The Duffy Family of Brighton, Massachusetts welcomed their second child into their lives and named her Joan, which in Hebrew means “gift from God”. Two more children joined the household, and many happy memories were created growing up in a multigenerational family. Daily life was punctuated by conversations, visits with relatives and neighbors, and participation in parish events. Sunday dinners were a highlight of the week! Much like the family dinners portrayed in the television drama “Blue Bloods,” Joan remembers her parents, John Henry and Mary, enjoying the visits of their grandchildren as her mother prepared their favorite meals with special desserts, and her father spent time with them in his garden. A very special visitor was Mrs. Duffy’s brother, a Franciscan priest who often stayed with the family while giving retreats and missions in local churches. In this home, Joan Duffy learned and honed her skills in generous hospitality and attentive listening, skills that serve her well to this day!

Joan attended Saint Columbkille School and participated in C.Y.O. and other parish activities designed to engage the youth of high school age. This involvement grew into a deeper faith and love of her rich, vibrant, and inviting parish community. The annual Cantata was enjoyed year after year. Teachers in the elementary, middle, and high schools were the Sisters of St. Joseph and Joan observed, learned from, and decided to join them. She was a good student and had the desire to serve God and others. So, at age seventeen, Joan, along with four other young women from Saint Columkille Parish, went to Framingham to begin life as a Sisters of St. Joseph. Five women from one parish - that was unusual!

Time in the novitiate passed quickly. Joan learned many things and received the name, Sister John Miriam, by which she was known during her early religious life. Her first experience as a teacher was with roughly fifty or so twelve-year old youngsters in Winthrop. Other school assignments to teach mathematics and physics followed. While a part-time faculty member in the Math Department at Regis College, Joan also served as the Administrator of the Regis College Research Center - a work-study project with Hanscom Air Force Base involving scientific research using Regis students to compile data. Sister Joan’s teaching career was earmarked by a deep respect for all those with whom she interacted, and these “dear neighbors” in turn deeply respected the soft-spoken teacher and friend.

A time came (after Vatican II) when the Sisters of St. Joseph asked Sister Joan to replace a long-tenured sister as Treasurer. Throughout the country, sisters assigned to similar positons in their congregations were gathering and learning necessary skills for these roles. For seven years, Sister Joan represented the Congregation and developed leadership in the field, which resulted in her becoming a national consultant to other religious congregations and enhanced her knowledge of, and respect for, women in a variety of places. A camaraderie developed among them that is a larger circle of the “dear neighbor”.

In 1994, Sister Joan’s leadership skills were called upon by the membership of the Sisters of St. Joseph. She was elected to Leadership in the Congregation as a General Councilor. Locally, Joan’s expertise was sought in important archdiocesan discussions about sisters’ stipends and continuing care. A deeper spirituality grew within Sister Joan since much emphasis was placed on prayer for guidance as various groups tackled difficult issues involving all religious, and the Archdiocese. New ministries blossomed within the Congregation. More outreach to the vulnerable “dear neighbor” was envisioned and actualized. Casserly House and Bethany Hill School are examples of this outreach.

“I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”
Psalm 27
Then, in 2000, Sister Joan was called to be president of the Congregation. With prayer and reflection, she agreed to companion the sisters in this special relationship. Many changes and decisions occurred during the years 2000-2006. The renovation of the Motherhouse into an environmentally sound residence was a learning experience. Encouragement of the associates marked these times. Some powerfully sad moments were lived, endured, and graced. At no time did Sister Joan’s trust in God and God’s support of the sisters ever waver.

In 2006, freed of leadership responsibilities, Joan deepened her own spirituality, began offering spiritual direction, and engaged in retreat ministry. Today, Sister Joan continues to companion those desirous of deepening their relationship with a loving God in her ministry of spiritual direction. She is blessed in her ministry as a retreat director at Saint Joseph Retreat Center in Cohasset, Miramar Retreat Center in Duxbury, and at Bethany Health Care Center in Framingham. Throughout her life, Sister Joan has experienced and invited others to know “of the goodness of God in the land of the living.”

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