Sister Denise Devitt, OP
1937-2020

“She had the heart for hard conversations. Truth telling. Denise’s heart, her courage, showed through at every stage of her life.”

These words by Sister Mary Ann Dixon, in her homily for Sister Denise Devitt, drew upon the Gospel reading Sister Denise had chosen for her funeral: John 20:19-22, which includes Jesus’ exhortation “do not let your hearts be troubled.”

“The root of the word courage is cor – the Latin word for ‘heart,’” Sister Mary Ann said. “In one of its earliest forms, the word ‘courage’ meant ‘to speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.’ That [Sister Denise] did! She spoke her mind and it revealed her heart, her strong heart.”

Sister Denise was born Catherine Denice (but was always known as Denise) Devitt on June 17, 1937, in Chicago. Her parents were Thomas, a homicide detective with the Chicago Police Department, and Irene (Mackey) Devitt. She was the older of two children in the family; her sister Pat was born four years after her.

The family lived on Chicago’s South Side with Denise’s grandfather, known as “Poppy,” and her Aunt Eleanor until Eleanor’s marriage. Another aunt was an Adrian Dominican, Sister Catherine Dennis (Catherine) Mackey.

Denise attended St. Brendan School, which was staffed by the Sinsinawa Dominicans, and then Loretto High School, where she was taught by the “Ladies of Loretto,” the IBVM Sisters. In her life story, she wrote that she made many good friends there and had an active social life. But she also had a longtime desire to enter religious life, and although she loved the Sisters who taught her in high school, her aunt’s example led her to decide she wanted to become an Adrian Dominican Sister after graduation.

Her aunt took a more direct role as well. At Sister Denise’s wake service, Sister Joan Mehney, her close friend of many decades, shared the eulogy Sister Denise gave at Sister Catherine Dennis’ wake in 1998, and among the memories Sister Denise had of her aunt was this one: “… she prayed me into the Adrian Dominicans rather than the Ladies of Loretto and arranged a trip for me to visit her at St. Agatha’s in Detroit, and we just happened to drive into Adrian and meet Mother Gerald [and] Margaret Phillip [O’Connell, the postulant director] and watch the novices singing the Salve.”

With the blessing of her parents and her aunt, Denise entered the Congregation on September 3, 1955, and was immediately sent to teach third and fourth grade at Rosarian Academy in West Palm Beach, Florida. It was to be the only time in her entire religious life that she ministered outside of the greater Chicago area. She was received as a novice the next August and was given the religious name Sister Thomas Irene.

After completing her canonical novitate year, she was sent to Visitation School in Elmhurst, Illinois, where she spent the years 1957-1962. Following that came an assignment to St. Laurence School, Chicago (1962-1967), during which time she earned her bachelor’s degree in English at Siena Heights College (University) and was sent to earn her master’s degree in speech and drama at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., in the summers. That experience led her to teach those subjects at St. Edward High School, Elgin, Illinois (1967-1969); Montini High School, Lombard,

By this time, both of her parents were in failing health, and she shared caregiving responsibilities with her sister and was able to spend a year at home in 1971 and 1972. Thomas and Irene died in 1981 and 1983 respectively.

Sister Denise returned to Aquinas High School in 1972 and was there until 1978, at which time she went to teach at Immaculate Heart of Mary High School in Westchester, Illinois, for two years and then became an academic advisor and campus minister at Regina Dominican High School in Wilmette, Illinois, for two more years.

She was elected Chapter Prioress of the Upper Midwest Chapter in 1982. In that capacity, she became part of the Congregation’s first Leadership Council, and Sister Carol Johannes, who was Prioress of the Congregation then, said in a remembrance sent in for Sister Denise’s wake service that

> at that time the role was very new and many sisters were reluctant to accept it. But Denise embraced it courageously and carried out the role with the sisters in Chicago with lots of pastoral sensitivity. She understood right from the start how important our relationships with each other are and began to convene what she called “Bonding Weekends” for sisters to come together in small groups and shared their stories.

“I loved working with our women and would have run for another three years, except I asked to study full-time at Loyola College in Baltimore for a Master of Science degree and Certificate of Advanced Study in Pastoral Counseling,” Sister Denise wrote in her life story. After completing that two-year program in 1987, she returned to Illinois, this time to serve as a pastoral counselor first at St. Victor Parish in Calumet City from 1987 to 1994 and then at St. Elizabeth Seton Church in Orland Hills in 1994-1995.

