Sister Flora Brennan was born on Sept. 12, 1918, to Philip Patrick Brennan of Ireland and Clara Viola Hartley of Maryland. Flora was Clara’s ninth child – six older children were the fruit of her earlier marriage. Because Flora was born on the Feast of the Holy Name of Mary, her father insisted she be called Mary Elizabeth.

The good man died two months later and Flora’s siblings, Patrick and Nell, were placed in St. Vincent’s Orphanage in Toledo. When Flora was about 3, her mother married again to “a lovely bachelor farmer who fell in love with both of us,” according to Sister Flora. After many years, Flora and her brother and sister eventually were reunited.

Sister Flora said, “Mother was a Methodist, so I grew up loving the Bible and the beautiful hymns she sang.” Her mother was also a licensed teacher who home schooled Sister Flora and gave Flora her first lesson in painting. Her mother was also a hard worker on the farm. “I was reared as she had been: homework, reading, plus drawing and painting. I learned responsibility by raising my pet pig and pet hen,” wrote Sister Flora.

A few years later, when Flora was 8, the family moved to Toledo so her stepfather could find employment and Flora could attend St. Thomas’s Catholic School. As financial times worsened and her father lost his factory job, Flora’s blood sister, Nell, paid Flora’s tuition at the Ursuline Academy, and a Jewish family let them use one of their apartments rent-free. Mary Elizabeth, at 17 and familiar with the Ursuline Sisters, believed she had a vocation to religious life. A priest she consulted suggested she visit the IHM Sisters in Monroe.

Mary Elizabeth became a postulant in 1935, finished her high school education at St. Mary Academy, and received the habit in 1937. She wrote: “I had entered the convent in love with the Lord, having put my art talent and training in the background and having chosen the teaching profession as one of service.”
Service during the subsequent 15 years meant teaching grade school children and then a nine-year stretch with high school students in schools in Michigan and Ohio. Service also implied continuing her education: earning a Bachelor’s degree from Marygrove College, a Master of Art Education from Wayne State University and, eventually, a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Notre Dame.

In 1962, Sister Flora was assigned to the University of Puerto Rico where initially she was responsible for teaching public school art teachers and then for setting up a fine arts department. This entailed developing both undergraduate and graduate programs which met state requirements and working with humanities and history departments. Even with all the administrative challenges, Sister Flora continued to teach courses in drawing, design, painting and so forth. For 19 years, these tasks were her joyful and arduous occupation.

One of Flora’s dreams was satisfied when she entered the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Notre Dame and completed it in 1970. As she says in her autobiography, there was another good thing offered to her during her time in South Bend that went way beyond her studies: an introduction to the Catholic Pentecostals.

When she returned to Ponce, Puerto Rico, she jumped at the chance to attend a charismatic retreat, the first on the island in 1971. She explained that she was unemotional before this powerful experience of the Spirit in her life. She then was so filled with emotion and such tears of joy that for several weeks her friends thought she had a bad cold.

In her autobiography, she goes on to say, “My life began to change, never to be the same again, thanks to the Spirit who was doing most of the work. I woke up each morning with a song of praise or a prayer. I taped religious songs from records and no longer used my radio. Prayer was frequent during the day since it was easy to praise, love and thank the Lord.”

Though art was her life and passion, she added, “Prayer became more attractive than the painting I had always loved to do. The detective stories began to gather dust. I was reading Scripture and charismatic and religious books and was no longer interested in fiction. A greater unity in love with my community of sisters was also noticed.”

Though this period of personal transformation was very dynamic for her, Flora became concerned that charismatics generally seemed uninvolved with
social service. She said, “It seemed that the Lord wanted us to do something about this after we had acquired spiritual formation in prayer and the life of the Spirit, to combine the prayer of Mary with the works of Martha in service to others.”

She was confirmed in this inspiration when the local bishop invited some people to visit at hospitals. She knew this was a new call that fit well with the charismatic experience of healing on every level. Flora recorded several “miracles” that happened in the hospital after their group had prayed and laid hands on some very sick people.

In 1984, Sister Flora moved to the Motherhouse community. In a recent commitment statement, she sums up her vocation during these retirement years: “I am called to personal and communal prayer, reflection on the Word of God, to prayer for the world. I try to accept and affirm everyone, to promote action for peace and justice, doing all in the name of Jesus in the power of His Spirit. I paint, show and see art for the retirement fund and teach ceramics to the retired sisters.”

Indeed, a very comprehensive agenda of service, Flora, in which your art, your teaching and your charismatic prayer life and healing gave glory to God in effective and very surprising ways!

God bless her.

Sister Jane Mary Howard
Feb. 18, 2009
Sister Joyce Durosko
Jan. 2013