Sister Dorothy Jeanne Burns, OP
1920-2019

“When I entered religious life in 1938, it was, as it were, a transferring or a joining of one grand big family with another.”

Those words from Sister Dorothy Jeanne Burns’ life story sum up the way she went from one experience of community – as the youngest of fifteen children (nine boys and six girls) born to James and Josephine (Rano) Burns. Thirteen lived to adulthood; Daniel died at birth and Michael died of diphtheria at age three.

James Burns was born in St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada, to an Irish-immigrant father who with his brother had fled their homeland at the time of the Great Famine. At a young age, James worked with his father on the Union Railroad, and as an adult he continued to do similar work, eventually ending up in Detroit working for the Department of Street Railways as supervisor of the laying and maintenance of the streetcar tracks in and around the city.

Josephine was a native of St. Clair, Michigan, and just as her future husband had worked in the same place as his father, when she was a teenager Josephine and her father worked together at the Diamond Crystal Salt Company located in St. Clair.

After James and Josephine married in St. Clair, they settled in nearby Richmond, and as James’ career advanced the steadily growing family moved over time to Port Huron, Monroe, and Ann Arbor, Michigan – where Sister Dorothy Jeanne came into the family on October 4, 1920 – and finally to Detroit.

Her early schooling came at All Saints School on Detroit’s southwest side, and then when she was ready to begin fourth grade the Burnses moved to the north side of the city and she attended St. Brigid School. It was there that she first met the Adrian Dominican Sisters, who “impressed me with their happy spirit,” she wrote.

Her first two years of high school were spent at St. Theresa High School, also staffed by the Adrian Dominican Sisters. In March 1938, the spring of her sophomore year, the then-seventeen-year-old wrote to Mother Gerald asking to be admitted to the Congregation that June. Her request was granted, and she entered on June 23.

She received the habit and her religious name, Sister James Marie, on January 3, 1939, and in February 1940, after her canonical novitiate year (and the rest of her secondary schooling at St. Joseph Academy) was complete, she was assigned to St. Columbanus School in Chicago.

“It was a great moment for me, at last, to be an active part of our great Adrian Dominican teaching community,” she wrote in her life story. It was a ministry in which she would spend the next fifty years.

In all, Sister Dorothy Jeanne served at eighteen – one of them twice – in four states: St. Columbanus until the end of the 1940 school year; Our Lady of Good Counsel, Chicago (the start of the 1940 school year until October 1941); St. John Nepomucene, Cleveland, Ohio (October 1941-June 1942); St. Celestine, Elmwood Park, Illinois (1942-45); Sacred Heart, Munising, Michigan (1945-46); St. Anne, Gilbert, Arizona (1946-47); St. Lawrence, Utica, Michigan (1947-49); St. Bernard, Alpena, Michigan (1949-50); St. Joseph, Port Huron, Michigan (1950-51); St. Jude, Detroit (1951-53); St. Stephen, Saginaw, Michigan (1953-54); St. William, Walled Lake, Michigan (1954-55); St. Thomas Aquinas, East Lansing, Michigan (1955-60); Holy Name, Detroit (1960-62); St. Jude, Detroit, a
second time (1962-67); St. Peter, Harper Woods, Michigan (1967-78); Blessed Sacrament, Toledo, Ohio (1978-80); St. Michael, Monroe, Michigan (1980-83); and St. Alphonsus, Dearborn, Michigan (1983-90). At the last three of those, she was the elementary principal.

Over these years, Sister Dorothy Jeanne earned her bachelor’s degree in history in 1950 and her master’s in education in 1974, both from Siena Heights College (University). She also earned a certificate in theology from Siena Heights in 1957.

Sadly, her mother died of a stroke at just sixty-six years of age in 1942. Sister Dorothy Jeanne wrote in her life story that her mother’s early death could have resulted from the stress of having five young sons all serving in the military during those war years. James, on the other hand, lived to be ninety, passing away in 1963.

Sister Dorothy Jeanne’s seven years at St. Alphonsus were her last in the educational field, but she did not leave the parish behind. In September 1990 she was asked to become the church’s Christian Service Coordinator, a role which “took me to the heart of the parish,” she wrote. It allowed her to minister to the senior parishioners, many of whom were homebound, and she worked with the RCIA team as well.

A back injury brought her to Adrian in 2005 to recuperate at the Dominican Life Center. She ended up remaining there permanently, until her passing on June 6, 2019, at the age of ninety-eight.

“She, Dorothy, thank you for your presence among us for eighty years; thank you for modeling such a gracious and loving spirit,” said Sister Pat Dulka, Holy Rosary Co-Chapter Prioress, in her eulogy for Dorothy Jeanne at the wake service on June 10.

Sister Pat also read an email from Sister Frances Mary Fitzpatrick, who had been a postulant at St. Williams, Walled Lake when Sister Dorothy Jeanne served there. “I have so many happy memories of her,” Sister Frances Mary wrote. “… I was to teach second grade and Dorothy thought that would be difficult since I had no teaching experience. She spoke with the superior and convinced her that I would be more able and apt to teach in fifth grade! She was right! Dorothy taught second grade. … I learned a great deal from her; she was lovely, interesting and most helpful. Now she is at peace.”

Sister Molly Nicholson preached the funeral homily the next morning. Sister Molly reflected on how struck she was with the way the readings Sister Dorothy Jeanne had chosen, especially the first reading (Isaiah 43:1-5) and the Gospel reading (Mark 4:35-41), seemed to connect with her own life story.

As the youngest of fifteen children, Sister Molly said, Sister Dorothy Jeanne could well have found appropriate Isaiah’s message from God, promising protection and safety, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” And perhaps, Sister Molly continued, through her lifetime Sister Dorothy Jeanne prayed Psalm 63, from which the psalm response was taken: “O God, you are my God whom I seek: for you my flesh pines and my soul thirsts. Your kindness is a greater good than life; my lips shall glorify you.”

And the Gospel story, as it unfolds, begins to imitate life as Sister Dorothy was experiencing it, Sister Molly said. Near the end of her time on earth, as she lay in bed resting, “she quietly waited for the One who came for her, who said, ‘let’s go to the other side.’ And he took her, just as she was.”

 “… For those of us who have come today celebrate Dorothy’s new life, may we also trust in the invitation of our loving God to accept us as we are, to call us further, and to be with us in the times of darkness. Dorothy, thank you for teaching us so much, but also for showing us the way, the truth, and life.”
Center: First Holy Communion; Right: Sister Dorothy Jeanne Burns on a home visit in 1944

Postulants on Entrance Day – June 23, 1938 – are, from left, Sisters Mary Agnes Brennan, Ruth Thome, Agnes Stewart, Dorothy Jeanne Burns, Elizabeth Gerber, and Ruth Kennedy.

From left: Sister Dorothy Jeanne Burns cuts the cake for the celebration of the 150th anniversary of St. Alphonsus Parish, Dearborn, Michigan, 2004. Sisters Dorothy Jeanne Burns, left, and Betty Dolan stand in front of Stella Maris Church in Rome.
From left: From left, Sister Diane Odette, Gertrude Onderbeke from the parish, Father Eugene Fedewa, and Sister Dorothy Jeanne Burns celebrate Halloween at St. Alphonsus Parish, Dearborn, Michigan. Members of the 2014 75-year Jubilee crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Dorothy Jeanne Burns, Mary Margaret Beh, Maura Phillips, Attracta Kelly (Prioress) and Virginia LaTourelle, and front row, from left, Sisters Marie Amada Garcia, Irma Gerber, Marie Bride Walsh, and Helen Patrick Bartley.