Sister Thomas Josephine Lawler, OP
1920-2020

When Sister Mary Keefe preached the funeral homily for Sister Thomas
Josephine Lawler, she concluded with these words:

*She is a shining example of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. May we follow her example of love for God and service to all of
creation.*

Julia Jeanette Lawler was born December 3, 1920, in Chicago to Thomas
and Josephine (Schriber) Lawler. She was the oldest of four children,
followed by Thomas (called “Bud”), Josephine, and Harold. Her baptismal name honored her
grandmothers: her Irish paternal grandmother Julia, and her Dutch maternal grandmother Jeanette.

From a very early age, Julia was someone of deep spirituality. She recalled in her life story that as a
first-grader she pasted pictures of Jesus into a book and being fascinated by the pictures; in third
grade, she was especially drawn to the lives of the saints and daydreamed about being in a dungeon
awaiting martyrdom. By about seventh grade, her daily visits to the Blessed Sacrament in St.
Columbanus Church included praying to become a Sister and that her parents would consent.

Her parents agreed to let her enter religious life, but wanted her to wait for two years after graduating
from high school so that she would be more mature. When it was time for high school, she attended
Aquinas Dominican High School, and two trips to Adrian helped solidify her desire to enter the
Congregation.

Graduation brought the challenge of what to do for the next two years; it was the time of the Great
Depression, and while the family decided that she should not work because it might take a job away
from someone else who would need it more, her parents also could not afford college tuition. She
was able to earn a scholarship to St. Xavier College and spent those two years there.

Finally, on August 15, 1940, the Feast of the Assumption, Julia, her mother and sister, and four
Adrian Dominican Sisters arrived by train in Adrian from Chicago. She wrote in her life story, "As we
chugged toward our destination, a wave of fear and anxiety washed over me and I heard myself ask,
‘What am I doing here?’” Then it turned out that her trunk – with the postulant garb her mother had
made for her – had been offloaded from the train at the stop prior to Adrian, undoubtedly adding to
the anxiety.

She spent a year as a postulant and was received as a novice on August 12, 1941, at which point she
received the religious name Sister Thomas Josephine after her parents.

Her first assignment after her canonical novitiate year was to St. Lawrence School, Detroit, where she
taught from 1942 to 1945 and during which time, in 1944, she completed her bachelor’s degree in
biology from Siena Heights College (University). It was the start of more than twenty-eight years in
education.

After St. Lawrence, Sister Thomas Josephine was sent to St. Paul School, Owosso, Michigan, and
spent two years there. It proved to be her last ministry outside of California; from 1947 to 1954, she
taught at St. Louis Bertrand School in Oakland, followed by Holy Cross High School in Santa Cruz,
where she taught for the 1954-1955 school year and then was assistant principal in addition to
teaching (and, in 1957, completing her master’s degree in education from the Catholic University of
America) until June 1963. She then went to Bishop O’Dowd High School in Oakland, where she was a teacher (1963-1965), dean of studies (August 1965-December 1970) and assistant principal (August-December 1970).

She was elected to a three-year term as administrator of the Holy Cross Province in 1970, an experience which gave her a special view of the Congregation’s Renewal years. “As a member of the Provincial Team, I participated in the last session of the Congregation Renewal Chapter,” she wrote in her life story. “This experience and delegation to the next 2 Chapters expanded and deepened my vision of Adrian Dominican Life.”

That time of Renewal led her, in fact, to a whole new ministry. In 1973, her term on the provincial team completed, she went to the School of Applied Theology, a sabbatical program in Oakland administered by Santa Clara University and affiliated with the Graduate Theological Union, for the 1973-1974 school year. She completed her master’s degree in theology from GTU in 1976, followed in 1987 by a doctor of ministry degree in pastoral ministry from San Francisco Theological Seminary.

Ministering to the elderly became her focus; she spent fifteen years (1974-1989) with Catholic Charities, first in Oakland and then in Los Angeles. Her ministry in Oakland involved beginning the diocese’s Department of Aging, through which she helped the local parishes in several ways, including developing classes for senior citizens and teaching parishioners how to become advocates for older adults. In Los Angeles, Sister Thomas Josephine was Catholic Charities’ Aging Services director.

These ministries were a true passion for her; as she later wrote, “I concluded that current theology and spirituality were largely irrelevant to frail older persons and their experiences,” and she had set about to change this.

Budget cuts led to her leaving Catholic Charities in 1993, but she quickly began a whole new ministry, a retreat program called Older Adult Spiritual Ministry, with a colleague from the Oakland Diocese, Sister Alma Rose Gaffney, SNJM.

Her time in Los Angeles also saw her taking care of her mother for some six years until Josephine’s death in 1995, and that experience coupled with her ministry later led her to write two books: an expansion of her doctoral dissertation titled Good News for Your Autumn Years: Reflections on the Gospel of Luke (and an accompanying Leader’s Guide), and Mother’s and My Way of the Cross: A Meditation Memoir for Caregivers.

“I continually pray and reflect on how we might better minister to our older loved ones and our sisters so that their last days may be times of peace and spiritual enrichment. They and I are approaching the goal of our lives, eternal life with our God,” she wrote to conclude her life story.

Sister Thomas Josephine continued to live in Los Angeles until 2001, when she went to live at Dominican Oaks in Santa Cruz. Throughout this time she continued to minister to the elderly as a spiritual director.

She returned to Adrian in 2010 and spent the last ten years of her life at the Dominican Life Center. She died there on May 16, 2020, at the age of ninety-nine and in her seventy-eighth year of religious profession.

“She was a brilliant and well respected teacher,” wrote Sister Adrienne Piennette, in a remembrance shared at the wake service, of her experience with being taught by Sister Thomas Josephine at Holy Cross High School. “She was well loved by all who had any dealings with her, and she was my
sponsor [in entering the Congregation]. Blessings on a life well lived, and may God grant her eternal rest."

"It meant so much to her to be in community with these women whom she highly regarded and dearly loved," wrote Jennifer Jenkins, Sister’s chaplain. “She shared her joy with everyone she engaged; often she would sing ‘This Little Light of Mine’ or the Hail Mary. Sister knew the love of Christ and it poured out in her deep joy.”

Sister Genevieve Jeziolkowski, who compiled the remembrances of those who lived in Sister Thomas Josephine’s community at Maria, also noted Sister’s singing of those particular songs. “I referred to this as her daily prayer time and it helped put me in a quiet place for the rest of the day as I am sure it did for her,” she wrote.

In her homily at Sister Thomas Josephine’s funeral, Sister Mary Keefe noted that Sister Thomas Josephine had chosen Romans 14:7-9 and John 12:20-26 as the readings:

_In these ten verses, three from Paul’s letter to the Romans and seven from the gospel of John, she has described the life of a disciple of Jesus._

_From Paul we heard: None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s._

_In many ways, Thomas did not live for herself. What she did and what she said was for the benefit of others: for her students, for the congregation, for the elderly, for her co-workers, for her family._

_From John we heard: Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit._

_During her life, Thomas produced much fruit and gave it generously to everyone she met._

_… Thomas was a very quiet person but when she spoke, you would do well to listen to her. She was insightful and tenacious. She had a deep sense of truth and justice. She saw Jesus in everyone. She gave her all to the people of God._