

# Joan Kirby, RSCJ



Birth: May 24, 1926  
Profession: Feb. 10, 1956  
Death: Sept. 9, 2015

Religious of the Sacred Heart Joan Kirby died Wednesday, September 9, 2015 in her community in New York City. Remembered for her inclusivity and generosity of spirit, her life will be celebrated in a Mass of Christian Burial on Thursday, September 17<sup>th</sup> at 11:00 a.m. at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church, 457 West 51st St. (between 9th & 10th Aves.) in New York City. Burial will be at the Society of the Sacred Heart cemetery at Kenwood at a later date.

Joan Carol Kirby was born in New York City May 24, 1926, the second of four daughters born to Daniel B. and Cecilia K. Kirby. In addition to her parents, she was predeceased by her sisters Betty Wooters and Janet Clark. She is survived by her sister Cecilia (Billie) Mullen, Bronxville, New York, numerous

nieces and nephews and her sisters in the Society of the Sacred Heart.

A graduate of the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Maplehurst and Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart, she entered the Society of the Sacred Heart at Kenwood in Albany, December 8, 1947. She made her first vows at Kenwood in 1950 and her final profession in Rome on February 10, 1956.

Sister Kirby's first assignment after making her first vows was as head of the lower school at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Overbrook, Pennsylvania, 1950-55. Following final profession, she studied at the University of Louvain in Belgium, where she earned a licentiate in philosophy. In 1959, she was assigned to Stone Ridge Academy of the Sacred Heart in Washington, D.C., where she taught history and also served as head of the boarding school. In 1963, she became the first headmistress at Stuart Country Day School of the Sacred Heart in Princeton, New Jersey, where she spent four happy years. She was director of students at Newton College of the Sacred Heart, Newton, Massachusetts from 1967-69. In 1969 she became headmistress of the Convent of the Sacred Heart (91<sup>st</sup> Street) in New York, a position she held until 1981.

While still working at 91<sup>st</sup> Street, Sister Kirby joined the newly-formed community on West 49<sup>th</sup> Street, in the "Hell's Kitchen" neighborhood. In 1981, Sister Kirby began exploring new areas of ministry in this neighborhood. From 1981 to 1984, she served as a housing counselor and director of home ownership for Housing Conservation Coordinators. Broadening her vision, she also served as executive director and president of Homes for the Homeless in New York, 1986-88, and as a member of the Community Planning Board.

In 1994, Sister Kirby found her true passion when she became the director of the Temple of Understanding (TOU) in New York, an interfaith organization affiliated with the United Nations. The TOU works to educate adults and young people across cultures and religion to create understanding and peaceful co-existence. Sister Kirby remained with the Temple of Understanding, first as director, then as its representative to the United Nations, until 2014, when her illness made it necessary for her to retire. In 2010, the Temple of Understanding presented Sister Kirby with the Interfaith Visionary Lifetime Achievement Award, "for promoting interreligious values at the United Nations, her lifelong commitment to addressing human rights and ecological issues, and her passionate devotion to the development of young leaders." *UN Secretary General BAN Ki-Moon wrote at the time, "We are especially mindful of the special role you have played in advancing the Millennium Development Goals and interfaith and intercultural dialogue, as well as confronting climate change. I am also thankful that you have taken the time to nurture young global citizens from all parts of the world. Your leadership has been exemplary. Your influence profound. I thank you."*

The TOU experience brought Sister Kirby into contact with the world of Buddhism, which had a profound effect on her spirituality for the last twenty years of her life.

Sister Kirby recently wrote, "People ask me why I practice Zen Buddhism. I do so because Buddhism has taught me to stop looking for Jesus 'out there.' For decades I sought to regenerate an inner awareness. I imitated the affections, feelings, attitudes of Jesus, but always as someone, something beyond me – outside – other than me. Buddhism has taught me to stop reaching, looking outside of my inner self ... I

am Christ. I receive Christ as my food; I have been permeated by the living Jesus. ... This prompts me to live in the present moment because this is where God is."

Memorial contributions may be made to the Society of the Sacred Heart, 4120 Forest Park Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63108 or to Encore Community Services, 239 West 49th St., New York, NY 10019.

