Sister Susanne Hofweber, OP
1919-2017

“Because I was born on December 6, 1919, I always knew in an unexpressed smug little way that I had something a bit more special than anyone else in my little world: MY birthday was on St. Nicholas Day. Santa Claus himself and I had a celebration in common.”

So begins the autobiography of Sister Susanne Hofweber, the second of six children born to August and Emily (Campbell) Hofweber. Baptistized as Elizabeth Jane, she was the middle child of a set of three – with August (called Jack) the oldest and sister Dorothy born a year and a half after her – that was followed by a baby brother, Jimmy, who died at birth. Later, two more children, Billy and Marian, came into the family.

Sister Susanne’s maternal grandfather, Michael, emigrated from Castlebar, County Mayo, Ireland, at the age of 15 in search of his older brother, Joseph, who word had it was working on the boats on the Great Lakes. He went to live with his immigrant cousins in Detroit, and although he never found his brother he did meet Sara Jane Somers, the daughter of immigrants from the northern part of Ireland. The two married and settled in Ovid, Michigan. When Sara died, the eldest daughter stayed with her father while the other three girls, including Emily (who was known as Amy), went to live with Sara’s parents on a farm near Elsie, Michigan.

As for August, his parents, Peter and Catherine Hofweber, emigrated to LaCrosse, Wisconsin, from Regensburg, Germany. Peter operated a thriving plumbing business before becoming one of the first Ford dealers west of Chicago, and his sons and daughters followed him into the new and burgeoning automobile business. Several of them became Packard/Nash, Oldsmobile, and Ford/Lincoln dealers, while August built custom-made cars at his shop in Detroit.

Sister Susanne recalled in her autobiography that she and the other older children in her family knew many of Detroit’s pioneering automakers – Barney Olds, James Cousins, Henry Ford, Harry Bennett, and the Fisher and Leland brothers – by name.

As the young August was building his business, he met Amy, who by that time had graduated from the University of Michigan and taught in a rural school near Elsie before coming to live with relatives in Detroit and going to work for the phone company.

The young couple married and, as their family grew, moved from an apartment on West Grand Boulevard to a two-family flat on the northwest side of Detroit. Sister Susanne and all her siblings were taught by the Adrian Dominicans of St. Theresa’s parish school; then, the girls went on to St. Theresa High School while the boys were educated by the Jesuits at U of D (University of Detroit) High.
Sister Susanne was nine years old when the Great Depression hit. Her father lost his business and eventually the family was evicted from their home. As time went on, August was able to rebuild a business and even held two patents, one for the first self-contained domestic water heater and another for a process that allowed graphite to be used as a lubricant. With other investors, he was able to build that process into a thriving oil-refining company.

From the time she was in first grade, Sister Susanne had admired the Adrian Dominicans who taught at St. Theresa’s, and “it shouldn’t have been the surprise it seemed to have been” when she decided to join the Congregation – informing her parents in January 1937 that she wished to enter the next month. She entered on February 2, completed her high school education at St. Joseph Academy, and after completing her novitiate year received her first appointment, to St. Kilian’s in Chicago, “with stars in my eyes and joyful anticipation,” as she wrote in her autobiography.

Her year at St. Kilian’s was followed by appointments to St. Nicholas of Tolentine and St. Carthage, both also in Chicago; St. Mary’s, Rockwood, Michigan; Blessed Sacrament, Toledo, Ohio; and St. Mary’s in Assumption (Swanton), Ohio, for seven years that she later recalled as “perhaps the most enriching experiences of my life.” During those years, she earned her bachelor’s degree in history from Siena Heights College (now University), graduating in 1948. After her mother died, she was sent to Guardian Angels in Clawson, Michigan, to be closer to her family.

Then, in 1954, she was sent to the Academia del Sagrado Corazón in Santurce, Puerto Rico. It was the beginning of what would be twenty-two years in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. With brief exceptions, she was in the Caribbean until 1976.

Her time in the Dominican Republic, at the Colegio Santo Domingo and in Las Matas, was filled with the repression of the Trujillo dictatorship and its aftermath; while serving in Las Matas, she wrote in her autobiography, “we lived through three revolutions, flight from the frontier, sanctuary in the capital, evacuation by the armed forces and eventual return to ‘our people.’ Therein lie another hundred stories, stranger than fiction.”

Already the holder of a licentiate in philosophy from Santo Domingo University in the Dominican Republic, Sister Susanne spent the fall 1970 semester at Catholic University completing her master’s in theology and then returned to Puerto Rico, this time to be the diocesan coordinator of religious education. Among her duties were to serve as a theological consultant to the Bishops Conference and to work in Rome with the bishops of the Spanish-speaking world on the International Catechetical Directory and the synod that followed.

