



Remembering Sister Jane (Marmion) Johnson

May 13, 1921 - April 22, 2008

I'm fairly certain that there is not a person present who does not have at least one story of Sister Jane Johnson's influence on her or his life. Most of us can recall many more than one single time when Jane was there for us.

In most recent years how many Motherhouse residents have sought her expert advice on the purchase of a new TV or of a La-Z-Boy chair? How many committees have been enriched by Jane's presence? How many ill or dying sisters have been comforted by her faithful and loving ministry in so many ways! And who hasn't experienced the goodness of life just by being in touch with her, whether in ministry or in recreational settings?

In her own inimitable way, whether by some requested assistance graciously offered, by her unusual recognition of the importance of details in getting a work accomplished, by one of her insights shared in a deeper moment of reflection, or within a time of partying together, Jane has found a treasured place in our hearts.

But to go back to the beginning--where it all got started--Jane Angela was the eldest of four children born in Flint, Mich., to Herbert N. Johnson and Jean Frances McGovern. Her brother, Tom, and her two sisters, Pauline and Monica, completed this family grouping. Mrs. Johnson, some of you may recall, was a resident here at the Motherhouse for the last few years of her life, and Jane was most grateful for the care that she was given by our Health Care Center staff.

Sister Jane remained ever in close relationship with the members of her family, looking forward to visits with them. A number of her nieces and nephews have kept in frequent touch with "Aunt Angela," as she is known to them. One of her nephews is Father Tom Johnson who will be presiding at Sister's Mass of the Resurrection.

Young Jane was educated during her elementary grades in the public schools in Flint, Mich. She transferred to St. Michael School, also in Flint, to continue her high school years. I happened to be an eighth grade student at St. Mike's at the time. One day I was curious about several oil paintings that had been set to dry on the chalkboard ledge in my homeroom. "Who did this beautiful artwork?" I inquired of my teacher, Sister Marie Celestine, who was currently our school's art teacher. Sister introduced me to Jane and thus began my lifelong friendship with this extraordinary woman.

Following her graduation from high school, Jane entered the IHM congregation as a postulant on July 1, 1938. She became a novice on January 1, 1939, receiving the religious name of Sister Marmion. Sister continued her education toward her bachelor of arts degree at Marygrove College and received her master of arts, majoring in geography, at St. Louis University.

After profession of vows, Sister Marmion began her years of educating students at Christ the King School in Detroit. The quality of Sister Marmion's work with her students gave ample evidence of carefulness of preparation, creativeness in performance and follow-up of procedures that are the hallmark of a superior teacher.

Some short years after my own entry into the community, we both shared the distinction of teaching in the Monroe parochial schools--Sister Marmion at St. Joseph's, and I at St. Mary's. With the IHMs who were teaching at St. John's and St. Michael's we shared much together, learning from one another, and commiserating with one another when things did not come out as well as we had planned. We playfully dubbed ourselves in those days as "The Parochs," short for "Parochial" or Parish."

St. Mary Academy in Monroe and schools in Detroit and Battle Creek were other places of ministry. Within those years, sister co-authored an elementary workbook on geography as her master's thesis, and she maintained a lifelong interest in the field of geography.

At St. Gregory High School and Immaculata High School in Detroit, she served both as local superior and principal of the school. In the capacity of administrator, she did much to organize the school procedure in such a way as to maximize both student and teacher output. These were challenging and productive years when her educational and relational gifts and talents were in full play.

In 1966, Sister Marmion was elected to the office of General Treasurer of the IHM Congregation. In those days, amazingly, the General Treasurer was not numbered among the General Council members, and so attended only that portion of the Council meeting specifically devoted to her presentation of how the IHMs were doing financially. I have a recollection of one of those meetings when the Council members were in session. Outside of the room, Sister Marmion moved up and down the corridor awaiting "her turn." She had a rosary in one hand and a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* in the other!

Another recollection: I would never characterize Sister Marmion as one of those who "shopped 'til she dropped" at the mall. But at Radio Shack -- that was a different story! She could spend a long time there fascinated by various electronics and gadgets, always looking for items that would fulfill a need more effectively. She was a marvelous researcher!

One of Sister Marmion's many talents was her ability to gather a working group around her and to call on their best collected input to complete a work with finesse. Several of these co-workers who sought our greatest financial interests along the way are still among her many friends. They have shared some of their favorite memories...

