Sister Elisa Joan Doherty, OP 1932-2019

From the Gospel of Matthew\textsuperscript{1} we listened to the words, “When Jesus saw the crowds he went up on the mountainside and he sat down. His disciples gathered around him and he began to teach them.” The Beatitudes are not only a code of living. They are about Jesus. The teaching of the Beatitudes is to become like Jesus – to be that compassionate, empathetic, joy-filled, in solidarity with the vulnerable and to be selfless.

From the Gospel of Elisa’s life, many experienced Jesus.

These words began Sister Patricia Harvat’s homily at the funeral Mass for Sister Elisa Joan Doherty, a woman who spent forty-five years in ministry to the people of Puerto Rico, much of it living and working directly among the poor.

Joan Marjorie Doherty, who in 1971 legally added Elisa to her name, was born on October 19, 1932, in Detroit to Frank and Melita (Dederich) Doherty. Frank was a model-building foreman at General Motors while Melita was in charge of the home and the couple’s four children, of whom Elisa was the youngest daughter, preceded by Eleanor and Eileen. Later, Richard came into the family.

Joan’s elementary-school years were spent at St. Catherine School and then Our Lady of Good Counsel School in Detroit, where the IHM Sisters from Monroe were her teachers. Her musical talents began being nurtured at a very early age; she began taking piano lessons and later learned the organ. Her father bought a pump organ so she could practice at home and not have to stay after school to practice in the church. Within six months, she was playing the organ for the daily 6:30 a.m. Mass, with her sister Eileen singing.

“Music was a favorite pastime in our family,” she wrote in her autobiography. Melita had played piano from her teens up until arthritis set in, and in the evenings the family would go downstairs to their rec room where Joan would play and everyone would sing along.

Joan met the Adrian Dominican Sisters as a student at Dominican High School, where she continued both piano and organ studies under the direction of Sister Thomas Gertrude Brennan. She wanted to enter the convent right after graduation, but her parents suggested she work for six months first in order to make sure religious life was the right choice. She became the secretary to the personnel manager for a car-hauling company and then, in December 1950, not long after her eighteenth birthday, she wrote to Mother Gerald Barry seeking admission to the Congregation.

She entered the next February 2 and was received as a novice and given the religious name Sister Michael Eilese that August. She wrote in her autobiography that when it was time to ask for the postulant mistress’s recommendation to receive the habit, she discovered that her former boss at the car-hauling company had written a letter every week begging her to come back to work for him because she could take shorthand and the woman who had replaced her could only take dictation in longhand.

After her canonical novitiate year, Sister Michael Eilese was missioned to Mother of Divine Grace School in Cheektowaga, New York, where the already-talented young pianist and organist taught

\textsuperscript{1} Matthew 5:1-12, the Gospel reading for the funeral Mass.
music as well as first and fifth grades. She spent two years there and then in 1954 was sent to St. Anthony School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where she taught eighth grade and music. She was at St. Anthony’s until 1960, during which time she earned her Bachelor of Music degree in piano from Barry College (University). That was followed in 1969 by a master’s in music education from Florida State University.

In 1960, she was sent to the Congregation’s Colegio Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, where she experienced seven of the country’s most tumultuous years: the final year of the dictatorship of President Rafael Trujillo, which ended with his assassination, and the turmoil and civil unrest that followed. After spending the 1967-68 school year back in Fort Lauderdale, this time at Our Lady Queen of Martyrs School, where she taught Spanish and religion as well as music, she embarked on her lengthy time of service in Puerto Rico.

Her first eight years on the island were at Parroquia San Antonio (St. Anthony’s) in Guayama, first as superior and the high school’s principal from 1968 to 1974. She also served during that time in public school adult education and in jail and hospital ministry. It was during her time there that the Sisters were able to return to their baptismal names, and she chose to legally make her name Elisa Joan so it would be less confusing to people. After her six-year term was up, she remained at the parish to coordinate a service program she had organized with the parish’s young, and to handle the liturgical music needs.

According to Sister Rose Ann Schlitt, who spoke at Sister Elisa’s wake service, Sister Elisa also during this time translated into Spanish two books on biblical formation in the context of liberation theology, for use in parishes, home gatherings, and the like. “Elisa was proud of this contribution and group experience,” Sister Rose Ann said. “She was very responsible, organized and thorough.”

From 1975 to 1977, in addition to her parish ministry, she served as the administrator for the Overseas Vicariate while Sister Ivelisse Auffant was the Vicaress. She was also part of the Congregation Mission Board, which had been established to respond to questions particular to the Vicariate. Sister Ivelisse’s successor, Sister Mary Lou Putrow, accompanied Sister Elisa on some of her pastoral visits, and wrote in an email after Sister Elisa’s death that “her work in Puerto Rico was incredible. … she was very sensitive to the people she visited and knew well the background of all those she visited.”

