Sister Jean (Jean Bernard) Denomme, OP  
(1931 – 2014)  

“In the skies we try to imagine the immensity and potentiality of the universe. In one another we perceive hidden dimensions of thought, feeling, and emotion that make us mysteries to ourselves and to one another. Whether it is sky, earth or one another we scan, it is the hidden Presence we seek.” Jean Denomme, Where is this God of Yours? For Those Who Wonder… (Universe, 2010)

Sister Carol Jean Kesterke, Chapter Prioress of Great Lakes Dominican Chapter, began the wake service for Jean Denomme, on August 4 with the following reflection: “We know Jean was an educator, a life-long learner, an avid reader, a lover of opera as well as a compassionate, fearless woman who possessed a keen mind. She sought answers, probed for clarity, challenged and questioned everything! Ambiguity did not intimidate her; she was driven in her search for understanding…Jean just couldn’t help herself; her book title even ends in a question mark…Really?

Sister Jean was born June 13, 1931, in Detroit, to Richard and June (Penney) Denomme. She was the oldest of three siblings: Beverly, Richard and Michael. In 1949 she graduated from Dominican High School and entered the Congregation from St. John Berchmans Parish on June 26. Jean’s ministry years began at St. Lawrence O’Toole in Oakland, California, where she taught grade school for eight years. In 1959 she began teaching high school: first at Bishop O’Dowd in Oakland for three years, then at Holy Cross High School in Santa Cruz, California, for five years. In 1967, Jean returned to Illinois, where she taught for two years at Regina Dominican High School in Wilmette.

From 1969 to 1975, she was principal at Aquinas High School in Chicago. Sister Carol Jean Kesterke described this period at Aquinas as “a transformation experience that directed [Jean’s] future ministerial life to those living in poverty. It is here that she began to articulate the questions that drove her to develop educational and training programs for the poor in our cities and rural areas.”

Sister Jean explains it this way in her book, “Learning compassion pulls us into a keener awareness of our inter-connectedness. We begin to see that the health of the whole is necessary if anyone is to be well; the safety of the whole is necessary if anyone is to be safe. The more we understand this fundamental reality, the more we internalize it, the more compelled we are to act responsibly.”

Driven by this vision of compassion, Sister Jean, along with Sisters Margaret Johnson and Sharon Culhane, moved to South Carolina to provide education and training programs for women in a rural community. Bishop Ernest L. Unterkoefler describes his first celebration of the liturgy with twelve people at McClellanville, South Carolina, in the diocesan newspaper, The Catholic Banner: “Three Adrian Dominican Sisters came to the town from an educational ministry in Chicago, Illinois. These Sisters have a refreshing approach toward their new experience. Deep dedication and generosity impress the people in the area as the Sisters search
for ways to serve the wonderful people there.” During their five years in the area they established the South Santee Community Center for Women.

In 1980, Sister Jean returned to Detroit and participated in the following adult education and training programs in the southeast corridor of the city: Project C3 for four years, Detroit Public School/Marygrove for two years, teacher/coordinator at Higginbotham Education for five years and department head at the Community Based East Adult Education for four years. In a Nokomis Chapter newsletter, Jean wrote to her Sisters: “It is here, in the struggle to survive, that I experience the power of the human spirit.”

From 1996 to 2007, Sister Jean served one year as consultant at Schott Communities/UD Mercy in Cement City, Michigan, and six years as grants manager and administrative assistant at Schott Communities in Cooper City, Florida. From 2007 to 2014 she divided her time between Cement City, Michigan, and Pembroke Pines, Florida.

Sister Jean died on July 29, 2014 at Jefferson Hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, while she was visiting her family. She was 83 years of age and in the 64th year of her religious profession.

Sister Jean Denomme’s wake-remembrance service was held on August 4. Beverly Gattari, Jean’s younger sister, shared the following story:

“Jean and I grew up in the same home, had the same parents and siblings, attended the same elementary school, St. John Berchmans, and high school, Dominican High in Detroit. That’s where the similarity ends. We both left different impressions on our teachers. She was a hard act to follow. When she returned to Detroit around 1980, we re-acquainted seeing each other frequently along with Margaret Johnson. That’s when I got to know her as an adult, without being the younger sibling. We shared childhood memories, family dinners and went to the opera and movies together. My husband and three sons all loved Jean because she took an interest in them and what was going on in their lives.”

Bob Dougherty, teaching colleague and friend, shared this remembrance:

“It’s no secret that our sister Jean had two addictions in her life. She was hopelessly captivated by both. Addiction 1: Jean was a consummate educator. Not just a teacher but an educator. …When I stumbled onto the faculty of Aquinas High School with Jean as principal, I didn’t know what I was getting into. It changed my life. …She had this way of making each faculty member feel that she or he was an expert – and darned if it didn’t happen that there were then experts all over the place. Addiction 2: Jean was never without a book at hand; she was a relentless reader. She was, however, something of a wanderer on the book shelves; she could be reading Elizabeth Johnson at one point and an almost tawdry paperback at the next. Clearly, though, there were favored corners of the Library: theology followed by science; other times, science followed by theology. Her book, Where is This God of Yours? is a testimony to Jean’s keen intellect and to her life-long search for God, the transcendental and the incarnational.”

Sister Betty Flaherty and Sister Jean came to the novitiate the same year and became life-long friends. Sister Betty shared the following stories at Sister Jean’s wake:
“During the time of the traditional home visit every three years, I was her companion and became a part of the Denomme family. Her mother once asked me if Jean had done something wrong because she had been sent so far from her home, while I was close to my family in Detroit. I assured her that Jean was the perfect novice.

After her first block of assignments Jean spent a dozen years at our community schools in the Chicago area. She served as both faculty and administrator with glowing reports. There she developed a strong interest in providing ongoing education and services for women who had minimal assistance and lived in poverty. Partnered with good friend Margaret Johnson, Jean began a period of five years in the poorest area of a southern state, doing just that. I went there to check up on them and asked about safety. I was told not to worry: there was shotgun behind the door!”

Margaret Johnson, friend, colleague and companion, was unable to attend the wake and funeral because of illness. Below are excerpts from the poem she wrote.

The mangos outside the window dance to the music of the wind.
The rain splashes on the screen.
The constant herald of summer in South Florida.

When you said you were going away,
I knew it was important for you;
A journey for family not just friend.

You were coming back, you said.
You were excited to see my improvement.
It would be the first time the poison would not be administered.
You couldn’t wait to return to celebrate real signs of victory.

And now, I’m here, not the only one waiting for you.

Yet, I see you in the empty chair,
And wonder if you ever really left.