



Eulogy of Sister Joan Newhart, BVM (Joan Michael)

Marian Hall Chapel, March 20, 2018

Good morning and welcome to the celebration of life of our Sister Joan Newhart.

Mary Joan Newhart was born on March 21, 1928, in Oak Park, Ill., the first child of George and Pauline Burns Newhart. Siblings George Robert (Bob), Pauline, and Virginia completed the family. In her autobiography, Joan wrote, "There was always a lot of laughter in our house . . . My dad was an extroverted storyteller . . . He loved to entertain and be the center of attention. My mother was very shy and retiring. [However,] looking back, I think my mom was the real humorist of the family. She never wanted center stage, but she was able to make really funny observations on the passing scene."

When Mary Joan was in seventh grade, she became intrigued by a chemistry textbook from the public library. "I was hooked. From that point on, I insisted that chemistry was my chosen career." With a love of science and math, Joan entered the college prep track at Siena HS, Chicago. World War II happened to coincide with her high school years. "Boys just older than [us] were joining up," she recalled. "Two boys, [the only two children in a family] on our block, were killed in the war. . . Their loss made a great impression on me. It put real faces on the war headlines."

Mary Joan decided to attend Mundelein College over DePaul University after receiving a scholarship. In her words, "The fatal choice was made." She joined the Sodality in her junior year and was asked by Sister Marguerite Neumann to lead a weekly discussion group. During her preparations for this group, she realized her religious vocation. With a bachelor of science degree, Mary Joan entered the congregation on Sept. 8, 1949, and received the name Joan Michael upon her reception on March 19, 1949. She professed her first vows on March 19, 1952, and lived 68 years as a BVM.

Joan taught high school science and mathematics courses for 25 years with missions at The Immaculata in Chicago; St. Patrick in Lead, S. D.; Columbus in Waterloo, Iowa, Xavier in St. Louis, Mo.; and Carmel in Mundelein, Ill., where she also taught computer science. Like many of the sisters, she also taught religion. She never forgot how a student at Immaculata answered a question on a religion test. Question: "Why did God give the moral law to men?" Answer: "Because they needed it more than women."

Joan loved the community and the small classes in Lead, but her experience there taught her a lesson. "I [was] teaching physics, which was a learning experience for me too. I distinctly remember telling the class, that although it was theoretically possible for a vehicle to escape from the earth's gravitational field, I did not think it would be done soon. Nice work, Sister, within five years the Russians launched Sputnik. At least it taught me to measure my words."

In 1965, Joan headed to the Universidad Javerianan in Bogotá, Columbia, to teach chemistry in Spanish. "I was apprehensive . . . As it turned out, this was one of the best experiences in my life. Three months of language training was certainly not enough, but I started to get better at it after giving the same lecture four times a day . . . I discovered that I had an aptitude for the language."

Joan also had an aptitude for technology. "I am one of those persons who walked into a room with a computer for the first time and wished to spend the rest of my life in that room." In 1989, she established a new computer center at Mundelein College and became the director of academic computing. Two years later when Mundelein merged with Loyola University, she joined the information technologies department and became the coordinator of the computer center at Loyola.

During the "Thank a Nun" campaign a few years ago, the BVM website received several messages from Joan's former students. One woman wrote, "Sister Joan has to be the funniest person I have ever met, hands down . . . I wonder if she can still do the Pledge of Allegiance in Russian?" Another commented, "Sister Joan [was] one of my all-time favorites [and] made computer programming fun. Years ago her brother Bob was on the Tom Snyder Show. I called in and was put on the air! [I] just called to brag that his sister taught me in high school!" Many of the other messages simply relayed that Joan was a "wonderful woman" and "a beautiful soul."

In the late 1970s, Joan began spending most weekends with her parents, assisting them as their health declined. After her father died in 1985, Joan and her mother became very close until her mother's death in 1994. "She looked forward to my arrival [at the nursing home] on Saturday mornings," Joan recalled. "She could hear me come to the nurses' station near her room. I could hear her shout, 'Is that my girl?' I've told my family and friends that those are the first words I expect to hear after I breathe my last: 'Is that my girl?'"

After retiring in 1998, Joan traveled around the country to provide computer training for BVM sisters. Her occasional column called "Tech Tips" offered additional assistance. After moving to Mount Carmel in 2007, she taught computer classes in the Roberta Kuhn Center and volunteered as a computer consultant on campus.

Joan loved old movies. For a number of years, she previewed and selected the movies shown at Mount Carmel. She also enjoyed crossword puzzles, and, of course "religiously" followed the career of her brother Bob.

We, as BVMs, believe that where one BVM is, we all are. Joan relied on the BVM circle of friends for "the warm, comforting feeling that gave me strength." She referred to Mount Carmel as "the best of all worlds," providing companionship and opportunities for deep sharing. We, too, are blessed to call Joan a sister and a friend and know that her spirit remains with us.

As requested, our first reading from Ezekiel will be in Spanish. To quote Joan's translation, "I shall give you a NEW HEART and put a new spirit in you." God certainly did give us a "Newhart" and we are deeply grateful.