

“Corita’s life and art has struck a sensitive cord in writer Sister Rose Pacatte. She does not shy away from telling the painful history of the courageous IHM Community—which is essential to Corita’s story. Artistically and spiritually, Corita has always been my hero. Her life has influenced my teaching in so many ways—her love of the city, her celebrations of the ordinary, her sacramental visual theology. Pacatte understands the struggle of an artist in an institutional lifestyle. She presents a very vivid picture of a creative, joyful woman who has been an inspiration to so many.”

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Professor of Art, Villanova University  
Painter, Printmaker, Illustrator

“Corita Kent’s story, from her childhood landscape to her journey, both spiritual and aesthetic is told in a linear, intimate, and unembellished style that draws the reader close through a clear lens. The writer’s subdued affection for and admiration of her subject enables a nuanced understanding of Kent’s likely inner dialogue. This influential artist and educator lived a complex emotional and philosophical existence, relayed as if one is being taken into confidence by a sister.”

—Sarah Yuster  
Artist, documentary filmmaker

“Corita Kent’s art offers the sacred hidden in the ordinary. Rose Pacatte’s compelling and balanced account of this significant modern artist’s immersion into religious and public life reveals Corita as the sacred and ordinary woman she was. *Corita Kent: Gentle Revolutionary of the Heart* invites readers to view Corita’s spirit-filled art with enriched understanding. Expect surprises.”

—Nan Deane Cano, IHM

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# Corita Kent

## *Gentle Revolutionary of the Heart*

Rose Pacatte



LITURGICAL PRESS  
Collegeville, Minnesota

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Cover design by Stefan Killen Design. Cover illustration by Philip Bannister.

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2016962949

ISBN 978-0-8146-4662-5    978-0-8146-4686-1 (ebook)

*This book is dedicated  
to the Immaculate Heart Community today  
and to all women religious past, present, and future  
who live love and mercy in their lives  
even when no one is looking.*



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# Acknowledgments

There are so many people who contribute to a book that it is impossible to thank everyone but I would like to try. Special thanks to the Corita Art Center in Los Angeles, especially Ray Smith and Keri Marken and staff for their kind assistance and to Anna Maria Prieto, IHM, archivist for the Immaculate Heart Community. I am grateful to Nan Deane Cano, IHM, for permission to quote from her book and her availability to sit for an interview; to Lenore Dowling, IHM, Hermine Lees, IHM, and Helen Kelley, IHM, for their willingness to talk to me about Corita, as well as to Sasha Carrera and Mickey Myers for their assistance through the writing and research process. I am grateful to the helpful staff at the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University for access to the papers of Corita Kent.

Thanks go out to Ian Berry and Michael Duncan and Skidmore College's Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery for permission to quote from their book on Corita, to author April Dammann for talking with me about aspects of Corita's life that I continue to wonder about, and to Mother Mary Anne Noll, OSB, for sharing her memories. To Joan Doyle goes a special thank-you.

I am most grateful to my Daughters of St. Paul community in Los Angeles that always supports me. I could never have

completed this book without my sister Libby Weatherfield and her husband, Tracy; their dogs Petunia and Buster, rescue donkeys Buttercup, Daisy, and Harold; the chickens and random wild turkeys; and the roving nighttime skunks and coyotes for sharing their home in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada so I could have a quiet place to write as well as some interesting antics, smells, and sound effects. I think Corita would be pleased.

# List of Names

Because many of the sisters named in the book had names given them in religious life and who either returned to use of their baptismal names or left the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and married, this list may be helpful.

Sister Mary Corita, Corita, Frances Kent  
Sister Mary William, Helen Kelley  
Mother Mary Humiliata, Anita M. Caspary  
Sister Mary Lenore, Lenore Dowling  
Sister Marie Fleurette, Liz Bugenthal



# Introduction

The Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) founded Immaculate Heart College in 1916 in Los Angeles; by 1947 it was becoming known as having one of the finest art departments in the country. *The Tidings* (now *Angelus News*), the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, reported in an October 10 article that year that additional faculty and curriculum offerings had been added—five new studios for painting, general design, costume design, weaving, and ceramics had been combined to form an art department of which the small college was rightly proud. The college now had three art majors: painting and commercial art, interior decoration and costume design, and teaching of secondary school art.<sup>1</sup>

But little did the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters know that one of their own, Sr. Mary Corita Kent, a name that perhaps meant “little heart,” would go on to become one of their most revered teachers and a world famous silkscreen (serigraph) artist when she was assigned in 1947 to assist Sr. Magdalen Mary Martin in the art department. In 1951 Corita had completed a master of arts in art history at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and had begun to experiment with serigraphs. When she started winning awards in 1952 for her modern Byzantine-influenced serigraph *the lord is with thee*, even Corita didn’t know that

## 2 *Corita Kent*

her art on the West Coast would morph and emerge in the sixties as part of the pop art revolution that Andy Warhol was leading on the East Coast.

