



Sharing of Memories of Joan Opatts, BVM (John Annette)

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Dec. 27, 2022

Sister Margaret Sannasardo, BVM, Set of 1953

Joan and I are both in the Set of 1953 and she was my pew partner (*There were two-person pews in chapel at that times. Sisters were arranged by height with short ones in the front, taller in the back.*) As quiet and reserved as Joan was, her pew partner was, and is, somewhat talkative and extroverted. It never failed that when she saw me, I would always get a big smile and a "Hello, hon!" greeting. I'll miss that greeting and especially my gentle pew partners smile and presence. Rest in peace, Joan.

Sister Judy Callahan, BVM

So much of Joan's eulogy reminded me of my own experience with Joan which goes all the way back to 1963. About this time of year, I was student teaching at Mary, Queen of Heaven in Cicero, Ill., and Joan was my cooperating teacher. It was quite an interesting development of the Scholasticate education program. Rather than just going out to schools for an entire semester, we were assigned to stay at a convent for six weeks. It was quite an adventure. Joan, being an excellent teacher, made me feel so confident, so smart, so creative, and so wonderful that when I finished my student teaching, I was ready! I was going to be the best teacher in the whole world! That's how she made me feel. I'm sure every person in this room who knew Joan well had that same experience. Being with her was feeling extremely loved and appreciated, a joy.

One little story about the student teaching. BVM culture about teaching has lots of wonderful stories. It was a tradition when a guest came to the classroom that the children stood up straight and tall on the right side of their desks and in perfect unison said, "Good morning, _____!" One time, Joan's mother was coming to visit. She hadn't prepared the students about how to address the guest. The group stood up and said, "Good morning, Mrs. John Annette!"

She was wonderful. She always called me "Kiddo." But she left me with such confidence. I appreciate all she has done over the years. I lived with her briefly at St. Anthony's here in Dubuque, where I again found her a mature, loving, kind, great teacher, and a wonderful person. I grieve for all of you who will miss her dearly as I do.

Colleen Carroll, Friend

I am a close friend of Joan's. We go back probably way before I was born! One of my fondest memories of Joan was her coming over to my mom and dad's home on weekends along with Sister Rose André Koehler. She used to walk us kids down to the library. From my parent's house to the library was quite a walk. We always took the bus back home. There were ten of us. Thinking back on this, she really did give my mom and dad a break. She was a very special woman who will be missed and never forgotten.

Sister Angele Lutgen, BVM

I have heard several sisters say, "What a wonderful teacher Sister Joan was." I can attest to that because I had the privilege of living and working with Joan at three different times in my life and at different locations. Joan and I both taught students in the primary grades at St. Eugene, Chicago, and St. Paul the Apostle, Davenport, Iowa. She was a patient, organized and caring teacher.

In the 1990s, Joan and Rose André Koehler joined me in Montgomery, Ala., to tutor adults with limited reading ability. Joan and I trained volunteer tutors in the city and in several prison literacy programs where inmates who could read tutored others with limited skills. All that Joan had acquired over her years of teaching children she applied to helping adults with limited reading skills.

Later while working here at Mount Carmel, I witnessed the wonderful care Joan gave to her friend, Sister Rose André. I have been living here at Mount Carmel for three years and have visited with Joan often. She was a prayerful woman, loyal to her family and friends. She enjoyed reading and working crossword puzzles. We celebrated Joan's birthday in September with her favorite Happy Joe's pizza and cake. Continue to celebrate your new life Joan with your family and friends in heaven.

Bob Cedar, Brother

Joanie didn't become my sister until my mom, who was a widow, and Joan's dad, who was a widower, were married. When they were married, I got a brother, a sister, and a sister sister. It started with, "Oh dear brother of mine."

