



Sharing of Memories of Joanna Rettenmeier, BVM

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, April 25, 2023

Sisters Mary Nolan, BVM

Joanna carried on a quiet ministry of presence flowing from having lived with Peggy Nolan years ago. When Peggy moved to Marian Hall in June of 2011 and began hospice, Joanna asked me what she might do to help Peggy and the Nolans during this challenging transition. I suggested she stop in after lunch and just talk with Peggy. And so it happened, and their conversations flowed freely and led to playing cards often and sometimes just sitting comfortably in silence. Joanna continued this quiet ministry of presence every day from June 2011 to October 2011 and never missed a day. My sister Pat and I have never forgotten her kindness.

Ro Palmer, Med Aide, Mount Carmel Bluffs

My dearest Joanna, you will be greatly missed. I enjoyed our get-togethers with our card games. You have some of the players up there already. Give them all hugs from me. I love you and I'll see you on the other side. Thank you for being a friend. Love you.

Bill Rettenmeier, Brother

Years ago, when I was in 12th grade, Sister was up here, I and some friends were walking the railroad tracks down by the river. We stopped and I noticed that we were just below Mount Carmel. So, I decided that I would go up the bluff. I climbed the bluff and when I got up there, to my surprise, all the postulants and novices were out on the grounds. I thought, "Maybe I can find Sister." I did. She told me to stay put while she went to look for Sister Leo [Hogan, Novice Mistress]. She found Sister Leo who gave her permission to visit with me. We had a nice visit. I didn't go down the bluff, but walked North Grandview back to the house. I have to thank Sister St. Stephen [Mallinger], my teacher and Sister Leo for letting me have those visits.

Sister Mary McCauley, BVM

Everyone in this chapel and anywhere else who had the privilege of knowing Joanna could offer a never-ending list of words to describe her. Joanna was special. She was extraordinarily kind, sensitive, hospitable, humble, generous, caring, and on and on and on. And yes, indeed she had a very special sense of humor.

Regarding her various ministries I would be remiss if I did not publicly acknowledge her generous response to our BVM Community request to have BVMs engage in what we called Ministry Sites. Joanna, BVM Nan Ross, and our Franciscan friend Marian Klosterman, OSF said yes to going to Maloy, Iowa, and simply be present to and responsive to the needs of the people. One person described this initiative as "going to a place when the people really did not know why you were

coming and then leaving when they did not want you to go." How true this was for Joanna, Nan, and Marian!

In addition to the above ministry, I believe Joanna's final gift to us was to show us how to die. She did this through her quiet, gracious, and faith-filled acceptance of her impending death. To step into her room was to know that you were with a person who was very close to God. During her final two months of life, she maintained her gracious spirit and did not exhibit an ounce of self-pity. Instead, she exhibited only trust, love, warmth, honesty, and concern. And when you were ready to leave her, she would say, "Pray for me. Pray for my family!" Thank you, Joanna, for your integrity, charity, humility, and love. And now Joanna, we say to you, "Pray for us!"

Sister Kathryn Lawlor, BVM

When Joanna worked in the Office of the Secretary, one of her tasks was to keep track of all the sisters in the congregation. Now this is many days after the Provincials decided what mission the sisters would be on, and they would stay there. They were now free to choose any place in the world for their mission. It was Joanna's task to keep track of them. The treasurer of the congregation would come and say, "Where is Sister _____?" Joanna would know. Even the president of the congregation would come and say, "Where is in the world is Sister _____?" And Joanna would tell her. Every year for the 18 years she worked for the Office of the Secretary, she created a community directory which included the name, address, phone number and mission for every sister. We thank Joanna for keeping track of all of us through those years, those very busy years!

Susan Bobb, Niece

Speaking of Malloy, I was thinking about when we first moved to Des Moines. My son Justin was turning three. Sister decided to drive to visit with us and celebrate his birthday. Many of us know that Sister didn't like to drive. In that little trek to Des Moines, Sister got a speeding ticket, which maybe some of you knew. Afterward, I would always relate to her as "Sister Mary Lead Foot." It was really nice of her to make that trek to Des Moines. We appreciated it and loved her very much.

Todd Rettenmeier, Nephew, Son of Tom & Mary Rettenmeier

I have just a couple of memories to share. Years ago, my brother and cousin who are much older than I am, were just old enough to be taken to a Chicago Cubs game. I didn't quite make the cut given my age. I was pretty torn up about that. I still remember that. Anyway, Sister came over and took me out to lunch. I don't remember the store downtown. It might have been Roshek's; it was a downstairs diner. I just thought it was a regular lunch, but after years had gone by, I realized it was an act of kindness. She knew my brother and cousin went to a Cubs game. That's better than saying I got left behind!

Her love for cards has been mentioned. We would go over to Grandma and Grandpa [Rettenmeier] when Sister would come home to visit from Fort Dodge or Chicago. It was not only an opportunity to play cards, but an opportunity for unity of the family. I remember being pretty young, sitting at the kitchen table with the adults and playing "May I." I thoroughly enjoyed those opportunities.

Sister Irene Lukefahr, BVM

Speaking of Joanna's love for cards, before the pandemic started, some of us started play Pinochle. Joanna was part of that group. Then we could not play together for several years. Last year, the first Sunday after Easter, we finally got four of us gathered. Joanna didn't always have good cards to play, but her last Sunday playing Pinochle with us, she won every game.

Sister Bernadette McManigal, BVM

I cannot help but think of Joanna without thinking of kindness, but also a delightful sense of humor. I recall that when she was asked to come to work in the Secretary's Office, she sent a letter accepting the offer. In that letter, she misspelled practically every word and punctuation was unheard of! And she wrote, "I will be so happy to write letters for you." That was Joanna.

