Sister Janet Capone, OP  
1938-2018

On June 13, 2003, Sister Janet Capone, Prioress of the Adrian Dominican Sisters, and her counterpart from the Dominican Sisters of Edmonds, Washington, Sister Michele Kopp, co-led a ritual in Edmonds that officially united the two congregations.

It was a defining moment for Sister Janet during her term in leadership, which lasted from 1998 to 2004. “Sister Janet’s great gifts of sensitivity, loving care, creativity, and good humor were brought to bear in the coming together of our Dominican communities,” said Sister Patricia Siemen, Prioress of the Congregation, when Sister Janet died in 2018, in a statement for the press release that was issued upon Sister Janet’s passing. “Her love of beauty and gentleness complemented an inner strength and determination to make difficult decisions throughout her life.”

Sister Janet was born on June 5, 1938, in the New York borough of Brooklyn. The Capone family – parents Leonard and Veronica (Hall), older brother Don, Janet, and Carole, who was born four years after Janet – lived on the second floor of a two-family house in Astoria, Queens, New York, with Veronica’s parents on the first floor. Leonard, an attorney, was chief clerk of the Queens County Court, while Veronica was a legal secretary for a law firm in Manhattan.

Sister Janet and her siblings attended P.S. 68, which gave them a fine education and plenty of activities and field trips in which to be involved. When she was in sixth grade, it was decided that her asthma required a warm climate in the wintertime, so she spent the second half of the school year at Rosarian Academy in West Palm Beach, Florida.

More accustomed to her own relative independence in New York than to the environment of a boarding school, however, Sister Janet came home at the end of the year and informed her parents she was not going back because she found it too confining. Having to hold someone’s hand to cross the street next to Rosarian was too much for someone used to riding New York buses and subways.

But she did go back in the middle of seventh grade, and every winter thereafter until she graduated in 1955. Her love for the Adrian Dominican Sisters at Rosarian inspired her to become part of the Congregation, and she entered that September 2.

She was received as a novice the next August and was given the religious name Sister Mary Leonard. After completing her canonical novitiate year in August 1957, she was sent back to Florida to teach, and spent the 1957 to 1961 school years at Sacred Heart School, Pensacola, followed by eleven years on the faculty at Rosarian. While at Rosarian, she earned her bachelor’s degree in French from Barry College (University) in Miami Shores, Florida.

After a year as a graduate student at St. Louis University in Missouri in 1972-73, Sister Janet returned yet again to Florida, becoming a teacher and then assistant principal at Tampa Catholic High School. She then spent the 1977-78 school year teaching on the college level at Marymount College, Tarrytown, New York.

Then came a real change. She earned a master’s degree in guidance and counseling from Siena Heights College (University) in 1980 and embarked upon a whole new series of ministries in that field. From 1981 to 1983 she worked as a counselor for Adult Protective Services in Orlando, Florida, and from 1983 to 1996 she was the director of the Emmaus Community, a residential program for women
religious in St. Louis, Missouri. In 1996, she returned to Adrian to serve as administrator of the Dominican Life Center.

Two years later, at the General Chapter of 1998, Janet was elected Prioress of the Congregation, with Sisters Maureen Comer, Molly Giller, Barbara Rund, and Kathleen McGrail elected as General Council members.

During Sister Janet’s time in leadership, the Motherhouse campus saw a number of important physical changes: renovation and restoration of Holy Rosary Chapel, construction of St. Catherine Chapel, and remodeling of Weber Retreat and Conference Center.

And there came the very profound changes inherent in the merger between the Edmonds and Adrian Dominicans that became official in June 2003, after several years of discussion and two years of serious consideration before the Edmonds Sisters’ vote on the issue at their General Chapter in late 2002.

Sister Joanne McCauley, who was part of the merger committee as an Edmonds Dominican Sister, said in the press release about Sister Janet’s death that the merger “was a time of real deep searching, and Janet was with us all the way through it. Janet and her Council were so welcoming and attentive to our every need. That meant a great deal to us. She made sure we were welcomed as much as possible. We admired Janet’s vision and her acceptance of us – every single one of us.”

After Sister Janet left office in 2004, she spent her sabbatical year in Florida and then became Vice President of Sponsorship for what eventually became known as Dignity Health Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz, California. She spent six years there, and then served as chair of the hospital’s board from 2012 until 2017. During those latter years, she lived in Punta Gorda, Florida, and served in volunteer ministry at Sacred Heart Parish there as a lector, Eucharistic minister, and nursing-home visitor.

Then, in 2017, Sister Janet was diagnosed with cancer, which soon brought her back to Michigan to live at the Lourdes Senior Community in Waterford and to be looked after by Sister Maureen Comer, who ministered there. She died there on July 29, 2018, at the age of 80.

Her Chapter Prioress, Sister Mary Ann Caulfield, remembered at the wake service one week later – which she called “Janet Capone’s dance of life” – that at the 2004 General Chapter, Janet had quoted to the Sisters Lee Ann Womack’s song, “I Hope You Dance,” which concludes with the words, “When you get the choice to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance.”

