

## **Sister Maureen Killough**

Entered eternal life on December 21, 2016



Before I offer a reflection upon the life of Sister Maureen Killough, I want you to know that I speak not only for myself but for all of the teachers and staff at Sacred Heart School, including our ever faithful volunteers from St. Elizabeth Parish in Wyckoff, the Dominican Fathers who for many years were partners in mission with Sister at Sacred Heart, and, most of all, the children – generation after generation – who so loved Sister Maureen. I also hope to echo the feelings of Sacred Heart’s longest serving teacher – Roosevelt Graham –who is visiting his mother out of state and could not be here today. Like Sister Maureen and Sister Frances, Roosevelt is one of those giants in Sacred Heart’s history upon whose shoulders today’s Sacred Heart School stands. It is my honor as well to do this reflection for the Killough family: Sister Margaret (Peggy) Killough, who is Maureen’s sister in reality and in charity, brother Walter, his wife and their two children, and sister Julia, her late husband and their eight children.

Sister Maureen was rarely alone over the past extraordinarily stressful eight years of her life because of some remarkable people: Sister Peggy, of course, became her sister’s guardian angel. Sister June Favata faithfully and selflessly also watched over Sister Maureen and brought to her the warmth of human companionship, as did Sister Christine, Sister Cathy and so many others here at the Villa.

And finally I speak for Sister Frances Salemi, who in her unfailing devotion to Sister Maureen has given us all a life lesson in friendship, compassion and love.

Sister Maureen...

Last week, on Wednesday, when all the children of Sacred Heart School were gathered together in the beautifully decorated gym – little dancing reindeer in blue gym suits, elves, angels and Wise Men – taking turns singing funny and touching Christmas Carols, class by class, Sister Maureen Killough, Sister of Charity, longest serving principal in Sacred Heart School’s 104 year history and a person of unsurpassing compassion, justice and grace, went home to God. It was in a way... perfect. Sister loved Christmas – the merriment, the music, the holiness of the season and...the Rockettes. Believe me, I know. Having some grown children living in New York, I often found myself sending them off to the Radio City box office to get tickets for Sister Maureen, Sister Frances and Sister’s dear friend Pat Pyatok. It’s only coincidence, I know, but leaving this world while the children of her school were brimming with the special joy of Christmas – singing carols, ringing bells, placing the Baby Jesus in the manger – Sister Maureen’s spirit had to have been there with them.

For more than a quarter century, Sister Maureen was a familiar and reassuring figure standing on the corner of Jackson and Bayview Avenues – directing children, talking with parents – one hand waving at familiar faces driving or walking by, the other in the pocket of her tan raincoat. She usually looked calm and relaxed but her blue eyes darted everywhere and caught everything that was going on. Nothing got passed her. One minute she might reproach a child for running, and in the very next, if something struck her as funny, a laugh would burst forth filled with sheer delight that made anyone – everyone – who heard it smile. No one could avoid smiling when Sister Maureen laughed. Even if you didn’t know what she was laughing at – you still had to smile. It was a joyous, spontaneous sound that instantly lifted your spirits. Sister Maureen’s laugh seemed to come from a deeply held sense of delight - a delight in people and in life.

Sister Maureen’s basic desire in life was to serve God within the community of the Sisters of Charity and nurture, teach and guide the children entrusted to her. From the start, she was clearly a gifted teacher and counselor. I’ve never seen anyone better. Watching Sister Maureen speak with children or parents was a

master class in how to handle interpersonal relationships. Those talents alone were more than enough to guide and support her life as a teacher. Yet apparently God had further plans. Sister Maureen was, I believe, what they refer to in the world of sports as “a natural” – someone who seems to have innate abilities – not learned or acquired – that can mark and direct a life in ways never expected and sometimes not even wanted. The special, natural abilities that Sister Maureen possessed ultimately brought her on a life’s journey she never would have predicted, sometimes didn’t want, but always accepted with faith and humility.

Let’s go back to the beginning. Born and raised in Jersey City, Maureen, along with her two sisters, Peggy and Julia, and brother, Walter, attended St. Joseph School under the direction of the Sisters of Charity. With her formative years guided by these “blessed nuns”, as her father Walter Killough often referred to them, Maureen quite naturally chose to attend the Academy of St. Aloysius, guided also by the Sisters of Charity.

From the very start of her high school years, Maureen showed a few tendencies that normally would not lead to the convent. Her Spanish teacher threw her out of the class as “hopeless” and she was caught, during school hours, in “The La”, a Jersey City soda fountain of some renown. Once, when asked what she loved and remembered most about her time at the Academy, Maureen thoughtfully replied that, without question, the best part of her high school years was ... having fun. More than anything, Maureen remembered that she had so much fun at the Academy – and loved every minute of it.

