Sister Joanne O’Connor, OP
1920-2017

Sister Joanne, baptized Helen Susan O’Connor, was born on April 5, 1920, in Chicago. She was the sixth child born to the Irish Catholic family of Daniel and Corinne (Barry) O’Connor. Her father was a graduate of the University of Notre Dame who, after serving in the army during World War I, became a real estate agent and efficiency expert. Her mother was a California native who had studied at the University of California in Berkeley and, according to Joanne, was a gifted artist and poet.

In 1922 everything changed for this young idyllic family when their mother died of pneumonia. In her autobiography, Sister Joanne described how she, her siblings and her father coped with the impact of their mother’s death.

My father’s courage in coping with the dilemma of six youngsters, for whom he had to be both parents, has always filled me with awe and respect. He attempted at first to keep us together by hiring housekeepers. However, none of these satisfied his criteria of child guardians so he decided to place us in Catholic boarding schools. When I was three, my sisters and I began this phase of our lives with [two years at St Angela Academy] in Morris, Illinois; [two years at Immaculate Conception] in Davenport, Iowa; and [two years at St. Mary Academy] in Notre Dame, Indiana. My two brothers were placed in boarding schools as close to us as possible so that my father’s visits could include all six of us. For Christmas and summer vacations, we gathered in a rented house or apartment with a housekeeper to care for us. These times together were precious hours when we learned to know each other and our father in a more normal home environment. Perhaps his dual responsibility caused my father to become quite strict and exacting in his treatment of us, so I learned early that manifestations of love and affection would be found in my siblings rather than in my father. I am certain that this has greatly influenced my life.

When Sister Joanne was nine years old, her father married and the family lived again in a “full-time” home in Chicago. After finishing grade school at St. Ambrose, she began studies at Immaculata High School. Her sister Mary, known as Sister Helene, had entered the Congregation in 1926 at the age of seventeen, and two other sisters were now employed and living in their own apartments.

Sister Joanne found all these changes so difficult that she almost became physically ill. This led her father to send her to St. Joseph Academy for her senior year. Sister Joanne wrote, “The return to boarding school life and the dominance of my nun-sister profoundly affected my life at the academy; but I was happy in that structure.

Sister Joanne entered the postulate on Easter Sunday, March 28, 1937, seven days before her seventeenth birthday. In April of the following year, she received her religious name, Sister Mary Joannes, and began her canonical year which she described as “one of planned tensions, study, and hard physical labor. I was being prepared for a life on a mission with teaching as the major occupation.”

Her major occupation began in August 1939 when, following profession, she was assigned to teach at St. Patrick School in Miami Beach, Florida, for the next five years. Summers during those years were devoted to studying at Barry College where she received a bachelor’s degree in 1944.

The following August, Sister Joanne was sent to Chicago to teach at St. Philip Neri School for one year. This ended her teaching at the elementary school level. For the next thirty-three years (1945 to 1978) she taught at five Congregation-owned institutions, known today as sponsored institutions.
In August 1945 Joanne began teaching at Barry College, which had just opened five years earlier. Sister Joanne described this assignment as a leap of faith. She wrote:

_I was sent to teach art in our newly established Barry College in Miami. The experience of teaching in college, of relating to students almost my own age, and of assuming responsibilities on a rather high level was more of a leap than a step in my development. For [a total of ] nine years I taught at Barry College during which time I also studied for a Master of Fine Arts Degree [which I received in 1955]._

During the summer of 1952, Sister Joanne had the opportunity to visit Cuba. In a letter, she described the experience.

_Cuba is really fascinating. The sounds, sights, and colors keep the senses on active duty. There are so many potential pictures in this country that I am going to try painting a few while we are here. It is unfortunate that sounds cannot be expressed graphically because they are such an important part of the Cuban picture._

In between her years at Barry, Sister Joanne was assigned to teach at Dominican High School in Detroit for one year and then she returned to teaching art at Barry. In 1955, she began her eleven-year ministry at Siena Heights College. During those years of college teaching, she was called upon to do a variety of commissioned art works. Sister Joanne summarized them as follows:

_I was commissioned to do a variety of art productions. These included such works as life-size limestone sculptures, stained glass window designs, numerous paintings, Stations of the Cross, and ceramic pieces. One summer I was asked to come to Santa Cruz, California, to produce a stained glass window and Stations of the Cross for the chapel of our new hospital there._

