

Remembering Jean O'Connor, IHM

April 3, 1930 – Jan. 23, 2013



We are gathered here today to remember and celebrate the life of Sister Jean O'Connor. Jean Marie was born in Jackson, Michigan, the second child of Dorothy (Schmidt) and John O'Connor. Her sister, Betty, preceded her and brother, Jim, followed several years later. Mrs. O'Connor was a loving homemaker. Mr. O'Connor served Jackson as a police officer and retired as chief of police.

Growing up in Jackson, Jean attended St. John School, taught by IHM Sisters. For her freshman year of high school, however, she won a scholarship to St. Mary Academy here in Monroe, where we became roommates. While Jean was at the Academy only one year, we continued to be good friends. In the summer of 1948, we both entered the IHM congregation, walking in the front door together so we could be next-in-rank. (We Academy girls knew these things.)

Following the postulate and a two-year novitiate, Jean made her first vows on Jan. 2, 1951. In later years a picture of Jean as a young novice appeared on a Hallmark greeting card. Several of her friends recognized her and sent her the cards. Jean wrote to the company to inquire about the use of her picture. How Hallmark came in possession of that photo still remains a mystery. But after several months of communication Jean received a settlement for the unauthorized use of her picture.

Before entering the IHMs, Jean had a desire to be a missionary. So it is not surprising that while teaching at St. Anne in Warren, Mich., in 1956, when she heard that Mother Anna Marie was looking for a first grade teacher to go to Puerto Rico, she immediately volunteered. By Aug. 11, she was in Puerto Rico learning numbers and colors in Spanish, preparing to teach the first grade.

Little did Jean know at the time that her mission in Puerto Rico would span 17 years. It was throughout these years that she and her friend, another Jackson-ite, Sister Carolyn Campbell, worked together. During this time, Jean taught primary grades or high school at Colegio la Merced in Cayey, and Academia Santa Teresita in Santurce. In Santurce and at Colegio San Joaquin in Adjuntas she was also principal.

During Assembly 1972 in Puerto Rico, the decision was made to move into other ministries there. Jean worked hard to ensure a smooth transition to lay leadership at Santa Teresita and to prepare for the 10-year middle states evaluation scheduled for 1974.

In June 1973, Jean returned to the states to begin another type of ministry. Her years in Puerto Rico set her on a course that led to her ministering with Hispanics in the United States. Jean always felt a deep affection for and comfort with people of other cultures.

From 1974-1979 and from 1985-1990 she worked with the Mexican-American community at Cristo Rey Community Center in Lansing and coordinated the summer migrant program there.

In the five year interval from 1980 to 1985, Jean went to France to become a volunteer for the Fourth World Movement and worked with the poor in large cities. During this time Jean worked in the streets and back roads of Paris and Marseilles, in villages outside of London, in the foothills of Switzerland and around the lower eastside of New York City. This experience was also compatible with her earlier desire to be a missionary.

In 1990 Jean's mission took a new turn and she became a pastoral coordinator at St. Luke's Parish in Flint, Mich., living in a large rectory with a group of inter-community sisters. Unfortunately she left this ministry at St. Luke in 1994 under what she described as "difficult circumstances."

This was followed by another difficult year for Jean - the death of her dad in 1992. From 1994 until 1996 Jean worked various ministries. She lived at Hartman Hall on the campus of Marygrove College, worked part-time at the Theresa Maxis

Apartments and the McCauley Commons, supervised Haitian boys at Marygrove and went to Haiti in search of a new ministry. A broken arm there cut short her Haitian aspirations.

Then, in 1996 Jean became a pastoral associate at St. Mary Parish here in Monroe. She wrote of this new ministry: "When I arrived at St. Mary Parish in August, it was a 'homecoming of sorts.' I seemed to arrive full circle in my life's journey. It wasn't exactly '80 days around the world' but there are some comparisons." And we can add, "Indeed there are!"

Jean loved her time at St. Mary where she worked in the RCIA program, visited the homebound, led wake services, and initiated the "Come to the Well" scripture program.

When coming to work at St. Mary Parish Jean realized how little she knew of the Motherhouse and wondered if she would ever feel at home here. To help in this transition, she joined the "Ruth Companions." This was a group of sisters, organized by Sister Frances Ryan, who made a commitment to visit on a regular basis a particular resident of the Health Care Center (Infirmery) who did not have other company. Her first assignment was to visit Sister Catherine Therese Amb. Of this experience Jean said, "She did much more for me than I did for her." She led Jean to realize the Motherhouse was **home**.

Following her mother's death in 2002 (leaving 98 descendants) and her retirement in 2003, Jean continued to volunteer in many areas. She was on the board of Women Empowering Women and on the steering committee of Building Restorative Community. She served as eucharistic minister here at our Motherhouse and sang in St. Mary's Resurrection Choir.

Another aspect of Jean's retirement that deserves mention is her involvement with Paula's House. This was a home established to help young women recently released from prison to find jobs, to become reacquainted with their families and to be involved in the Monroe community.

It was also during these years that Jean was involved with women in the Red Hat Society.

In 2005, two friends Jean had known in Lansing invited her to work with them in the Hispanic community in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. After a visit there, Jean closed her apartment in Monroe and moved to Texas. She soon became involved in the peace and justice activities of Holy Spirit Parish, moved into a mobile home park and joined a new Mission Unit. This ministry, however, was not to be long-lasting.

In 2007, while visiting her brother, Jim and his wife in Florida, Jean became ill and returned to Monroe for a temporary stay in the Health Center. In June she returned to Texas but after two weeks she again returned to Monroe in continuing poor health. After several weeks of testing she was given the diagnosis of multiple myeloma, and she became a permanent patient in the IHM Health Care Center.

But she remained active, enjoying contact with friends from St. Mary Parish and other IHMs, serving on the Elder Council, joining a book club, and of course, working jigsaw puzzles.

In 2009 Jean celebrated her 60th Jubilee as an IHM Sister. During that year she invited her family to a celebration of this milestone. Her sister, brother, sister-in-law and many nieces and nephews and their children came to celebrate with her. One of her friends from St. Mary, who does clown work, added a special entertainment for all.

This past year Jean was happy to visit her sister in Warren several times as well as relatives in Jackson.

Jean often expressed gratitude for the wonderful care she received in the Health Care Center. Mary Conner, associate, was a faithful friend who often accompanied Jean to doctor appointments. Many friends from St. Mary, her IHM friends and her family continued to visit her and offered mutual support.

Jean's life has now ended peacefully, and we are grateful for the life and love she shared with all. We are at peace because we know Jean is at peace in the arms of God.

Written by Carolyn Campbell, IHM and Grace Mary Ofs, IHM
Delivered by Grace Mary Ofs, IHM
Jan. 28, 2014