

Reflections for S. Jeanette Klimisch – March 26, 2017

As we learned of S. Jeanette's death on Thursday afternoon, I suspect that many of us imagined the reunion she was enjoying with her twin sister, S. Jane, as she entered into fullness of life, where God makes all things new. Sisters Jane and Jeanette were very close all through their shared lives, yet each woman was her own person, with her unique talents. Sister Jeanette said in her oral history, "I would have to name my twin sister, S. Jane, as the most significant person throughout my entire life. As a sister, she is always there when needed." As we speak of S. Jeanette's life tonight, we will easily mention S. Jane at times, their lives having been intertwined in our monastic family, as well as in their birth family. One of the gifts of Spring they both treasured is the pasque flower, pictured on the cover of the worship aid. They always appreciated it when their nephew would bring them one of the first pasque flowers from the fields around their home, a promise of new life.

Sister Jeanette was the youngest of twins and eight children, born in the family's farm home on Aug. 22, 1920 in Sigel Parish, north of Yankton. Baptized Clara Caroline, she and twin sister Jane Julia attended their first eight grades in Klimisch School, a one-room, one-teacher country school. Sister Jeanette wrote, "It was fascinating for me to listen to all the activities taking place in the schoolroom," noting the benefit of befriending characters in the classics read aloud by older students. In grade school she was active in extra-curricular activities, including spelling contests, field meet sports (including soft ball), music, and Young Citizens League meetings, where her expertise in parliamentary procedure began. Music was a part of her life from her earliest years; at the age of four, she and Jane sang "I Miss My Swiss" at their first public appearance! The Klimisch twins often sang together for social events and on WNAX radio.

Another seed planted early in S. Jeanette's life was love of teaching. She shared that, "Playing school was one of my favorite pastimes as a child, and I spent many hours in an upstairs storeroom at home assigning lessons to imaginary pupils and reading poems and stories to them."

The twins went to Lesterville High School for one year, before transferring to Mount Marty Academy in Yankton. Near the end of her senior year, Jeanette decided to enter this Benedictine community, encouraged by S. Thomasine, whose chemistry lab she cleaned. She wrote, "Although the decision was made independently of my twin sister, still it was a happy sharing when we told one another of our plans." She was also delighted to learn that Sigel friend and classmate Christina Hunhoff, to become S. Julia, was planning to enter this community. "We [three] had good times purchasing the strange items of clothing required of us, and had many a good laugh as we tried them on in an upstairs room of our house!" They entered Sacred Heart Convent on Aug. 28, 1938.

A year later, in 1939, she was invested and given the name S. Jeanette and made temporary vows in 1940. She studied at Mount Marty Junior College, preparing to be an elementary teacher, then finished her degree at St. Mary-of-the-Woods College in Indiana,

where she majored in speech and drama and minored in music. After professing her final vows in June 1943, she began her teaching career that fall at Mount Marty, mostly in the high school, teaching a wide variety of courses – voice, piano, orchestra, chorus, speech, physical education, shorthand, and theatre. During her first 11 years of teaching she also served as personal secretary to Mother Jerome, whom she named as the most significant person in the formative years of her Benedictine life. Working and talking daily with Mother Jerome helped S. Jeanette trust her own competency – and to receive helpful suggestions for the pageant, “Song of Creation,” which M. Jerome had asked her to write for the 1950 dedication of this chapel. Five years later M. Jerome offered suggestions to S. Jeanette as she wrote and directed the symphonic drama, “Along Sure Paths,” for the celebration of the community’s 75th anniversary in 1955.

Besides her love of teaching, S. Jeanette found great fulfillment directing plays and musicals at Mount Marty, “not only for the joy of bringing a work of art to life, but also because of the close contact with young people.” Over the span of five summers she earned her Masters in Speech and Drama at the Catholic University in Washington, DC. She participated there in theatre productions as part of the crew; of this experience she wrote, “I learned how to direct by watching Fr. Hartke who never yelled at the players but guided each one individually to bring out his or her best.” Sister Madonna, a dear friend of S. Jeanette’s for the past 74 years, shared these thoughts: “What I most loved about Jeanette was her gentle spirit, but she was straight forward as a teacher, a choral director, and in theater. She loved and fought for the arts; was an artist, did some painting as well but her theater productions were magnificent and she had fun doing them. Always kind, but she left no doubt as to who was director.” As she embraced the privilege of directing plays in Marian Auditorium, the “new theatre” in 1955, a great blessing came when she was allowed to include men from Yankton College and from the town in her productions, among them “The King and I” and “The Sound of Music.” Bob Titus tells this story:

One day S. Jeanette called me to say, “I need some men in my play productions!” I had just gotten out of the Army and was going to Yankton College and felt like it had been a long time since I’d been in a theatre class. But S. Jeanette insisted, and I found myself in a dozen productions, with her encouragement. “I always admired how she could work with college students. She remained calm, in control, and made the experience enjoyable.

