

Sister Mary Kathleen Flanagan, SC
Entered eternal life on January 6, 2024

Sister Mary Kathleen Flanagan, a Sister of Charity for 64 years, died on the feast of the Epiphany. It seems very appropriate for Kathy to have gone to God on that day. The Wise Men followed the star which led them to Jesus as they presented their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Sister Kathleen in her long-life journey followed her star – her gift of faith – to an ever-deeper relationship with Jesus.

Raised in Madison of devout Catholic parents Andy and Irene Flanagan and her aunts Bernadette and Gertrude Finley, Kathy and her big sister Maureen became faith-filled Christians at an early age. They both attended Saint Vincent Martyr grammar school and Bayley Ellard High School where they excelled in academics. Kathy also played basketball. She and Laddie, the convent dog, ran up and down the court together. I don't know how many games they won, but they both seemed to enjoy it. Kathy was an active member of the Sodality of Our Lady and in her senior year was chosen to crown Mary Queen.



In the fall after her graduation from Bayley Ellard she entered the Sisters of Charity and became a devout postulant and novice. While some found ways around the rules they were expected to obey, Kathy kept the letter and the spirit. I often thought she might have been born on the Feast of the Holy Innocents.

When she made her first vows and was sent on her first mission to teach at Saint Augustine School in Union City, Sister Bobby O'Hea and company were eager to tutor her in classroom management. Among other things they taught her that in the event of a fire drill she was to take the American flag down from the wall and hold it high as she accompanied her class down to the schoolyard. When it actually happened, Kathy dutifully and proudly entered the schoolyard holding the flag high; the rest of the flagless faculty had a good laugh. In her next assignment to teach history at Saint Cecilia High School in Englewood I'm pretty sure she got a lot of "useful" coaching as well.

When Kathy was living at Xavier Center Sister Carita assigned her to be groundskeeper. In order to be able to push a lawn mower up the steep hill she hammered nails into the soles of her shoes. Unfortunately, the nails, instead of digging into the lawn, dug into the soles of her feet. Many years later she got to ride the tractor-lawn mower at Harvey Cedars. She loved it – and so did her feet.

Kathy was a good friend of Sister Ceil Mary. They discovered there were horses down in the cow barn across Park Avenue. They were happy riders all over the campus until Mother Josephine heard of it. She told them to stay off the front of the motherhouse. I think she feared that their horses would besmirch the pristine beauty of the front lawn and parking area.

Kathy's serious journey began when her travels took her to Collegeville, Minnesota where she met the Benedictine monks. Building on what had begun in her early years under the tutelage of Father Leonard Cassell, OSB, Kathy studied for and received a master's degree in religious studies. More than that, she had breathed in the monastic atmosphere which moved her more deeply into her journey toward union with God. She also began to look more deeply into the lives of Saint Elizabeth Seton and Blessed Miriam Teresa. She shared her knowledge of their lives with us, making us more aware of Elizabeth's history in the early U.S. Church and the Church's role in the early life of the Sisters of Charity. Kathy also worked with Sisters of Charity of other congregations to do research and to write of Elizabeth and her legacy. She put a more human face on Blessed Miriam Teresa and drew others of us to appreciate her holiness. I'm not aware that Kathy received any of the mystical gifts that were Sister Miriam Teresa's, but I do think she lived a rich, contemplative life.

After a few years at Barry College in Florida where she lived with Sister Myra Jackson, who remained a faithful friend, she also taught Diocesan seminarians and deacons. Then she returned to live in New York City with

Sister Chris Reyelt while she pursued a doctorate at Union Theological Seminary. Sister Kathy and Sister Chris became companions on their journey, frequently joined for meals by Father Dan Berrigan who led them by his words and example.

Having received her Ph.D., Kathy returned home to teach at the College of Saint Elizabeth. Here, both the young women and the sister students loved her courses, both for the knowledge she imparted but also for the obvious love of God she shared.

The final phase of Kathy's journey was, to our minds, the most difficult. She lost so many of the gifts she had – the gold of her intellect, the frankincense of her prayer life ascending to the throne of God. The myrrh remained – a bitter though fragrant substance that represented the increasingly total care that she would need. Sister Helene Hicks, IHM, was the Good Samaritan who accompanied her in her early confused days. Like the Holy Family who fled into exile in Egypt, Kathy entered her desert of dementia. She lost her ability to recognize people, even old friends. I once asked her if she prayed. She said, "No." I asked her if God spoke to her. She said, "Yes." Who knew what was going on within her? What I do believe is that God was very close to Kathy as she approached the end of her journey.

The noted theologian Sister Elizabeth Ann Johnson tells us that no one really knows what happens after we die, but we trust in God's promises. What are a few of those promises? That our sins, though scarlet, will be made whiter than snow; that our sins are forgiven not seven times, but seventy times seven times. Jesus told us that in His Father's house there are many mansions and he went before us to prepare a place for us. In the vast mystery who is God there is a minor mystery which is death and its surroundings.

Last Saturday after attending the beautiful liturgy to honor Saint Elizabeth Seton on her feast day my niece Nancy, Marilyn Thie and I visited Kathy for the first time in over a year. (Thank God for Sister Liz Kremp, Sister Beverly Ornes and Patti D'Esmond who visited her frequently, bringing chocolate.) Kathy was non-responsive to us but looked lovely – youthful and peaceful. To some it may seem a coincidence, but I consider it a gift. As well, I wonder, I just wonder if God sent Elizabeth Seton to accompany Kathy over the last speed bumps and potholes as she neared her journey's end. What I believe is that God was very close to Kathy in those last few days.

Finally, after years of lying almost comatose, Kathy came to the end of her journey when she came face to face with Jesus. Can you imagine the joy they shared??

Kathy, we have missed you and we will miss you, but we rejoice that as you have completed your earthly journey you have earned your eternal rest in the company of God and the Holy Family whom you loved and served so well.

Sister Mary Canavan, SC