Focus Health Magazine for the summer of 2007 included a two-page article about Sister Joanne’s artworks that had been commissioned for Dominican Hospital. In preparation for the article, she was asked what her favorite medium was and who’s art works does she appreciate. She said:

_I really don’t have a favorite medium. Most of my work has been done at someone’s request, and whatever I’ve been doing at the time, I’ve enjoyed very much. When you teach, you have to be at ease in several media, so it’s good to be able to enjoy them all._

The article continued:

_For herself, Sister Joanne appreciates the work of American realist Andrew Wyeth and Spanish surrealist Salvador Dali, although she has many favorite artists. She said, “St. Dominic, whose symbol is an eight pointed star, inspired the Chapel’s stained glass window.” The Tree of Life Fountain is shaped in a cruciform, to reflect its placement in Santa Cruz (Santa Cruz translates to holy cross.)_

During her sabbatical year in 1970, Sister Joanne began exploring areas in the hospital where she might serve. This led to her working part-time in the hospital’s Nuclear Medicine Department after she completed a training program. For the next several years, she continued to assist with tests, clerical work and transporting patients to the rooms following a medical test procedure. This eventually led her in 1978 to explore pastoral care ministry. She wrote:

_One of the sisters who had CPE [Clinical Pastoral Education] training shared much with me about her daily experiences. I also became a Eucharistic Minister so that I could serve the patients in that_
capacity. I am hoping for an opportunity to study CPE [at St. Mary’s in San Francisco] because of the theological thrust its program offers.

But Sister Joanne was in for a surprise. At the end of her year of CPE training at St. Mary Hospital, she was elected to serve a three-year term as Co-Provincial of Holy Cross Province in 1979. At the end of her term, she accepted a position at the Archdiocese of San Francisco as auditor/advocate in the Marriage Tribunal. In her annals she wrote the following about her fifteen years in this position:

> My ministry deals constantly with the idea of commitment and the work required to make it successful and persevering. I am made acutely aware of the needs of the people in the Church/world and the limited way the Church meets those needs.

Sister Joanne retired in January 31, 1997, and moved into Dominican Oaks, the congregate living facility located on the property of Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz. During her fifteen years at the Oaks, Sister Joanne volunteered in the several hospital areas: public relations, chaplain services, and hospitality services. She wrote, “I enjoy my interaction with the staff whose dedication impresses me. I also do calligraphy for Chaplain Offices by preparing invitations to bi-monthly memorial services.”

In 2012, Sister Joanne returned to Adrian and resided at the Dominican Life Center. She died March 3, 2017, at the age of ninety-seven.

During the remembrance service, following the funeral liturgy, this message from Sister Veronica Kelley was read.

> Joanne was my birthday partner. We were born on April 5 – a few years apart. Joanne attended St. Ambrose grade school in Chicago for a short period of time, I also went to St. Ambrose.

> Joanne was my Provincial in Santa Cruz in the 70s. During that time many changes were happening in the congregation and I realized that I wasn’t as involved as I should have been. Meeting with Joanne was a special blessing because she encouraged me to make some hard decisions. With her guidance, I made these decisions and, though hard at the time, I knew they were what needed to happen.

> Joanne also shared in many celebrations, cards, and fun time with Sisters Mary Margaret Beh, Jeanne Burns and me in our home on Woodcrest Place during the years she lived at Dominican Oaks. I will be forever grateful to Joanne for being part of my life. Rest now in peace – my birthday buddy.

Father Jim Hug, SJ offered this prayer of thanksgiving for Joanne’s life:

> As You welcome Joanne into her promised future, let her prayers continue to support us as we enter the future to which You are calling us. May our prayers rise with the graciousness of her wise, humble, skilled and compassionate service – the source of so much healing care in our lives.
LEFT: The O’Connor children: back row, from left, Daniel, Jr., 11; Mary, 13; and Catherine, 5; and in front, from left, Helen (the future Sister Joanne), 2; John, 9; and Corinne, 7. RIGHT: Sister Joanne at her first Communion, May 6, 1937

RIGHT: From left, Sisters Mary Jean Walsh, Rita Cecile Boyle, and Joanne O’Connor prepare to leave for Washington.
LEFT: Sister Joanne, facing the camera, at a Chapter Assembly in 1988. RIGHT: Working on a statue of St. John

LEFT: Sister Joanne, left, with her close friend, Sister Mary Margaret Beh
At Barry College with one of the Stations of the Cross that she designed and executed for Barry