As Sister Susanne immersed herself deeper into catechesis, she became well known in the field in both Puerto Rico and the United States. She returned to the U.S. in 1976 and became the coordinator of religious education for the Diocese of Saginaw, Michigan. In 1982, she became the executive secretary – the first woman to hold this post – of the National Conference of Diocesan Directors of Religious Education in Washington, D.C., which honored her with its Annual Award in 1990.
NCDD President Jean Marie Weber’s speech for the occasion included these remarks:

To know Sr. Susanne is to soon appreciate the vision. It is: “… that all may become ONE in You, O God.” It is a priestly vision of a woman who accepts her priestly vocation – so that from east to west, from north to south, a people may be gathered to God’s own Self as a perfect offering. It is the vision of Mary, who saw future generations exalting the lowly, and filling the hungry with good things, who humbly saw herself as blessed. It is a vision fired with the passion of a shooting star …

In many ways, Susanne typifies the heart of Catechesis in this country and around the world. In one special way, she is the HEART.

Susanne left the NCDD in 1988 but stayed in Washington, first for a sabbatical year and then as the national program director for the St. Vincent Pallotti Center for Apostolic Development, an organization dedicated to connecting laity who wished to do missionary work with missionaries in the U.S. and overseas. She also served as the vice president of the Religious Education Association during this time.

Although she retired in 1991, it was retirement in name only, for it was not long before the bishop of the Saginaw Diocese asked her to serve as principal of St. Hyacinth’s school in Bay City after the previous principal had been let go. She hired a principal for the next school year, but was promptly asked to take on the principalship of a small school in Rosebush, Michigan. She also continued to mentor catechists and, from 1996 to 1999, helped out in the Nokomis Chapter Office.

She returned to Adrian in December 2012 to take up residence at the Dominican Life Center. There, her spirit of graciousness and gentleness became known to all. As Sister Joanne Peters, Co-Chapter Prioress of Holy Rosary Chapter, recalled in her remarks at the vigil service, Sister Susanne disliked being the center of attention but always found a way to turn a question about how she was doing into a “How are you?” to the person posing the question. Furthermore, said Sister Joanne, even as Sister Susanne won many awards for her life of service, “she always stepped out of the limelight and let others shine.”

Sister Susanne died on August 28, 2017, at the age of 97, leaving behind her oldest sibling, Jack, and her youngest, Marian – and people whose lives she had touched indelibly in her 80 years in the Congregation.

“Faith, courage, love of the poor, humility, graciousness – Susanne’s gifts,” Sister Joanne said to conclude her remarks at the vigil service, ending with a quote from Micah that had been part of the evening’s readings: “This is what God asks of you, only this: to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Sister Fran Nadolny was the homilist at Susanne’s funeral. She remembered Sister Susanne’s wonderful smile, her made-from-scratch angel food cakes, and her capacity for enabling people to see the good in themselves and to grow in that goodness.
Susie was a compassionate person. To her last days, she stayed informed about world affairs and spoke against, and prayed for, the injustices that have been piled upon people. At the same time, she was not judgmental nor condemnatory. Her educated expertise in catechetics enabled her to speak truth to bishops, to keep them in touch with the “people in the pews,” to make our Church as inclusive as possible. Susie was a pardoner. Her stories of living through the Trujillo regime are stories of bravery and grit, and also stories of helping the Dominican people to heal and grow – just as she herself needed to heal and grow.

In the Gospel reading [Luke 6:36-38] we learn that the true meaning of a life well-lived is the capacity for generosity. And the measure of this generosity should be extraordinary, flowing out of a person’s whole self. That was our Susanne, our Susie.

To begin her homily, Sister Fran had made note of a small print that had hung on Sister Susanne’s wall and had obviously traveled over the years. In modern English, the quote on it, from St. Augustine, would say, “O Lord, you struck my heart with your word and I loved you.” Sister Fran brought this quote back to mind in her concluding words: “We give thanks to God for Susie as we pray Augustine’s words for her: O Lord, you struck her heart with your word and she loved you.”
Top: Sister Susanne (second from left) stands with other members of the Spanish-speaking delegates to Vatican II, working on documents and the General Catechetical Directory, 1971. Bottom left: Sister Susanne receives the NCDD (National Conference of Diocesan Directors) Award during the April 1990 meeting in Atlanta, Georgia.

Left: Sister Susanne in Las Matas, Dominican Republic. Right: Sister Susanne’s siblings, Dorothy Gatchell and Jack Hofweber

Members of the 1987 Diamond Jubilee Crowd are: front row, from left, Sisters Ann Seraphim Schenk, Rita Noeker, Esther Sitzmann, Margaret Moran, Elizabeth Kreiner, Mary Roche, Jane Edward Schutz, and Marie Elizabeth Doherty; and back row, from left, Sisters Agnes Helen Rabe, Marie Jutte, Rita Anne Moceri, Susanne Hofweber, Merici Valgoi, Cathryn Deutsch, and Michael Mary Madden.