

Wake Reflection
Sister Joan of Arc Urban, OSF
 Born: April 11, 1916
 Entered our community: July 15, 1932
 Returned to the Lord: March 4, 2018

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away”

1 Corinthians 13:4-8



We have just heard the best description of Sister Joan of Arc in St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians.

All we need to do is substitute her name for Love. **Joanie** was patient and kind and all the other wonderful virtues mentioned. We have all experienced her “grace.” And so, let us tell Grace’s story. Grace Gertrude Urban was born on April 11, 1916 to Grace Smigelskis and Anthony Urban, the first of three children. Her sister Justine was her childhood and lifelong friend. Her baby brother, Anthony, known as Tony, was a dear and precious friend as well. Joanie had a deep devotion to St. Anthony because of her father and brother. Everyone knew that if you lost something, ask Joanie to ask St. Anthony, and you would find in a jiffy. Tony’s wife, Kay, became a second sister to Sister Joan of Arc. The children of her sister and brother have been cherished and extremely

precious to Sister Joan. She would say: “The kids that are grown up now.” Carol (Pinky), Charles, Ron, Bob, Joe, Dave, Shelly have been so attentive of their dear Auntie especially in these last years with cards, phone calls, visits and a beautiful bouquet of flowers on the 11th of each month! When her niece Gay, named Grace after Sister Joan of Arc, died and left a big hole in Joanie’s heart.

Grace’s story of her life in our Franciscan community began in 1932 when she was just 16 and left her beloved Hartford, CT, and family. Some of what we know about those early days was recorded in the oral history of her good friend Sister Helen White. Helen wrote that Grace and 28 other postulants welcomed Helen when she arrived in Pittsburgh in January and that Grace “took care of her.” It seems that Grace, who was given the name Sister Joan of Arc as a novice, spent her lifetime doing just that - taking care of others!

Sister Helen wrote that she joined Sister Joan of Arc in Elizabeth NJ where Joanie was teaching 3rd grade. Helen and Joanie would spend the afternoons and Saturdays catechizing. Sister Joan of Arc had the communion classes and she often told the story of a man criticizing her habit while she was traveling

on the train to catechize and a woman came to her defense telling the man to mind his own business. That incident must have made a lasting impression because we have all heard that story many times!

Ten years later after Joanie had taught grades 3-6 in Elizabeth NJ, Mahanoy City PA and Amsterdam NY, Helen and Joanie were together again catechizing children in Transfiguration Parish in Maspeth NY and at two other parishes in Brooklyn, NY from 1942-1952. Her absolute favorite mission was Brooklyn, NY. She talks about walking across the Brooklyn Bridge with arms filled with flowers to decorate the churches. It was here that she met up with three trouble-making 12 year-old-boys. In her own unique fashion, she got them to attend her classes and found odds jobs to keep them off the street. These three “guys” stayed in touch with Sister all these years. As a matter of fact, Joe Marceda and his wife Joyce corresponded with her on a regular basis. Chubby and John have both gone home to the Lord. They attribute Sr. Joan of Arc from keeping them out of gangs or going to prison! She also would have her kids go by bus to Radio City Music Hall and get them in the side door for free!

Sister Helen’s brother was a Marine Sergeant in Okinawa and even though Joanie didn’t know him she wrote to him that she was having her First Communion children say the Rosary for him on Sister Helen’s (Anchilla’s) feast day March 25. Her brother credited his life to these prayers since everyone in his platoon was either killed or wounded on that very day. Needless to say he wanted to meet Joanie on his return after the war and told Helen that “if anyone is a saint in your community, I know she is.” Yes indeed, we have a saint in our community – that’s what we all think of our Joanie. Quiet, prayerful, courteous, loving, caring, dedicated, the words go on and on. Her good friend, Sister Francine can attest that Sister Joan of Arc never had a critical comment about anyone and always had a joyful positive spirit.

From 1956 to 1989 Joanie taught mostly junior high students but was also principal while teaching the 7th and 8th grades for four years in Kenosha, WI and two years in East St. Louis. During those years she also taught grade 5 at Holy Trinity, Moon Run and St. Valentine. Her 5th graders at St. Valentine remember her well since she spent nine years there. Sister Joan of Arc’s 55 years of dedicated teaching provided her with warm and wonderful memories. Even today, after so many years, the friendships she established during those years are still vibrant and strong and they constantly continue to nurture and support her. Just last year, at a David Haas concert at St. Joan of Arc Parish, there were a number of her former students who came up to greet and thank her, and David asked to have his picture taken with her.

