Sister Therese Johnson, OP
1940-2015

Sister Therese Johnson, known also as Sister Joseph Aquin, was born on May 22, 1940, in Chicago. She was the third of five children born to Joseph and Mary (Conway) Johnson. Her father was a claims adjuster and, before their marriage, her mother operated a comptometer. In her autobiography, Sister Therese wrote the following description of her parents:

*My mother was the heart and soul of our family and was always doing special things for us. From early on she taught us to love God and to be good Christians. She showed us more by example than preaching of any kind. [My father] possessed a keen intellect and was very articulate. He was always there to help me with my homework. I have fond memories of him rocking on the porch and reading countless books. He inspired me to have an appreciation of literature and poetry."

The family lived in St. Carthage Parish and the children attended the parish grade school. Sister Therese attended Aquinas High School, where she met Sister John Bernard, who eventually became her sponsor. In her autobiography, Sister Therese wrote that she actually decided to become a nun on the day she received her First Communion.

*Although I had decided to become a sister at the early age of seven, I was hoping that this desire would leave me. Instead it grew stronger in high school. I made my decision to enter the Adrian Dominican Congregation on Christmas Eve of my senior year, December 24, 1957, while I was attending Mass. I was with my boyfriend Tom Hannigan, who was getting very serious. He wanted to give me his ring. I knew I had to make a choice and I chose Adrian."

After graduating from Aquinas in June 1958, Sister Therese entered the postulate the following September. Following profession in August 1960, she was assigned to teach at St. Vincent de Paul elementary school in Fort Wayne, Indiana. After teaching there for three years she returned to Chicago to teach in the inner city at St. Matthew. It was there that Sister Therese was diagnosed with an eye disease called Keratoconus. She said,

*The disease was very progressive and debilitating. My sight was getting increasingly worse and I had great difficulty reading and seeing. My only hope for restored vision was to have two corneal transplants and this surgery was uncommon in those days. Dr. Fitzgerald performed cataract surgery [on both of my eyes]."
In 1966, Sister Therese was assigned to teach at St. Rita School in Chicago. It was here that her eye condition worsened and she became legally blind. Now she would have a corneal transplant as soon as a donor could be found. While waiting for a donor, Sister Therese continued to teach third grade religion class. “Some of the sisters used to read me the lesson to be taught the next day,” she said. “I didn’t want to stay home and feel sorry for myself.”

After successful surgery and three years at St. Rita, Sister Therese was assigned to teach in the following Illinois schools: Queen of Angels in Chicago, Ascension in Harvey and St. Joseph in Homewood. Summers during this period were spent studying at Siena Heights College where she received her bachelor’s degree in 1970.

From 1977 to 1978, Sister Therese studied full-time at St. Xavier College in Chicago, where she received a master’s degree in administration. Sister Therese wrote:

I felt a call to the ministry of administration. At first I was afraid to pursue a master’s degree because I thought that a year of intense study would be too much of a strain on my eyes. With the Lord’s help I graduated Summa Cum Laude in Administration/Supervision.

Sister Therese served as school administrator of the following schools in Illinois: St. Mary School in Des Plaines, Illinois, for seven years; Our Lady of Good Counsel in Chicago for one year; St. Benedict School in Blue Island for seven years. During these fifteen years, Sister Therese suffered a serious back injury which required a six-month period of recuperation. Her sister Jacki died suddenly of a heart attack and her mother became seriously ill. Sister Therese continued her ministry and became her mother’s care giver with the help of her friend, Sister Pat Walsh. Of this period, Sister Therese wrote,

I lost my sister and mother within two and a half years. Celebrating the holidays was extremely painful for me because I had spent the holidays with them. The only good that has come out of this experience is that I am a more compassionate person. My brothers Greg and Joe have also become closer to me and all of us are very good friends.

Sister Therese stayed at St. Benedict School until 2000, when she resigned because of health problems. Her next ministry was a ministry of care at two parishes in the Diocese of Joliet: St. Mary Magdalene and St. Mary Nativity. She continued this ministry despite suffering a heart attack in 2005 and the gradual increase in other health issues. She retired in 2014 and returned to Adrian in February of 2015.

Sister Therese Johnson died October 12, 2015, at the age of seventy-five and in the fifty-sixth year of her religious profession.

During the wake service, Sister Kathleen Klingen, Chapter Prioress of the Dominican Midwest Chapter, said:
Therese was a young professed when she developed an eye disease. She found being blind a very difficult cross to accept. She said, “It was like going through a dark night of the senses. It was a turning point in my spiritual life. After her sight was restored Therese began to write poetry to thank God for restoring her sight. She began her ministry of care in the Joliet Diocese because she believed her sufferings gave her the empathy to minister with people who also suffer.

Therese loved being an Adrian Dominican and was grateful for her care here at Maria. Last May she celebrated her birthday here and was so grateful for the way the staff remembered her.

Sister Helen McAllister sent the following remembrance that was read during the wake.

Therese was fondly known as ‘TJ’ by all of us from St. Carthage. We both went to Aquinas and we both entered the Adrian Dominicans. The two of us are the last two vocations from St. Carthage.

In 1995 I taught language arts in grades 5-8 at St. Benedict in Blue Island where Therese was the principal. I had a speech fest for the children that was planned only for children but, due to Therese’s great PR, we had to move the event to the Church because there were so many who attended. Afterwards, Therese told me that Sister Margaret Philip would have been proud of the production.

Therese, you were a special part of our lives. Remember us!

In her homily, Sister Pat Dulka said,

Unfortunately, I did not know Therese over a long period of time. My connection with her has only been brief these last seven years. But as her Chapter Prioress our connection was focused, deep and meaningful. What I do know is Therese specifically chose the Gospel reading1 for today and that she valued the Eucharist. She also valued the importance of fidelity – the importance of staying faithful to her commitment to God, to religious life, to this Congregation.

Anyone who has been in a long term commitment, whether in marriage, religious life or another vocation of service, knows that there are days when our commitment looks like death, and we may want to give up, but we know better; we know that this commitment brings us life, and offers a greater and deeper meaning to what we are about.

1 John 6:51-57
As a community of believers we have the opportunity to bring the face of Christ – to bring Eucharist to all we meet in our ordinary lives.

Let us now celebrate the Eucharist as a community of believers and then be Eucharist to one another.

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

May our prayers rise with the joy of TJ’s loving service and the fragrance of the incense that we use to show respect for her earthly body, the source of so much joy-filled and prayerful caring in our lives so much laughter and compassion shared with those in need. We place our trust in Christ, the Risen One, Who conquers all things, even death. Amen. Alleluia
Right: Sister Therese Johnson, left, with members of her crowd, Sisters Mary Ann Ferguson (center) and Jane Zimmerman.

Right: The September Crowd of the 2009 Golden Jubilarians: back row, from left: Sisters Mary Kay Moran, Teresa Disch, Emelie Petelin, and Mary Ann Ferguson, and, front row, from left; Sisters Therese Johnson, Dorothy Glaister, Marie Carmen Gonzales, Jane Zimmerman, and then Prioress, Sister Donna Markham.