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## **Comments**

### **In praise and memory of Joan Kirby**

Submitted by [Sandy Theunick](#) on Wed, 2015-09-09 22:07

I first met Joan as a freshman in high school at Stone Ridge. "Mother Kirby" was our debate coach, and although my gifts were limited in that area, she encouraged all of us to work hard to represent our school well at tournaments. She was then our Third Academic Class Mistress. We loved her and she loved us. She was a brilliant teacher and confidante of many of us. She continued to be a personal support and friend particularly during my time in New York. Always an example of openness to new ideas, new ways of being, new understandings of the world community. Many of us owe a lot to Joan for making us strong and better women. There is not a doubt in my mind that the Lord will bless and keep her for her goodness and example. My sincere condolences to her RSCJ sisters and family. Joan, you did good. Love and aloha.

- [reply](#)

### **Mother Kirby certainly**

Submitted by Ruth Wade on Wed, 2015-09-09 23:43

Mother Kirby certainly accomplished what she prayed for and with such style and grace! What a steady and loving hand she extended to each of us through our Junior year. I will always carry a piece of her in my heart. Mahalo and Aloha

- [reply](#)

### **Mother Kirby**

Submitted by Kay DeFranceaux... on Wed, 2015-09-09 23:59

Mother Kirby was a great woman, a great teacher, and a great nun. A true role model for us crazy high school girls and as Sandy mentioned, staying "with" many after we flew away from the nest. My recollections had to do with the SR boarding school and the time we "short sheeted" her bed. She made everything happy. Rest in Peace dear lady. Mahalo and aloha!

- [reply](#)

### **Very fond memories of Mother**

Submitted by ANA M AZCARATE on Thu, 2015-09-10 08:26

Very fond memories of Mother Kirby. She got us up in the morning, had her all day in Third Academics and put us in bed at night. Kay, funny you should mentioned the "short sheeted". We all missed when she left to open the new school in New Jersey. Great role model. May she rest in peace. Pray for all your "girls". Love you.

- [reply](#)

### **"Mother" Kirby, you taught me**

Submitted by Patty Myler on Thu, 2015-09-10 11:32

"Mother" Kirby, you taught me so many life-learning lessons as a 3rd Academic student at Stone Ridge, I remember them well. A few years ago I had a wonderful opportunity to re-connect with you when you came to speak at Stone Ridge, while I was working there. During our visit I reminded you of the "lessons" that you had taught me, you gasped in horror as you said they seemed so strict. They weren't and they were lessons well learned that have guided me for the rest of my life. Rest in peace grand lady, you touched so many of us with your wisdom and grace, I know you are in a better place!

- [reply](#)

### **You were such an inspiring**

Submitted by Gussie Conway on Thu, 2015-09-10 17:09

You were such an inspiring role model for me while I interned for you at the Temple of Understanding. Your smile brought such warmth to the room, and your determination and passion encouraged every intern to work to their best potential. When I would meet with you, you always made me feel

accomplished and special, but also that I always had more to give. I hope to one day be as generous, thoughtful, and hardworking as you were. I will miss you and will think of you often!

- [reply](#)

### **Sr. Joan Kirby**

Submitted by Victoria Allen on Thu, 2015-09-10 17:10

It was my privilege to have been hired to teach Upper School English at 91st Street. Over the years, Sr. Kirby and I kept in touch, as recently as this summer. She was a truly exemplary woman: intelligent, modest, a worker on behalf of others, a woman whose soft and gentle voice reflected her peaceful, kindly nature, as well as her intellect and thoughtfulness. 91st Street was magic, and Sr. Kirby was a big part in making it so. God rest her soul and comfort her family and all whose lives she touched. I will never forget her.

- [reply](#)

### **Thank you Mother Kirby and all who serve as she did**

Submitted by Jerry Flach on Thu, 2015-09-10 17:33

The present is so rich and requires so much of our attention as we continue to assimilate the wisdom and strength from Sacred Heart embodied in this woman and the many hands of service instilled. I just learned that Sister Joan Kirby was a Zen Buddhist. I am also a Catholic Zen Buddhist practitioner often feeling not great at either but perhaps a little better now knowing we share this ever evolving path. May God continue to bless and lead us on. Gratefully yours.

- [reply](#)

### **Sister Kirby**

Submitted by Frank Mieles on Thu, 2015-09-10 17:39

Easily one of the most wonderful human beings I've had the wonderful pleasure of knowing. Her eternal smile will live on forever. I always would look forward to events she would attend, she would make you feel special with her presence. An Angel in every sense of the word. Rest in peace.....you will be missed.

