Joy is the echo of Christ’s life within us.¹

Baptized Kathleen Phillips, Sister Maura was born on April 25, 1914, in Defiance, Ohio. She was the third and last child born to James and Catherine (O’Donnell) Phillips. “I was blessed,” Sister Maura wrote in autobiography, “with a wonderful mother and father. I never remember hearing an unkind word in our home.” She went on to describe her family.

My father, a strict puritanical Protestant, was born in Ada, Ohio, in 1877. He taught in the local school and later moved into the telephone business in Norwalk, Ohio, where he met and married my mother. My mother would never divulge the year she was born – not even for her grave marker. She used to say, ‘We are related to the kings of Ireland,” whatever that meant, since every proud Irishman loved to make the same boast. My father joined the Church in order to marry my mother.

My two older brothers, Donald and Richard, brought me great joy and the feeling of joy was mutual. During one of the horrible epidemics Don developed infantile paralysis at an early age that affected his chest and lifting power of his arms. Dick was blessed with an outgoing, lovable disposition and personality which made him loved by [his] peers and associates of any age. Dick and I were both trained in music from an early age.

After eight years at St. Mary School with the Adrian Dominicans, Sister Maura attended the local public high school. Because of the Depression and what she described as “changes in family finances,” she decided to study at Defiance College and had begun the admitting process, when she received word that she had received a scholarship to attend St. Joseph College in Adrian. “Sounds like the Holy Spirit was again leading me to the Adrian Dominicans!” she wrote.

After studying three years at St. Joseph College and teaching for two years in a grade school in Defiance, Ohio, Sister Maura entered the postulate on July 2, 1938, at the age of twenty-four. That same year she received her bachelor’s degree with a major in French from St. Joseph College. “I literally ran away from home,” she wrote. Her decision to enter the Congregation was difficult for the family but it was traumatic for her mother. It took many years before she was able to accept her daughter’s decision.

Sister Maura made first profession on January 4, 1940, and was immediately sent to St. Mary High School in Royal Oak, Michigan, to teach religion and English until June. The fall of that same year, she was assigned to St. Ambrose where she would continue to teach music to both grade and high school classes for the next eleven years. She described those years as “challenging, interesting, intense, and spiritual.” She went on to say:

¹ Joseph Marmion
I was part of the move from the old wooden house convent on Alter Road to the gym during the building of the new convent. The attached old rectory housed the “sleeping quarters” for the twenty-four Sisters. We were lined up on cots like soldiers in an army tent! These days, however, provided some of my happiest in religious life.

During her years at St. Ambrose, Maura studied music at Siena Heights College (formerly St. Joseph College). She also began her graduate studies at Columbia University in New York City, where in 1951 she received her master’s degree in applied music.

From 1951 to 1973, Sister Maura divided her time between Barry College in Miami and Siena Heights College in Adrian. The first twelve years were at Barry College. Once again she faced some unique housing challenges. She wrote:

My initial surprise at Barry was the housing of the music department. Across the street were two small wooden houses: one, the piano department, the other house, with an attached wooden frame for choral/instrumental room, housed the voice department. We were in constant sound competition – the sound waves had little distance to travel between the two old frame houses. The happiness, happenings, and programs the new building [eventually] provided, never exceeded that which came from the two wooden houses.

From 1963 to 1973, Sister Maura taught music and directed the choral program at Siena Heights College. Here again, she was part of a move from the old auditorium that housed the music department to a new building. At the remembrance service, Susan Matych-Hager, former student and retired faculty member at Siena Heights, shared this story about Walsh Hall.

It was a disaster; the plaster was coming down and the light board didn’t work well. There seemed to be no money for repairs, so Sister Maura bought gray paint and recruited me to help her paint the back stairs and floor. Maura was in her white habit and as we went along she took off her cuffs, and then off came the scapular, the veil, belt, rosary and keys. It was okay because it was just the two of us. But when we got to the bottom of the stairs, someone came in and said to her, “Sister, Father So-and-so is here to see you.” She went up the freshly painted stairs to collect pieces of her habit and get presentable to see the priest. I had to go back up the stairs and patch up the paint. Maura gave everything she had. She was very generous of spirit...physically beautiful and beautiful inside.