When Joan taught in the Chicago area and would come home at Easter, Dad would make this ungodly horseradish. Tears would be going down his cheeks as he was making it and saying, "Oh, this is going to be good!" Joan and he would sit in the kitchen with hardboiled eggs shoveling that stuff on them and eating them. I could never understand how they could do it. She also counselled members of my family, including an uncle who depended upon her all the time after he lost his wife. My older grandson, who attended a Lutheran high school, as an assignment had to interview a Christian role model. He chose Aunt Joanie. She is also godmother to my oldest son Bob.

One of her accomplishments that she was just so proud of was the reading program she did in Alabama. When we went to see Joan in Arizona, we had to go to the zoo to see the monkeys.

My wife and I moved to Florida. With every storm, the phone would start ringing. "How you alright?" "Are you going to be alright?" "The storm's heading your way." I said, "We'll be OK, Joan. We'll be fine." I am here today not to say goodbye to my sister, but that I'll always be her brother.

Jim Drish, Former Student

Sister Joan was my fourth-grade teacher at St. Joseph's [Rock Island, Ill.]. Everybody always had a favorite teacher. Sister Mary John Annette was mine. I would often think about her and wonder where she was. We looked and looked for her about twelve years ago. A friend at Mass told us about Mount Carmel. One phone call and we found her. We made arrangement to visit. How excited we were! A great loving friendship grew between us. We didn't know her real name was Joan. I asked how she came up with Sister Mary John Annette, and she said, "That was my father's and mother's name. What a neat tribute to her parents; that was the kind of person she was.

I remember when my dad died. She collected the milk money in our room. She asked me why I didn't have it. I said, "My dad died, and my mom must have forgotten to send it with me." She paid for my milk. How lucky we were to have her for a teacher. She was so full of life, caring and helpful. She would light up the classroom. We had a large classroom of kids, and she just knew how to handle them. And she was a pretty lady too.

Now the school is gone; the church is gone. They were replaced with a jail and a courthouse. It always hurts to drive by and see what they did, but nothing like the hurt in our hearts today with Sister Joan gone. Being with the Lord, what better place could she be? She loved all of you and worked all her life for the Lord. She is in a special place – in heaven with her God. Sister Joan's was with her best friend Sister Rose André continually during her illness. Now she is with her again.

We had some great visits with Sister Joan. We would come to Mass, have lunch, and enjoy long visits. It was like we knew each other all our lives and hadn't had that time apart. She introduced us to all the sisters, all the help, and everyone we met. Even on our little ventures out, we had to meet everybody. We loved her with all our hearts and will miss her terribly.

Debbie Drish, Wife of Jim Drish

Joan told me, "I love chocolate and the sisters I rode with don't drive anymore. Walgreen's has some really good chocolate." I had my mission. I sent her boxes of Pringles, peanuts, and chocolate. She would get it and call me. I said, "I sent extras so you could share with your sisters." She said, "I'm not sharing this. I'm hiding it in my room!" I would also send her flowers periodically. I found a lady here at Hy-Vee. Sometimes I couldn't get the candy in the mail so that lady would shop for me and take the candy and the flowers to Mount Carmel for Joan.

One funny story. We have a 1958 Buick that we drove here because Joan wanted to see it. It was a nice but cloudy day, so we were going to go for a ride and have lunch. She started to get into the back. I said, "No, you sit in the front. You're special. You sit in the front." There was a car show in East Dubuque that she wanted to see. There was a downpour as we drove over the bridge. The wipers on an old car are not very good. She says, "I can't see anything." Jim says, "I can't either." She says to me, "That's why you put me up in the front seat. I'm up here saying prayers for us!" Well, we got there, and she made friends with everyone. She just had a good day.

In the time I knew her, I told her, "You just make my day. You have a charisma about you. I feel so important talking to you." It is sad that we hadn't seen her and hugged her for so long because of COVID. I will miss her dearly as we all will.

