



**Eulogy of Sister Mary Johnellen Garrity, BVM**  
Marian Hall Chapel, Jan. 12, 2018

Mary Jane Garrity entered this world in Chicago on Jan. 11, 1927. She was the sixth of eight children born to John Joseph and Mary Ellen Lonergan Garrity. Her father worked as a stockbroker and, according to Mary Jane, her mother was “a fine singer.” They were both sweet, quiet, loving people who never raised their voices. They were also generous and graciously invited an unmarried uncle to live with them. They also experienced great heartache when their eldest son John, the second child, died as an infant.

Mary Jane was very proud of her family. She bragged how her younger brother, James, worked for the Chicago Fire Department while another, Donald, was a detective with the Chicago Police Department and a veteran of the Korean War. She was good to her family and present to them in difficult times. When her mother was ill, she provided care and companionship after school and on weekends. She also helped one brother with his children when his wife died suddenly.

The Garritys were members of St. Andrew Parish, where the pastor was Bishop Bernard Sheil, the founder of the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO). Through CYO, Mary Jane was able to enjoy sports and make friends with other Catholic youth. She loved to sing and dance and took dance lessons in ballet, acrobatic, and tap. Through a scholarship, she attended The Immaculata HS, where she participated in theater and even had the lead in the school play during her senior year. “I still know all the words to the songs,” she commented in a 2008 interview.

Mary Jane first met the BVMs at The Immaculata and recalled, “I was so impressed with all of them; loving, happy, good teachers . . . Sister Mary Joan Patricia [Reilly] had the greatest influence on me. I became a history teacher like her.” Mary Jane entered the congregation on Sept. 8, 1945, and received the name Johnellen upon her reception on March 19, 1946. She professed her first vows on March 19, 1948, and lived 72 years as a BVM.

Johnellen taught 11 years in the primary grades and was missioned at St. Charles in Chicago, and in New York at Our Lady of Loretto in Hempstead and St. Gregory the Great in Bellerose. At St. Charles, she had 42 first graders—all boys—and in her words, “I loved it!” Nonetheless, history was her favorite subject and she spent 35 years teaching history at Wahlert HS in Dubuque, Iowa; St. Mary HS, The Immaculata, and Madonna HS in Chicago; and Kapuan-Mt. Carmel HS in Wichita, Kan. A high school boy once asked her if she had taught little children. When she replied “Yes,” he said, “I thought so. You make the Sign of the Cross backwards.”

Johnellen was a strong disciplinarian who set high standards for her students, and they lived up to her expectations. She made the past come alive through reports, dramatic presentations, and guest speakers. Her students knew their history. Even though she was tough, the students admired her as a teacher. In 1988, while teaching honors history at Kapaun-Mt. Carmel, Johnellen received Outstanding Teacher Awards from the University of Chicago and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. KMC graduates nominated Johnellen for being an enduring influence in their lives.

Johnellen moved to St. Constance Convent in Chicago in 1994. She taught evening English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for many years at a local junior college. However, every day she visited her sister Annamae in the nursing home, where the staff, especially the activities department, loved her. She made song sheets to lead the residents in song, demonstrated Irish dancing, and encouraged the residents to dance whatever their hearts

desired. Drawing on her love of both musicals and acting, she enthusiastically created and performed her own shows for the residents.

Johnellen always seemed to be on the move. Singing and dancing remained her two favorite activities throughout her life and she wanted everyone to join in whether they wanted to or not. Some may recall how she would teach a dance or two at area and regional BVM gatherings. In her younger years, she almost appeared to be dancing while simply walking across a room. She had a great voice and a special love for Irish songs. Despite throat surgery in 2008 that damaged her vocal cords, she continued to sing, especially at the Friday night sing-a-long in the Caritas Center.

Johnellen loved life even in the tough times. The twinkle in her eyes and her smile were her signature features, even when she was walking along at a fast clip. She had a big heart and would do anything for anyone. She especially loved children and, upon seeing them, would immediately go to them and play. She was a strong, proud and loyal Irish woman. Even though she may have forgotten many things later in life, it is doubtful that she ever forgot she was Irish.

Johnellen could echo the words of St. Paul to Timothy. "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. From now on, a merited crown awaits me." (2 Timothy 4:7-8a). Johnellen has returned home to receive her heavenly reward. Can you see her dancing?