Sister Jeanne O’Laughlin, OP
1929-2019

When Sister Jeanne O’Laughlin transitioned away from the Presidency of Barry University in 1994, she was honored at a celebratory luncheon as “a durable woman who went ahead of us leading the way often through uncharted waters.”

Several memories of Sister Jeanne’s tenure at Barry are found in those luncheon remarks. Found there is a mention of the creative ways in which she got donors to contribute toward a capital project on Barry’s “west forty” acreage – singing a song, accepting a bet regarding learning to ballroom dance – and an accounting of all the people she had helped to get a Barry education, ranging from countless underprivileged students to hundreds of refugees.

In all, Sister Jeanne O’Laughlin spent twenty-three years as Barry’s president. That ministry was part of a long life of service to the field of education as well as to the Congregation itself.

Sister Jeanne was born on May 4, 1929, in Detroit to Thomas Anthony and Mary Margaret (Croak) O’Laughlin. She had very few memories of her mother, who died of complications from childbirth not long after Sister Jeanne turned six years old. Sister Jeanne wrote in her autobiography that she remembered her father taking the children to the hospital and having them stand outside watching the window of the room where her mother was. “I recall the picture vividly of a man holding a woman in his arms as she waved at us,” she wrote. “That was the end of my life with my mother.”

In all, four children were born into the family: Patricia, Bernard, Jeanne, and Mary. Jeanne’s childhood was filled with games like hide and seek, Red Rover, Run My Sheepie Run, and baseball, played with the neighborhood children. “Most often we were pretty good despite the fact that some went to church and some didn’t,” she wrote. “Some of the kids avoided our house in the evening because after dinner we all had to kneel down and say the rosary before we could rejoin our friends. If they ate with us, they had to pray with us. We weren’t the most popular supper club even though some of our neighbors were still Depression hungry.”

After beginning her schooling at Newton Elementary School, she spent the second half of her elementary education at St. Scholastica School, which was staffed by the Adrian Dominican Sisters. “We loved the nuns and they loved us,” she wrote. Her father took the Sisters shopping every Saturday, and after school and after Mass she and her siblings would walk them back to the convent. “I hated those walks to end for they were moments of feeling pride in who I was,” she wrote.

In April 1945, not just before the end of her sophomore year at Visitation High School, she wrote to Mother Gerald Barry asking permission to enter the Congregation. In that, she was following in the footsteps of her older sister; Patricia entered the community in 1943 but had left by the next September. Mother Gerald responded with a suggestion that because she was so young, she would benefit by becoming a “prep” student first and then could enter the postulate in the fall. Sister Jeanne promptly applied for admittance to the preparatory school and became a postulant in June 1945 just after her sixteenth birthday. She received the habit and her religious name, Sister John Anthony, in January 1946.
After completing her canonical novitiate year, she remained in Adrian until the 1947-48 school year began in order to begin work toward her bachelor’s degree at Siena Heights College (University). Her first mission was to Resurrection School in Lansing, Michigan, where she taught fifth grade – at the age of just seventeen herself – for a year.

From there, Sister Jeanne was assigned to St. Edward School in Rockford, Illinois (1948-50), and St. Agnes School in Iron River, Michigan (1950-51) until illness brought her to the convent at Dominican High School in Detroit for a year. After that, she was missioned to St. Alphonsus School in Dearborn, Michigan, from 1952 to 1961, and completed her bachelor’s degree in mathematics from Siena Heights in 1958.

Her next appointment was to St. Anthony School in Casa Grande, Arizona, for the 1961-62 school year, followed by an assignment to Sacred Heart School in Tuscon, Arizona, for the next school year. At that point, she began serving as an educational consultant for the Diocese of Tucson and studying for her master’s degree at the University of Arizona-Tucson. She was with the diocese from 1963 to 1969 and completed two master’s degrees in that time, a Master of Science in Teaching (1965) and a Master of Education (1966).

The Congregation then asked her to become part of the Holy Cross Province team to serve as Director of Apostolates for the Holy Cross Province. In that role, she traveled throughout the province, which encompassed the states of California, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico, supervising Sisters’ ministries. In all, she served in that role from 1969 to 1973, earning her Ph.D. in education administration from the University of Arizona-Tucson in 1970. At that point, 1970, she was elected to the provincial team, continuing her work as Director of Apostolates.

When her term of office was up in 1973, Sister Jeanne spent a year living in Washington, D.C., while working with the Adrian Dominican Independent School System (ADISS). Then she was elected to the General Council at the 1974 General Chapter, for what at that time was a four-year term. While on the Council, she studied at the University of Michigan’s Center for the Study of Higher Education for a year. After her term concluded she went to work as assistant to the president at St. Louis University.

She had begun serving on the Barry board in 1972, and in 1980 resigned from the board to apply for the presidency. In 1981, she became Barry’s fifth president and Barry became a university.