Carol Maas, Staff Member, Mount Carmel Bluffs

Sister Joanna introduced me to the Mall in the Hall when I started working at Mount Carmel five years ago. From then on, she always gave me a heads up if she thought something in the Mall would be of interest to me. Thank you for that Sister Joanna. May you rest in peace.

Sister Diane Forster, BVM

I recall myself one day when Joanna was working her way through the Mall in the Hall. She came to my door with a lovely bag and said, "Diane, you can't live without this!" Of course, with that introduction, I accepted the bag.

Pat Judge, Former Development Director

My first position working for the BVMs was assisting in the Secretary's Office with Sister Joanna. She was very patient and kind, teaching me about the BVM Community and the sisters. Although I moved to a different office, Sister Joanna remained a good friend. I'll always remember her and keep her in my prayers. I wish her peace.

Sister Karen Conover, BVM

I only know Joann from these last seven or so years that I have served here at Mount Carmel. The famous Mall in the Hall is the crux of this story. Prior to partnering with Presbyterian Homes & Services (BCLS) and creating this huge department called BVM Community Life Services, I was a department of one with several fabulous volunteers. Joanna was my "partner" in helping to pass along unwanted clothing and other things to sisters who needed or wanted them. Sometimes, very generous people would bring huge bags as if we were Good Will, thinking that the sisters would like it. Joanna graciously received and then quietly behind the scenes, would go through things and think, "Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no." Those items were not going to go into the Mall in the Hall for the sisters. It was always quiet and gentle as she worked her magic making the Mall and the turnover of items a stewardship.

In the last few hours of her life, I knew we were praying for her. Looking back, I know that she had already passed away, but I was awakened around one o'clock and thought, I need to pray for Joanna. It was a joyful prayer asking her to pray for us. That's all she ever asked as we left her room these last weeks. She gestured, "Pray for me." Joanna, we do, and we ask you to pray for us.

Andy Rettenmeier, Nephew, Son of Jim & Judy Rettenmeier

One of the funniest memories I have of Catherine was her spending Christmas Eve and morning with us. My parents wanted her to have the experience of being around little kids on Christmas morning. She would spend the night with us to be there on Christmas Day. I remember that a couple of years after my dad passed, she was setting out presents with my mom. We were upstairs trying to fall asleep. I remember hearing Catherine's laugh; it was so loud that it woke us up. It just kept going. My mom said that we couldn't come down. I went to bed wondering what was so funny. The next morning, we got up early and went downstairs. What made Catherine laugh so hard were these Garfield slippers with a big ugly face that my mom bought for me. Catherine was just busting out laughing. She was so filled with joy and great to be around.

Kristy Kaufmann, Niece, Daughter of Tom & Mary Rettenmeier

I am a sister to the poor guy that didn't get to go to the Cubs game. We have been very blessed. When Sisters Joanna and Nan moved back here, we were able to spend a lot of time with them for holidays or dinners on Sunday. They planted a garden in my backyard, which did not grow, but we tried. It struck me that when you were talking about the Mall in the Hall and clothes that were not used, that I'm pretty sure I sent a couple of bags here and I do not recognize a single item that you are wearing. Just wanted to let you know that.

Louise Kames, Former BVM

I want to acknowledge Joanna's role in Initial Formation. Joanna lived in the Novitiate in the Loggia community. I lived with her there a number of years. Joanna was pure grace to live with. She never convinced me to play cards, but I loved living with Joanna just because of her kindness to everyone. It was wonderful for novices to live with Joanna.

Rachel Hentges, Niece, Daughter of Jim & Judy Rettenmeier

My mom and Catherine started a tradition of baking cookies and all kinds of goodies in 1978. After my mom passed, we decided to keep that tradition going. My daughter, Abbey, was a big part of that. She used to call Catherine "Grandma." When Abbey was little, instead of saying, "What did you say?" would say, "Whad you said?" Catherine, being the teacher she was, would say, "It's 'What did you say?'" Abby would look at her and say, "Whad you said?" Catherine said, "Forget it, girlie."

Sister Mary Martens, BVM

I lived with Joanna in the big house that the congregation owned on Southern Avenue for about three years enjoying Joanna and the community of five that we were. Everything that has been said about her, yes – kind, gentle, loving, a good cook, and a wonderful presence. When she went to Malloy, Iowa, she went from keeping track of this rather large BVM congregation and where we were located, to a town that in the 2000 census had 28 people. What a wonderful gift to be able to take her personality from a large group of people to a small town. A group went down to visit her in Malloy. We could see the wonderful relationship she had with the people in the town and the reaching out she was able to do.

John Wade, Former Student

Sister Joanna taught with me at Sacred Heart in Fort Dodge, Iowa. This was my first job. She was a tremendous woman of faith. I learned a lot from her and feel blessed to have known her.

Tim M., Former Student

I had Sister Joanna as a teacher at St. Edmonds in Fort Dodge, Iowa, many years ago. I remember her as a kind lady who always had time for her students. She was one of several BVMs at the school who had dedicated their lives in the service of the school and the students. She will be sorely missed here on this earth by all her students, but heaven will be the classroom she always wanted to teach in. Thoughts and prayers for Sister and her family.

Sister Diane Forster, BVM

As many of us know and some family may know, Joanna belonged to our Schola, our choir, for many years. In those years, she did a number of things, as we have said, that are quiet, present, kind. She made phone calls to people who had forgotten what time it was. She helped for a long stretch of time to assemble the music to prepare us for Sunday. We are grateful to Joanna for her service there as well.