Sister’s youthful enthusiasm, however did not prevent her from being profoundly affected by the dedication of her teachers, particularly, Sister Mary Genevieve. Sister Maureen told me that everything about Sr. Mary Genevieve spoke of discipline, dignity and a life devoted to a higher purpose. Sister Mary was the model, the blueprint for the vocation Maureen was about to embark upon. Here, in Sister Maureen’s own words, is how she described the first steps she took on her life’s journey. “About three weeks before graduation, I came downstairs into our kitchen where my mother was, as usual, ironing, and I told her I wanted to enter the Sisters of Charity. She didn’t say much, she accepted my pronouncement, as was her way, and she quietly began to get things ready. I would like to be able to say that I heard the voice of God, felt a tap on my shoulder or sensed an inner calling. But I didn’t. I don’t know why I made that decision and believe me if they had placed bets, few would have bet that I would enter the convent and no one would have bet that I would stay. I surprised everyone – including myself.”

I believe that given Sister Maureen’s family and strong faith, the unique community that Jersey City was at that time (everyone placed themselves in the City by parish – even if you weren’t Catholic) and the powerful influence of Catholic schooling that defined Sister’s young life, she couldn’t help but be infused with an abundance of grace. Grace is a powerful force. It defies simple definitions. It is transcendent but reveals itself in practical, very human ways that nudge us through life. We sense its presence most through its consequences. Perhaps that is why we say that it is “amazing”. Grace meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us. And that is what happened to Sister Maureen. The presence of grace within her made her let go of the life she imagined and planned for herself and led her to accept the one that awaited her.

Grace, therefore, brought Maureen to that moment in the kitchen with her mother. It was June of 1952 and by September Maureen found herself teaching first grade to 70 “beautiful children” in Holy Rosary, Elizabeth. She worked for her Bachelor’s degree from the College of St. Elizabeth while teaching at St. Margaret’s in Morristown and later, St. Cecilia’s in Englewood. Maureen was pushed by her superiors to get her Master’s degree from Seton Hall in 1967 and found herself being asked to teach in ever-higher grades despite her protests. Young as she was, Maureen was feisty, held strong opinions and felt amazingly comfortable asking her superiors, “Why?”

In retrospect, you can see that during those years people were beginning to notice all the different ways in which Maureen was a natural. The list is long and we all admired different traits in Maureen, but I’ll mention here my personal favorites: Sister was uniquely charming, shrewdly intelligent and possessed a natural authority. She could mother children and keep them in line at the same time. She had a seemingly effortless

ability to see situations and people as they truly were. You could not fool Sister Maureen. By the early 1960's, whether she liked it or not, Sister Maureen was looking more and more like a leader.

Then, in 1968, Sister Maureen's world change irrevocably and in a way she never expected. After 15 years of teaching in various suburban parishes, Sister was transferred to the one place where she thought she would never again find herself: Jersey City and the inner-city school of St. Patrick's. She was extremely upset and tried her best to come to terms with the situation. In later years, Sister told me that although she did not see herself as a social activist, she dealt with the shock of this unexpected change by telling herself that she might possibly have the opportunity to save some people's lives and perhaps even their souls.

It was not to be. To quote Sister, "I was confronted with children burdened by the harsh realities of poverty, ignorance, dysfunctional families and substance abuse. Yet I did not save them...they saved me. The essence of what happened to me as I started my years in Jersey City is that I went from believing that I more or less knew it all to not being sure if I knew *anything at all*. I went from reasonable confidence to quite a bit of self-doubt and soul-searching. I went from being in control to feeling totally out of control.....And I thank God for it all."

Sister went on: "My years in Jersey City have brought me frustration and exhilaration, sorrow and joy. I lost children to drugs, to petty crime and to the superficial but powerful lure of the street. I saw children die – through illness, through fire but most of all, despite our best efforts, children who died in spirit. But I have also seen the triumph of the human spirit and was humbled by the people and the children I met. Our children see things that no child should see and hear things no child should hear. Yet I am continually amazed – not that our children are occasionally angry or act up, but that day after day, they come into school – particularly the little ones – smiling at you and hugging you. If you want to see the face of hope, of God's love – come to Sacred Heart and see my children."

About 4 years after her arrival at St. Patrick's, Sister Maureen came to Sacred Heart and for the next 25 years she led, guided, taught, chastised, consoled, fed, nursed, cleaned, clothed, fought for, cried for and lived her entire life for the children of Jersey City. She was as respected as she was loved. Maureen received the Distinguished Educator Award; the Caritas Award from her alma mater, The Academy of St. Aloysius; and, of course, she was Irish Woman of the Year... twice. Yet Sister Maureen's stature within the community, her formidable presence within the lives of her students was always matched by a touching humility about all that she did. Maureen indeed brought justice and love while walking humbly with her God. Her spirit, her natural talents and abundant grace blessed her life and the lives of all who knew her. In the end, as she endured for almost eight years, particularly cruel infirmities, she was valiant – and proved just how strong her heart was, in every way.

Let me give Sister Maureen the last word: "While I did not hear God's voice telling me what to do with my life – telling me to enter the Sisters of Charity, I know that I hear it every time a child passes me in the hall and says, "Good morning Sister Maureen". A Sister of Charity is no longer what I am – it's who I am. And as long as there is a child who is hungry or who wants to learn, or who needs his jacket washed, I pray that God will continue to give me the privilege of being able to help."

"Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come. 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home."

~ Rosemary Sekel, Advancement Director,  
Sacred Heart School