



# **Charity's Sister, The Story of Sister Mary Joaquin Bitler, SC**

*Mari Grana*

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In 1951, when Sister of Charity Mary Joaquin Bitler was called to Santa Fe, New Mexico to be the Supervisor of Nursing at Santa Fe's antiquated St. Vincent Hospital, she remarked that the 1910 Catholic hospital was surviving on "nerve and hope." Later, as Administrator (1960 - 1976), she was lauded locally and nationally for her achievements in health care and for bringing that care to the poor of New Mexico. Considered by many a brilliant businesswoman, she turned St. Vincent's into a state-of-the-art facility in its time, managed by a community corporation. Sister Mary Joaquin's story tells of a very complex personality. A tough hospital administrator, she had many admirers as well as some enemies; a devout nun, she drew strength from her religion to open her heart to the poor and the sick, while she herself suffered a chronic and debilitating illness. In 1977, after succeeding in her goal to build Santa Fe a new and greatly expanded community-owned hospital, Sister Joaquin retreated to a life of contemplation and prayer in a little hermitage in central Mexico. Appalled by the poverty and sickness around her--the distended stomachs of hungry children, the heart-breaking number of infant deaths from dysentery and other parasitic diseases--she opened a small clinic in her hermitage to treat the villagers, most of whom had never seen a doctor or had any access to health care. Her last years were spent living as a hermit in New Mexico's Christ in the Desert Benedictine Monastery until her death in 2003. *Charity's Sister* is a book that will appeal to students of medicine, Southwest history and women's history, as well as being a testament to one woman's profound strength of will, to one who always sought divine guidance in dealing with adversities in her own life and in the many lives she touched.

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