Sister Joan of Arc was 79 when she returned to the motherhouse and began a 22 year period of **community service** which meant she did **everything** anyone asked or needed: RTR tutoring, craft work for the gift shop, receptionist and, most important of all, postal service. This included preparing the mail for the mail person, making a snack for him or her, sorting the incoming mail and hand delivering to all the offices and the sisters in the infirmary. All the staff and sisters remember this time because Joanie did it with such a quiet, gentle manner, greeting everyone with her loving smile. She always wished us “smooth sailing.” What a wonderful image!

Another task that she quietly did each day was to deliver the newspaper to each floor by 5 a.m. and make sure the coffee was on! Everyone knew they could find Sister Joan in the lunch room for her 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. coffee break. We often tease it’s the coffee that kept her going all these years!

Two and half years ago Joanie moved to our new convent in the rectory of Nativity parish with Sisters Francine, Mary Ann, Miriam and Althea Anne. She adjusted to leaving her beloved motherhouse just the way she adjusted to all the previous changes in her life. She never complained or mourned; just made comments about missing the motherhouse and concern for her dogwood tree and the plants that came from Lithuania.

Sister Joan of Arc was our first sister to celebrate her 101st birthday and her 85th Jubilee! She did all this with her wry sense of humor and attitude of “well if I have to celebrate, I guess I will!” For her 85th Jubilee, her nephew Chuck and his wife Terry gave her a copy of *Advice from a Tree*; a poem he felt reflected his aunt. The opening lines are:

”Dear Friend
Stand Tall and Proud
Sink your roots deeply into the Earth
Reflect the light of your true nature.”

Joanie love people and nature. Francine tells the story of driving for the first time in New York City with Joanie as her navigator. When Francine asked: “Do we turn here?” Joanie responded: “I don’t know. I am looking at the people!”

Sister Joan was like St. Francis as a true lover of all animals, lovely flowers and trees as well! She was forever reciting the poem “Trees” by Joyce Kilmer. She also wrote her own reflection entitled “Why I Love Trees.” Joanie’s love of nature went beyond just admiring it; she would do drawings and paintings of trees. She was a quiet artist who used her gift in designing beautiful bulletin boards and notes. She could see the beauty in the vines from her beloved grapes, which she ate by the pounds!

She and her faithful buddy, Sister Francine, have made several trips to Costco (as well as Hawaii to visit their dear friend Trudy Comba, who generously covered all their expenses). Francine has shared many stories of Joanie’s ability to talk with everyone and make friends with other shoppers to the point that they always either pay the sisters’ bill or give them money for a treat. She is the ultimate **unintentional** fund-raiser! Not only did she get money, Sister Joan of Arc picked up new friends at the store, especially at Aldi’s. Sister Francine also shared that Sister Joan was not a fighter and would never argue with someone; no, she would stand behind Francine and pray for her!

Sister Francine shared this as a favorite thought of Joanie, The Swiss philosopher Henri Frederic Ameil said,” *To know how to grow old is the master-work of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of life. These individuals have learned how to begin and end, to leave and come, to say goodbye and hello, patiently waiting for the day when the Head Librarian calls them home.*” Sisters Francine, Mary Ann and Althea Anne devoted much of their time this past year to caring for Joanie. We have all felt the loss when Joanie could no longer come to celebrations so all our gatherings were at Nativity. We are so grateful to these three sisters, especially Francine, for their selfless dedication to her care and well-being. Our community is experiencing a very great loss but we know that Joanie would not want us to grieve but to rejoice with her as she knows fully the joy of resurrection.

So, Sister Joan of Arc, our Joanie, it is time for us to say “smooth sailing” to you. May you sail right into the loving arms of your God whom you served all these many years. Thank you for your example of Franciscanism which we treasure. We will miss you more than you could ever know or imagine! Each time the leaves pop out on a tree or they begin to fall, we will know you are sending us graces from heaven.

Written by:

Sister Althea Anne Spencer
Sister Francine McDonald
Sister Peg Markey

Read by Sister Althea Anne Spencer
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