- [reply](#)

### **Sister Kirby at 91st Street**

Submitted by Susan Brady Konig on Thu, 2015-09-10 18:29

Mother Kirby arrived at 91st Street when I was entering the first grade. We all soon found out that she had legs and hair as the habits got shorter and the veil was retired. One week at Primes, she announced to us that she had seen a new play, Godspell, in which the character of Jesus was portrayed as a hippy with suspenders and a t-shirt. Well, I thought, it's 1971 and we're all going to hell in a handbasket. We didn't -- and Sister Kirby saw us graduate in 1980, ready to face transitions and changes after so many life lessons at Sacred Heart.

- [reply](#)

### **Sister Kirby**

Submitted by kik skakel williams on Thu, 2015-09-10 18:44

Sr. Kirby was a family friend of the Skakel's in her youth. I had the great pleasure of meeting her several times. It was wonderful to hear her stories about my family. I feel blessed for knowing her, even slightly.

- [reply](#)

### **Thank you Mother Kirby**

Submitted by Marian Lizzio on Thu, 2015-09-10 19:45

I was a student at 91st street from 1969 - 1972 when Mother Kirby was the Headmistress. She provided the example of a woman of intelligence, strength and faith. We were blessed to have had her as our Headmistress, a role model of what it was to be a daughter of the Sacred Heart.

- [reply](#)

### **Sister Kirby**

Submitted by Christina Horner on Thu, 2015-09-10 20:57

Sister Kirby was a warm and inspiring headmistress. As a young girl at Sacred Heart my memories of her are of feeling nurtured and safe in her presence. My experience with her was foundational as she modeled strength, intellect and grace. Rest in peace Sister Kirby and Thank You.

- [reply](#)

### **Among the cloud of witnesses**

Submitted by Dennis Leder, sj on Thu, 2015-09-10 23:27

Dear Joan, your leaving is a great loss! So many memories: times at 91st Street, breakfasts at the Great Jones Diner, Masses at 49th and later at 51st Street (most recently in August), visits to the Temple of Understanding. It's your spirit that has replenished my own. My prayers and love sail northward from Guatemala.

- [reply](#)

### **Thank you, Lord, for Joan**

Submitted by Pat Dw on Fri, 2015-09-11 00:16

Thank you, Lord, for Joan Kirby!

- [reply](#)

### **I taught mathematics at**

Submitted by JoAnn O'Brien on Fri, 2015-09-11 09:08

I taught mathematics at Sacred Heart from 1969-1984. I was 21 years old when I started and right out of college and she was my first Head Mistress. She guided me to become a good teacher. She had faith in me when I made mistakes as a beginning teacher. I remember her as a warm and loving person to everyone she met. She will be greatly missed!

- [reply](#)

### **An inspiring life**

Submitted by Nanette Byrnes on Fri, 2015-09-11 09:22

As a student at Sacred Heart during part of Sister Kirby's tenure I have such fond memories of her kindness, her dignity and of her remarkable way of reminding us gently when we were perhaps not on our best behavior how we could do better. I can't count how many handfuls of her candy corn popcorn I ate or how often I heard her laugh. When she left, I remember parents wondering why she would go, she was so good at what she was doing. But reading of her life after school is further inspiration. Ever curious and compassionate, she followed her values and fulfilled a remarkable destiny. I was so lucky to have known her on one step of her journey.

- [reply](#)

### **Thank you Sr. Kirby**

Submitted by Erin Hylton on Fri, 2015-09-11 10:54

My heart is so full of gratitude and love this evening to have known such a phenomenal woman. My 1st boss, Sr. Joan Kirby passed away yesterday. She was so generous and full of great wisdom. It was an honor to intern with her at the United Nations, my first ever internship, and develop a lasting connection to her work and spirit. She continued to inspire me as she tirelessly worked for others and her interfaith philosophy drew me closer in my understanding of my own faith and how to develop community with everyone.

- [reply](#)

### **Thank you for loving me, Sr. Kirby!**

Submitted by Laura Booth on Fri, 2015-09-11 11:33

I WAS trouble! I was a handful and you loved me through it. Life has not been easy for me and you cautioned me that this would be so. I Thank you for reminding always that, no matter what, my "inner Jesus" was always with me and to "tap into" Him. This was 35 years ago, and your words are still with me. God bless you!

- [reply](#)

### **Joan Kirby, rscj**

Submitted by Joanne Curley K... on Fri, 2015-09-11 13:58

When I came to New York in the spring of 1996 with my 12 year old daughter, Lizzie, the admissions had closed for all of the private schools. Only two would see us, Dalton and Sacred Heart. Dalton said they were interested and would get back to us, but Joan Kirby said: "We are full. But we will make room

because Lizzie should be here." And she did, and Lizzie spent middle school at 91st Street. A woman of few words and great action.

