

Obituary



Sister Joanne Witucki, IHM, 77, died Wednesday, Oct. 18, in the IHM Health Care Center, Monroe.

Sister Joanne was born on March 6, 1940 in Detroit to Roman and Elizabeth (Armstrong) Witucki. Given the name Joanne, she was baptized at Saint Cecelia, Detroit. Joanne attended St. Francis of Assisi Grade School and graduated from Holy Redeemer High School, Detroit. She entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Monroe) in 1958 and received the religious name

Sister John Mark.

After entering the community, Sister Joanne began teaching elementary students at Gesu, Detroit while pursuing a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College, Detroit. She later earned a master's degree from the University of Detroit. She spent one year studying at Lumen Vitae Center in Brussels, Belgium. Returning to Michigan in 1970, her teaching focused on religious education and administration at Epiphany and Mother of Our Savior, Detroit, and for 10 years at St. Priscilla, Livonia, as director of religious education.

In 1980, Sister Joanne entered congregational leadership as provincial of the Northeast Province until 1988. Sister Joanne moved to Oklahoma City for a year of renewal. During this time, she earned a second master's degree in pastoral ministry. She stayed in Oklahoma City for the next 14 years, serving Immaculate Conception Parish as religious education coordinator and parish minister.

In 2003, she accepted a position as pastoral associate at St. Joseph in Bay City, Mich. These were very enjoyable years at the parish and with all who participated in the community life. Considering her health, Sister Joanne said good-bye to St. Joseph's and moved to the Motherhouse in 2011. Sister Joanne volunteered within the Motherhouse community as she was able and often shared her sense of humor with residents and staff alike.

Remembering

There is a Native American story of a young child asking the grandparent how long life will last? The grandparent replies, "Life will go on as long as someone tells stories about me." Many stories are being told about Joanne these days and

this part of the story focuses on what Joanne did with her life, because she was about ministry, always and everywhere. While Joanne was a very public person, outgoing and fun loving, she was also an introvert and inherited the Witucki traits of being somewhat private and reserved. Joanne didn't talk a lot about herself, her feelings or her faith, but bring up some theological or social justice issue and you would hear the most current thinking on the topic and her opinions. Joanne's faith was expressed in her teaching, writing, poetry and her presence to others. This poem, written in 1963, expresses her faith then and in her last days:

Advent:

Into my stillness/ Now/ He comes/ Softly/ Gathering to a dawn/ My
darkness./ Slowly/ Like the night's/ Imperceptible/ Progress/ To
tomorrow./

In my stillness/ Waiting./ He comes./ Now?

Joanne Lenore Witucki was born March 6, 1940, in Detroit. Her father, Roman Stanley Witucki was of Polish descent and her mother, Elizabeth (Betty) Armstrong, came from an Irish-Welch background and was a convert to Catholicism. Joanne was baptized at St. Cecilia in Detroit on March 31, 1940.

She was the oldest of four children. Her brothers, Larry and David, are here with us. Michael, affectionately known as "Mikie," died in 2009. Joanne attended St. Francis of Assisi Grade School and Holy Redeemer High School, where she met the IHM's.

In the Witucki household, her father's mother lived with the family and was quite an opinionated character but if Joanne disagreed with her, she would always take time to listen to what Joanne had to say. Joanne's mother relied on Joanne for assistance around the house and with grandma, especially when her father and brothers were going out to play baseball or other sports. Joanne would have preferred to be out playing sports with the boys. She was a very good athlete and a better baseball player than her brothers. She enjoyed all kinds of sports. We used to tease that if two turtles racing was a sporting event, she'd be there cheering and watching!

As many high school girls did at that time, Joanne took care of other people's children. One of them was David Girardin, who contacted Joanne two years ago and came for a visit. He said, "My purpose is to convey my gratitude." Joanne in many ways was the first person to teach me about Jesus." He still had the book,

The Boy Jesus, that Joanne gave him for his 7th birthday more than 63 years ago. In the card, she wrote: "May this little volume help you, while you are a boy to know and love the wonderful years of Christ's boyhood so that when you are a man you may better understand the sacrifice of his manhood and in understanding live your life accordingly."

Even before entering the congregation, Joanne knew that there had to be a connection between faith and life. She spent the rest of her life working to enable others to see the connections for their lives and act upon them. Joanne entered the IHM congregation on Sept. 7, 1958, right out of high school. On June 28, 1959, she entered the novitiate and received the name John Mark, which she loved. She made her final vows on June 29, 1966.

