



**Eulogy of Sister Judith Dewell, BVM (John Marie)**  
Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Sept. 22, 2023

Good morning. It is good to be here to celebrate the life of our Sister Judith Dewell.

Judith Ann Dewell was born August 29, 1942, in Clinton, Iowa, the first child of John Albert and Mary Catherine (Dyer) Dewell. Siblings Robert, Michael, and Catherine "Cathy" completed the family. Her father worked as a mail carrier for many years and was quite beloved. Her brother Robert also became a police officer while Michael joined the Marines. Judith shared that when her father died in 1968, the funeral procession included mail trucks, police cars, BVMs in the "holy habit," and Marines.

Judith attended St. Irenaeus Grade School in Clinton, Iowa. She recalled, "Prior to the start of the school year [in 1954], the pastor of St. Irenaeus organized a group of students to help the sisters set up prior to the start of classes. Many hands helped clean and unpack books and meet the new seventh and eighth grade teacher, Sister Paulina [Sullivan]. Thus was the beginning of my friendship with Paulina. We discovered a young, vibrant, fun person who was to be our teacher and my seventh-grade self was smitten. Paulina was such a kind and caring individual who was very easy to talk to . . . I'll be forever grateful for Paulina's love and encouragement over the years. I am especially grateful to have rediscovered her as a model for aging and moving into eternal life."

Judith attended Our Lady of Angels Academy in Clinton, Iowa, where she served as freshman class officer and as class representative to the Catholic Youth Organization. She was a member of the Sodality and her parish choir. During these years, she worked as a babysitter, a part-time receptionist for a chiropractor, a salesclerk and assistant at a drug store, and taught piano lessons – the beginning of her teaching career. She wrote, "During my thirteen years in BVM schools . . . I have always been deeply impressed with these devoted women and the spirit which permeates their teaching. . . We loved the nuns and . . . the quality of education was exceptional."

"My friendship with [Paulina] continued through my high school years. Gradually, the discussion of vocation became a big topic as she patiently guided me through the decision to enter the community." Judith, along with her cousin Nancy McCarthy, entered the congregation on July 31, 1960, as the two redheads of the set. Judith received the name John Marie at her reception on February 2, 1961. She professed first vows on February 2, 1963, and lived 63 years as a BVM.

After profession, she was sent to the Scholasticate in Chicago to study. She completed a bachelor's degree in music at Mundelein College in Chicago in 1965. Her first mission was as a music and religion teacher at St. Joseph Academy in Des Moines, Iowa. She returned to Mundelein College as a music instructor and remained there until Mundelein merged with Loyola University in 1991. She then ministered as an associate professor of music at Loyola until 2006.

"I like working with [college age] students," commented Judith. "They are so full of potential and can make exciting leaps. . . I love trying to figure out how students think, how they make sense of it." Judith noticed that many students relieved their stress by learning to play an instrument. She recalled the day when a student burst into her studio just after taking a tough exam and announced, "I *have* to play the piano!" "It's through music that students gain self-confidence and begin to claim their personal gifts," commented Judith. In a BVM Sister

Shoutout during Catholic Sisters Week, a former student wrote, "Sister Judith Dewell, thanks for putting up with my silly ways and inspiring an even deeper love of music!"

Judith completed a master's degree in music education and organ at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, in 1972, and a PhD in music education from Northwestern University in 1986. Judith shared, "There is a different focus for why you get the knowledge and what you do with it . . . It is *you* that is being developed, but it is for the purpose of enabling you to work with *others*. You acquire the knowledge and the personal skills to share that knowledge. The whole reason for getting the degree is to share it with somebody else. Knowledge is the single-most powerful way to alleviate oppression."

Judith and Sister Eliza Kenney lived and worked together starting in 1969 when they taught at Mundelein. They retired from Loyola University and moved to Dubuque in 2006. Eliza assumed the role of Motherhouse curator. Meanwhile, Judith worked part-time as an adjunct faculty member at Clarke University and volunteered as a Eucharistic minister at Mount Carmel. In 2010, Judith began volunteering at the BVM Center in the Office of the Treasurer and assisting Eliza. When Eliza died suddenly in 2018, Judith assumed the duties of curator.

The partnership between the BVMs and Presbyterian Homes and Services necessitated a great downsizing. Judith served on the Mount Carmel Transition Task Force, the BVM History Wall Committee, and the 190<sup>th</sup> Planning Committee. She spent countless hours assisting in the storage and redistribution of furniture, artwork, and collectables. Judith also served as a member of the Sisters Council, where she carefully listened to the sisters and brought their concerns and desires forward for consideration—always striving to care for the community. Judith truly volunteered wherever and whenever assistance was needed – and always without fanfare. She lived as Mary Frances Clarke directed, "Go on steady and quiet." (Mary Frances Clarke, Letter 11).

Judith was kind, caring, and so full of life and good common sense. She loved her family and was thrilled to spend quality time with her sister Cathy after she moved to Dubuque. Judith also loved her BVM sisters, a love ignited by her BVM teachers long ago.

Imagine Saint Paul's words to the Philippians as Judith speaking to us. "I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you . . . I hold you in my heart." (Philippians 1:3,4,7). Judith was a tremendous presence here at Mount Carmel for the past 17 years. Her death leaves an enormous hole in our hearts. Teilhard de Chardin reminds us that "In the shadow of death may we not look back to the past, but seek in this utter darkness the dawn of God."

We know that Judith has been joyfully reunited with her parents, her brother Michael, Paulina, Eliza, and all her deceased BVM sisters, relatives, and friends. May we find consolation in knowing that Judith continues to be with us in risen life, praying for us with joy, and holding us close to her heart, as we do her.