Sister Helen Emerson, BVM

In 1974, I was living with my dad and teaching at the [Holy Trinity] parish school [in Bloomington, Ill]. In August, my dad was dying, and it was time to get classrooms ready for the opening of school. To my surprise Joan Opatts and Catherine Jean Hayden drove in from Davenport, Iowa, and came to the hospital to tell me they were there to get my classroom ready for school. They brought all the decorations with them and did a great job. I remember Joan who was very compassionate, prayerful, and ready to help in every need.

Lynne Chapman

I was blessed to become acquainted with Sister Joan during my five years as the Coordinator of Liturgy at Mount Carmel. Joan was the sacristan at Marian Hall during that time, and was one of the first BVM sisters I met when I arrived.

Joan had a beautiful spirit. She had a true gift of hospitality, especially when greeting friends, family, and neighbors who would join the sisters for weekday or Sunday Mass at Marian Hall. She was meticulous in her work, giving each celebrant, sacred vessel, holy cloth, vestment, flower, and candle her undivided attention. Each day when I arrived for Mass, I found her reading through the list of BVM sisters to be remembered that day. Many had been her friends, and others were part of the BVM history that she so loved. Joan has now joined that list of holy women who, we pray, will continue to intercede for us.

On a lighter note, Joan and I, together with Sister Rose André Koehler, often accompanied Monsignor Bob Vogl on his favorite Saturday lunchtime outings to Happy Joe's. We had been there so often that we could order for each other! We would sit at the same table each time, in the quietest corner so we could visit. However, if you've been to Happy Joe's on a Saturday, you know that there really aren't any quiet corners! I think the real reason those Three Musketeers (as they liked to call themselves) wanted to be there was to watch the many little children who were celebrating birthdays or running around the room, or snuggling up to their parents. I can't remember the number of times we sang "Happy Birthday" to a beaming little boy or girl celebrating their big day. The joy on Sister Joan's face when she encountered a child was always contagious.

Joan will always hold a special place in my heart as a holy servant of God and as a friend. May she now rest in the loving arms of Jesus, whom she loved and served so completely.

Margo Richeson, Friend

Like many people, I got married and had a family. When my family were mostly on their own, I took a job in the cafeteria at St. Anthony's School [Dubuque, Iowa]. That's where I met my dear friend Sister Joan. We would get together every so often to do things like shopping and having lunch. Our friendships just grew over the years. It was very, very special. Happy Joe's was one of our lunch spots. She also liked her Whopper at Burger King, but she wouldn't take fries because she wanted to be able to eat the whole Whopper, without onions. She became, more or less, a member of my family. My mother, my husband, my daughters, and my grandchildren all met her and fell in love with her. How could you not fall in love with that sweet caring person?

Joan and I had more in common than we thought. On special occasions we would go to Dollar Tree to buy cards to send to relatives, friends, and each other. We often sent the same card to each other. As time went on and these things kept happening, we decided that we were becoming more like sisters than just friends. That warmed our hearts. It meant so much to have someone as kind and loving as Joan when I didn't have a sister of my own. She did become my sister; that's what we called each other – sisters. I had a sister finally and she will never stop being my friend because she is in heaven looking down on all of us. She will always be in my heart.

The pandemic caused problems for everyone. We couldn't see each other; we couldn't hug each other. But in the last year, I did get to see Sister once in a while. The last time was when her niece Maryanne from Kansas City called me up and said, "We are going to do it. Whether she wants to see us or not, we are going to see her." We arranged a little birthday party in September for just the three of us. I was the brave one who went into her room and said, "Joan, look who I found out in the hallway." In walked Maryanne. Everything was fine. She was giving hugs and was as happy as could be. The three of us had our party. She was smiling and giggling and could not wait to cut the birthday cake and open her presents. She loved the new Sketchers shoes, that we got her. She was so proud of them. We gave her hugs and said our goodbyes not knowing that it would be the last time we would see her. Treasure your family and treasure your friends. They are precious, precious memories.