Sister Mary Corita Kent would eventually leave her religious community, exhausted and overcome by years of work. It was during the upheaval of the post-Vatican Council II world (and the IHM Community in particular), a world of war and social unrest. She would also quietly walk away from her Catholic faith. At age fifty and after thirty-two years of religious life, Corita began the next stage of her life.

Why, you may ask, would a Catholic publisher discern and decide to include a biography of Corita Kent in its “People of God” series, biographies that showcase Catholics, living and deceased, some even beatified and canonized, who led and are leading exemplary Catholic lives?

And why would I, who entered the religious congregation of the Daughters of St. Paul the summer before Corita Kent left hers, want to write it?

The overarching reason for this account of the life of Corita, as she became known—jettisoning even her last name when “Corita” became a brand—is that we have celebrated the Year of Mercy. Every family and every person in the pew has a family member or knows someone who has walked away from his or her Catholic faith and loves that person still as God does. Each person is on a journey toward God, even if the journey is unacknowledged or unwanted. And each person has something to teach us about being better human beings if we are paying attention.

And then, sometimes people just get tired.

In addition there is the incredible contribution that Corita Kent made to the world of art, indeed to fine art and to culture, that remains with us today. Her ways of seeing and making us look and pay attention to the people and needs of the world and how we are connected are the stuff of

legend and an ongoing education of the spirit. The “Some-day Is Now: The Art of Corita Kent” exhibition that was originally organized by the Frances Young Tang Museum and Gallery at Skidmore College, New York, and shown at the Pasadena Museum of California Art in 2015, was for me an immersion into all things Corita.

On a personal level, as I learned more about Corita from articles, correspondence, books, films, her art, her own words, and interviews with people who knew her or know a lot about her, I discovered that she suffered from insomnia for decades, something that as a person with multiple sclerosis, I understand. She admits that “it had all become too much” as that summer of 1968 approached. I think Sr. M. Corita Kent was exhausted in body and weary in soul when she asked for a sabbatical from which she never returned. Her story evokes my empathy.

It was a privilege to research her papers at the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University, meticulously ordered by Mickey Myers. While the papers were all about her, they reveal that she had a minimalist sense of self. There are loving letters from her brother Mark, written in his own calligraphic style, thanking her for monetary support using coded language; letters from her friend and artistic executor of her estate, Mickey Myers, who complains to Corita that she doesn’t “get” Flannery O’Connor from the book of her letters that Corita had suggested she read; and almost nothing from her beloved sister Mary Catherine or other siblings.<sup>2</sup>

All the correspondence is one-way except for a couple of small, brief messages that made their way back to her and she decided to keep. There are two handmade books of art that students had made and she kept. There are many letters, written and typed, as well as scribbblings in margins of articles from her great friend Daniel Berrigan, SJ. The letters

#### 4 *Corita Kent*

are warm, light, admiring, and complaining in his inimitably witty double-edged style about the authority figures in his life, asking Corita to design something for what he had written. And there are letters from corporate leaders who commissioned her after she went on her own and letters that reveal the small amounts that galleries wanted to pay her and other artists for their art.

The most telling contents of the *Papers of Corita* are two calendars she kept toward the end of her life as she struggled against ovarian cancer. She was not totally consistent in making notes in the small squares laid out month by month, but they reveal a woman who wanted to live, who walked and followed a strict diet, who was called back to her desk to answer and write letters and tidy her desk (one gets the impression that tidiness was a challenge for her!), and to continue to create art.

What is missing from Corita's papers, and understandably so, is any reference to the disagreements between Cardinal James Francis McIntyre of Los Angeles, Corita, and the IHM Community. In fact there are few letters from women she knew in her convent years. I believe that in order to understand more fully what happened to the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the choice that Corita made for herself, it is necessary to include this history in the chapter titled "Heavy Heart." It is shameful that a religious community of papal right was subjected to what the IHM sisters suffered—thirty years later the church apologized. These were and are valiant women. Corita, "little heart," was stalwart to the end.