Joanne was really quite brilliant. Carol Quigley noted that "Joanne could have been a PhD in theology. Her life could have been writing books and giving lectures. Rather, she made a conscious choice and set a ministerial direction closer to the people of God." The "less travelled road" she took made all the difference and we, and countless others, have reaped the benefits of that choice. Joanne was also humble and unassuming; never talking about her accomplishments or education unless it served some purpose to her ministry.

Joanne was a consummate teacher/educator: creative, possessing great organizational skills, knowledgeable, thorough and full of enthusiasm and zeal for whatever she undertook. There are 25 letters in her file from leadership personnel, coworkers, parishioners, students and friends testifying to her abilities, achievements and competence.

Joanne's passions were religious education, social justice and the integration of faith and life. Always working to link the Gospel to life and life to the Gospel, she had a wonderful facility to bring clarity and understanding of the word of God to others.

In the '60s and '70s, Joanne worked, tirelessly and intensely, in catechist formation and as a consultant for religious education in schools and parishes. We all remember the years in response to the insights of Vatican II when major shifts were happening in religious education, in content as well as methods of presentation.

Joanne's studies at Lumen Vitae (Belgium), her education at the Pius XII Center (Detroit), her master's degree in religious education (University of Detroit) and her years of teaching at Gesu, Epiphany and Mother of Our Savior enabled Joanne to respond to these challenges. Joanne loved learning and researching all possibilities when preparing to teach. She read broadly and stayed current in the latest theological developments.

With Marcella Regan, IHM, Joanne helped prepare IHM Sisters to make the transition from the classroom to religious education. As an IHM and religious education consultant, she offered pastoral sensitivity and a solid catechetical and biblical foundation for ministry post Vatican II. She eased the way for many sisters.

As co-director of religious education at St. Pricilla (Livonia) from 1972-1982, Joanne brought people together, offering them the opportunity to learn about their faith and apply what their learnings to real life. She created and taught major programs and learning experiences each year and created an atmosphere for parishioners to become a community of sharing together. Topics explored ranged from parenting to economics, Scripture to feminism, Church law, religious art and social justice. Joanne provided Advent and Lenten retreats; created programs for children with appropriate liturgies; and counselled parishioners.

Joanne was an exceptional poet and writer. Her love of language, ability to see deeply into reality and nuance words made her poetry expressive of her sensitive and tender heart. She could write reflectively and creatively on any occasion and authored many articles for parish and diocesan papers, and magazines, such as *The Religion Teacher's Journal*, later wrote a series for "Groundwork" on the Bishop's Peace Pastoral.

Joanne was a teacher of teachers. She taught at the Pius XII Center, Marygrove College and students of theology and religious education at St. Mary's Seminary (Orchard Lake.) Using a variety of methods and drawing from a wide range of thought in the Christian tradition, she would share examples from her own life experience to illustrate difficult points. Joanne did so with humor and depth of insight that challenged participants. Our deceased Sister Trinita Schilling once said of Joanne: "... is one of our best prepared and most capable ministers of

religious education, not only in the congregation but also in the diocese.” Others would add in the United States.

Joanne used her organizational and pastoral skills in her ministry of leadership in the community from 1982-1985 as provincial of the Northwest Province, a position she co-shared with Remi Pauwels, IHM; and as provincial from 1985-1988. Many sisters from that Province have made it a point to thank Joanne in her later years. They often appreciated the way she handled situations and assisted them.

Joanne was invited by Mary Kinney, IHM, to serve as chairperson of the congregational government committee. Joanne served for two years. Mary later reflected that Joanne helped move the congregation to a new model of governance with her creative thinking and ability to explore options and develop processes.

During her leadership, Joanne interacted with LCWR Region VII, where she helped in the preparation of meetings and developing processes to expedite the business of the region. Elizabeth Venhuis, SSJ, chairperson of the region at that time, said that “Joanne facilitated regional meetings with sensitivity, a non-threatening approach and an understanding of the issues that could bring a group of 80 members to consensus. Joanne was an active participant, deeply concerned and knowledgeable, about justice issues.” After the martyrdom of the four women in El Salvador, Joanne wrote:

“Life blood spilled/ crimson/ on the winter/ of our greed./

How can we ever weep enough/

Our heart grief/ for their dying/ in which we mourn/ ourselves/ the dead?

Entombed in the rock/ of our half-choices/ we plead/ another (last?)/ chance.”

