bulge in World War II. When she was about nine years old, her dad called her into the living room to watch a special on TV about the Holocaust camps. (Nancy was born in 1947 shortly after WWII ended.) This inspired Nancy to teach about the Holocaust and WWII.

The teachers worked together on a unit about teaching the Holocaust and World War II, which are valuable lessons for today.

Mrs. Sims taught literature and had students read a book. For an English term paper, they had to write on either the Holocaust or World War II. In Science, they studied atomic bombs. Miss Vincent taught about planes and tanks. In math, they learned how much a million was since six million Jews were exterminated.

Nancy taught history. At first, they had a Holocaust survivor talk at the school with the eighth graders. All the teachers came in and it took all afternoon. As survivors got older, the school took field trips to the Jewish Center. In films, students learned about the camps, the people that were rescued, and the rescuers.

Nancy taught about her dad's experiences. He was in the Infantry. It was a very, very scary time. The Germans had perfect English and would call in so soldiers would get killed. Her dad was in a fox hole buried up to his head. The man next to him died. Another story was that his ship had problems on D-Day. The replacement ship was blown out of the water.

As was typical for the men in the war, they didn't talk too much. She stated that he lived because her grandmother prayed for him.

Marcella Boerding and Sacramental Preparation

Marcella taught at Saint Peter Grade School for over 40 years. Nancy described Marcella as easy to work with. Marcella loved the school and parish. She prepared the children for First Communion and Reconciliation. She took this responsibility seriously.

Nancy wrote the following about Marcella:

“Marcella was a very calm and quiet person, therefore her classroom was a quiet sanctuary for her students. This made it a place conducive to learning.

Marcella was very adept at getting volunteers. To help her students succeed she enlisted her friends and students’ mothers to work one-on-one with students having difficulties. These helpers were there nearly daily. For First Communion she enlisted many adults to help keep the excited little ones calm, to answer all their last minute questions, to fix hair, straighten ties, etc.”

The kids knew exactly what to do regarding receiving the sacraments. They were first taught in class and then they practiced. Every year they made a tablecloth with their handprints on them, which was the First Communion altar covering. They were taught how to line up for First Communion, starting in the cafeteria. They carried grapes, wheat, and hosts. Nancy said, “By the time the Communicants reached Church they were silent, calm, and focused on this monumental moment of receiving Jesus for the first time.”

For Reconciliation, they were taught how to line up. They were taught what to say in the confessional, and could practice by going into the confessional, kneeling, and then coming back to the pew. They could kneel on one side or sit on the other side since this was the 1980’s. All this extensive practice was so that the kids would be calm and know why they were doing this; they could enjoy the day.

There wasn’t much money so Marcella and Nancy worked on grants to get money for religious items for the school. They got a nice Knights of Columbus grant for \$500. They bought Bibles, rosaries, prayer books, and movies with the grants.

Marcella worked tirelessly with no fanfare. She was on the Liturgy Committee for many years. She wrote the list for the Servers and Eucharistic Ministers.

Family

Nancy and David got married in 1969 at Our Lady of Guadalupe. David worked at Eco Lab as a salesman for 38 years. He sold detergents and things for laundry, dishwashers, and pools.

Nancy and David had a girl, Anne-Marie, and a boy, Michael. One was baptized at Saint Peter and they both received the childhood sacraments here. Her children graduated from Duchesne, which Nancy described as a very good school. Her daughter was married at Saint Peter.

Her daughter was embarrassed because her mom was a teacher at Saint Peter Grade School. She never wanted Nancy to be her teacher. Since Nancy was the only Confirmation teacher, Anne-Marie had to have her as her teacher. On the other hand, Michael, wanted to be in Nancy's class. She had him from fifth to eighth grade for one class.

Anne-Marie had a special experience one year. She carried the lectionary. She was tiny and it was so heavy. She prayed to her godfather who had just passed away for help. She exclaimed, "I didn't even feel it. It was light as a feather." Other children carried grapes, wheat, and the hosts.

Anne-Marie was very shy but blossomed in eighth grade. She played basketball and ran in girls' track. She still runs today. She became involved with the Young Singers of Missouri in eighth grade. They would sing at different places, mainly in Saint Charles.

Anne-Marie is now a kindergarten teacher at Saint Joseph in Cottleville.

Nancy's granddaughter was finishing sixth grade when Saint Peter closed. It was very hard to see the school close. For closing activities, since there was no longer a picnic, they had a day at the park with a bubble machine. They had a last Mass.

Their son, Michael, represented Saint Peter in the Post Dispatch Spelling Bee for three years. He came in third place the last year. He liked science and won science fair ribbons. He liked to play chess and played with the teachers. He's now a salesman selling and troubleshooting computers.

Volunteer Work

Besides giving church tours, Nancy has done much volunteering. She was a room mother. Room mothers helped plan games, got treats and prizes, and made gifts to take home.

