

Sister Mary Christine Athans, BVM (Christophil)

Eulogy

Marian Hall, Dec. 16, 2019

Welcome to the celebration of life of our Sister Mary Christine Athans. It is good to be here with you.

Mary Christine Athans was born April 7, 1932, in Joliet, Ill., to Christophil and Mary Anderson Athans. An older sister Catherine and a younger brother Cyril Patrick completed the family. Christine attended Our Lady of Victory and Our Lady of Bethlehem elementary school in Chicago and graduated from The Immaculata in 1950.

Christine's parents were a tremendous influence in her life. From her Greek father she inherited a love of philosophy and politics; from her mother, a love of poetry and piety. Her bachelor's degree in history and education from Loyola University–Chicago included minors in political science and English, a nod to both parents. She thrived on political news throughout her life, even to her last weeks. Her passion for Jewish-Christian dialogue and studies also started in the family home. "Our home was open to all faiths," she shared, "and we grew up with a real appreciation and reverence for the Jewish tradition."

After a year of teaching in the Scottsdale, Ariz., public school system, Christine entered the congregation on Sept. 8, 1955, from St. Thomas the Apostle parish in Phoenix. She received the name Christophil upon her reception on March 19, 1956, professed first vows on Feb. 3, 1958, and lived 64 years as a BVM.

Christine's first missions were as a seventh grade teacher at St. Eugene in Chicago, an English and speech teacher at Our Lady of Peace HS in Saint Paul, Minn., and theology and history teacher at Xavier HS in Phoenix. Her arrival in Phoenix coincided with the formation of the North Phoenix Corporate Ministry (NPCM), co-founded by the St. Francis pastor. NPCM was a group of Catholic, Jewish and Protestant congregations who collaborated in areas of education, liturgy, social concerns, and communication. As its executive director, Christine coordinated ecumenical activities for both clergy and laity. This ministry held a special place in her heart for its fruitful outreach and even more for the love shared within the community.

After earning her master's degree at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif., Christine served as assistant dean and faculty member at the Claremont School of Theology and faculty member at the University of San Francisco. She completed her doctoral degree in historical theology at GTU in 1982 and returned to the Midwest. Over the next 34 years, she was as an assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Illinois in Champaign, an associate professor of church history at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, an associate professor and professor at the St. Paul Seminary, now the School of Divinity of the University of St. Thomas in Saint Paul, and an adjunct professor at Loyola University Institute of Pastoral Studies and the Catholic Theological Union, both in Chicago. She moved to Phoenix in 2016 and worked as a guest lecturer and in alumnae relations at Xavier College Preparatory until coming to Mount Carmel.

Christine was a prolific author who wrote extensively on Jewish-Christian relations. She penned several books, most notably *In Quest of the Jewish Mary: The Mother of Jesus in History, Theology, and Spirituality*. In addition, she contributed chapters to a number of books, wrote numerous magazine articles and book reviews, edited several publications, served on theological discussion panels and gave countless lectures and presentations.

She served on over 20 boards and committees, including the Commission on Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs for the Diocese of Phoenix; the Committee on Jewish-Christian Relations for the Commission on Ecumenical Inter-religious Affairs of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul – Minnesota; and the Catholic-Jewish Scholars Dialogue sponsored by the Archdiocese of Chicago, the Chicago Board of Rabbis, and the United Jewish Federation of Greater Chicago.

Recognitions include the B'nai B'rith Humanitarian of the Year Award, the Samuel H. Scheiner Human Relations Award presented by the Jewish Community Relations Council Anti-Defamation League of Minnesota and the Dakotas, and the National Conference of Christians and Jews Award. She was named to both *Who's Who in Religion* and *Who's Who in America*.

Christine's gifts and activities were indeed many, but at all times she was a dynamic educator. The Director of the Office of Pastoral Planning in the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis wrote, "Sister Christine has a marvelous ability to present data in a lively, concise, and enthusiastic fashion. While telling the story, she makes it come alive . . . [She] is a great teacher of history. Through her vast experiences and extensive study, she is able to draw conclusions which are exciting, logical and insightful."

Christine was a deeply spiritual person; her years of theology informed and enriched her prayer life. Celebrating liturgy, especially the Eucharist, with the BVM community meant so much to her that even when she felt poorly and needed to be brought to the chapel in a wheelchair, she was present. Surely she was comforted and guided by the words of St. Paul: "By the might of God's glory, you will be endowed with the strength to stand fast, even to endure joyfully whatever may come" (Colossians 1: 11).

Christine was warm and welcoming. She loved to talk, but she also listened. Perhaps this is why, no matter where she lived, she easily formed relationships, many lasting for decades. She remained deeply loyal to her family, friends and communities and grateful to all, especially to the BVM congregation who has "loved me and allowed me to be creative these many years."

When asked how she wanted to be remembered, Christine quoted Cardinal Newman and Teilard de Chardin, S.J., respectively: "[She was] a link in the chain, a bond of connection between persons." "May the Risen Christ keep me ever young for God's greater glory – young, that is, smiling, active, optimistic and perceptive."

And this is how she will remain in our memories and in our hearts. Rest in peace, Christine.