After her time in leadership, Joanne spent the next 14 years in Oklahoma City as director of religious education at Immaculate Conception parish. Her creativity was still evident as she had the children painting murals of the parish’s pioneer history in the hallway of the parish center. The children adored her. Their parents appreciated her talents, pastoral style, humor and how she invited them to grow in faith. Kathy Mooney, a parishioner, reflected, “I learned so much from Joanne. There has been no religious education for me that will ever match what she gave me.”

Joanne initiated a ministry of offering retreats and reflection days for women's groups, inviting other Christian denominations. This outreach was greatly appreciated to those who participated.

Joanne continued writing through the St. Gregory College Center for Spiritual Development and created four courses for adult faith enrichment. These courses were included in study booklets used throughout the diocese.

In 2003, Joanne was invited by Mary Ann Flanagan, IHM, to teach in the Diocese of Saginaw's Pastoral Ministry Graduate Program in conjunction with Assumption University, Windsor and was a faculty member for several years. As with everything Joanne did, the students received theological education and formation that was clear and challenging, participated in a variety of learning experiences and went home with copious handouts for ongoing reflection and prayer. Most of all, they experienced a vibrant educator, someone not afraid to question and to encourage their questions. They saw a woman of passion who loved her ministry and wanted the Church to be all that it could be. They found a woman of commitment, competence, humor and heartfelt kindness in Joanne.

At the same time, Joanne was the pastoral minister at St. Joseph Parish in Bay City, Mich. Whether working with children and parents, providing opportunities for adult learning, visiting people in the hospital or walking with parishioners in their grief, Joanne was always good-natured, compassionate, easy to be with and inclusive of all. She was loved by everyone. Joanne often told me "that as the parish pastoral administrator, I had the hard job and all the work. ..." all she had to do was love the people. That she did very, very well. Joanne had a way of making people feel special, comfortable and welcome; her contagious smile put everyone at ease.

Joanne's sense of humor made its presence known when we were attending an HIV/AIDS fundraiser together. She pulled me outside and said, "this is really discouraging ... all these good-looking guys and we're the only women and no one is paying us any attention." Joanne enjoyed social occasions and did not take herself too seriously, wearing crazy hats, dressing up, going to any length to make people laugh.

Joanne came to the Motherhouse in 2011, but never claimed herself as "retired." She believed her ministry was to listen to the sisters and welcome everyone. Even in these last months, Joanne never thought about herself, always concerned about "what was happening to the sisters" and how she could help.

She saw herself in ministry, always. In the IHM Book of Life, Joanne's page cites three events that were transformative to her life.

The first was the election of Pope John XXII and the Council, which she says "shaped and challenged my entire religious life." The second was her brother Dave's decision to go to Canada after being unable to obtain conscientious objector status. She and Marcella drove him to Toronto. She said, "As Dave walked away from the car, his few possessions in a small duffle bag, I learned the meaning of the phrase, 'the cost of discipleship.' Indeed, there is no cheap grace." The third was her experience at the Global Awareness Through Education (GATE) meeting in Mexico. "Meeting Central American refugees, missionaries, catechists and base community members, I saw the face of the Third World. I heard a 16-year-old freedom fighter cry for justice and a plea for relentless hope." Reflecting on her GATE experience, Joanne wrote a poem titled "Cuernavaca." In the cathedral's shadow/ beggar women: all hands/ all eyes/ pleading. Our pockets full and "Poor in spirit"/ we pass by/ unlooking, we/ see./ your eyes/ measure the unequal world,/ mirroring a heart/ rich with/ pain."

The meaning and memory of these experiences run throughout Joanne's life. During her illness and diminishment, Joanne displayed remarkable courage and grace: never complained or lamented all that was lost. She always had a big smile of welcome for visitors and was extraordinarily content and grateful for whatever service received. When asked if she was afraid to die, she said very clearly and without hesitation, "No. I think God will remember me."

Joanne, we know God remembers you with great love and joy, as do we. We thank you for the gift and example of your life, zeal, creativity and love. You have blessed us all beyond measure. You will not be forgotten. Well done, good and faithful disciple, sister and friend. We now give you the last word through your poetry.

"And the glory of the/ Lord/ Shall be revealed/ Snow shall tumble/ Headlong,/ All our winters/ Hurl along,/ away. Life shall/ Reign/ When from some/ Crossed tree/ Seed shall find its earth to/ Die in./ Our heart/ be Ground for Glory.

Written and delivered by Gail Addis, IHM, Oct. 24, 2017.