“And so, Janet, you have graced us with your presence, you have blessed us in so many ways. Now you rejoice with your Beloved; your spirit dances with the Divine Presence. You are clothed in majesty,” Sister Mary Ann said, before closing her remarks by playing Womack’s song.

Among those sharing reflections at the wake was Sister Maureen, who said -- referencing a quote by the 5th Century mystic Rumi – that one of Sister Janet’s outstanding gifts “was to meet people in that field where one is known and accepted, right or wrong.”

“There is no doubt that this day, since a week ago today, heaven is richer,” Sister Maureen said. “A woman of great wisdom, integrity, insight, kindness, good humor, inclusiveness, contemplation, has joined the ranks of the saints.”

Sister Janet’s grandniece Caroline Goguen shared her own memories of her as “essay editor, and cheerleader, and far off friend who would always answer the phone when we needed her.” She told a
humorous story of meeting Sister Janet for dinner right after having become a vegetarian, at which she took a bite of her great-aunt’s veal without knowing it was meat.

Also part of the wake were Sister Marilee Ewing, who on behalf of the “crowd” remembered Sister Janet’s expressive smile, compassionate heart, and “spontaneous, insightful quips,” and Sister Carol Johannes, who sent an email to be read. As one of Sister Janet’s predecessors as Prioress, Sister Carol knew full well what leadership entailed, and her email reflected this:

Dearest, dearest Janet, I remember so well how reluctantly you accepted the mantle of leadership. You surely didn’t seek it. But as you listened and as it became clearer and clearer that God was calling you through the many voices of your sisters, you accepted it with a generosity, grace, kindness and greatness of heart for which we’ll all be eternally grateful.

Rest in peace, dearest Janet. The world is poorer for your passing, and we will always miss your wise and gentle presence among us. But we know in faith that, like Dominic, your love and care for us will only be enhanced as you enter your new life, where someday we will be together again.

The homily at the funeral Mass was preached by Sister Eunice Drazba, who ministered with Sister Janet at the Emmaus Community.

“Janet was a very private person and yet I learned lots from her,” Sister Eunice said. “She is one of those people in my life ‘that preached the Gospel and sometimes used words.’”

Sister Eunice focused her homily on reflecting on the readings for the Mass – including Proverbs’ familiar description of the Valiant Woman – and Psalm 111, which calls on the faithful to praise God daily. “Janet lived those praises daily, starting each day by putting two feet on the floor and showing up,” she said. “That was one of her mottoes: ‘Just show up.’ In showing up, we trust God to be with us and lead us to our next move, decision, choice. … We are the hands, feet, mouth of our God. Janet believed that and spread that love of God daily.”
Center: Sister Janet’s First Communion Right: Sister Janet Capone’s parents, Veronica and Leonard

Right: Sister Janet Capone, as Prioress, addresses the Sisters of the Florida Chapter during their Assembly in West Palm Beach on October 24, 1998.
From left: Former Prioreses, from left: Sisters Rosemary Ferguson, Nadine Foley, and Janet Capone, September 2002; Staff members of Emmaus House, circa 1993, from left: Mary Patrick O’Connell, OSF; Eunice Drazba, OP; and Sister Janet Capone, OP.

From left: During the 1998 Transfer of Leadership ceremony, the new General Council takes office: from left, Sisters Barbara Rund, Kathleen McGrail, Maureen Comer, Molly Giller, and Janet Capone. Sisters Janet Capone, left, and Michele Kopp, Priorress of the Edmonds Dominican Sisters, process into Madden Hall during the merger ceremony in Adrian, 2003.
From left: Former Prioresses: front, from left, Sisters Donna Markham and Rosemary Ferguson, and back row, from left, Sisters Patricia Walter, Janet Capone, Carol Johannes, and Nadine Foley; Sister Janet Capone during the sprinkling rite at the First Profession Liturgy of Sisters Mary Soher and Barbara Kelley, August 8, 1999

Former Prioresses, from left: Sisters Rosemary Ferguson, Carol Johannes, Nadine Foley, Patricia Walter, Janet Capone, Donna Markham, and Attracta Kelly
Members of the 2016 Diamond Jubilee Class, September/February Crowds, are: back row from left, Sisters Claudia Morgan, Mina Riggs, Rosalie Bulanda, and Joanne McCauley; fourth row from left, Sisters Joan Christie, Hilda Nadine Sheehan, Ann Englert, and Mary Irene Walker; third row, from left, Sisters Marilee Ewing, Ann Marie Petri, Prioress Attracta Kelly, Janet Capone, and Annette Desloover; second row, from left, Sisters Helen Essa, Dorothy L. Berg, Rosaire McAuliffe, Joanne Spisz, and Ruth Adamites; and seated, from left, Sisters Denise Devitt, Mary Kathleen O’Neill, and Maria Caridad Pinuela.