In Sister Charlene Cote’s autobiography, she wrote of the point at which she knew definitively that she was going to become an Adrian Dominican Sister:

I had been thinking of entering the convent ever since high school. One day, in the spring of my sophomore year at Siena, I met Sister Ann Joachim in front of Benincasa Dining Hall looking at the bulletin board. Standing next to me she softly said, “Sister Charlene; we don’t have a Sister Charlene,” and off she went! I knew at that moment I was going to enter the convent!

Sister Charlene was born on June 26, 1936, in Chicago to Napoleon and Harriet (Martineau) Côté. Napoleon and Harriet both came from Manistee, Michigan, meeting when Napoleon was a high school senior. He originally planned to go to college with the money he made working in the summertime on the freighters that plied Lake Michigan, but he ended up getting a job right there in Manistee and never did attend college.

Eventually, he moved to Chicago to find a better job, and after Harriet joined him there the two were married and settled down in St. Laurence Parish on the city’s South Side.

Two girls came into the family: Harriet Marie, named for her mother and called Marie to avoid confusion, and then Charlene three and a half years later. About a month after Charlene was born, their father had the family’s surname changed to remove the accent over the e. “I suspect that it was Mom’s idea,” Sister Charlene wrote.

Both girls attended St. Laurence School, where they were taught by Adrian Dominican Sisters, and when it came time for high school Sister Charlene wanted to go to Aquinas High School, which was operated by the Congregation. Marie, however, did not have the same warm feelings as her younger sister did for their teachers at St. Laurence, so she opted to go elsewhere for high school.

Sister Charlene attended Aquinas on a “working scholarship,” for which she cleaned the school library each morning. She also worked at a variety of after-school and summer jobs, including being an elevator operator and a telephone operator.

Her goal in life at that time was to become a nurse; when she graduated from high school in 1954 she applied to enter the nursing program offered by Little Company of Mary Hospital and Mercy College. The plan was put on hold, however, when her father told her that in the fall he and Harriet were going to Florida for several weeks for something connected to his work as a construction supervisor, and she opted to go with them and delay college for a year.

Once back in Chicago, she went back to work at the phone company and on Sunday afternoons went over to Aquinas to create pottery with Aquinas’s art teacher, Sister de Ricci Dalton. It was during those creative afternoons that Sister de Ricci convinced her to change her mind about studying nursing in Chicago and instead enroll at Siena Heights College (University) to major in art.

And, after that fateful encounter with Sister Ann Joachim in the spring of 1957, she completed her sophomore year and then, on September 8, 1957, entered the Congregation. She received the habit and her religious name, Sister Mary Leonette (according to her autobiography, she asked her parents
to come up with a one-word combination of their names, and “Leonette” was the result), on August 4, 1958, and during her canonical novitiate year completed her bachelor’s degree in fine arts from Siena Heights.

Immediately after making first profession in August 1959, she was appointed to St. George School in Roy, New Mexico, and stayed there until 1963, when the Sisters withdrew from the school. She wrote in her autobiography that in the summer of 1962, she was assigned to do parish census work in Chicago and told to take her trunk with her, for the Sisters were leaving St. George’s. But apparently the pastor was supposed to be given a year’s notice, and since that had not happened, the school was kept open another year and “my trunk and I went back to Roy!” she wrote.

After that extra year, Sister Charlene was sent to St. Joseph School in Winslow, Arizona, where she spent two years (1963-65) and was introduced to the Cursillo movement – a program designed to help Christians recognize their gifts and live out their baptismal call – when a center was established at the parish.

Cursillos were held every six weeks, and “since the school facilities were used and my classroom became the chapel, I had to move every sixth Thursday and Friday,” she wrote. “To get on my ‘good side,’ Father invited me to make a Cursillo. I did! And was very graced!” She became active in the movement, and found that her own Cursillo helped her prepare for her final profession in 1964.

Sister Charlene’s third mission (1965-68) was to St. Louis Bertrand School in Oakland, California, followed by an assignment to St. Elizabeth School in Pompano Beach, Florida. As it so happened, her first month there coincided with her parents’ move to St. Petersburg, Florida, and in 1970 she found herself assigned to Holy Family School in St. Petersburg.

