

**SISTER M. BAPTISTA MADDEN**  
**June 17, 1919 — January 25, 2005**



Mary Helen Madden entered the Sisters of Charity on September 8, 1944. Seven months to the day, April 8, 1945, she received, along with the habit, her new name, Baptista. Her name changed, but not the continuity of her Christ-centered life-theme expressed in faith, commitment, and loving, joyful service. Like her patron saint, John the Baptist, she spent her life helping make a pathway for the Lord in the lives of others.

Many, many years after entering the community, Sister Baptista, whom the community chose as its major superior in 1977, addressed us gathered at a community day in 1979. Reflecting on Psalm 139 in that day's prayer, she said:

*The fact that He knows me through and through: what I have been, what I am, might not give me confidence, if His knowledge were as the rest of humankind's—simply knowing a number of facts about me. But God's knowledge is one with His love; it's the creative power that brought me into being. Because He knows me, because He loves me, I am. Were He to stop knowing and loving me, I would no longer be.*

The facts of Baptista's life—even just the ones we can know—witness to the creative power of God's love and knowing. Mary Helen Madden was born in Youngstown, Ohio on June 17, 1919 and was baptized two weeks later. She was the third of eight children—4 boys and 4 girls—born to her parents Joseph and Helen. At age 25, Mary Helen entered the community from Assumption Parish in Bellevue. Her sister Margaret, known to us as Sister Mary Ronald, had entered the community ten years before Mary Helen. Two years later, her younger sister, Joan, known to us as Sister Joan Marie, followed their example.

They say that coming events cast their shadows before. Long before she entered the Sisters of Charity, the way Mary Helen Madden spent her time foreshadowed how she would spend her life as Sister M. Baptista. After graduating from Annunciation High School on the North Side, she worked as a clerk stenographer for four and a half years in the Pennsylvania Department of Public Assistance, and spent the next three years as a secretary with the National Labor Relations Board. The history of the Missionary Confraternity of Christian Doctrine authored in 1985 by Mary Downey James adds information, however, that Sister Baptista didn't think to note on her résumé. Ms. James writes:

*Sister Baptista Madden, former major superior of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, was an MCCD catechist from 1939 until she entered the community in 1944. Traveling downtown by streetcar to make connections with the 12:50 p.m. train out of Penn Station, Sister boarded the car reserved for MCCD workers. The car was filled with catechists and fishers going to various missions along the route. They sang and prayed the rosary during the journey. Sister was assigned to Cherry Valley. When she and her teammates arrived at SS Peter and Paul Church, the priest came for a congregational Mass, and afterward, the catechists taught for an hour in the body of the church. As they waited for the train home, the group usually enjoyed sundaes at the ice cream parlor located near the railroad station. The day which had started in the morning did not end until after six-thirty—a lot of traveling for an hour's teaching!*

*During the 1940's the Confraternity chartered buses to transport the catechists to the missions. Sister Baptista was sent to a different place each year. She taught at St. Veronica's in Ambridge and Holy Souls in Carnegie. At Oakdale, Sunday school was held in the public school. . . . In the small mining-company town of Montour, she and the other catechists taught in the cellar of one of the houses.*

*Sister Baptista recalled that during the five years she was involved, the volunteers engaged tirelessly in their ministry, sustained by their faith. In the midst of darkness, in some cases, Sister felt this "moment" each Sunday was a ray of light for all. The pleasure and happiness she experienced as an MCCD worker were so evident in her tone of voice. Any hardships she may have encountered faded from her memory.*

Isn't this the Sister Baptista we all know and love?

After entering the Sisters of Charity, Sister Baptista spent three years as an elementary school teacher. From there, she began a sixteen-year assignment at Seton Hill University (then College)—ten years as Dean of Residence followed by six years as Dean of Freshmen. Honoring Sister Baptista at the 1982 College commencement, President Eileen Farrell noted:

*Some of her duties may surprise us now. She checked to make sure that every student was in the dormitory by ten p.m. On weekends, when seniors were permitted to stay out till midnight, Sister Baptista was at the door to welcome each of them home. She checked rooms every morning to make sure beds were made and everything was in order. But she did more than check in and check up. She was a friend to the students. They confided in her, talked to her about their plans and their dreams. Alumnae today remember her with affection as "strict but always kind and always understanding."*

Isn't this the Sister Baptista we all know and love?

In 1964, Mother Victoria Brown appointed Sister Baptista Director of Initial Formation for our community. In 1969, Sister Baptista took up her next appointment as General Secretary of the Congregation. After she had served eight years in that position, the community elected Sister Baptista major superior in 1977, a position to which she was re-elected in 1981. Leading the community through endless transition and transformation must have challenged her spirit of obedience to God's will during those eight years. Still, she frequently called us to a renewed and hope-filled commitment to our mission as Sisters of Charity. She was the first of our major superiors to retain the title "Sister" rather than "Mother." Those of us who worked and lived with her then knew her as a genuine "servant leader." And the close of her term of office, after 40 years of service to the College and internal ministry to the community, Sister Baptista took up the work of pastoral associate at St. James Church, Apollo, a position she held for 12 years. Reflecting on the years in which Sister Baptista served with him at St. James, Father Larry Kiniry wrote:

*In thinking of Sister Baptista, I think of a wise person of Scripture. . .the individual who through wisdom understands the art of living. . . one who is always cool, calm, and patient. . . one who is knowledgeable yet has a great deal of common sense. . . one who is reflective and never ceases to scrutinize one's destiny. She is insightful in matters religious and pious in the profound sense . . . always aware that God rules the world and her life.*

Isn't this the Sister Baptista we all know and love?

If you told Sister Baptista she was a "charismatic leader," she would give you that wry smile of hers and staunchly deny it. But dear Baptista, we know that you had many charisms—gifts given to build up the Body of Christ. We know this because you claimed your gifts and you gave them to us freely, as they had been given to you. And through these gifts, you led us—quietly and with faith, steadfastly, lovingly, with conviction and integrity. These gifts of yours, so freely and generously given, enriched our lives and strengthened us to walk with you in making a pathway for the Lord.

As you noted at that Community Day in 1979, God knows you better than any of us could. But you really couldn't hide from us the work he was doing in you. Your words that day illumine what was hidden, perhaps, by your simple, steady, presence in our lives. You said:

*Because we have [God's revelation in Christ], this assurance of God's love and mercy, we don't hesitate to approach Him, to call to Him, to seek Him for whom, as Augustine says, our hearts yearn. Then when we have found Him, and because we have found Him, we seek Him still more.*

*We seek Him in prayer: liturgical and ritual, communal and personal. We seek Him in the prayer which is making ourselves available to Him, holding ourselves at His disposal; learning His will and reaching out to embrace it; opening ourselves and our lives totally to Him, so that our permanent disposition is one of pledging all we are for all time.*

You also quoted St. Augustine that day because you said, "I certainly can say nothing which would equal Augustine." But I think you only chose words from Augustine's long tract on "The Singing of Alleluia" to say what was deepest within you:

Let us therefore sing "alleluia" now as often as possible, that we may one day sing it forever. In heaven our food will be "alleluia," our drink "alleluia," our act of contemplation "alleluia," our total joy will be "alleluia," that is to say, "Glory to God."

We know how you loved to sing, Sister Baptista. May you raise your voice now in an eternal "alleluia" until all of us can join you one day in that heavenly choir.

Thank you, dear Baptista, for all you have been among us, for all you have done for us and for all God's people.