Sister Jean Charles Birney, OP
1924-2018

Among the many priests and religious who were part of the extended Birney clan were two Adrian Dominican Sisters: Jean Charles Birney and her sister Mary Jean (Sister Jane Dominic).

Elizabeth Ann Birney, who became Sister Jean Charles in religious life, was born January 20, 1924, in Jackson, Michigan, to Charles and Jean (Crawford) Birney. Charles’ great-great grandfather came from Northern Ireland to Canada and from there to several other locales, finally coming to Bunker Hill, Michigan. Charles was born in Tawas, Michigan. Jean’s side of the family was Scottish, and emigrated to Canada, where Sister Jean was born.

Charles and Jean married in 1918 and settled in Jackson, Michigan. Their first child, a son whom they named John, was stillborn. Next came Mary Jean and then, two and a half years later, Elizabeth, who was born by Caesarean section. Tragically, complications ensued, and Jean died three days later.

Charles remarried in 1928, when Elizabeth was four and a half and Mary Jean was seven. In the meantime, an aunt and great-aunt raised the children. Charles’ second wife, Marco Brennan, was nearly twenty years younger than Charles and, by Sister Jean Charles’ own account in her life story, the marriage was often stormy. The girls attended grade school and high school at St. Mary Star of the Sea in Jackson, but while they were in high school, an especially difficult time in their parents’ marriage led to them being sent away to St. Joseph Academy in Adrian.

It was there, surrounded by Adrian Dominican Sisters, that both young women decided they wanted to enter the Congregation. It wasn’t an idea that came easily to Elizabeth; Mary Jean entered first, in 1939, and when she told her younger sister of her decision, “I thought she was nuts,” Sister Jean Charles wrote in her life story. But, the next year, she followed Mary Jean into the Congregation.

She received the habit and her religious name on January 7, 1941, and made first profession in January 1942. The day she did so, she was sent out on mission to St. Celestine’s in Elmwood Park, Illinois. When she was told to get off at a different train station than she had originally been instructed to, there was no one there to meet her on the especially cold January day, so Sister Mary Rita Riedel took her home to the convent at nearby St. Carthage along with the newly professed Sister who had been missioned there.

Sister Jean Charles finished out the school year at St. Celestine’s and then spent the 1942-43 and 1943-44 school years teaching fifth and sixth grade social studies at St. Theresa’s in Detroit because Mother Gerald had decided to send her to be nearer her sister, who was missioned at St. Brigid’s.

More elementary-school appointments followed: St. Dominic’s, Detroit (1944-48); St. Philip Neri, Chicago (1948-52), during which time she earned her bachelor’s degree in history from Siena Heights College (University); Blessed Sacrament, Toledo, Ohio (1952-57); St. Edmund’s, Oak Park, Michigan (1957-58); and St. Alphonsus, Dearborn, Michigan (1958-62).

While at St. Alphonsus, Sister Jean completed her master’s in history from Loyola University in Chicago, and her next assignment was to teach history at St. Ambrose High School in Detroit. She wrote in her life story she did not care for high school teaching because she did not understand that age level, and she was only at St. Ambrose for one year.
She spent the 1963-64 school year at St. Henry’s in Cleveland and was then missioned to Santa Catalina School in Las Matas, the Dominican Republic. It was a very short-lived assignment; it was a personally difficult time for her, and after just three months she was sent back to the U.S. to take the place of a Sister at St. Matthew’s in Jacksonville, Florida, who had died unexpectedly.

After two years at St. Matthew’s, Sister Jean Charles was sent elsewhere in Jacksonville, to Assumption School, and spent the next fourteen years there. In 1980, she went to St. Rose of Lima School in Miami Shores, Florida, where she taught on the junior high level for a year.

At that point, Sister Jean Charles decided to take a new ministerial path, and got a job as a pastoral minister at St. Jude’s Church in St. Petersburg, Florida. Her ministry specifically involved visiting the parish’s shut-ins, and the eighteen years she spent in that job “were good years and I loved my old people,” she wrote in her life story.