She was there until 1972. During her second year there, she made a retreat at the Cenacle Retreat Center in Lantana, Florida, but chose to stay at Our Lady Queen of Martyrs Convent in Fort Lauderdale so that she could spend time with Sister Ann Marie Meagher, her principal and superior from St. Elizabeth’s, and this led her to her final teaching ministry: she discovered that there would be an opening the next school year for an art teacher at St. Thomas Aquinas High School, across the street from Our Lady Queen of Martyrs. She interviewed for the position and when the 1972-73 school year began, she was St. Thomas Aquinas’ new art teacher. In 1975, she completed her master’s degree in art education and administration at Florida State University.

Sister Charlene taught at St. Thomas Aquinas until 2003, when a ruptured colon put her in the hospital for five months. She retired from her teaching job but stayed at the school as the assistant transportation director until 2008.

When she had hip replacement surgery in August 2008, she stayed at the home of a St. Thomas Aquinas teacher until she could drive, at which point she moved back to her apartment. From then until the time she returned to Adrian to live, she spent part of each weekday looking after the teacher’s bedridden husband.

Sister Charlene moved to Adrian in June 2011 to live at the Dominican Life Center. She was eighty-three years old and in her sixty-first year in the Congregation when she died on September 11, 2019. She received a “green” burial two days later in the Congregation cemetery.

The homilist for her memorial Mass was Sister Joella Miller, who tied Sister Charlene’s personal story to the Gospel passage Sister Charlene herself had chosen: Matthew 9:18-22, about the women with a hemorrhage who knew that if she could just touch the edge of Jesus’ cloak she would be made well.
Charlene picked these readings and put them as a part of her autobiography. I quote from there: “Matthew 9:20-22. As a novice, one day at morning prayer I was ‘squashed’ next to the statue of the Sacred Heart, listening to Sister Patrick Jerome. I don’t know if it was Sister’s words or the fact that I was pressed against the statue, but the woman’s prayer of ‘If only I can touch the hem of his cloak, I will be healed’ prompted me to pray ‘Lord, make me never stray further from you than the reach of your garment!’ God has always honored my prayer.”

Throughout her life, Charlene reached many times for Jesus’ cloak. When for her first mission she was sent to Roy, New Mexico, to teach grades one through four, then was sent from the West to Florida where she taught art for thirty-one years, there were probably many times when she reached for Jesus’ cloak. When she was ill and in the hospital with a ruptured colon, and when she moved to Maria, she reached for his cloak.

She also reached for his cloak when wonderful things happened, like her travels to Rome, Ireland, and the armchair pilgrimage to the Holy Land. God surely loved Charlene and kept her close to his care.

The reading from Revelations that Charlene also shared in her autobiography and we used in this liturgy, and I quote, Revelations 3:8: “I truly believe that God has opened many doors for me that no one can ever close.” Those of us who knew Charlene knew she believed this so much that her mission group had it put on a plaque for her.

Charlene, with your simple faith, you approached Jesus to touch his cloak. Let each of us with faith keep Jesus close enough to be able to touch his garment. Charlene, rest in peace.
From left: Sister Charlene Cote at her graduation from Aquinas High School, Chicago, 1954. Napoleon and Harriet Cote with their daughter, Sister Charlene Cote, and Sister Clara Patricks

Right: Sisters Clara (Anthony Ann) Patricks and Charlene (Leonette) Cote, Bisbee, Arizona, May 1963
From left: Standing, from left, Sisters Charlene Cote, Diane Odette, and Thomas James Burns and seated, from left, Sisters Jeannine Holway, Kathleen Donnelly, and Margaret Mehigan. From left, Sisters Jeannine Holway, Jodie Screes, Marie Bride Walsh (seated) and Charlene Cote, April 2013

From left: Sister Charlene Cote, left, with Sister Rosa Reyes. Sisters Charlene Cote (left) and Jeannine Holway
Members of the 2008 Golden Jubilee September-February Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Charlene Cote, Mary Rita McSweeney, Kathleen Clausen, and Marilyn Felice Barnett and front row, from left, Sisters Attracta Kelly, Maria Odelia Romero, Annette Marie Sinagra, and Mary Katherine Dolan. Not pictured is Sister Iva Gregory.