Mariah Kroll, Grand Niece, Sharing stories for Maryanne Kroll, Joan's Niece

Many people know her as Sister Joan. I would like to share stories about our Aunt Joanie. She was pretty fun. She loved to travel with Aunt Maryanne. I have a mildly inappropriate story to share, but it all ties in. The eulogy spoke about the dolphins that Joanie saw. The real story: Joanie was in the bathroom. Maryanne was looking out the window and started yelling, "There are dolphins! There are dolphins! Joanie, Joanie, Joanie, come quick!" Joanie got really excited about the little things in life. She was in awe of everything; everything was a blessing. Well, she came bursting out of that bathroom door butt naked going as fast as she could to see those dolphins. I think Maryanne was pretty shocked.

Joan went on another cruise with my Aunt Maryanne. This time, Joan's baggage didn't come for four days. She was in the same clothes every day. Maryanne finally said, "We have to go down to the gift shop just to see what they have. At least get some underwear." Joanie was very stubborn. They did not have the underwear that she likes. She was dead set that she would not get them, but Maryanne made her. We are pretty sure that Joanie washed her underwear in the bathroom sink every single day and refused to wear the other ones.

We miss Joanie. We love her. One of the greatest things was that every time she called it was, "Hey, O Kid." I'm pretty sure I knew that from the time I was a year old. It was never "Young Kid" or "Kiddo," but "O Kid." Maryanne carries on that tradition now for all of us. Now my child knows, "Well hello, O Kid." We hope you are enjoying heaven, O Kid!

Sister Mary Nolan, BVM

When Diane Rapozo and I made our first trip together to the deep South in 2001, we enjoyed the hospitality of Rose André [Koehler] and Joan Opatts, in Montgomery, Ala. We weren't there long before Joan began to share about their ministry to the children. With a twinkle in her eye and a smile, Joan shared her love for the children and her eagerness to help them read and write in spite of limited resources. As their ministry grew, they spent hours tutoring and eventually offered G.E.D. classes. They received awards for their endeavors over the years. I believe Joan's gentleness, love and presence attracted children and left them with a joy of learning, truly reflecting our Mary Frances Clarke.

Sister Kathleen Mullin, BVM

Joan was a young and successful primary teacher at St. Joseph, Rock Island, Ill. The children and parents greatly appreciated her. One of her skills was teaching the children to sing and dance for school programs which became quite popular. Then Joan got changed and I followed her. She really was missed.

Later Joan returned to the Quad Cities and taught at St. Paul the Apostle, Davenport, Iowa. At that time, the Sisters had a spacious new convent. The regional made that her base and many BVM meetings were hosted there. Joan answered the door to guests and earned a reputation for being especially hospitable. Imagine her welcome into Heaven!

Sister Rose Mary Meyer, BVM

Joan was a beloved teacher. Because our student body was so large at St. Eugene's [in Chicago], we had two school buildings. She and I taught in different buildings. However, I still remember her caring words and the admiration of her students. She loved them and they knew it. Thank you, Joan, for your life among us.

Sister Ann Therese Chaput, BVM

I met Joan when Rose André [Koehler] and she lived in Montgomery, Ala. They worked in the adult literacy program there and inspired me to take the training to be a literacy tutor. Joan, Rose André, Flo [Heflin], Laurene [Brady], and I would drive to Opelika, Ala., to meet Bridget Ann Henderson for our cluster. We enjoyed sharing, prayer, and a meal.

I was impressed with Joan's caring and concern for Rose André. Joan and I became friends. She was a faithful and kind sacristan for Father Vogel at Marian Hall. Despite her very crippled arthritic hands, she would write notes to me on cards, often having to type them. We would talk on the phone at times, even a couple of weeks before her death. She always assured me of her love and prayers. And now I know she sends them from heaven. Joan, may God continue to send abundant graces to us through your intercession.

Bob Bildstein, Former Coworker

Sister Joan was such a sweetheart. She taught first grade in the room next to me when I was at St. Anthony's. She was definitely a master teacher. May she rest in peace!