Travel was very fulfilling to S. Jeanette; her four trips abroad to study theatre, to see new places, and to meet new people expanded her horizons and enriched her teaching. Other significant experiences in her life included singing in the monastery choir; serving as Academic Dean under MMC President S. Evangeline Anderson; directing MMC’s Alumni Office; serving on the monastery council, on boards of Sacred Heart Hospital in Yankton and of Madonna Center in Lincoln, and on the SD Health & Education Facilities Board (1977-90). Of this last experience Mike Healy shares:

S. Jeanette was very instrumental in assisting Sacred Heart Hospital in obtaining financing for the hospital replacement in 1980. Sister was not only on this board; she also chaired it. Her comment privately was, 'I probably don't know much about what we do, but I guess they appreciate my chair skills to control all the attorneys on the board.'

Serving as Sub-prioress to S. Aidan was also a cherished opportunity for her, of which she wrote: "Those eight years (1981-89) were challenging ones, but never without the grace needed to be of assistance to S. Aidan and to be of service to the Sisters. It was a time of getting to know the Sisters better and to feel the deep meaning of belonging to community." She wrote appreciatively of S. Aidan's constant support and of the trust placed in her. The love and respect has been mutual, as S. Aidan shared,

I consider her one of my best friends. S. Jeanette was so organized and so helpful to me as Prioress. She would say, 'Do you think we could do such and such?' She was so creative and had a knack of doing things well. She suggested that we celebrate our jubilarians with a party and have a program at which we could share something about each Sister. She had to conduct my first Chapter meeting since I had lost my voice! One thing that stands out for me is the slide presentation she developed to show our hospital CEOs and board chairs – about our history and about our Benedictine values we wished them to share with their employees.

A broken hip suffered in 1990 changed her life drastically. Of this she shared: "This event slowed me down and I never recovered my former agility. But then, I believe it is all a part of growing older. I am now reconciled to walking slower, not attempting to do the impossible things, and accepting help from others." In her latest years, S. Jeanette called on S. Louise Marie, her Buddy, for some of that needed help. Sister Louise Marie shared that S. Jeanette "affectionately called me her 'scribe,' since she no longer could read or write. She had many friends and relatives, and she was always making sure that we sent a response to them." Sister Louise Marie admired S. Jeanette's quick mind and dry sense of humor – and the twinkle in her eye that alerted you that she was up to something. Sister Louise Marie shared this story:

I told Jeanette one day that she reminded me so much of my mother and told her a story about my mom who, in her later years, would always have a list of things for me to do the minute she saw me. Well, one day I no more than opened the door of her house and without so much as a 'hello,' she pointed to the pantry and said, 'The light bulb in the pantry needs changing!' Jeanette and I laughed over that one. Several weeks later I opened Jeanette's door and she said, 'Hi. Oh, good, you're here' and proceeded with her mental list of little things to do for her. She then paused and said, 'Oh, yes, I think you better change the light bulb in the pantry too!'

A key project she initiated after her service as Sub-prioress was recording, transcribing, and archiving the oral histories of our Sisters. As a community we are blessed with the fruit of S. Jeanette's labor, and – happily – she has included her own memories in seven different entries, including a diary she was asked to keep during our days of living at the Human Services Center after our fire. Of this work in Oral History, she wrote: "It has been stimulating for me to hear how our Sisters experienced various events and changes in their lives. Their stories have made me appreciate God's faithfulness in the past, and therefore to believe that God will support and guide us as we journey into the future." As she looked to that future, she reflected:

My hopes for the future are anchored in 'community.' When we went through the fire in 1997 I felt the strength of community more than I had ever felt it before. My hope is that this bond will remain strong among our Sisters and with the community of lay-people we touch in Yankton and surrounding areas. My hope for myself is that I will be able to face the end of life with peace and joy. I hope that frequent reflection on this favorite saying of St. Paul will remind me to be patient and strong: 'All things work together for good for those who love God.'

Thank you, S. Jeanette, for having shared your life, your self with us. You have loved God well; may you now enjoy the goodness, the fullness of life with our loving God, with S. Jane, and with all the communion of saints.