- They recall that, as Treasurer, "Marm" encouraged Congregational Business Office personnel to cut out their seven-day work weeks, and work smarter, not longer. Her invitation to "take care" really meant just that.
- They remember that she had a clever way of turning a phrase in a note or greeting card that would make its receiver smile or laugh.
- They reflect on her gift of finding a special reason for getting together, having lunch, or just taking a moment to chat and give a person's spirit a boost.
- They recognized her as a true servant of IHM, of the sisters, and of the many who found in her a listening ear, a caring heart, and a true friend.

Anyone who knew Sister Marmion at all remembers her keen, clear thinking, and her usual efforts to search for a better way to accomplish the task of the moment. She was practical and had an expectation that day-to-day needs would be supplied rather simply and easily. To her chagrin, she early discovered that this was not always the case.

Sister Margaret Brennan gave an example in point: On the evening of Election Day, 1966, Sister Marmion approached the newly elected General Superior, Mother Benedicta, inquiring, "Where can I pick up a new pair of shoelaces?" "They're kept in the "Common Press" located on the lower floor of the Motherhouse," was the reply. "However," Mother Benedicta continued, "the room is locked right now. Sister Alexaida will be opening the door in the morning at nine o'clock." Sister Marmion's response: "This place is barbaric!" Needless to say, the "Common Press," together with other older modes of operation, have long since gone their way.

Sister Margaret recalled, also, Sister Marmion's famous "pie charts" designed in her years as treasurer to enable our better understanding of financial matters; and her foresight in enrolling the members of the congregation in Social Security, daring the risk, and within the year beginning to see a return on the dollars invested!

In 1973, Sister Marmion, having returned to her Christian name Jane Johnson, realized a strong desire to serve in one of the IHM overseas missions. Writing of this desire she says: "By 1972, viewing the end of my six year term as Treasurer, I was searching for insights into my next career. The appeal of East Africa became stronger after a second trip with Sister Anne Marie Hughes to visit our IHM Sisters and again assess needs. Because of what I witnessed about East African needs for education I became convinced I could make a contribution in that field and could adapt to a mission lifestyle."

Sister Jane's ministry in East Africa included teaching student Sisters in Bwanda who were being prepared for ministry among their own people, young lay students at St. Maria Goretti School in the town of Fort Portal, Uganda, and seminarians at a nearby minor seminary there. I believe that it was while she was in Fort Portal that Sister Jane received some nylon stockings from a friend in the states. The nylons were carefully packaged between layers of a heavyweight white paper in order to insure their safe delivery. In thanking her friend for the nylons, Jane mentioned, as well, how glad she was for the white paper which she had used in the classroom with her students. Always practical; always aware of opportunities for recycling!

Speaking of how her mission experience influenced her life, Jane wrote: "It provided a broader view of the world, especially the third-or-fourth world than could ever have been achieved by any other means. My sense of values about what is important in life was forever changed."

Upon her return from Africa, there were years of ministry at St. Michael School in Miami, and Nativity School in Hollywood, Fla. In the late 1980s in Boynton Beach, Fla., Jane cared for her mother, whose health was rapidly failing. Then, in 1990 Sister Jane completed full circle, returning to the Motherhouse in Monroe as a resident, where a new vista for offering her many gifts and talents awaited her.

For the past several months Jane has experienced life as a patient in our Health Care Center. Here with great tenacity and sharpness of mind she held on to life, doing her best to take charge despite her increasing frailty. Even in these months she valued neatness, order and beauty; and these prompted her desire for a functional arrangement of objects around her especially as her sight and hearing gradually diminished. Nurses and aides were diligent in their efforts to meet her needs and to offer her the comfort of their nursing skills and their caring presence. Jane was grateful, as we are.

Sister Jane specifically asked that whoever wrote her "Remembering" would do so with a simple narrative--and some humor. She wished no "testimonials." Hopefully, she would approve of what we have done here in friendship and deep respect.

Without a doubt, each of us who knew her as family member, friend, and sister will offer personal tributes to her life among us--within the depths of our heart where we hold her in love, when we break bread together in the dining room, or at Eucharist, and when we experience some facet of life around the Motherhouse where she made her impact of service and love.

We love you dearly, Jane. Continue to love and pray for us as you experience the "Fullness of Life" toward which you have faithfully journeyed.

Marie Gatza, IHM
April 24, 2008