During Sister Maura’s years at Siena, her mother was allowed to live in the old infirmary during her final years. Sister Maura said, “It was a special blessing and privilege for my mother, for me and for my family.” Her mother died in Bixby Hospital in 1970.

In 1973, Sister Maura began preparing for a new ministry. She enrolled in a Clinical Pastoral Education Program at the University of Michigan in preparation for hospital chaplaincy. But when she learned about a new and challenging opportunity at Gesu Parish in Miami she knew this was the ministry to which she would devote her remaining years of ministry. In 1974 she began serving as pastoral minister and choir director at Gesu Parish but by 1976, her ministry evolved into directing a center for the poor and elderly at Gesu Parish in downtown Miami.
During the remembrance service, Sister Maria Goretti Browne, Vicaress of the Adrian Vicariate, shared the following about the Center’s early days.

*Maura knew that establishing an entirely new ministry brought many problems and concerns. One was converting a 90’x 180’ hall that was the church basement, into a livable, workable center for the elderly. What do you do with a falling ceiling, two hundred old pews, one thousand old books, two hundred dead plants? Also there was no paint, no chairs, no tables, no running water and no money.*

*But with the help of a long-time Gesu friend and lawyer, the Center received funding for a hot meal program and thus the downtown Senior Citizens Center was established and continued for twenty-five years with Sister Maura “caring for the whole person: spiritually, emotionally, psychologically and physically.” Of course that included entertaining people with her piano playing.*

Sister Maura retired in 1999 and five years later returned to Adrian, where she lived at the Dominican Life Center/Maria. She died on July 26, 2016, at the age of one hundred two and in the seventy-seventh year of her religious profession.

Father Jack Dister, SJ, Sister Maura’s cousin, sent the following message that was read during the remembrance service.

*While it is a great joy for me to know that my cousin is now with the Lord, I share with you sorrow at her passing. I enjoyed visits with her when I was still able to drive to Adrian almost yearly. The last time I was there I recall her playing the piano from her wheelchair and singing for us. How typical this was of her, both in her career in Miami and Adrian. I remember too her work for the homeless in the basement of the Jesuit church in Miami and her work directing glee clubs including a joint concert with John Carroll University’s glee club while I was teaching there. I hope the memory of Kathleen Maura Phillips, OP, will continue to inspire you as it does me.*

Sister Betty Flaherty, OP, gave the homily during the funeral liturgy. Here is an excerpt from her reflection.

*Today’s scripture readings² offer images of flowing water as models for Maura. Isaiah wrote, “I have called you by name, you are mine…” And John’s Gospel tells us of a woman who carried a heavy jar for well water needed in her village. Both describe Maura’s life. Her flexibility is evident in her own words. “The changes from convent living to living alone at age sixty proved both dramatic and traumatic.” She added, “No words can ever express my love for the Adrian Dominican Congregation. I have been given the opportunity and grace to grow in love and the companionship of Jesus and to serve Him through service to the people of God.”*

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² Isaiah 43:1-2; John 4:5-15
Left: Sister Maura at Barry College (University) with Magdalena Ezoe, before Sister Magdalena entered the Congregation. Right: Sister Maura with Sister Therese Mary Foote, OP (left).

Right: With Nod, her shepherd dog, before Sister Maura’s entrance into the Adrian Dominican Congregation
Left: Entertaining the seniors at the Downtown Senior Citizen Center in Miami. Right: Archbishop John C. Favalora of Miami presents the Outstanding Service to the Miami Diocese Award to Sister Maura.

Left: Sister Maura stands behind other Adrian Dominican musicians, from left: Sisters Denise Mainville, Mary Catherine Brennan, and Marie Carol Hurley. Right: At her parish Golden Jubilee celebration.