Sister Jean Joseph Hughes, OP
(1938 – 2015)

*Something sacred is at stake in every event*

- Rabbi Abraham Joshua Hescel, *God In Search of Man.*

Sister Jean Joseph Hughes, baptized Patricia M. Breen, was born on May 5, 1938, in Chicago, to Patrick and Jean (Richards) Breen. Her mother had seven sisters and one brother. Sister Jean knew little about her father because her parents separated when she was two years old.

In her autobiography, she wrote, “I spent my early childhood in the bosom of my mother’s family. At family gatherings, holidays, everybody sang, argued about local politics, and played cards for pennies.”

When Sister Jean was seven years old, her grandmother died and the family members who had been living in the ancestral home began to leave. Her mother sent her to St. Patrick’s Academy boarding school in Momence, Illinois, for second and third grade so she would not be home alone. After two years at St. Patrick’s, Sister Jean returned to Chicago, lived with her mother’s sister and her husband, and attended St. Joachim School for fourth grade. She spent weekends with her mother, who was living in an apartment with two other working women.

The following year her mother married James Hughes. She described how this event affected her life.

*My mother, Jim, his son by a previous marriage, and I, moved to a basement apartment across the street from St. Ailbe’s where I went to fifth grade and Jimmy went to second. This arrangement bore no resemblance to living with the Richards clan. The experience was too complex to describe here and I would rather not be reminded of the details.*

At the end of that same year the Hughes family moved into a converted attic apartment located near Our Lady of Peace School, where she would complete her elementary education. When Sister Jean was in sixth grade, her mother gave birth to her sister, Terri. Her mother and Jim Hughes separated while Jean was in seventh grade; he took his son, Jimmy, and her mother kept Terri and Jean. Jean wrote,

*We remained in the attic until I finished 8th grade. My mom reconciled with her family. She and my Aunt Bea bought my Aunt Jo and Uncle Joe Gargola’s house in St. Joachim’s parish forming a new “we.” We had arrived, finally living in the middle of a house! It was kind of like the Richards clan revisited, but time, age, letdowns and disappointments had taken their toll. Although there wasn’t much singing any more, life was peaceful. People were kind to one another.*

Sister Jean attended Aquinas High School from 1952 to 1956. In her autobiography, she described her high school experience as “great years.” She said:
We knew the sisters loved us and believed in us. The whole environment conspired to call forth wholeness, leadership, creativity, and social responsibility. It was all founded upon faith and, although I wasn’t aware of it then, it became the foundation for my expectations for future relationships.

Sister Jean entered the postulate in June 1956, and at reception in December of that year she received her religious name, Sister Jean Joseph. The year after first profession, she was missioned to St. Paul School in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan, where she taught elementary grades for two years.

1960 marks an important transition date for Sister Jean because for the next fourteen years her ministry was in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. The only interruption would be her year of study at Aquinas Institute in Dubuque, Iowa, where she earned a Master of Arts Degree in Systematic Theology in 1974.

Her first year at Colegio Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic began in August 1960, where she spent much of her time “learning more about culture, the world and myself than I could ever have anticipated.” It was during the end of that academic year that Bishop Thomas Reilly defied Rafael Trujillo by joining the country’s other five bishops in reading a pastoral letter in all churches condemning the arrest and imprisonment of thousands of people. He sought refuge in the capital with priests and nuns from his diocese but was placed under house arrest on April 9, 1961; later he was released (Bishop Thomas F. Reilly, 83, Dies; Resisted the Trujillo Dictatorship, Wolfgang Saxon, July 23, 1992).

In her autobiography, Sister Jean wrote about having witnessed the Bishop’s arrest. “I learned that bravery is a spontaneous response equal to the depth of one’s convictions.”

Sister Jean’s next assignment was at St. Vincent Ferrer in San Juan de la Maguana in the Dominican Republic, where for six years she taught elementary and secondary grades. During the last year Sister Jean also was assistant principal.

Sister Jean’s next assignment was Guayma, Puerto Rico at St. Anthony where she taught high school for two years. Her last three years in the Dominican Republic were spent at the University Madre y Maestra in Santiago, where she taught for one year, and at the Institute Dominico-Americano for two years, where she taught adult education courses.

