



Eulogy of Sister Judith Sheahan, BVM (St. Judith)

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, July 15, 2022

Good morning. It is good to be together to celebrate the of life of our Sister Judith Sheahan.

Mary Constance Sheahan entered this world on Jan. 31, 1924, the third child of John and Beatrice (Stiles) Sheahan of Oak Park, Ill. She joined siblings Helen and John and was followed by siblings William, Judith, and Gerry. Mary was a graduate of Our Lady Help of Christians and The Immaculata and worked as a file clerk for a year before entering the congregation on Sept. 8, 1942. She received the name St. Judith upon her reception on March 19, 1943, professed first vows on March 19, 1945, and lived 79 years as a BVM.

Judith taught in the primary grades at Sacred Heart in Fort Dodge, Iowa; St. Eulalia in Maywood, Ill.; and St. Anthony in Casper, Wyo. Her favorite mission was Casper because she loved the people, especially the children. She taught high school English at Wahlert in Dubuque, Iowa; St. Edmond in Fort Dodge, Iowa; Bishop Garcia Diego in Santa Barbara, Calif.; and Our Lady of Peace in St. Paul, Minn. She was the principal at St. Joseph Academy in Des Moines, Iowa, and was part of the planning team to merge St. Joseph with Dowling High School in West Des Moines, Iowa.

Judith spent twelve years at Dowling after the merger serving as administrative assistant, assistant principal, and curriculum director. She was known for her service-oriented leadership and her meticulous organizational skills. "Dowling is a very special place and working here has been a pleasure," she shared upon her departure in 1984. The Dowling student council president at that time sang her praises, "Her guidance in the academic affairs of the school has been brilliant, much of it done very quietly with suggestions here and encouragement there so that the curriculum has been more nurtured to its present state than pushed. Most of what happens academically here at school is the result of Sister Judith working behind the scenes."

Following the typical summer school plan, Judith completed a bachelor's degree in English with minors in education and history from Clarke College in 1957. "When I think of my early days at summer school I can think of only one thing – how much I loved it," she shared. "My very favorite memory has to do with dancing. Every night at [Our Lady of the Angels in Clinton, Iowa,] those who wished gathered in the gym to dance. . . We waltzed, two-stepped, and polkaed until time for night prayers. Joan of Arc [Jane Coogan] was the superior at that time and she was a woman of great wisdom who could see no harm in a little schottische!" Overall, Judith called summer school "a wonderful invention created to make those trying days of sixty students per class fade into oblivion as we . . . made our way to a different world. It took me sixteen years to get a degree, but I can't say I regretted the time."

Judith completed her master's degree in educational administration and supervision from Loyola University in 1963. She recounted, "During those Loyola days, President Eisenhower came to Chicago. Pat [DaCosta] and I decided we had never seen a president live and we should skip a class and stand on the street corner as he went by. . . Ike was riding in an open convertible and, to our horror, when he saw the habited sisters, he motioned for the car to move closer so he could shake our hands. The newsreels and cameras were snapping away, and we could see our faces on the front page of the Tribune the next day and our class-skipping sin revealed to all! However, we weren't such big news after all!"

For the next fourteen years after leaving Dowling, Judith held the position of Coordinator of Schools for the Diocese of Des Moines. Besides her regular responsibilities of school visitation and evaluations and curriculum development, Judith established the Talented and Gifted Program and implemented the staffing of counselors in the Catholic schools. In response to her excellent work with school guidance counseling programs, she received the 1995 Administrator of the Year Award from the Iowa Counseling Association. "In terms of faith development, that is the real reason why Catholic schools exist," commented Judith. "Kids could go to a secular school. But to live and work daily in an atmosphere that encourages them to live by gospel values, [that] encourages their faith development. And we work to help those values permeate in all the things they are learning."

Judith resigned as Coordinator of Schools in 1998 after a total of 53 years as an innovator in education. During a well-deserved sabbatical year, she volunteered with outreach centers serving the poor in Des Moines. She then carried her experiences into a four-month program that provided the opportunity to deepen her spiritual life through courses, interactions, prayer, and spiritual direction.

In Judith's honor, Dowling High School established the Judith Sheahan Award given annually to four sophomores who reflect her qualities of organization, leadership, and service. These skills were invaluable when Judith served as the Administrative Assistant to the BVM Council from 1999 to 2007. Her duties included processing grant applications and administering the Prayer Partner program. But her favorite activity was planning beautiful prayer experiences for the BVM Center staff. She created a warm, inviting environment in which the staff would gather to nourish the spirit and remember those in need. Sister Peggy Nolan, vice president at the time, wrote, "[Judith] not only does the work effectively but brings such a peaceful and happy presence to the people and events she is part of. She is a great blessing to us."

As a lover of language, Judith was a voracious reader and an active participant in a weekly literature class at Mount Carmel. She loved sports and attended many games at Dowling and watched sporting events on TV. She also enjoyed playing bridge for many years.

Judith looked forward to traveling to visit family and friends or to simply get away. She went to Ireland, her ancestral home, with a niece and often visited her sister Judy and her husband Fred in Florida. During the summer, she spent time enjoying the birds and nature in Wisconsin at the home of a friend's parents.

Judith was a gentle spirit who blessed us with her common sense, sincerity, and graciousness. We give thanks to our God at every remembrance of you, Judith, because of your partnership for the gospel and we are confident that the one who began a good work in you has brought it to completion. (Adapted from Philippians 1:3,5-6). Rest in God's love.