



Eulogy of Sister Joan M. Opatts, BVM (John Annette)

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Dec. 27, 2022

Good morning and welcome. It is good to be together to the celebration of life of our Sister Joan M. Opatts.

Joan Marion Opatts and her younger twin sister Anne entered this world in Chicago on September 23, 1935, as the first children of John and Anne (Krzewinski) Opatts. Brothers John Opatts and Bob Cedar followed.

Joan attended three Catholic grade schools in Chicago prior to enrolling at Blessed Sacrament, a BVM school. She completed her secondary education at St. Mary High School in 1953.

Joan entered the BVM congregation on September 8, 1953, because she “wanted to serve children as well as the Lord.” She received the name John Annette upon her reception on March 19, 1954, professed first vows on March 19, 1956, and lived 69 years as a BVM. From the time Joan entered the doors of the Motherhouse, the community was of utmost importance to her. “I’ve often said, I’ll teach in a barn, but community life is a priority. The [times] that I’ve chosen my place of work, I’ve made my decision because of the local BVM community. I’ve always loved community [and] appreciate the support within community.”

As was common at the time, Joan spent summers pursuing higher education. She completed a bachelor’s degree in English with an education minor at Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa, in 1968. She earned her master’s degree in elementary education with a specialization in reading from Arizona State University in Tempe, Ariz., in 1977.

Joan ministered as a primary teacher for thirty years. She was a wonderful educator – well-prepared, thorough, creative with a warm, caring approach that clearly conveyed her love for her students. Her first mission was at Blessed Sacrament in Chicago where she taught third grade. An incident at that school prompted her to request a first-grade assignment for the first time. “One day I heard a first-grade child crying in the cloak room. The teacher was not around, so I went over to see what was wrong. I hugged the little girl and talked to her, and soon had her laughing. I said to myself, ‘This is the age group I really want to be with.’” From that point on Joan taught first grade, almost exclusively, at St. Joseph in Rock Island, Ill.; Mary Queen of Heaven in Cicero, Ill.; St. Eugene in Chicago; St. Paul the Apostle in Davenport, Iowa; Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Tempe, Ariz.; and St. Anthony in Dubuque, Iowa, where she also worked in the resource center. “I see real value in education, and I see that I can accomplish something being a teacher,” she shared.

Joan’s favorite subject was religion. “I’m helping children become Christians. I encourage them to think about others, to make a better world.” Joan, together with Sister Catherine Jean Hayen, initiated a religious education program for special education students at St. Paul the Apostle in Davenport, Iowa. They wrote about preparing their students for Confirmation for an article in *The Religion Teacher’s Journal*. “At three o’clock on Monday afternoon, when we are completely exhausted from our school activities, only the happy greetings and hugs of the children in our CCD class could ‘spur’ us on for another hour of teaching. We continue to marvel at the refreshing and rewarding experience of being with these children . . . Without a doubt, their Confirmation Day will remain a very important day in the life of each child. They radiated the happiness of people filled with the Holy Spirit. We teachers are constantly receiving this gift of happiness through them.”

In 1979, Joan received the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) Award for Outstanding Service to Catholic Education. The certificate reads, "Your faithful contributed services at St. Paul the Apostle School have been a source of hope and encouragement for those who sacrifice their lives for the moral and academic development of students. Thousands of students and parents have been touched by your dedication."

Joan received a mission and ministry grant in 1992. It was the beginning of an eleven-year mission at the St. Jude Literacy Center in Montgomery, Ala., primarily serving low income, African American adults. In addition to tutoring, Joan served as training director and certification manager for both tutors and trainers. She assigned tutors to students, moderated a tutor support group, and mentored over 100 tutors as they explored various methods, strategies, and techniques to ensure their students' success.

In 2007, through the generosity of her family, Joan embarked on an eight-day cruise from Port Everglades, Fla., to Costa Maya, Mexico, and on to Costa Rica and the Panama Canal. During the trip, Joan discovered how large, long narrow blade-like leaves are turned into rope, explored the rainforest from an aerial tram above the trees, and marveled at the ingenuity born over a century ago as her ferry passed through the locks at the Canal. "I shall never forget all the beauty I saw in God's creation from the school of dolphins jumping alongside our ship to the vegetation and animal life on the tours, to the wonderfully kind and friendly people I met. Deo Gratias! Alleluia!"

Joan established many long-term friendships with staff, coworkers, and parishioners everywhere she lived and served. She was meticulous, especially in keeping her room neat and tidy. Yet, she welcomed visitors with an offer of a drink, a cookie, or a piece of candy and always her beautiful smile. Regarding food, she loved peanut butter as well as bear claws from Panera. Her pastimes included reading and crocheting as well as doing crossword puzzles with her good friend Rose André Koehler.

Where can words be found to describe Joan? Perhaps among St. Paul's reflection on love. (I Cor 13:4-6). To rephrase, Joan is patient, Joan is kind. She is not jealous, she is not pompous, she is not inflated, she is not rude, she does not seek her own interests, she is not quick-tempered, she does not brood over injury, she does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth.

Joan was a person of prayer, simplicity, compassion, service, and love. She *is* a dear, gentle soul who, surely with childlike delight, rejoiced to celebrate Christmas with Jesus this year.