



Eulogy of Sister Joanna Rettenmeier, BVM
Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, April 25, 2023

Good morning. It is good to be together to celebrate the life of our Sister Joanna Rettenmeier.

Catherine Anne Rettenmeier was born on July 25, 1933, a very hot day in Dubuque, Iowa. She was welcomed by her parents John and Viola (Dolan) Rettenmeier and one older sister Peggy. Brothers Tom, Bill, and Jim completed the family.

“My mother was proud to be Irish,” recalled Catherine, “and in a lighthearted tone she reminded us that the *best* part of us was our Irish heritage.” Her mother was very involved in church, school, and neighborhood activities and encouraged her children to participate as well. Her father was a quiet man but with a wonderful sense of humor. He enjoyed bowling and playing horseshoes and baseball with men in the neighborhood. His “pride and joy” was his vegetable garden which he generously shared with neighbors and friends.

“My parents’ faith was very strong, and they passed this along to the five of us. There was no choice in choosing which schools to attend. The five of us attended the Cathedral for grade school and then St. Joseph Academy or Loras Academy.” Surely, walking down the Third Street hill to school, back up the hill for lunch, back down for afternoon classes and then back up the hill after school for eight years was a commitment – and good exercise. Perhaps it was the beginning of her love of walking as well as a testament to her love of Catholic education.

Catherine entered the BVM congregation on September 8, 1951, with a desire to “dedicate my life to Christ [and] to teach children to love God and serve Him.” Moving “up the hill” had its advantages. At times, her brothers would ride their bikes around the Mount Carmel property, and they were often assigned as altar servers. Occasionally, she was given permission to visit with them. Catherine received the name Joanna upon her reception on March 19, 1952, professed first vows on March 19, 1954, and lived 71 years as a BVM.

Joanna taught middle school and junior high for 36 years. Her first mission was to St. Patrick in Cedar Falls, Iowa, which was followed by Blessed Sacrament in Chicago. She taught at St. Augustine and St. Thomas in Memphis, Tennessee, serving as principal at the latter, and at St. George in Seattle, Washington, before returning to Chicago to teach at Holy Cross. She also was missioned at Corpus Christi and Sacred Heart in Fort Dodge, Iowa.

Joanna served as the administrative assistant to the Secretary of the Congregation for fifteen years beginning in 1980. Although nervous about working at the BVM Center, she was delighted to be close to her family. She called being in Dubuque a blessing because her sister Peggy, her brother Jim, and both of her parents died during those years.

In 1995, Joanna and Sister Marian Klostermann, OSF embarked on a new ministry project in southwestern Iowa sponsored by Iowa-based religious communities called "Planting New Seeds." BVM Nan Ross joined them the following year. The goal of this collaboration was to address childhood poverty and elderly isolation so prevalent in the region. "Working with a team excites me," commented Joanna. "I [desire] to be part of a group of women religious willing to build a loving, supportive and prayerful community in the midst of 'walking' with the poor." Their ministry in Maloy, Iowa included leading communion services; visiting nursing homes and hospitals; dispensing food, clothing, and fuel assistance; teaching English as a second language; and, in general, ascertaining the needs of the local community. "What we're really supposed to be here is a presence," is how Joanna summed up their mission. They loved the people of Maloy, and the surrounding area, and the people loved them. It truly was a mutually enriching and memorable experience. In 1999, they were featured on Iowa Public Television in an episode of *Living in Iowa* titled "My Three Nuns." After a so-called retirement in 2005, Joanna continued to manage the clothing room at the Neighborhood Center and visit residents in nursing homes.

Joanna returned to Dubuque in 2009. She enjoyed living at Mount Carmel, especially the peace and beauty of early morning walks and the opportunity to build relationships with her BVM sisters and the staff. For many years, Joanna worked with Catherina Walsh ensuring requests for DVDs of BVM funerals, jubilees, and other events reached sisters and family members outside the Dubuque area. She enjoyed a variety of activities including playing cards, reading, and Tai Chi. She crocheted numerous afghans as wedding and baby gifts for her nieces and nephews. For decades she assisted her sister-in-law, and later her niece, in the annual Christmas baking, filling the freezer with holiday treats. As a bonus for helping, Joanna would bring samples home to Mount Carmel where the residents quickly consumed them.

Joanna was a simple, gentle, kind, and understanding person. She could perceive the needs of others and responded generously with her support and assistance. Joanna was a person close to God, faithful and faith-filled. For her liturgy, she chose a reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans. "We do not live for ourselves, and we do not die for ourselves. If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord, so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." (Romans 14:7-8). Joanna never wavered from her youthful desire to love, serve, and dedicate her life to Christ. We celebrate and rejoice with Joanna who now rests in the loving arms of Jesus to whom she has always belonged. Praise be to God! Alleluia!