The artist Ben Shahn (1898–1969) impressed by Corita's art, especially her work with typefaces, once called his friend Corita a "joyous revolutionary." Taken alone it would seem that Corita was a rebel. Corita was, only and always, an

artist who told the truth as she saw it in the world around her. She knew words have power, even words on a colorful silkscreen print.

Although this book is about an artist, no illustrations are included, except the cover which was drawn from a photograph by British artist Philip Bannister. You can use your imagination or go to [Corita.org](http://Corita.org) to see some of her art and order books and films about her. But look closely at the cover art. Let your eyes look into Corita's blue eyes and follow her gaze. What is she looking at? What does she see? What does she know that we do not? See and contemplate the hint of her smile. What is she thinking? As you read the book, return to the cover and imagine Corita.

Corita said a course in Catholic social teaching that she took in 1963 filled a void in her intellectual life and brought her a new awareness of social justice.<sup>3</sup> Taken with her growing awareness of the clash between the human person and consumerism and the blight of war and struggle for peace, this social teaching greatly influenced her serigraphs.

Though Corita Kent was dispensed from her vows by the Vatican and she quietly walked away from the practice of her faith and her church, neither her religious community, the church, nor God ever walked away from Corita. Nor does God walk away or abandon any of us or our loved ones on our earthly, human journey. Corita engaged in the mystery that surrounded her. Corita believed in hope as much as she believed in love.

Sr. Rose Pacatte, FSP  
September 1, 2016  
Jubilee Year of Mercy

## CHAPTER ONE

# Little Heart

“Love is here to stay and that’s enough.”

—The Beatles,

“Things We Said Today,” 1964

Corita was born Frances Elizabeth Kent, the fifth child and third daughter of Robert Vincent and Edith Genevieve (nee Sanders) on November 20, 1918, in Fort Dodge, Iowa, just after the end of World War I. Her mother was a thirty-four-year-old housewife when Frances, or Frannie as she was called in the family, arrived. Her father was born in Wisconsin and her mother in Nebraska. Robert Kent was a farmer but, according to Corita’s birth certificate filed on November 26, Robert was working for his father-in-law’s furnace company at the time.<sup>1</sup> Corita was preceded by Ruth, Mark, Robert, and Mary Catherine and followed by Richard. Robert’s parents were born in Ireland. Edith’s father was born in Holland, and her mother’s background was French (Chartres) and French-Canadian.

Corita’s family tree lists at least two cousins of her generation who became religious besides her and Ruth (1912–2004), both of whom entered the Immaculate Heart of Mary

Community. Their brother Mark entered the Maryknoll community and was ordained but later left and married.

When Corita was not yet two years old, the family moved to Vancouver, Canada, where Robert worked in the restaurant owned by his brother. Before Corita was of school age, the family went to Los Angeles by ship and moved into a multifamily housing unit owned by Edith's parents who had since moved to Hollywood and purchased property there. The Kents were poor, and Hollywood was, as Corita once described it, a sleepy town. The family lived at 6616 De Longpre Avenue between Seward and North June streets. In an oral history she recorded for UCLA, Corita said that there was a small park across the street where movies were often filmed.<sup>2</sup> De Longpre Park is still there today.

## School Days

Corita and her family belonged to the nearby Jesuit-led Blessed Sacrament Parish on Sunset Boulevard. Many Catholics of Hollywood's golden era between the 1920s and '50s attended Mass there, including Irene Dunn, Bing Crosby, Loretta Young, and Ricardo Montalbán. Famed director John Ford paid for the grand bronze doors of the church.

Blessed Sacrament School, which Corita and her siblings attended, had the junior high system that ended with the ninth grade so Corita started high school in her sophomore year. She followed her older sisters to Los Angeles Catholic Girls' High School on Pico Boulevard that was still relatively new, having opened its doors in 1923. The school was renamed Bishop Conaty-Our Lady of Loretto High School in 1989 as a result of a merger. The Catholic Girls' High School had been dedicated in memory of Bishop Thomas J. Conaty (1847–1915) who headed the Monterey–Los Angeles Diocese

from 1903–15. It was the very first Catholic high school built in the archdiocese to serve the girls of Los Angeles. Our Lady of Loretto High School, opened in 1949, was the first high school for girls built under Cardinal John Francis McIntyre's ambitious post–World War II archdiocesan building program. The school was partially staffed by IHM sisters, and it is highly probable that due to her family's limited means that the school subsidized Corita's tuition.

