

Obituary: Sr. Mary Joan Coultas, former president of La Roche University, dies at 89 Sept. 29, 1936 – Aug. 2, 2026 AVA DZURENDA For the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette AUG 10, 2026 1:23 PM

When Michele Bisbey met Mary Joan Coultas as a freshman at Divine Providence Academy, she was immediately drawn to her. “She was bright, she was happy and she saw in us what we hadn’t yet seen in ourselves,” said Bisbey, of Pittsburgh, a Sister of Divine Providence who would go on to know Coultas for 63 years. “She spent her life mentoring younger people to be leaders.” Serving as a high school English and history teacher, guidance counselor and librarian at Divine Providence Academy was just the beginning of Coultas’ career in education and leadership. She later became the fourth president of La Roche College, now University, serving from 1975-81, where she oversaw a period of significant growth. Coultas, who also dedicated 73 years of religious life to the Sisters of Divine Providence, died Aug. 2. She was 89. Before becoming president, Coultas served La Roche as a professor of psychology, dean of students, trustee and later trustee emerita. During her presidency, she launched the North Hills college’s first capital campaign, oversaw campus expansion and helped establish graduate education. Bisbey said Coultas’ leadership during a period of declining enrollment and financial challenges reflected both her academic background and her faith. “She had a Ph.D. in psychology, and it wasn’t just something she practiced — it was something she lived out of,” Bisbey said. “She was someone who walked the walk. She stood up for justice in the boardroom and at the kitchen table.” Her sibling, Joan Bruce of Oakland, said Coultas’ passion for education began early. Inspired by her mother and the religious sisters who taught her, she spent the rest of her life encouraging others to discover their own potential. Bisbey agreed with that assessment. “If you have the image of Vatican II, the byword was *aggiornamento*, which meant, ‘Open the windows. Clear out the cobwebs. Don’t be a museum,’” she said. “She did that. She blazed the way, especially for younger sisters who didn’t have a voice. She became our voice and gave us the strength to have a voice ourselves.” Bisbey said Coultas also recognized the growing need to support women returning to college during a challenging period for higher education. “She had enough foresight to know there was a special niche for women returning to school, so she became a support for many of them,” she said. She was elected provincial leader of the Sisters across three terms — 1981- 85, 1986-90, and again from 2001-07. She served on the board of directors of Divine Providence Hospital, the Leadership Pittsburgh steering committee, and the board of directors of Union National Corp. From 1990-2001 she practiced as a psychotherapist with the Lee Fogarty Group, and from 2007 she coordinated programs at the Kearns Spirituality Center. Outside of her work, Coultas enjoyed watercolor painting, reading and traveling, particularly to New England and Europe. Bruce remembered Coultas as family-oriented with a quick sense of humor. She said they enjoyed traveling together, including trips to the Democratic National Conventions in Los Angeles in 2000 and Boston in 2004. Bruce said Coultas’ concern for others extended from foster children who called her “Joan Bug” to international

students who found a home at La Roche and a friend in Coultas. “My sister never met a stranger,” Bruce said. “I would like folks to remember my sister for her strong sense of social justice, her love of life and love for her fellow human beings.” “She’s someone upon whose shoulders we stand,” Bisbey said. Coultas was preceded in death by her parents, John and Margaret Coultas. In addition to Bruce, she is survived by the sisters and associates in the Sisters of Divine Providence community; her dear friend, Sister Agnes Raible; and countless friends, colleagues and former students.

Ava Dzurenda (ava.dzurenda@gmail.com) is a science writer and exercise physiologist based in Squirrel Hill. Correction, posted Aug. 11, 2026: An earlier version had incorrect names for the parents of Mary Joan Coultas. First Published: August 10, 2026, 1:23 p.m.