At that point, she stepped away from active ministry for just over a year to get help with her struggle with depression, something she came to be quite open about in hopes that others would come to understand mental health disorders and be comfortable with difficult conversations surrounding those issues.

Over the next several years, Sister Denise ministered in a variety of settings: chaplain and bereavement counselor at Hospice of Great Lakes, Darien, Illinois (1996-1999); director of pastoral care at the Bethlehem Woods Retirement Center, LaGrange Park, Illinois (1999); and hospice chaplain and bereavement coordinator at Loyola University Medical Center, Maywood, Illinois (2001-2002). She then returned to Regina Dominican High School, this time as assistant librarian, and served there until retiring in 2008.

In 2009, Sister Denise began volunteering as a chaplain at Glenbrook Hospital in Glenview, Illinois, and was in that ministry until 2012 when her health required her to return to Adrian to live at the Dominican Life Center. She died there on February 6, 2020, aged eighty-two and in her sixty-third year as an Adrian Dominican Sister.

At the wake, Sister Pat Dulka, Co-Chapter Prioress of the Holy Rosary Chapter, read several passages from Sister Denise’s life story, concluding with this one: “The Dominican charism has affected my prayer life. My daily prayer is contemplative. … [T]he vision and action statements have called me to ‘let go.’ I think I do that every day [and] hope to continue until my final ‘letting go’ into the arms of God.”
“Denise, you are there now, in the arms of the God you longed for!” Sister Pat said. “May you rest in peace.”

Sister Joan Mehney, after sharing Sister Denise’s long-ago eulogy for her aunt because “I believe we reveal a lot about ourselves through what we write,” remembered her longtime friend as “a vibrant, talented, gifted person” who faced both her physical and psychological challenges with courage. “Like [your aunt] Katie, your heart was a generous heart filled with fierce pride and strong loyalty,” she said.

“Denise was a really honest and transparent person,” said Sister Carol Johannes in her emailed remembrance. “When something bothered her she always had the freedom to name it, address it, pray about it and work it through. Once she became ill, she never tried to pretend that her life was ‘sweetness and light.’ She admitted that things were hard and was always grateful for our prayers. As her health declined, she often asked her friends to pray with her while she lay quietly listening and praying silently.”

Among the family members present was a niece, Kathleen Carlson, who spoke of her “Aunt Dean” as someone who loved movies and plays, had a contagious laugh and “great dance moves,” and was a fan of singer Mitch Miller. “My brother John and I remember fondly dancing with her to the song ‘Baby Face’ by Mitch when we were kids at our Nana and Grandpa Tom’s,” she said.

She had a big influence on me in terms of where I went to college, which was right here at Siena Heights University. Like her, I studied English and theater. My time at Siena was very special and gave me a deeper insight to the commitment to social justice the Adrian Dominicans have and their bond of sisterhood.

... To share a last memory: my Aunt Denise took me to see the [musical] “Les Miserables” in Chicago when I was in high school and it was then that I knew I had a real interest in studying theater. I remember being so moved by the play, its beauty and the incredible songs. As we celebrate Aunt Denise’s life, I’d like to close with a lyric from Les Mis that brought me to tears the first time I heard it sung and I know moved Aunt Denise as well:

Take my hand, and lead me to salvation/
Take my love, for love is everlasting/
And remember the truth that once was spoken/
To love another person is to see the face of God.

Aunt Denise, we love you and you are forever in our hearts.¹

¹ From the Epilogue of “Les Miserables,” musical by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michael Schönberg.
Right: Denise Devitt, on the day of her First Holy Communion, poses with her little sister Patricia.
Left: Sister Denise Devitt presents a small potted plant to Sister Rita Crotty during an Assembly of the Upper Midwest Mission Chapter.

From left: Sister Denise Devitt, right, with her maternal aunt, Sister Catherine Dennis Mackey. From left, Sisters Pauline Opliger, Cecilia Marie Brown, Bernice Olszewski, Denise Devitt, Catherine Siena Fisher, and Ann Kelly
Members of the 2006 Golden Jubilee August Reception crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Jean Harlan, Donna Kustusch, Janet Capone, Ann Marie Petri, and Rosalie Bulanda; middle row, from left, Sisters Joan Christie, Annette Desloover, Ann Englert, Denise Devitt, Hilda Nadine Sheehan, and Ruth Adamites; and front row, from left, Sisters Marilee Ewing, Helen Essa, Joanne Spisz, and Maria Caridad Pinuela.