Corita knew her simple neighborhood well and Hollywood that surrounded it. There were movie theaters and many radio and film studio offices in the area during her school days. When she walked to and from school, none of the billboards were present that would later become so important to her work in the sixties.<sup>3</sup>

Corita loved learning and reading as a child, and her interest in art began at a young age. She enjoyed making paper dolls, designing their clothes, as well as drawing. She made posters early on for school events. Her parents, especially her father who was a pianist and a skilled calligrapher (as was her older brother Mark, which is evident in his letters to Corita), always encouraged her.<sup>4</sup> Both of her parents were artistically inclined. When she was in sixth grade, one of the nuns who taught her, Sr. Noemi Cruz, IHM, was taking art classes at UCLA. Noticing Corita's interest and talent, she began to share what she was learning with the young girl after school.

But art education was not so great in high school where an elderly nun just had sophomores copy things using pencil. The next year they used charcoal, then pen and ink. Corita remembered her father asking her, "Why don't you do something original?"<sup>5</sup> She admitted that it had never occurred to her until then. She learned discipline from the copying approach but not much else and later said that the copying

method was a terrible way to teach art to children. The house had little art in it except for framed pieces of Corita's own high-school art. Corita believed her father saw her potential and noted that he could have been a poet but was burdened with his large family. He became an alcoholic and died at the age of fifty-six. Her mother lived in the family home and managed the rental properties there until she died in 1964.

Corita's high school report card (all three years are on one card) show that she was a good student with no marks for art in tenth grade but with all As in her junior and senior years except for one B+. Her grades for conduct were all Bs and B+s except for one C in her sophomore year, and one wonders what caused that dip. Her marks for English, which would become important to her, were mostly Cs and a few Bs despite her voracious love for reading. She did surprisingly well in Latin throughout high school with a strong B average. The only D she ever received was for civics in the last quarter of a one-semester course of her senior year. Her marks in religion ran from C+s to a single A in tenth grade. Her final religion grade before graduation was a B. Except for art, her high school years were academically somewhat better than average, but unremarkable overall. During her three years at the Los Angeles Catholic Girls' High School she missed seventeen days, seven of them in her senior year. She was tardy eighteen times. It's hard to interpret what a report card means in the day-to-day life of a student, but from Corita's we know one thing for sure: her interest and focus was on art.<sup>6</sup> She remarked later in life that she was often bored in school, and this made her want to be a better teacher.

Corita, quietly planning to enter the Immaculate Heart congregation, graduated from high school in 1936 and took art classes that summer at the Otis Art Institute in the Westchester neighborhood of Los Angeles, near what is now the

Los Angeles International Airport (it was called Mines Field until 1937).

That summer of 1936 had been hot and dry in Los Angeles, but the heat reached record-setting levels throughout the Midwest, adding to the human misery of the country's dust bowl. At that time the United States was inching its way out of the Great Depression with unemployment still at 11 percent, down from a high of 25 percent in 1933. Nazism was on the rise in Germany; in February FDR signed a second neutrality act while in May the Dutch Catholic bishops forbade membership of the faithful in the Nazi party. In April anti-Jewish riots occurred in Palestine, and in May Italy invaded Ethiopia. That same month Alan Turing published his paper on computable numbers that laid the theoretical foundation for modern computers (and would later lead to the breaking of the German Enigma Code that helped to end World War II). In June the Empire State Building broadcast a television transmission to experimental receivers; Pope Pius IX issued his encyclical letter *Vigilanti Cura* (On Motion Pictures); and Margaret Mitchell published *Gone with the Wind*. In July the Spanish Civil War began. In August Adolph Hitler opened the summer Olympic Games in Berlin and Jesse Owens earned his fourth gold medal for track.

Now almost eighteen years old, Corita, the budding artist, was about to enter the convent. She was of diminutive stature, little more than five feet tall, with brown hair and blue eyes that opened wide to look directly at those with whom she spoke. One source says that she never weighed more than ninety-eight pounds. Throughout her life she was always described as trim and youthful. A *Newsweek* article noted in 1967 that she had an "infectious vitality."<sup>7</sup>

Corita would need that in the years to come as an IHM sister, teacher, woman, and artist.