Because of her mother’s illness, Sister Jean returned to Chicago in 1975 and got a job at Aquinas High School as a substitute English teacher. She ended up staying at Aquinas for the last eight years the school was open, teaching, and, during the final four years, serving as principal. In her autobiography, she wrote, “Aquinas’ closing was very difficult. I have always believed that education is the answer no matter what the question is. [Now] there is no affordable Catholic high school education left in the inner-city.”

From 1984 to 2013, Sister Jean was an active participant and leader in the social justice and peace coalition known as the 8th Day Center for twelve years, and then for seventeen years at St.
Leonard’s Ministries, which provides residential programs for women and men just released from prison with no place to go.

Sister Jean’s own words offer the best insight into the impact of these seventeen years.

*During this period, my sense of who God is was consistently challenged by treatment of women, especially in the church and the unwillingness of organized religion to take radical stances on issues of justice. Bent, but not broken, I continue to identify myself as a Roman Catholic. Aware of the fatal flaws in myself, I am willing to cut the church some slack but not at the expense of conscience. The congregation’s choice of the Vision Statements helps a great deal.*

The experience taught me another profound truth. Up until then, I had thought of myself as belonging to the congregation and being proud of the women who were in it. Eighth Day [Center] made me realize I am the congregation. Who I am actually contributes to what it is. It is unlike any other organization one might join that has an established goal and rules by which to live. It is a living organism, no more or less than the sum of its parts. Its history informs and inspires. We are the congregation’s witness to the living God. This was made particularly clear when we chose the Vision Statements as a way of being in the world.

In 2013 Siena Heights University presented the St. Dominic Award to Jean in recognition of her “lifetime of dedication to social justice and serving the poor in our world.” Mary Ann Corley, who had nominated Jean for the award, said:

*Jean has always been a teacher, and sometimes a preacher. Whether in the classrooms of Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, Nicaragua or the United States, she has carried the torch for truth and justice. This Award, named after St. Catherine of Siena, seems an appropriate endorsement for this strong woman who walks in St. Catherine’s steps.*

Sister Jean Joseph Hughes died January 15, 2015, at Kindred Chicago Lakeshore Hospital in Chicago, at the age of seventy-six. She was in the fifty-eighth year of her religious profession.

At the wake/remembrance service, Bob Dougherty, a close friend of Sister Jean since they were in 4th grade, shared the following reflection on her ministry,

*Jean earned a master’s degree in systematic theology from Aquinas Institute in Dubuque, Iowa. Her master’s thesis was a study of the theology of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose memories were still so vivid in our collective consciousness at the time of her graduate work. Jean didn’t just study theology, she lived it and became a part of it through her many forays into the shaping of the corners of creation in which she found herself. So many of us were blessed to be part of these forays. Jean didn’t just study Dr. King’s beliefs; she gave them life in all her activities; so many of her students and colleagues witnessed this.*

In her homily Sister Rose Ann Schlitt related John’s exhortation, “…my friends let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action,” to Jean’s “aha” moments. Sister Rose Ann told the following story:
One time she went to the movies in the town with some children. [It was a] typical Cowboys and Indians movie. She was jolted when the children went absolutely wild applauding each and every time the Indians had even a small advantage over the cowboys. ‘Oh! ... something is very different here!’ They were letting her know which side she had to be on: the side of people who were poor, oppressed, and needy in ever so many ways. The ‘AHA’ moment shaped her passion and the way she looked at people and situations for the rest of her life — asking others: Which side are YOU on?

Father Jim Hug, SJ, offered this prayer during the funeral liturgy:

Our Loving God,
We offer these prayers for and with our sister, Jean,
In our desire to teach and care for our hurting world and all its peoples.

Help us to be like Jean,
Passionate and prophetic,
Creative, active, practical and generous,
Trusting always in the fullness of your Life and Love.

We make our prayer in the name of Jesus,
In solidarity with all your poor and oppressed peoples,
And in the prophetic power of Your Holy Spirit
where we live now and forever.