

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER JOAN MCGINLEY

August 26, 1930–December 12, 2014



“My life has freed me to know myself in relation to others and to continue to integrate my personal, spiritual, and ministerial roles in a way that brings peace, satisfaction, and opportunities for new beginnings.” These words of Sister Joan give us some insight into this woman of faith. Sister Joan McGinley was born on August 26, 1930, to Edward and Elizabeth (Zimber) McGinley, the second daughter and the youngest of their family of six. She attended Resurrection Elementary School and Elizabeth Seton High School. After graduation from Elizabeth Seton in June 1948, she entered the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill on September 8, 1948.

When Joan received the habit, she was given the name Sister Elizabeth Marie— a name she held until we had the option to return to our baptismal names in the late 1960s. Joan received a bachelor’s degree in education from Seton Hill and a master’s degree in reading and language arts from the University of Pittsburgh. Joan taught primary level children in diocesan schools of Altoona-Johnstown, Greensburg, Pittsburgh, Tucson, and the Archdiocese of Washington. She was also principal at three different schools. In her last years of ministry, she served as social minister at Saint Sebastian Parish in Ross Township.

Throughout her life, Sister Joan carried God’s word with enthusiasm. During her ministry to children of over 40 years, she sought innovative ways to teach and discipline. Children whose lives she touched were invigorated and encouraged to use their imagination and energy to move to greater heights. As a principal, she was a kind leader of the school community and demanded only the best from the teachers who ministered with her. Her heart was always open to the poor and needy. She found ways to minister to them both in the schools in which she taught and in extracurricular ways in her free time.

When Sister Joan left school ministry and began social ministry in the parish, she transferred many of her skills. Open to learning new things and finding new opportunities, she brought energy and life to the parish community. Ministering in a parish where many of the parishioners had been fortunate enough to obtain “the American Dream,” Joan offered them opportunities to learn about and assist those who were poor and needy. Her messages to the parish gave everyone who was able an opportunity to serve. She stretched her own thinking and that of the Saint Sebastian parishioners to move to new ministries, serve new people, reach beyond the parish boundaries, and even think globally to meet the needs of others.

Joan invited several parishioners to participate in AIDS ministry, prison ministry, and Bible studies. She wrote requests in the Sunday parish bulletins for everything from diapers and food to cars. Yesterday, one of the women who came to pay her respects for Sister Joan said, “She could convince the devil himself to do what she thought was important.” No one in the parish was off the hook for service. If you were retired and could drive, you could do that. If you were in your 80s and hard of hearing, you could help to repair bicycles. If you had young children, you could invite the refugee children to come to play with your children. This is just a sample of Joan’s outreach.

Joan did all of this while having a reputation among all as a woman who also knew how to play. Her party-organizing skills were well known and she was able to make fun out of the smallest occasion.

Joan was particularly famous for her Saint Patrick Day parties. She loved the Irish Festival, the parade, providing Irish soda bread for all the shut-ins of the parish, and having an open house at her home office from after the first morning Mass until evening. She served Irish soda bread and potato soup. People were always asking for her recipe for the soup which she never revealed. In came as dry mix in cans from Walmart.

Parkinson's disease took its toll on Joan's body. As it progressed, Joan—once so energetic, always open for a new challenge, looking for a party, or learning a new dance—was now unable to walk well or at all. Her voice slowly went from a whisper to almost silent. Her lack of balance landed her on the floor far too many times. Her eyesight diminished. First so happy with a motorized wheel chair that helped to transport her to all places, she soon had to forgo that option and try to manage to get around using a chair powered by her arms and legs—a very slow process for one who was always the first to come.

However, even as more and more was given over and more losses took place, Joan continued to think of what could be done for others. Every sister in the house received a birthday card from Sister Joan. Of course, she needed a bit of help from her friends to accomplish this, but she was determined that this was important. She also sent cards to Saint Sebastian parishioners. She continued to collect toys and gifts for the children of the Kosovo family that she sponsored. She was a quiet visitor to the side of any of our sisters who were dying.

Joan, I believe, asked with difficulty for help from her friends. However, she was most grateful for all who helped her. Once she wrote a lovely tribute about angels for Sr Carita, who through the years helped Joan every morning to be ready for the day—her hair fixed just right and her clothes matching and in good taste. She was also most grateful to Sister Barbara Boss who did her hair on Saturdays and to the nurses and the nurse aides. A few months ago she wrote me a note telling me that she knew that she was getting worse. She said “I am not complaining. I was diagnosed so long ago and I have been able to do a lot. I know I ask a lot. Please know that I am grateful. You are a good friend.”

Throughout her life, Sister Joan made the work of charity visible with a joyful spirit and a loving heart. As she became more and more locked in her body from the ravages of her disease, she never lost her zest for life, her interest in others, her Irish wit, and her ability to laugh. Joan did indeed grow to know herself in relation to others, and even in her tears of joy and sadness, was able to reveal God's love for his people through her courage and spiritual strength.

As Joan is now at peace with God and released from all the bonds of disease, she is free at last to dance and sing. What a wonderful gift to be home for Christmas with the God she served so well.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Louise Grundish
December 16, 2014*