



Remembering
Sister Joanne Marie (Giovanni) Chiaverini, IHM
April 18, 1940-June 4, 2008

Joanne Marie Chiaverini was born on April 18, 1940 to Giovanni and Mary Chiaverini; she was the youngest of three children. Joanne's father was born in Italy and after being abandoned by his father went to trade school in Naples. He became a skilled blacksmith and tool-and-die maker, starting a workshop in his hometown. Joanne's mother was born in a coal mining camp in Colorado where, later, Joanne's grandmother ran a boarding house for miners. After her grandfather's death, Joanne's mother went back to Italy and married Joanne's father. Joanne was very proud of her Italian heritage and had a life-long interest in genealogy and family stories. She was proud of her big brother Roger, known as the "Godfather of Western Michigan High School Football" (in the first group of the Coaches Hall of Fame) and her big sister Theresa Oehmke, who earned a doctorate in math education and developed teaching labs for struggling math students, a model used across the country.

Joanne's vocation was planted by her mother who walked to Holy Redeemer Church in Detroit for Mass every day and who had great devotion to the Mother of Perpetual Help. Mary Chiaverini said that when Joanne's birth was imminent and something of a surprise, she told the Mother of Perpetual Help, "If this one turns out normal I give this child to you."

Joanne's parents both worked hard to help settle new immigrants (finding the Italian store, Italian priest and how to become a naturalized citizen). Her father protested the UAW not representing African-American auto workers. That sense of caring beyond the family was deeply nurtured into Joanne.

Joanne's vocation was inspired by the IHM Sisters at Holy Redeemer, Detroit, especially Sister Vita Marie, IHM, Sister Claire Elizabeth, IHM, and Father John McCarthy, CSSR.

Joanne knows more than most of us the meaning of the Gospel words, "Leave father, mother, brothers and sisters to follow me," because in those days when you joined the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters you would never go into your house again; you had to choose whether to go to your mother or father's funeral, you could never eat in public. Entrance day Sept. 7, 1957, was the first time Sister Joanne saw her father cry. In fact Joanne's sister Theresa recently told her that he sobbed so hard that his older daughter had to drive home from Monroe. But at the same time he'd say to Joanne, "Be strong." When Mary, Joanne's mother was given the bag containing her graduation dress and heels she

remarked to Joanne – “You look like an old lady. You’ve seen the place...now come home.”

When Joanne was given the name “Giovanni” her father’s name, at her profession her folks began to accept her call.

For both Joanne’s 25th and 50th Jubilee celebrations her Bible quote was from Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you. To whomever I send you, you will go.”

She describes her years at St. Agnes Detroit (where the riots happened) as her **real** novitiate. The reason she was assigned there was, “she could drive a stick shift.”

At 5:30 a.m., Mother Josine every so often used to tap Joanne on the shoulder and whisk her away to drive to the railyards, saying, “You can miss prayers today. We have to get **free** bananas from the box cars for our poor kids’ lunches.” She taught Joanne how to beg for the poor. In that same parish, Joanne went by herself to have religion classes in the tenement houses on Philadelphia on Saturday mornings. When her pastor, Father Granger, heard she was doing this he exclaimed, “Sister, for the love of God, what are you doing there? I can’t find 10 men brave enough to go there to take a census. They are too scared.”

A shrewd businesswoman, Joanne was with a dear friend Dr. Jack Stanzler and me in the old market in Jerusalem. Joanne exclaimed, “I need to buy some crosses for my family and friends.” She began the dance of bargaining and Jack and I could see we were in the presence of a master. The merchant began with his price and she began with less than half. Then they began in earnest.

“For you, for you ...You think I am a hustler – you have mysterious eyes, you have beautiful eyes.” She countered with “but I need seven of these crosses – I’m a poor sister,” etc. Finally she sealed the deal and the three of us walked up the narrow street a block or two away. “Oh,” Joanne said, “I forgot chains. I’ll get some in here.” We were way down from the original store; she selected seven chains and approached the counter; the same man jumped up to bargain with her – “I boss here too,” he exclaimed – and they began all over again.

As friend Art Swirtz once remarked, “Joanne has great ability to beg, borrow, and...make good use of her tax exempt status.” Nothing at the Prayer Center was ever paid for at the regular rate.

Two other stories illustrate Joanne’s passion to follow the words of the IHMs’ co-founder, Louis Florent Gillet, who said, “I desire to be everywhere when I see so many needs.”

At the Prayer Center, Joanne saw a young child on our yard swing. "Can I help you?" she asked. Fourth grader, Leroy said, "I'm never going home," and told stories of terrible daily beatings. "I saw God on your sign and need your help." She offered to make chicken soup and fried bologna, Leroy's favorite meal, but he wouldn't eat. When Protective Services came, they raised his shirt and we saw his stripes. He knew his brothers and sisters had to be removed, too. He couldn't eat till Joanne said, "Leroy, if I have to go to jail, I guarantee you will never go back in that house and we will get your brothers and sisters out too." Then he felt safe, ate his lunch and the worker came back with his siblings to take them to a safe home.

The St. Francis Prayer Center Joanne founded in 1974 was involved in environmental justice issues on the north side of Flint where the poor were being environmentally abused. Hearings were in white suburbs. We agitated and finally got a hearing at Carpenter Road School, but the hearing room was full of armed guards. She was a witness that the poor were treated differently (armed guards) in the hearings compared with middle class in suburbs (no armed guards).

A courtroom can be an intimidating environment. In the long environmental trial, Joanne kept describing how the poor were treated differently. She told her story – no matter what the attorneys asked. When she was in the lady's room she overheard the other attorney (we affectionately called "The Dragon Lady from Chicago") yell, "What am I going to do with that damn nun?" Joanne has always been gifted with speaking truth to power and many have wondered "what to do with that damn nun."

