Sister Joanne Podlucky, OP
1948-2019

On December 25, 2019, as the Adrian Dominican Sisters joined with Christians around the world in celebrating Jesus’ birth, Sister Joanne Podlucky was born into new life as she went to meet Jesus face to face.

Joanne Theresa Podlucky was born March 22, 1948, in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, to Joseph and Julia (Viboch) Podlucky. She was the oldest of five children, with Joseph, Ronald John, Francine, and Carolyn following her into the family.

The Podluckys were a close-knit family in a close-knit community. Like so many Johnstown men, Joseph was a steelworker, while Julia took care of the home and family, and in their Slovak and Italian neighborhood, everyone knew everyone and people looked out for each other.

Sister Joanne and her siblings all attended Sts. Peter and Paul School, where they were taught by the Vincentian Sisters of Charity. She went on to Vincentian Academy, a boarding school in Pittsburgh, for high school. Such a lengthy relationship with the VSC Sisters, plus the fact that an aunt was in that religious community, led Joanne to decide to enter that congregation at the beginning of her senior year, and she finished high school as a postulant. When she was received as a novice in August 1966, she was given the religious name Sister Jessica.

Her early years in the community were spent as a teacher in several Pennsylvania schools: St. Sebastian, Pittsburgh (1966-67); Holy Trinity, Duquesne (1967-68); Donora Catholic/St. Ann (1968-70); and St. Sebastian again (1970-73). She was then missioned to City of St. Jude in Montgomery, Alabama, where she taught junior high grades from 1973 to 1976 and spent a summer volunteering in St. Jude’s Department of Social Service. In 1973, she completed her bachelor’s degree in English from LaRoche College in Pittsburgh.

Gradually over all this time, she began to question whether or not the Vincentian Sisters were the right community for her, or even if she belonged in religious life at all. It was the era of Vatican II, and she had come to realize that teaching was not where she felt she could best serve. Having met some Adrian Dominican Sisters in Montgomery and through other means, and liking what she saw in them and their ministries, in February 1976 she wrote to Sister Rosemary Ferguson, the Congregation’s Prioress at that time, to inquire about transferring.

In the time that this process took, she taught junior high at Presentation and Precious Blood schools in Chicago and then, in 1978, came to Adrian to be the advertising coordinator for Weber Center. She also began working toward her master’s degree in communication arts at Notre Dame, which she completed in 1984. Preaching the Word through media was her dream come true.

Sister Joanne’s transfer to the Adrian Dominican Congregation became complete in September 1980. In 1981, she was appointed the Congregation’s communications director, a position which she held for five years.

As Sister Rosemary Asaro, Holy Rosary Chapter Assistant, described that time in her eulogy at Sister’s wake service:

In the five years she served in that position she initiated a number of new ways of communicating. She pushed for the use of computers, redesigned the Congregation
newsletter, and introduced and developed an electronic mail network. Another achievement in those years was the development of an ad campaign for recruitment of new members. This campaign was the posting of billboards along the highways of the greater Detroit area that read “Life is short. Eternity isn’t,” and included our email address. It had over a thousand hits. Her hand and creative spirit touched many other campus developments that have been the forerunners of our present-day system of communications.

Sister Joanne’s next ministry was at Mercy Health Services in Farmington Hills, Michigan, first as a media specialist (1986-90) and then as director of corporate communications (1990-93). Over that time her work was honored multiple times; for five years in a row she earned the Apollo Award for Excellence/Achievement in Healthcare Communications and Public Relations, an honor given by the Michigan Hospital Public Relations Association for extraordinary achievement. She also received an Award of Silver in the 1991 Catholic Health Association Spirit Awards.

She left Mercy Health in 1993 to take a year’s sabbatical, which she used to learn more about video-production work. This led her to start her own production company, JTP Communications, primarily engaging in helping nonprofits with their video needs. One of her contributions to the Congregation was to videotape the members of the various General Councils discussing their terms of office, in order to preserve those memories for historical purposes.

Sister Joanne’s final ministry was at the Dominican Center for Religious Development, located first in Detroit and then in Farmington Hills, where she originally served in 1994-95 and again from 2005 to 2015 as either administrator or director. During this time she completed the Center’s graduate program in spiritual direction. She also was very active in her local parish, Christ the King, and was a member of the team that presented the “armchair” Holy Land pilgrimage at Weber Center.

