

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER JOAN MURRAY March 2, 1956–August 1, 2021



Good morning and welcome to this celebration of the life of our Sister Joan. Many of us continue to ponder this so sudden and unexpected death. But our Lord who watches over us with loving care and knows the depth and largeness of our lives far beyond our understanding is with us today as we join together to celebrate and remember one of our own who left us suddenly and certainly without much fanfare.

Years ago as Joan was preparing to enter her postulancy, she wrote in response to a questionnaire:

"I think I was initially drawn to the Sister of Charity because I was taught by the sisters in elementary and high school. However, during my affiliation period and my years at Carlow, I have had the opportunity to become acquainted with sisters from other communities. Now, I am even more deeply attracted to the Sisters of Charity. I am attracted for five reasons.

First, the spirit of the community, which is the Charity of Christ. Second, the life of Saint Elizabeth Seton. Third, the personal individual witness of sisters I know. Fourth, the virtues which the community accents in their everyday life—humility, simplicity, and charity. And fifth, a sense of being at home—a sense of belonging."

How did these five attractions continue throughout the life of Sister Joan Murray, the only child of William Joseph and Margaret Mangan Murray? Joan was born in Columbia Hospital in Wilkinsburg on March 2, 1956 and was baptized in Saint Brendan's church on March 9, of the

same year. She lived with her mother and father in Swissvale and attended Saint Anselm Grade and High School. After high school, she enrolled in Carlow College and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology and anthropology and a minor in psychology in 1978. She was the recipient of the 1978 Carlow College Sociology Award. Later she earned a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Pittsburgh with distinction.

Throughout her life in community, Joan spent her years in active ministry in many forms of social work, which began following her time in the novitiate in 1980. She began as a caseworker for the Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Greensburg and later served in the Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Pittsburgh. She was a social worker at Divine Hospital, later Mercy Providence Hospital, in Pittsburgh. In 2006, Joan joined Life's Work of Western Pennsylvania.

In this position, she assisted persons with handicaps of various kinds to find positions suitable for their abilities. This intensive work involved dedication to work alongside the person until enough skills developed that the person could perform the work needed. Not each client was successful, but Joan supported each client with deep understanding and great patience to see one through from total lack of ability to the freedom to perform a job with skill and competence. This suited Joan perfectly because throughout her life whenever asked about her dreams, her wishes, and her reasons for being she replied, "I enjoy empowering others to solve their concerns and issues in order to improve their quality of life. I want to make a difference so that the world will be a better place. I want to make a difference so a person's environment, the world, etc., will be a better place because God gave the gift of life and a religious vocation."

When I began writing this reflection, I took to the internet to see if there was any new information about Joan. This would not have been Joan's mode of operation; she shied away from computers and was always

having issues with email, computer addresses, messages, etc. She preferred the usual way of communicating—talking directly, meeting at dinner, joining prayer groups, or participating in projects such as Black Lives Matter or chairing the Elizabeth Seton Care Fund Committee. She did learn in these days of COVID to do Zoom, but even when she said the word, it was with a bit of disdain. Computers were a foreign language to her. However, believe it or not, I did find a wonderful presentation where Joan was one of four participants in the fourth and last discussion of the members of the Charity Federation as they reacted together to the seventh episode *The Chosen*.

Sister Joan was deeply involved in the subject and commented about how the interactions between Matthew and Nicodemus and Jesus reflect our deep struggles with questions. Some of Sister Joan's comments were very thoughtful and profound. She talked about the importance of faith as one moves through life. How often life events prompt one to take a leap into the unknown! She noted that she believed that when she was able to do this, God was with her even at times when she did not feel his presence as she hoped. She also talked about the importance of going back again after a decision had been made to do a reality check as it were. She described her own experience of discussions with her parents and friends when she made the decision to enter religious life. She found their reactions varied. Her father was opposed as he was hoping that his only daughter would give him grandchildren. Her mother was neutral. Some friends were supportive, but one friend walked away and never spoke to her again. These experiences, Joan noted, help one evaluate a decision. Is this God directing me in a new path or have I chosen the right way forward?

Sister Joan knew the joys and the difficulties of our religious life. She eloquently described on the video of last February that the life of a religious vocation is not easy. She relayed that we all come from different backgrounds, families, cultures, and ethnic groups. However,

if one can keep one's eyes on the God who called her and can be faithful to prayer, God will bless each effort with final success even though not each day and moment is easy. There will be joy and sorrow, hope and discouragement, success and failure.

Dear Joan, you have run the race and fought the fight, and now you may rest with the God who called you home. Thank you for sharing life with us through these years. As you have loved being a Sister of Charity please keep those of us still journeying in your heart as you now sing joyfully and on key, Ubi Caritas et Amor, Ubi caritas, Deus ibi est. Where Charity and love are found, there is God. The love of God has gathered us together. Let us rejoice with Him and be glad.

Funeral Liturgy Reflection

Sister Louise Grundish, SC

August 5, 2021