Nancy was also a sacramental mother for Marcella Boerding, even when her kids were not making sacraments. She made banners for the pews which were used for 20 years. Mothers made snacks and decorated tables for every meeting and for the sacraments themselves for First Communion, Reconciliation, and Confirmation. These activities were originally in the cafeteria but then celebrated in the parish center.

When the sisters left in 1987, Nancy was asked to be the Coordinator of Religious Education. It was a transition time from when Sister Benet ran PSR to when Nancy ran it. She had to research being the principal of PSR. Since Nancy was currently the Coordinator of Religious Education, Monsignor Peet asked Nancy to look into getting RCIA started. She found out how RCIA worked and found people to run it - Jim and Joan Bishop. RCIA had previously been informally run by the priests at the rectory. Nancy taught RCIA for several years. She described teaching religion as a wonderful, wonderful experience.

Nancy described her volunteer work as a privilege. She was able to use her religious background. She has loved giving church tours and teaching.

Nancy and David both visited homes as part of "Monsignor Peet's Time." Monsignor didn't like asking for money so he developed God's plan for church support. Many people volunteered to visit about 10-12 houses, talk about the parish, answer any questions, see if people needed a ride, and see if people could increase their donation by one dollar.

She and David both volunteered at the picnic and fish fries. They both helped with fundraisers selling parking spaces during the Festival of the Little Hills and with selling Christmas trees on the lots.

He helped her many times with the school kids. He's a wood worker and made her a manger and a big Lenten cross for her religious teaching. The school children used the cross to act out the stations and the sorrowful mysteries. The cross is still displayed in the gathering space during Lent; it has a purple cloth on it and a crown of thorns.

David was on the parish council. He helped get things started with fixing the leaking roof of the parish center and the elevator in the chapel. He took care of machines at school.

Priests and Deacons

Nancy actually requested to talk about our clergy. She stated that we've had wonderful pastors.

Father Bromschwig was wonderful and was so happy to be a priest. He was always at Eucharistic Adoration at 2:00. He would always exclaim, "Alleluia!" He taught the children to love Jesus and to be alive. He told them, "Don't be wishy washy about your faith. Be happy to let people know you believe in God. Grow in goodness.

How happy Jesus is that you know how to pray well.” The one expression came from his mom. He loved his mom. On Mother’s Day he asked her what to get her. She replied, “Grow in goodness.”

Pope John Paul II actually revitalized Eucharistic Adoration and to pray for vocations to the priesthood. Father Carey and Deacon Tom were always at Eucharistic Adoration. The kids saw them more than just at Mass. It was a good example, especially for the boys.

Monsignor Peet gave long homilies. She described him as such a holy man. When teachers arrived at school in the morning, he was walking back and forth by the rectory praying the rosary. He would be on his knees in church when the kids came in for Mass every day. That was unusual to see.

He would occasionally give ice cream from the ice cream machine for the school. He had monthly get togethers after Mass for the school and PSR kids combined. For example, he would have an eighth grade social. He wanted the school and PSR kids to get to know each other. He did this for every grade.

Father Peet stated to PSR parents, “We will never keep a child away for the price of a book. Don’t worry about it. Let it go.”

Father gave generous gifts to the teachers and kids. He gave a rosary and a religious book to the teachers. He would give gifts, such as a little catechism, to every kid when he found something that he thought would be helpful. Father was a generous and holy praying person.

On Mother’s Day, Father Carey would have a rocking chair with an Afghan on it and would tell stories. Christmas Masses were so special. He would tell stories and invite the kids to sit on the altar steps. He gave them candy canes. One of the kids would play Santa.

Father Martin visited with the children when the bell rang. He smoked a stogie.

One of Nancy’s fondest memories of Christmas is when Father Peet asked her daughter, Anne-Marie, to carry Baby Jesus and put him in the manger. She was very pleased that he would think to ask her.

Deacon Tom was the first deacon at Saint Peter. He told Nancy about the deacon formation process, which was being developed and in flux. The archbishops always wanted him to help out at the cathedral because they thought so highly of him. He helped with Confirmation, Ordination, and ceremonies.

Nancy stated, "Deacon Larry works so hard."

Nancy stated that all the priests and deacons have been wonderful and she only mentioned a few highlights.

Church Decorations

Roger Gronefeld decorated for many years for every holiday. He paid so much attention to detail.

At Christmas there used to be Christmas trees all along the altar on either side with lights everywhere. There were hundreds of poinsettias in front of the altar. The Magi moved starting at Mary's altar and then going to the Nativity set, which had beautiful lights behind it. It was gorgeous.

On Palm Sunday there were palms and red bows at the end of every single pew. At Easter, there was a statue of the risen Savior. Nancy said, "Saint Joseph's altar was aglow with flowers. Couldn't put another flower if they tried. There were flowers around the altar and everywhere and cascading everywhere."

When the school celebrated Feast Days at Mass, the children would get banners out of storage and process from the back of the church and place them in the sanctuary.

Nancy thought, "How could the church be more beautiful but they made it more beautiful. It was all in praise and honor of God."

Nancy described Saint Peter Church, "It's home, the beauty, love, history, and community."