And, as Sister Rosemary said in her eulogy,

Perhaps the piece of her ministry that Joanne is known for best is her outstanding photography. Her love for nature and being outdoors camping and hiking is attested to through the many prints among her personal belongings. She also loved swimming and traveling. … And although Joanne devoted much time and energy to her work, she never forgot about her family. She made an effort to keep in touch with her brothers and sisters and her nieces and nephews. They have been a great support to her. She loved being an Adrian Dominican and serving the Congregation, especially using her artistic gifts, in any way she was called upon to do.

Over her last year or so at the Dominican Center for Religious Development, Sister Joanne began to experience issues with memory loss. She left the Center in August 2015 and in 2016 returned to Adrian to live at the Dominican Life Center, where she died peacefully the afternoon of Christmas Day 2019.

She was remembered at her wake service by her longtime friends Sisters Carol Fleming and Charlotte Hoefer, the latter of whom had also been her housemate for several years.

“Our OP brother Don Goergen once noted that the description of Dominic that we would use today would be to say he was compassionate, contemplative, collaborative and committed to truth,” Sister Carol said. “These words today describe our sister Joanne as a communicator of the highest order. … We can say Joanne truly brought the Good News to so many with joy and grace. She did it in true OP style: compassionately, contemplatively, collaboratively, with commitment to truth.”
Sister Charlotte recalled that she first met Sister Joanne at a meeting at Rosarian Academy while Joanne was still a VSC Sister. “I thought she was crazy,” she said. “Who comes to a meeting during vacation when you don’t have to? Many years later I teased her about it. She told me she found the swimming pool and [spent] lots of time there.”

She went on to tell those gathered for the wake about some of their many shared experiences, from shopping to traveling, until Sister Joanne’s early-onset Alzheimer’s led them both to move to Adrian. “I never expected her to leave us so quickly,” she said. “The last words she said to me that I could understand were ‘I love you,’ a memory I will always treasure.”

Sister Fran Nadolny, in preaching the funeral homily the next day, began by reflecting upon the readings she had selected for the Mass: Job 12:7-10 and Matthew 5:14-16. Job, she said, even in the midst of his troubles “believes, and proclaims, that the Creator God is responsible for the beauty that we see: from the animals, to the birds, to the bushes, to the fish, to the earth, to the waters. The hand of the Creator God has brought these things to life.”

As for the Gospel reading, with Jesus’ admonition to not cover a candle with a bushel basket but rather illuminate the room “we reflect in practical and real terms what it means to be a light, to be a witness to the world.”

For Joanne, the beauty of creation was her lifeline. … As did Job, she often saw the beauty which came from the hand of the Creator God and Joanne photographed that beauty and shared those images with us.

… And a good photographer knows how to play with the light, to create tone, mood and atmosphere. When a person is in love with creation, she or he is able to share feelings in the most creative of ways – the ways that Joanne did. God’s goodness shone through Joanne to each of us. It is ironic that the bright light of Joanne’s life went out during these days of shortest light and yet on the very day that we honor the Light of the world come among us.

… As you care for creation and share your gratitude, the words of Job and Matthew and the life well-lived by Joanne will have truly made a difference.
Left: The future Sister Joanne Podlucky, age 2. Center: Sister Joanne as a Sister of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul

From left: Sister Joanne’s parents, Julia and Joseph Podlucky. Sister Joanne cuts her Silver Jubilee cake while her mother watches.
From left, Sisters Charlotte Hoefer, Maureen Comer, and Joanne Podlucky. Sister Joanne prepares for a photo shoot at Regina Dominican High School, Wilmette, Illinois.

From left: Sister Joanne Podlucky speaks during a session of General Chapter 2004. From left, Sisters Maureen Comer, Carol Fleming, and Joanne Podlucky
From left, Sisters Dorothy Guettler, Mary Pat Dewey, and Joanne Podlucky. Sisters Joanne Podlucky (left) and Charlotte Hoefer

Member of the 2017 Golden Jubilarian August 1967 Reception crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Kathleen Klingen, Marie Skebe, Corinne Mary Florek, and Donna Markham; middle row, from left, Sisters Joanne Podlucky, Mary Jane Lubinski, Ellen Burkhardt, Patricia Siemen (Prioress) and Donna Marie Baker; and front row, from left, Sisters Marie Solanus Reilly, Julie Hyer, Nancy Jurecki, and Nancy Murray.