Sister Marie Joannes O’Donnell, OP
1922-2019

“God has given me the grace of knowing that I want, more than anything else, to be a Sister of St. Dominic. Will you say that I may?”

The seventeen-year-old Mary Elizabeth O’Donnell, later to be known in religion as Sister Marie Joannes, was writing to Mother Gerald Barry on April 30, 1940, expressing her desire to enter the Congregation. At the time, Mary was less than two months away from graduating from Visitation High School in Detroit, and the Adrian Dominican Sisters who staffed the school had surely shaped her dream of religious life.

Mary was born on November 18, 1922, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, to Henry and Eva (Leppert) O’Donnell. Henry was born in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, while Eva was born in New York City. The couple had three children: Mary; Elizabeth, who was born in 1925; and Harry, born in 1928.

It seems that the family came to New York City at some point in 1928, for Mary attended St. Monica’s Parish school there in 1928-29 and was confirmed at the church in March 1929. By the time the 1929-30 school year began, the O'Donnells were in Michigan; Mary attended Visitation School for the rest of her elementary and secondary education. At least at the time she entered the Congregation, the family lived in the Detroit enclave of Highland Park and Henry was working at the Bower Roller Bearing Company factory in Detroit.

Mary entered the community on June 23, 1940, and received the habit and her religious name the next January. After completing her canonical novitiate year, she remained in Adrian to study at Siena Heights College (University), where she earned her bachelor’s in chemistry in 1943.

Immediately thereafter, Sister Marie Joannes was assigned to graduate school at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., where she was working on credits toward a master’s degree until the chairman of the chemistry department wrote to Mother Gerald suggesting that Marie Joannes – and Sister Ann Charles (Helen Duggan, who was in the same program – would do well to dispense with the master's studies and go directly into the doctoral program. Mother Gerald was happy to grant this permission, and Sister Marie Joannes completed her Ph.D. work in chemistry in 1947.

When the 1947-48 school year began, Sister Marie Joannes was at the Congregation-run Dominican High School in Detroit. Her one year there, and two years at St. Paul High School in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan, from 1956 to 1958, were her only experiences teaching at less than a college level. From 1948 to 1956, she taught chemistry at Siena Heights and then, in 1958, she was sent to Barry College (University) in Miami Shores, Florida, where she spent the rest of her professional teaching ministry in the chemistry department

By 1960 she was an associate professor, and by 1962 she was a full professor and department chair, a post she held for almost twenty years. One of her students in the late 1960s, Pamela Simonon, emailed a remembrance of her after her death that included one of her “fondest memories” of organic chemistry class with Sister Marie Joannes:

There were half a dozen Barry girls poised and ready to take notes when Sr. Joannes glided into the classroom with chalk in hand and eraser in the other. She “explained” the class lesson, writing with one hand and erasing with the other as we frantically tried to keep up with what she was saying. Later, when I tried to review my notes I was stunned at the number of times I had written “it is intuitively clear.” I don't think any of us found...
anything to be intuitively clear but we somehow survived and continued to take her classes.

Through the years I kept in touch with Sr. Joannes with the hope that she would make the “intuitively clear” clearer.

Fast forward to 2016. I was visiting Sr. Joannes and Sr. Mary Arnold Benedetto at Adrian. Sr. Johannes had prepared for my visit, tracking me down with a copy of a Scientific American article on the probability of success of chemical reactions in protein drug development. She had annotated the article and was ready to discuss the pros and cons, which we did for the next three hours! Thankfully by 2016 I had the advantage of 35 [years of] additional education and experience as a scientist, patent attorney, licensing and acquisitions attorney and General Counsel at both pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies.

Somewhere along the line I learned the “it” was intuitively clear. There wasn’t an answer, rather an understanding of the process or journey.

In June 1995, after thirty-seven years on the Barry faculty as well as lengthy service on the board of trustees, Sister Marie Joannes was appointed a Professor Emerita and retired from full-time teaching, but continued to teach in the university’s adult education program part-time for a couple of years. She served as a volunteer tutor at St. Mary’s School in Miami from 1996 until 2009, when she left Florida to return to Adrian.

Sister Marie Joannes died on June 16, 2019, aged ninety-six. She had been an Adrian Dominican Sister for seventy-eight years.

In her homily at the wake service, Sister Joanne Peters, Co-Chapter Prioress of the Holy Rosary Chapter, remembered Sister Marie Joannes’ deep spirituality.

I heard reference made to the fact that she was a mystic. In some of my reading, I found evidence of richness in her spiritual life as she left a book with quotes from books she read. It was inspiring to see. She seems to have a side that was not just external prayer and action, but a depth that allowed her to imitate her parents…

Said Sister Mary Jane Lubinski as she preached the homily for Sister Marie Joannes’ funeral,

She was known as a mystic in Florida, contemplating higher things, seeking union with God and making connections with all of creation.

It is not by accident that Marie Joannes entered eternal life on the feast of the Holy Trinity. An icon of the Trinity hung above her bed these last days, three angelic women who seemed to help draw her spirit home to union with the Divine that she longed for throughout life.

Among her writings I came upon her reflection on the Trinity. It was simple, direct, no-nonsense, just like she was. Almost like a “note to self,” she wrote:

In union with Christ and enabled by the Spirit, turn to the Father and pray Abba.

… Marie Joannes had it right – living in union with Christ. It is the boundless outpouring of the Spirit, the largesse of God that is offered to us, that makes sense, that brings the story to completion, that sets us on our way. Our language may be more inclusive, but this was hers, and so, today,

In union with Christ and enabled by the Spirit, turn to the Father and pray Abba.
From left: Sister Marie Joannes’ mother; Sister Marie Joannes with her father

From left: Sister Marie Joannes in her laboratory at Barry; Members of the 2001 Diamond Jubilee January Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Clara Patricks, Anne Marie Snyder, Agnes Carmel Dziak, and Mary Paula Connor and, front row, from left, Sisters Marie Joannes O’Donnell, Jean Charles Birney, Mary Annette Glendening, and Loretta Ann Walsh.
From left: Joining in a couples gathering of the Science and Math Department at Barry College are Sisters Marie Joannes O’Donnell, back row, second from right, and Paul James Villemure, back row, right. Religious Sisters celebrate completing their doctorates at The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. in June 1947. Among them, in the back row, are Sisters Marie Joannes O’Donnell, left, and Helen Duggan, right.

From left: Sister Marie Joannes works with a Barry student, March 1982. Celebrating the 75-year Jubilee of Sister Marie Joannes O’Donnell in 2016 are, from left, Sisters Anne Liam Lees, Marie Joannes, Peg O’Flynn, and Lucy Ann Quinn.
From left: Sister Marie Joannes in her kitchen at the Barry University Villa, December 2002; 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.