

EULOGY

Sister Jean Marie Des Jardins of the Child Jesus

October 7, 1919 – January 12, 2012

On the feast of the Holy Rosary, October 7, 1919, Sister Jean Marie Des Jardins was born in a small French district of Brockton, Massachusetts. She was baptized two days later at Sacred Heart Church, Brockton, and given the name Marcelle Helene. Ninety-two years later she went home to God in the 72nd year of her religious profession as a Dominican Sister of the Congregation of the Queen of the Holy Rosary.

In her brief autobiography, Sister Jean Marie described her parents, Eugene Des Jardins and Marie Barnaud, as “very devout Catholic parents.” She was the second of seven children; her sisters and brothers were Madeleine, Eugene II, Lucille, Eugene III, and twins John and Jeanne. When she was two years old, her family moved to Pasadena, California, where her father had received a new job. A few years later a terrible tragedy struck the family. One day Marcelle, her sister Madeleine and brother Eugene were playing near their home, and some neighbors told them about a vineyard just down the street. The children found the vineyard and ate some “luscious looking grapes.” They did not know that the fruit had just been sprayed with insecticide. All three children became critically ill. Tragically, Madeleine, age 8, and Eugene II, age 5, died five days apart. As Marcelle would write years later, “God spared me for his own good reasons.”

Marcelle’s education began in a public school, but when she was in the third grade her parents enrolled her in the newly opened St. Philip School, Pasadena, California. At graduation from eighth grade, Marcelle received a scholarship to Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy, Pasadena, which, at that time, was only a boarding school. Remembering this experience, she wrote, “I loved it there, but did get very homesick for my family as we went home only on month ends.”

At Flintridge Sacred Heart, Marcelle met the Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose, and in her autobiography she wrote, “I cherish the memory of many of the sisters. Sister Benigna [Krug] and Sister Rosemary [Kaffer] were my favorites.” How did these sisters influence young Marcelle? Of Sister Benigna she wrote: “She could do anything. . .was tremendously versatile, taught a variety of subjects. . .and was Director of Boarders. Most of all, she was always good and a sympathetic friend to us girls.” She found Sister Rosemary, the librarian, to be a great friend whose interest helped her to pursue her religious vocation. In her own words she wrote:

When I became a senior I was very busy with my two responsibilities of class president and Sodality Prefect, but I became increasingly more anxious about my future come graduation. As none of the sisters ever said anything to me about becoming a sister, I felt I didn’t show any of the qualifications necessary, so I began putting the thought out of my mind until one day Sister Rosemary gave the nudge I was waiting for when she suggested that I read the book, *Girlhood’s Highest Ideals*, which dealt with a call to the religious life. It was the first hint that possibly I might have the signs of a religious vocation.

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Right after graduation, on September 6, 1937, Marcelle entered the Dominican Sisters at the Motherhouse in Mission San Jose. Sister Jean Marie wrote this vivid description of her first day in the convent:

I was under the delusion that five other girls were entering with me. So when Sister Berchmans, the Novice Directress, more or less insisted that I make my act of consecration the night of my arrival, I told her I would rather wait for the other girls. But she won out, because I was afraid otherwise it would be my first act of disobedience and they would put me on the next returning train. It was not until the next day that I discovered that no one else had even applied for admission. Eventually, after we prayed daily with the novices to Blessed Martin de Porres, five more entered, among whom were Sister John Bosco [Lambruschini] and Eleanor Berge, Mother Pia's grand niece. . . One of my biggest disappointments on my first day in the convent was the refectory which, to me, was stark and severe with its bare tables around the walls and naked light bulbs hanging from a long electric wire. To add to the bleakness, no one was looking at each other, and, of course, utter silence except for the reader perched up high in a church-like pulpit. Thank God those early customs have changed.

After her postulancy, young Marcelle entered the novitiate on June 9, 1938, and received the religious name Sister Jean Marie of the Child Jesus. One year later on August 12, 1939, she made first profession. During the ensuing years she pursued college studies at Immaculate Heart College and the San Rafael branch of the Catholic University of America, earning a BA and California elementary and secondary teaching credentials.

In 1942, three years after first profession, Sister Jean Marie received her first ministry assignment to Sacred Heart Elementary School, Los Angeles, where she taught the fourth grade. Years later in 1999 when she was anticipating the 60th anniversary of her profession, Sister Jean Marie wrote, "I have had seventeen assignments, ranging from one week to fifteen years in duration." She then described what she called her "more memorable assignments." She selected only a few and began her recollections by remembering her assignments to St. Michael's Convent. She wrote:

I started out with the second grade in 1949 and remember well that I had 72 in that class. When I returned to St. Michael's as superior in 1957 some of the girls I had taught in the elementary school were in my high school junior English class. When I came back for the third time in 1987, a vivid memory stands out: the riots following the Rodney King trial in 1992. From a darkened upstairs bedroom our little community of five watched the clothing store across the street on Manchester be broken into, looted and then torched by an uncontrollable mob of about fifty persons of all ages. Finally, that night the sheriff ordered us to leave for the duration; so we sought safety at Flintridge and St. Catherine's Priory. After three days some of us went back to [St. Michael's] and served meals to the people who ventured back to help clean up the charred, devastated area; we also brought brooms and shovels to help with this depressing task.