The university notes this convergence this way on its Website:

> Both events were highly indicative of the change that was to come over the next two decades, transforming Barry from a small school to one of national prominence, the fourth largest private university in the state of Florida.

As for Sister Jeanne, she wrote this in her autobiography while she was still president:

> Each year has been a blessing for me and I believe my ministry at Barry has allowed me to fulfill my Dominican vocation with loving response to God’s call. I have loved this place and am amazed at what the Lord has accomplished through those of us who have sought to fulfill the mission of this great institution. I thank God for the blessings I have received here. Barry’s mission has been mine. It has made my life have meaning. What a privilege to have been allowed to serve here. I love it and all it is meant to be in this weary world.
Sister Jeanne’s twenty-three years at Barry saw its enrollment go from 1,750 to more than 9,000 students, its endowment grow from $770,000 to $24.1 million, new schools initiated, new facilities built, and the Orlando School of Law purchased. She also was recognized with numerous honors during that time and served the wider south Florida community in many ways.

On a non-academic front, Sister Jeanne found herself in the middle of a major national news story in 1990 when U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno asked her to mediate in the case of Elián González, a young Cuban boy who ended up in the middle of a custody battle between his father and other relatives after his mother drowned while bringing him from Cuba to the U.S.

Sister Jeanne retired from the presidency in 2004, becoming President Emerita and Chancellor of the University. In that role, she continued to fundraise – and, as she put it in her annals, “friendraise” – for Barry, along with continuing her civic involvement.

She returned to Adrian in 2016 to live with her longtime friend Sister Peg Albert, president of Siena Heights. After a lengthy period of failing health, she passed away on June 18, 2019, at the age of ninety and in her seventy-third year as an Adrian Dominican Sister.

Father John O’Grady, a longtime Barry professor and friend of Sister Jeanne’s, was the celebrant for the funeral Mass on June 25, with Sister Maria Goretti Brown preaching the homily. The Mass, which was livestreamed to Barry’s Cor Jesu Chapel, was attended by many family, friends, and Barry representatives, including President Sister Linda Bevilacqua and incoming President Michael Allen.

At the wake service the evening prior, Sister Jeanne’s beloved friend Sister Peg told the assembly that Sister Jeanne was “a woman with a generous heart.” She continued,

“She never counted the cost of giving and advocating for others…. She would jump right in and advocate for the poor, the homeless, the immigrant and many others. And the cost to self was great. I often saw what a toll it took on her but it never stopped her.

“… In her position as president of Barry she had the opportunity to meet many famous people and this is what often made the press. But what many didn’t see was that she enjoyed the company of the garbage men and the homeless as much if not more than the recognizable. And she treated all with the deepest respect and dignity.

“Jeanne was my mentor, my sister, but most of all my friend. We shared life together and we were soulmates. She often said to me and to many of you sitting here, ‘I raised you from a pup.’ Thank you Jeanne for the life and love you shared with me and others. In a wonderful way you were truly one of a kind and you will always live in my heart.”

1 From the Barry University Website, www.barry.edu.
Right: Regina White, left, and Jeanne O’Laughlin on their first day of kindergarten

From left: Sister Jeanne with her stepmother, Betty; From left, Sisters Nora Leahy, Jeanne O’Laughlin, and Diane Odette

From left: Sister Jeanne O’Laughlin and Janet Reno, Attorney General under President Bill Clinton, attend a Commencement ceremony. Sister Jeanne receives a blessing from Pope John Paul II.
From left: Sister Jeanne O’Laughlin, second pew, left, at her inauguration as President of Barry College (now University), 1981. Sisters Peg Albert, left, and Jeanne O’Laughlin enjoy their trip to Alaska.

From left: Sisters Mary Karen Lietz, Joan Leo Kehn, Jeanne O’Laughlin, and Therese Margaret Roberts; Members of the 2005 North Miami Mission Group are: back row, from left, Associate Lloyd Van Bylevelt and Sisters Pam Millenbach, John Norton Barrett, Jeanne O’Laughlin, and Sarah Cavanaugh; middle row, from left, Sisters Kathleen Donnelly, Peg Albert, Marie Carol Hurley, Jeannine Holway, and Helen Faiver; and front row, from left, Sisters Marie Joannes O’Donnell, Therese Margaret Roberts, Dorothy Jehle, Mary Arnold Benedetto, and Myra Jackson.
Members of the 2006 Diamond Jubilee Crowd are, back row, from left, Sisters Marcelline Fouchey, Marie Siena Chmara, Jeanne O’Laughlin, Anne L. Lindquist, Therese Tighe, Jane Quirk, and Clare O’Connor, and front row, from left, Sisters Sean Therese Halpin, Marie Sheila Beatty, Therese Margaret Roberts, Therese Craig, Donna Wencel, Betty Foster, and Mary Margaret Donnelly.

Members of the 1974-1978 General Council are, from left, Sisters Cathryn Deutsch, Rosemary Ferguson (Prioress), Nadine Foley, Jeanne Burns, and Jeanne O’Laughlin.