Sister Elisa remained in Guayama until 1987, at which point the Redemptorist Fathers, with whom she was ministering at St. Anthony’s, asked her to serve in pastoral ministry at Nuestra Señora del Carmen (Our Lady of Mount Carmel) Parish in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico. She was at that parish for twelve years, until 1999, and then went to San Juan, Puerto Rico, to be part of the pastoral ministry team at Parroquia San Agustin in Puerta de Tierra, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Old San Juan. During her time there, she taught catechetics, served as music minister, and worked and lived directly among the poor, helping them in many ways, including as a community organizer, especially among the women of the area.

“No life and the reality of the people in this part of the capital city is a very different environment for me,” she wrote at the time. “These months among the poor and abandoned have been the most difficult of all my years in the mission of the Lord.”

That immersion with the city’s marginalized led her to establish an outreach center in 2007 called Give a Hand. She wrote in her autobiography that she would buy food at Costco and prepare individual bags of food of one day’s meals, and distributed the bags from her car to the homeless at the corner closest to her home. The center also gave out clothing and personal items, and she provided tutoring, marriage counseling, pre-baptismal conferences, and sacramental preparation.
“My days were spent in offering a ministry of compassion and healing to the wounds of humanity,” she wrote.

In 2013, her health required her to, very reluctantly, leave the island and the people that she so loved and return to Adrian to live at the Dominican Life Center. She died there on October 17, 2019, aged eighty-six and in her sixty-eighth year of religious profession. Fittingly, her funeral Mass on October 22 was filled with Spanish songs, and the cover of the worship aid featured a photo of the plaza in Guayama.

Tributes to Sister Elisa poured in, either in person or by other means, for the wake service the evening prior to the funeral. Sister Pat Erickson, who ministered with Sister Elisa for some time in the early 1980s in Guayama, shared some personal stories and remembered Elisa’s “witness of self-giving, of proclaiming TRUTH in teaching people that their voice is important.” The Adrian Dominicans in the Dominican Republic thanked her for “all the love and joy you extended to our Latin American people” and recalled the joy she brought through her music. “And still they keep on singing and through those tunes they will always remember you,” they wrote.

Bertica Garcia Dubus, who was a music student of Elisa’s at the Colegio Santo Domingo, remembered her as “a lovely and beautiful person, a wonderful music teacher with a magnificent voice.” And Irma Bruno, a psychologist and professional singer who was one of Sister Elisa’s students at San Antonio High School in Guayama, called her “my favorite teacher and role model.”

She was very refined, kind and charismatic. Her talents as a piano player and singer made her a favorite of everyone. She was also my music teacher and church choir director. She told me that I could be a solo singer and thanks to her I became a professional singer. I owe her that. I still sing some of the songs she sang with me. … After I graduated we became friends and spent time together. I’m very sad that she is not blessing this world anymore with her presence. I will never forget her. May the light of God embrace her always.
Left photo: Joan, the future Sister Elisa Joan, at Otsego Lake, Michigan, 1937; center: at graduation from Dominican High School, Detroit; right: The Doherty family: back row, Frank (father), Sister Elisa Joan, and Melita (mother) and front row, from left, Eileen, Eleanor, and Rick.

Left: Sister Elisa Joan at Colegio San Antonio, Guayama, Puerto Rico, 1968. Right: Sisters Elisa Joan Doherty (left) and Carol Gross participate in a Dominican Praxis and Preaching Conference.

Left: Sisters Anne Liam Lees (left) and Elisa Joan Doherty at their Golden Jubilee celebration in the Dominican Republic, 2001.
Right photo: Back row, from left, Sisters Elisa Joan Doherty, Ana Feliz, Anne Liam Lees, Joyce Caulfield, and Carol Gross and, front row, from left, Sisters Margarita Ruiz and Helen Faiver.

Members of the 2011 Diamond Jubilee Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Attracta Kelly (Prioress), Julianne Wolny, Jeannine Holway, Anne Liam Lees, Judith Ann Lieder, and Agnes Peplinski; middle row, from left, Sisters Elizabeth Lynch, Rita Brunett, Thérèse M. Haggerty, Mary Daria Herbella, Catherine Ahern, and Elisa Joan Doherty; and front row, from left, Sisters Dolores Marie Dolan, Dolores Slosar, Nancy Hanna, Celine Marie Regan, Marian Edward Guethlein, and Clara Ann Budenz.