



In Loving Memory

Sister Jacqueline Marie Merz, SSND

Novice Jacqueline Marie wrote, “I became a citizen of this world on the morning of February 18, 1936, and a few days later, I was given my right to citizenship in heaven.” How quietly and rather unexpectedly she claimed that right very early in the morning of May 4, 2014.

Jacqueline Amelia Marie Merz was the first of four children born to Cletus and Isabel (Wessel) Merz. Being the oldest was seemingly training for leadership roles. “I always assumed I was in charge of everything, whether I was or not.” she related.

She went to school in Effingham, Illinois, under the tutelage of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. It seemed very like that of every child-to-youth experience until as a senior in religion class, she said, “I was just all of a sudden motivated that I needed to give my life to God. It was amazing.” Later she analyzed, “It was the joy of the Sisters who taught me, the experience of being councilor at a summer CYO camp where I realized the joy of giving myself for others that drew me.”

A busy summer after graduation ended, Jackie continued, “September 1954 found me among the happy number of new candidates gathering under the mantle of Notre Dame.” Continuing through early formation as a religious and a teacher at the St. Louis motherhouse, Jackie received the habit and, though it was unusual at the time, kept her baptismal name. She professed her vows in 1956.

Her teaching began with upper elementary students in Illinois and Missouri. She earned a bachelor’s degree in economics and business education from Notre Dame College, St. Louis. She always wanted to teach and considered herself a good teacher, but the early years were not easy. “Because some people took time to help me, teaching and community life became a better fit. Being in a teaching community has been one of the gifts of religious life.”

In 1960 she was sent to Redemptorist High School, New Orleans. She taught there and at Vanderbilt Catholic High School in Houma, La. Then her life took a surprising turn. She completed work on a master’s degree in theology at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio. Her studies opened new doors. She became associate director of religious education in the Dallas-Fort Worth Diocese. For three years she influenced religion teachers, the curriculum and methods. At the same time she had the opportunity to glean and grow from the experiences of others at local, national and international conferences and symposia. Of particular interest was her participation in the 1971 Institute on Spirituality in the Church since Vatican II, in Rome.

That same year Sister Jacqueline was invited to an SSND community ministry as director of ongoing formation for the province. Ongoing formation is a tapestry woven by her life from this point forward. Whether serving with initial formation, temporary professed, development in community, leadership or in retirement, she exemplified a prayerful life of loving commitment. She saw service as a way of involving others and of

continued

Birth

February 18, 1936

Baptism

February 23, 1936

Profession

August 3, 1956

Death

May 4, 2014

Burial

Chatawa Cemetery
Chatawa, Mississippi

*Precious and blessed is
the death of the faithful
before God... for
they die in union with
their dear Jesus, in the
grace of God, in peace.*

Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger
Foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame
Letter 11, September 10, 1831

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multiplying her own efforts. This she did through invitation with spiritual direction and with support for those who were innovative in their calling.

In 1974 she was elected to complete the provincial councilor term of Sister Wanda Potts who was elected to the General Council. At the very next election, Sister Jacqueline became the third provincial leader of the seven-state Dallas Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Through the two-term tenure in this office (1977-1985), Sister Jacqueline had the opportunity to affect the way many issues were perceived—issues important to religious life in the Church and in the world—education, ministry, the status of women. She guided the province in the implementation of the statement of mission—a policy that urged religious to develop the laity to replace religious in traditional ministries so religious could then serve in new endeavors. Many perceived this move as progressive. The policy also brought painful decisions that were equaled and perhaps surpassed by another inevitable decision—to sell the motherhouse in Dallas.

After an unstructured sabbatical year, followed by a year directing field service in the diocesan seminary, Sister Jacqueline was appointed administrator and director of the retreat center at St. Mary of the Pines in Chatawa, Mississippi. She described her role—“During this time I had the major responsibility for renovation of the old convent and chapel into a retreat center.”

When leaving this ministry in 1992, she chose to remain in Mississippi as the first remunerated pastoral minister of the parish in Gluckstadt. From here she, with three other SSNDs, set up the Notre Dame Educational Center for adult learning in Canton.

Because of her mother’s rapidly declining health, she sought ministry in Effingham in 2000. Through her mother’s dying and until 2003, her home parish, St. Anthony, benefited from her spiritual formation programs.

As director of ongoing formation, Sister Jacqueline served the Dallas Province in San Antonio for three years, then in New Orleans. She related, “I offered to move to Chatawa where I could continue this ministry while offering service at the retirement center.” She came to St. Mary’s in 2009. Though “prayer and presence” were her official ministry only from 2011 to 2013, time for prayer was sacred to her. If one focused her eyes carefully in the chapel each day before dawn, she found Sister Jackie’s familiar form. Her presence lent peaceful joy to the community.

Realization from her youth of, “the joy of giving myself for others.” held through her aging. For one who in early life “assumed I was in charge of everything, whether I was or not.” Sister Jackie disarmed herself easily of the trappings of leadership as she gently served in unassuming ways.

Sister Jackie fell in late 2013 and she never recovered physical mobility. Tests during a brief hospital stay in late April resulted in the opinion, “There is nothing more the medical profession can do.” Shortly after her arrival home at St. Mary of the Pines, on May 4, at midnight she quietly claimed her citizenship to eternal life. May she rest in peace.

By Sister MarieClare Powell, SSND