Sister Mary Ann Ferguson, OP
1940-2019

Someone who loved children, especially babies; friend to those most in need of help; a caring, generous woman with a sense of humor: those were some of the ways in which Sister Mary Ann Ferguson was remembered by other Adrian Dominican Sisters at the time of remembrance held after her passing.

Sister Mary Ann was born on August 10, 1940, in the small Detroit enclave of Hamtramck, in a neighborhood near Detroit City Airport. She was the oldest of eight children born to Edmund and Lydia (Wyborny) Ferguson. After her came Edmund Jr., Ronald, Jacqueline, Thomas (who died as a baby), Kenneth, Gwendolyn, and Timothy.

Edmund, who had come to Detroit from Houghton, Michigan, worked at Garwood Industries, which was owned by the legendary Detroit powerboat racer Gar Wood. Lydia, a Detroit native, was a typist for the R.L. Polk Company, producer of business directories.

Having both parents in the workforce meant that the Ferguson children were often looked after by their grandparents. And, as the oldest child, Mary Ann was expected to help with many of the tasks around the house – which she did not mind one bit. “I was eager to learn household chores from my grandmother and mother,” Sister Mary Ann said in her life story. “Little Mom’ was my nickname.”

The seven siblings were very close; “we played, we prayed, fought and cared for each other,” she said. They also were what she called “testers”: they routinely tested what they had learned – or what they had been told not to do – to see if it was true or not.

Illustrating the point, Sister Mary Ann related in her life story the tale of the time the siblings dared to enter a Protestant church, something which would have been unheard of at the time, to see if the devil was really going to get them. “Needless to say, there was no devil, nor did anything happen to us,” she said. And it ended up being a valuable spiritual lesson: “The God we knew was a judge, (but) we learned something different that day.”

Sister Mary Ann’s early school experience was at Patronage of St. Joseph School in Detroit. When she was nine years old, the family moved to what was then “the country”: Nankin Township, a now-defunct township west of Detroit. She attended Cady Public School in Wayne for the 1950-51 school year and then spent grades 6 through 8 at St. Raphael’s School in Garden City.

Her secondary-school years were spent at Ladywood High School in Livonia, where she was educated by the Felician Sisters. “These were … years of great competition, leadership, and service,” she said. They were also the years in which she decided to enter religious life.

Her father supported her decision. As she recalled in her videotaped “A Sister’s Story,” the two of them were out for a walk one day in her senior year and Edmund asked what she planned to do after graduation. When she told him she intended to become a Sister, he replied that he had long prayed that one of his children would become a religious.

Not long after graduating in June 1958, Mary Ann entered the Felician Sisters, and a year later was received as a novice and given the religious name Sister Mary LaVerne. She made first profession on August 13, 1960.
She was sent to study at Madonna University, and in 1964 earned her bachelor's degree in social studies. Her entire teaching ministry – in fact, almost all of her time in active ministry – was spent in Michigan, starting at St. Michael School, Livonia (1962-63), followed by assignments to St. Joseph, Manistee (1963-65); St. Thecla, Mount Clemens (1965-68); St. Hyacinth, Detroit (1968-70) and St. Valentine, Redford (1970-71). She then became principal at St. Mel in Dearborn Heights (1971-74) and then returned to St. Thecla as a teacher for the 1974-75 school year. From 1975 to 1977, she taught at St. Pius X in Southgate.

As the years went by, she began to feel that she wished to go in a different direction in her religious life, and spent nearly five years discerning what to do before deciding to request a transfer to the Adrian Dominican Sisters. She had gotten to know several members of the Congregation through her teaching experience and liked what she saw in them. Her transfer became final in April 1977.

She served as principal at Wyandotte (Michigan) Catholic School for the 1977-78 school year and then was asked to do public relations for Aquinas High School in Southgate, Michigan. It ended up being a three-year position and “a dream come true,” she said in her life story. “I was happy, flexible, open, and trusted. It was what I wanted for the good of education and the people. I got to do what principals dream of doing. It made my educational career complete.”

After one more turn in the classroom, for a few months at Sacred Heart School in Dearborn, Michigan in the fall of 1982, Sister Mary Ann embarked upon a series of varied experiences, ranging from clerking at J.C. Penney to working for Electronic Data Systems in the Buick Motor Division to selling baked goods at a store in Okemos, Michigan.

Along the way, she interned in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at the Catherine McAuley Health Center in Ypsilanti, Michigan (1983-84), followed by a pastoral care position at St. Lawrence Hospital (Lansing, Michigan) from 1984 to 1990 and several months in mid-1990 at Millard Fillmore Hospital in Buffalo, New York – her only time in ministry spent outside of Michigan. Her pastoral skills later were put to good use as an aftercare coordinator for the Tiffany Funeral Home in Lansing.

For much of her later life, Sister Mary Ann struggled with a series of physical ailments, and in October 2014 she retired from active ministry and returned to Adrian to live, first at Weber Center and then at Maria. It was there, on December 15, 2019, that God unexpectedly called her home.

Sister Maryetta Churches, her longtime friend, preached the funeral homily. “I always try to relate words to certain people,” Sister Maryetta began. “It helps me remember how I know them or what characteristics they have inspired me to continue in my own life. My words to describe Mary Ann are created, called, chosen, challenged and comforted.”

She went on to explain her “5 C’s”:

*The prophet Jeremiah has a passage where he uses the image of the potter. The potter was creating, molding, and forming into a beautiful creation at birth, Mary Ann. She was beautifully and wonderfully made by God.*

*… Isaiah 43 says: I have called you by name; you are mine. The scripture also says that the Lord calls us His friend. What a beautiful relationship to have with the Lord.*

*Mary Ann felt chosen in her call to religious life as a Felician and then the call led her to the Adrian Dominicans. What a gift to our community.*
Mary Ann became challenged at times and yet she saw challenges and fought them with the words “I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.” Mary Ann and the Lord could do anything together.

My next word is comforted: “Be still and know that I am God!” Whatever came her way, Mary Ann knew that she could handle it with prayer and the Lord beside her. (A bowl of chocolate ice cream could also do the trick!)

… In the Gospel of John it states, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” I believe now that Mary Ann has built her dwelling place created by love, trust, challenge, and openness, and has responded with a great Amen and Alleluia!
From left, Sisters Jacqueline Phillips, Mary Dougherty, Lorraine Réaume, and Mary Ann Ferguson. Sister Mary Ann with a special banner for the 800th Jubilee of the Dominican family, May 16, 2007

Right: Members of the 2019 Diamond Jubilee crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Sarah Ann Sharkey, Susan Van Baalen, Mary Emidio Singer, Christa Marsik, and Patricia Siemen (Priess); row 3, from left, Sisters Joan Christine Meerschaert, Rosemary Zuccaro, Joan Marie Weithman, and Jean Keeley; row 2, from left, Sisters Mary Ann Ferguson, Jo Ann Jauquet, Mary Jean Clemenger, Beverly Bobola, Jane Zimmerman, and Peter Anthony Schulte; and front row, from left, Sisters Dorothy Glaister (standing), Sean Eileen Allgeyer, Joan Krajewski, Emilie Petelin, and Teresa Disch (standing).
From left: Celebrating Sister Mary Ann’s 2019 Diamond Jubilee are, from left, Sisters Joanne Spisz, Leontia Cooney, Arlene Seckel, and Mary Ann Ferguson. Sister Lorraine Sinn, left, and Sister Mary Ann Ferguson.