Joanne loved to have fun fishing, playing cards, enjoying children, doing crafts and going to election headquarters where votes were counted to help her favorite candidates.

Joanne, we are grateful that in 1845 Louis Florent Gillet and Mother Theresa Maxis founded the IHM order and that you answered your call in 1957.

And we from Flint are especially thankful that you served most of those years in the Flint area. We thank you as our waitress, shepherdess, prophetess and anchoress.

Joanne, IHM, Auntie Jo, Aunt Josie, Gio, we commend you to the saints who dwell now in light eternal.

Lovingly submitted by
Rev. Philip Schmitter, IHM Associate
June 10, 2008

The Rev. Philip Schmitter offered the following homily at Sister Joanne's funeral Mass.

Have you ever been afraid? Lord knows I have – I mean really afraid. Where your next paycheck will come from? What this illness or accident will lead to? How can I resolve this terrible conflict with my son, my brother, my Mom or Dad, my boss? How will I fare this treatment or loss or whatever? Fear so often rages in our spirits trying to overtake who we are and how we are to live.

I can imagine the fear of the women in today's Gospel: Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James.

Leave it to women to venture out of hiding (while the 11 hid in the upper room) with their spices to properly anoint Jesus' body in the tomb. I'm sure they were afraid like they were afraid to see Jesus dead, to risk the wrath of a Roman soldier, as we were afraid to go to the funeral home and see, "Yes, Joanne is dead."

But there is a Gospel difference between being afraid and being a coward. Over and over again God has said to us, "Fear not" (as to Mary at the Annunciation, as to those to whom Jesus appeared after the Resurrection, "Don't be afraid"). Jesus knew fear in the Garden and when after his first sermon in Nazareth the people wanted to cast him off the hill or at least say he was deranged. But as Paul says to Timothy we are not given "a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power, love and self-control."

Our lives reflect in some way the image and reality of God. Joanne, my good friend Joanne, was often afraid. Especially in the face of her rare auto-immune disease, she was afraid of illness, pain, disability, diminishment and death. She, however, realized that God's love was always bigger than whatever she faced. So she made courageous choices, very courageous choices, for treatment, ultimately for the surgery that precipitated her death.

But I saw in the face of her fear, no cowardly spirit. She often would say, "the opposite of love is not hate...it is fear." She spent a lifetime trying to help people overcome the fears that kept them from being free and loving and human. You who had her for a spiritual director know that. When Pope John XXIII (of happy memory) faced the Council Fathers he saw many of them trembling lest the Latin, closed, triumphant, dominative world they knew might collapse. In his opening address he said "Couragio, Couragio, Couragio!" Face what needs to be done.

Joanne noticed people's needs, often simple needs. We were in Florida visiting Joanne's mother after her father had died. The intersection of Commercial Blvd and Federal Highway is huge and many homeless stayed there on the benches. While driving to her cousin's house she said, "pull over a minute." She looked over at a homeless man talking to people who were not there, tattered, ragged, dirty. She saw his feet and said to me, "He has no shoe laces; look he has pieces of string and old venetian blind cord. I've got to get him some shoelaces." Her cousin gave her two pair and we drove back. I pulled over and stood at the roadside, very uneasy. "You stay here," she said, "two people would scare him." She approached; he started to move away. She stopped and spoke with nurturing, reassuring calm. Finally, he sat down again and I watched as she knelt down. "You might be able to use these shoe laces, friend. I happen to have some extras." She carefully laced them in the man's shoes, handed him the extra pair, and gently backed away as he continued to mutter and sputter at invisible threats. She was a generous, kind foot washer.

One time, after we had brought a group of ladies to a Housing Commission meeting where they could voice their just concerns about a host of issues, I got an

eviction notice. I went to Joanne crestfallen. “I’ll have to move,” I said, “look at this.” “What, what do you mean you have to move? We’ll talk to Joe Dupcza, the ombudsman, and we’ll talk to Bruce Newman our attorney friend. We’ll talk to the Flint Journal. When we got done, they will wish that this tactic would never have entered their sorry heads!” It is no cowardly spirit we have been given.

One time Joanne and I went to community organizing training and we were sent materials to read before we got there. One several-page piece was on the Peloponnesian wars and described the Athenians and Melians at war. We entered the class nervous about what was going to happen and how it would be done. So we were up front of the group, some of us Athenians and some of us were Melians and role-play being in their conflict. At one point the leader tapped Joanne on the shoulder (she had just said something) and was told sternly “go sit down.” So Joanne sat down thinking, “Well, Chiaverini, I opened my big mouth and said something wrong.” We soon were finished and Joanne asked the director, “What did I do wrong? Why did you tell me to sit down?” And he said, “Do you believe everything white guys in three-piece suits tell you?” Joanne found that a turning point in her life and whether testifying before a legislative hearing, or on the witness stand in a lawsuit, or sitting in somewhere injustice was happening, in spite of her fears, her many fears, the truth was told. There was no cowardly spirit but one of power, love and self-control.

So we face life without Joanne present physically – as friend, as family, as Prayer Center, as Flint, as IHMs....we feel that emptiness and hole and loneliness. And we will have our moments of fear as new injustices happen, as a bishop wipes out the last three north end Catholic parishes, as we face meetings without her, or family gatherings without her, and our own illnesses, limitations and crises without her. But at the times of deepest darkness, we will hear Joanne’s voice. Joining Joanna, Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of James, and John the XXIII, sometimes whispering, sometimes shouting to us, “Courage, Courage, Courage!”