Sister Jean Marie devoted forty-nine years to the ministry of Catholic education. For eight years she taught elementary school students at Sacred Heart, Los Angeles; St. Anthony School, San Francisco; and St. Michael's Elementary School, Los Angeles. Over a period of forty-one years

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she ministered as teacher or staff member in secondary education at Immaculata Academy, Portland, Oregon; San Gabriel Mission High School, San Gabriel; Immaculate Conception Academy, San Francisco; St. Michael's High School, Los Angeles; and her beloved alma mater, Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy, La Canada.

In her autobiography, Sister Jean Marie wrote only briefly of the fifteen years that she served our Congregation as Director of Novices. As one among many of us who received our novitiate formation through her guidance, her words are humbling to read:

Probably one of the most painful yet rewarding assignments was being assigned Novice Directress in 1961 right after Sister Mary Dominic was elected Prioress General. First of all, my mother had just been stricken with cancer and died in February of my first year. I never really felt adequate nor prepared for the job, but the Lord seemed to have pulled me (and the novices) through. I remained in that position for fifteen years although I did have two opportunities to be relieved of it, but the alternatives frightened me more. Some of my most faithful and cherished friends throughout my life have been some of my former novices.

As one of her former novices, I well remember that an important part of my novitiate was a class very simply called "Instruction." I can see Sister Jean Marie seated in the novitiate classroom with index cards of carefully typed notes, and I can hear her voice as she mentored and prepared us for Dominican religious life. Today I propose that the more enduring lesson Sister Jean Marie taught us was not the content of those classes but the lifelong "Instruction" she gave us through her life: the words and good humor she shared in conversation or recreation, the generous and wholehearted response she gave to the many responsibilities she was asked to assume, and, most of all, the silent witness of her daily example.

Thank you, Sister Jean Marie, for teaching us to be faithful: faithful to God even when you assumed assignments like Novice Director for which you felt so unprepared, faithful to Dominican life especially as you taught and modeled religious life as Novice Director during the tumultuous times following Vatican II, faithful to your sisters by rejoicing in visits and maintaining correspondence with so many through handwritten cards or email greetings, faithful to common life—being present with your sisters for Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours, meals and recreation, faithful to those who felt that no one else understood them nor supported them like you did, faithful to your family and treasuring every opportunity you had to visit them or correspond with them.

Thank you, Sister Jean Marie, for teaching us the meaning of self-knowledge through your humble awareness that in different moments of your life you did not feel prepared and you even felt afraid. In the most simple yet profound way you realized that God loved you and that God was providing for you. This awareness began when you were a child and miraculously survived food poisoning that took the lives of your brother and sister; and as you observed, "God spared me for his own good reasons." How humbly you viewed your years as Novice Director by acknowledging that it was all God's work when you wrote: "The Lord seemed to have pulled me (and the novices) through."

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Thank you, Sister Jean Marie, for the extraordinarily effective way you corrected us—without raising your voice but with a memorable look and a raised eyebrow. It worked. We learned and we will never forget.

Thank you, Sister Jean Marie, for your patience. Most of all, pardon all of us who did so poorly in your French classes. We understand that in despair you once admitted that despite your best efforts one of your students, Celeste Marie, managed to speak French with a Chinese accent! We know you loved your French heritage and treasured the opportunities you had to travel to France to study the French language and culture.

Thank you, Sister Jean Marie, for your attentive ear and open heart that taught us that sometimes listening is more important than speaking. Thank you for letting us unburden our hearts and share our stories with you because we felt your personal interest in us, your kind words, wise counsel and unfailing promise of prayer for us.

Thank you, Sister Jean Marie, for being a gracious lady and teaching us how a warm smile and the kindness of one's manner bring joy to all whose lives they touch.

Thank you, Sister Jean Marie, for teaching us so much through the final years of your life in St. Martin Community. You have taught us the very challenging life lesson that it is difficult to age, that the desire for independence is strong and real, that it is very painful to ask for help when one's desire is not to be a burden, and that declining strength is a suffering—a painful, heavy cross to bear.

Thank you, Sister Jean Marie, for inspiring us with your deep love for Mary, the Mother of Jesus. When you were Novice Director, how often you led us in the hymn, "Sing to Mary," and how many times you prayed the rosary not only in chapel but as you walked the path around the senior lawn at Flintridge or the front gardens of Mission San Jose. You were born on a day that the Church celebrates Mary as Queen of the Holy Rosary, a mother, who lived the mysteries of her Son Jesus—mysteries of joy, sorrow, light and glory. In your life we see the traces of Mary's journey with Jesus as you, too, experienced times brightened by joy, periods shadowed by sorrow, days illumined by light, and finally—just six days ago—a transforming moment that quickly came without warning and drew you to Mary and her Son, Jesus, in the glory of new life!

This morning as the soft pink light of dawn was rising above the hills of Mission San Jose, the choir of your sisters gathered in our Motherhouse chapel to pray for you. We lifted our voices in the timeless chant of words you loved, the prayer closest to your heart—*Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, benedicta tu!* Sister Jean Marie, now you are with Jesus and Mary. As we pray for you, we ask you to pray for us with Mary our Mother—*Ora pro nobis. . . nunc et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.*

--Sister Mary Catherine Antczak, OP