Then in 1999, her sister suffered a stroke, and Sister Carleen Maly, the Florida Chapter Prioress, talked with her about returning to Adrian to be near Sister Mary Jean.

“It helped their relationship deepen,” said Sister Joanne Peters, Co-Chapter Prioress of the Holy Rosary Chapter, in her eulogy for Sister Jean Charles. “Jean Charles read to Mary Jean, shopped for her and really tried to help her regain her speech. Sisters have said that she was very compassionate and it especially showed as she tended to Mary Jean.”

In retirement, Sister Jean Charles continued to be very active for as long as she was able: singing in the choir, engaging with her mission group, and volunteering in various ways around the campus. She also kept up with her wide range of intellectual pursuits; as Sister Joanne said in her eulogy.

As an adult she had a variety of interests especially within the realm of religious and civic affairs. She always had questions about many things concerning justice and peace, world affairs and theology. These last years were difficult as her sight and hearing became more impaired. She continued to search out ways to read and used talking books. She sought out as many means as possible to stay in touch with areas she was most interested in. Always a searcher and learner!

… She was always prayerful and had a contemplative spirit which she supported with her reading, prayer, and study.

Jean’s table mates, Ann Kelly and Arlene Seckel, enjoyed the time they spent eating with her. They said she was concerned about others, charitable and knew just when to help people/cheer them up. She freely passed on the magazines she received, and was generous in many other ways. Her sense of humor and quick wit helped them laugh and they became very close in that relatively short time.

Sister Jean Charles died at the Dominican Life Center on August 3, 2018. She was ninety-four years old and had been an Adrian Dominican Sister for seventy-six years.

Sister Patricia Harvat, who had been one of Sister Jean Charles’ students at St. Alphonsus, preached the funeral homily. She remembered her long-ago teacher as a storyteller:

*The lesson plan Jean Charles had for us to learn religion, geography, English, spelling, and reading was captured in stories. Stories transport us to another world, and that’s what Jean Charles did – following in the footsteps of Jesus, who taught in parables transporting us to what the Kingdom of God is like. Like Thomas in the Gospel, we too*
would ask questions; we didn’t always get it. But Jean would once again have a story and always a most creative way to help us understand our new learnings. Even though we thought she was not teaching us, she was teaching us life lessons we would never forget.

… I am sure the reading from Isaiah\(^1\) spoke so much to her personal journey but from our vantage point it speaks to Jean – grasping us by the hand, forming us and setting us as a future hope for people whose lives we would cross many years later. Jean Charles brought comfort and such wonderful humor to us as children struggling to find our identity and figuring out where we fit in as we grew into adolescence. Even now all of us are that bruised reed that Isaiah speaks of, that will not be snuffed out. We trust in the God who is the way, the truth and the life.

… Thank you, Jean, for loving and endearing us to yourself in a narrative of a life well lived. We hold you dear in our hearts and minds.

\(^1\)Isaiah 42:3-7.
From left: The future Sisters Mary Jean Birney, left, and Jean Charles Birney; Sisters Mary Jean Birney (left) and Jean Charles Birney before they entered the Adrian Dominican Congregation; Sisters Mary Jean Birney, left, and Jean Charles Birney

Right: From left, Sisters Jean Charles Birney, Francis Assisium Proulx, Mary Jean Birney, and Maureen Gallagher enjoy a Golden Jubilee dinner together.

From left: Sister Jean Charles Birney, left, with Racine Dominican Sister Suzanne Noffke; Sister Mary Jane Lubinski, left, and Sister Jean Charles Birney
Members of the 2001 Diamond Jubilee Class are, back row, from left, Sisters Clara Patricks, Anne Marie Snyder, Agnes Carmel Dziak, and Mary Paula Connor and front row, from left, Sisters Marie Joannes O’Donnell, Jean Charles Birney, Mary Annette Glendening, and Loretta Ann Walsh. Not pictured are Sisters Marie Michel Allain and Virginia Mullins.