- [reply](#)

### **Sr. Joan Kirby**

Submitted by Gloria Sola on Fri, 2015-09-11 15:47

The Stone Ridge class of '63 has memories of what a wonderful history teacher she was, but I have a photo of her holding up pieces of her rosary after participating in an annual faculty-student field hockey game! She was a wonderful, warm person and friend to us all. Peace.

- [reply](#)

### **Thank you**

Submitted by Miranda G Lupion on Fri, 2015-09-11 15:59

Rest peacefully Sister Joan Kirby. That summer before junior year of high school spent at the UN under your direction cemented my decision to study international relations and pursue a career in public diplomacy. I will carry your wisdom, optimism, and unwavering support wherever life takes me.

- [reply](#)

### **Talk About The Power of Example**

Submitted by Tracy Flynn on Fri, 2015-09-11 21:37

Talk about the power of example. As Headmistress of 91st street in the 70s and 80s, Sister Joan Kirby was strong, passionate, stylish and loving. I was continually impressed by her unwavering spirit of generosity in helping others. When caught smoking, she was a force to be reckoned with and I knew where I stood.... in the doghouse. Stern but fair. I was so impressed to learn of her work with the UN and interest in Buddhism. She was a shimmering star and will be missed. May you rest in peace Sister Kirby, knowing the profound impact you had on so many young lives.

- [reply](#)

### **I am eternally grateful to**

Submitted by Suzanne Price on Sat, 2015-09-12 11:11

I am eternally grateful to Sister Joan Kirby for hiring me to teach English at Sacred Heart in 1972. The following 35 years were blessedly joyous and fulfilling. May you rest in peace.

- [reply](#)

### **Joan Kirby RSCJ**

Submitted by Irene Constantine on Sat, 2015-09-12 19:04

I am sad to hear of the death of Mother Kirby. She was a deeply devoted and blessed person. Love, Irene Constantine

- [reply](#)

### **Joan Kirby RSCJ**

Submitted by Sally Edwards on Tue, 2015-09-15 23:01

Mother Kirby hired me to be 7th grade Class Mistress, and high school history teacher in 1964 when I was a newly-minted MAT. As she did for hundreds of others, she gently encouraged with her wisdom, faith, compassion and sense of humor. It's fascinating and encouraging in this time of volatile religious intolerance to learn that her personal faith expanded to include Buddhism. Her voice will be sorely missed. Rest in peace, gentle soul.

- [reply](#)

### **UN Summer Internship Program**

Submitted by Ian Humphreys on Wed, 2015-09-16 11:20

I had known Sr. Kirby for many years as a teacher at 91st Street where she would come to tell us about her work at the U.N. through the Temple of Understanding. I was always so impressed with her passion and compassion for the world and the peoples. I was so very pleased when she called me one day to offer me a position as the Director of the U. N. Summer Internship Program through the Temple of Understanding. What a wonderful experience to spend the summer at the U.N. with a group of dedicated young men and women. Thank you, Sr. Kirby, for having faith in me, and may you rest in peace.

- [reply](#)

## **Joan Kirby RSCJ**

Submitted by Mary-Jane Ferri... on Thu, 2015-09-17 11:48

In the summer of 1967, Kit Collins, Joan Kirby and I made an "experimental" retreat together. Joan and Kit had been studying together at Manhattanville that summer while I had been starting my preamble to doctoral studies at Boston College. We stayed at Greenwich in one of the cottages. Each day we would go somewhere in the City or in the surrounding towns and immerse ourselves in whatever was going on there, then come back to Greenwich to reflect and share. We went to airports, to museums, to markets etc..I'd like to think that that retreat and the presence of Joan in our daly reflections was a catalyst for my own future focus on the "here-and-nowness" of God's presence and action in everything we meet in our lives. Thank you Joan, MJFerrier RSCJ

- [reply](#)

## **Remembering Sr. Joan**

Submitted by Jason on Sun, 2015-09-20 19:44

For 7 years I was a caregiver for a man with Alzheimer's. He had worked with Sr. Joan years before at the United Nations, and so every Tuesday he and I would go there and join Sr. Joan for lunch. Anyone who knew her knew how unforgettable she was: Feisty, opinionated, intelligent, passionate, and compassionate. I always marveled how, even in her early 80s, she managed two jobs. And I will never forget the many wonderful, thoughtful conversations we had during those lunches. I know she was older, but it still hits hard that she has passed away because we've lost an amazing person.