



## **Sr. Ellen Jane of the Trinity and Mary OCD**

**September 17, 1931 – July 17, 2018**

When our Sr. Ellen Jane's legs collapsed under her in the refectory on June 24 and later fell in her room, we had no thought that this might be the beginning of her final journey to heaven. Her mother lived to be close to 100, and several of her relatives achieved a ripe old age, so Ellen, though frail in body, seemed to feel she might follow in their footsteps. She was somewhat bent from osteoporosis and had dementia, but she was always eager to be at community acts and would greet each one with a big smile.

Ellen Jane O'Donnell was born on September 17, 1931 to Neil O'Donnell, a Cleveland dentist, and Loretta Bruyer O'Donnell, a nurse from Canada. She had a brother, Neil, two years older and a brother, Thomas, born four years after her. She was born at 7:15 a.m. and weighed 7 lbs. 15 oz. - an interesting coincidence that made the statistics easy to remember.

While her mother was pregnant with her, she thought she might be carrying twins and, if they were girls, determined to name them after her own mother and her mother's twin sister, Ellen and Jane. When an only daughter arrived she received both names and was known formally by both, though her family referred to her affectionately as Ellie.



Being the only girl between two brothers, Ellen was the sweet and gentle "only daughter," yet underneath had a character that could hold her own against anyone and was determined to be her own person. She was always a "people" person. When her mother warned her of the danger of being in close proximity to a skunk, little Ellen made it her mission to inform all she met about "kunks" and their bad habits. She loved flowers. Her brother, Fr. Tom, told us the story about a neighbor who had a bed of rather rare tulips, which little Ellen Jane could not resist and gathered a short-stemmed bouquet of them for her mother. Recognizing their source, her mother used the opportunity to educate Ellie about respecting other people's property, then took her to the neighbor to return the flowers.

As she grew older she discovered sports and, as might be expected from a girl with two brothers, engaged in and enjoyed baseball, volleyball, basketball, tennis, swimming, horseback riding and especially ice skating.

The O'Donnell household was an interesting and happy one. Her mother would take the children on excursions in the city – to movies, opera, art museums and shopping, and provided them with unlimited good books, while expecting them to take responsibilities around the house. Vacations meant traveling by train to her mother's family's farm at Wooler, Ontario, after a stopover at Niagara Falls. Dr. O'Donnell would take the children for car rides into the city, urging them to shut their eyes and, when he invited them to open them, he would challenge them to guide him home. He was the one who provided opportunities for and encouraged them to play sports. Tom had innate musical abilities and could play "by ear" so they often had

sing-alongs as a family with Tom at the piano. Ellen also showed some musical ability and took piano lessons for five years



Ellen loved school. After kindergarten at Taft Elementary School in Lakewood, OH, she attended St. Luke School for her elementary education and finished with high school at Saint Augustine Academy. During her senior year at St. Augustine she was prefect of the Sodality. She found spiritual inspiration in Sr. Colombiere, the moderator of the Sodality.

When it was time to choose a college, her mother had ideas as to where her daughter should go, but Ellen decided on Case Western Reserve University – Mather College and majored in elementary education. Through the Newman Club, she was able to make a pilgrimage to Europe during the 1954 Marian Year, visiting seven countries and ending in Lourdes.

On weekends and during school vacation Ellen worked at various times in a dairy store, a bakery, a shop, department stores and as a waitress to help pay her college tuition. She would gleefully tell us that the employees of the dairy store could have one ice cream treat at the end of the day and could make it as big as they were able. It was clear she didn't miss any days of the allowed ice cream treats, and that they were big ones!

Tragedy struck the close-knit family when Neil died suddenly at the age of 22. He had always been in poor health, but his death was unexpected and difficult to accept.

Her parents would spend their evenings reading spiritual books, including St. Teresa of Avila and St. Therese. Her father was fond of the Imitation of Christ. He liked to visit the Cathedral which was near his office. Small wonder that the idea of religious vocation would be present to the children.

Another significant person in Ellen's life was her father's sister, Sr. Alma, an Ursuline Sister stationed in Cleveland. The family considered her the "big gun" for their prayer intentions and needs. She believed Ellen had a religious vocation. Ellen taught kindergarten for two years after college but was more and more convinced that God was calling her to belong to Him. When she broke the news to her parents, they expected she would follow her aunt as an Ursuline. Ellen said that all her life she had been known as Dr. O'Donnell's daughter and Sr. Alma's niece. She wanted to be her own person and, after visiting several religious motherhouses, decided to enter the Sisters of the Humility of Mary, known affectionately as the "Blue Nuns." She began her religious life in 1956 and professed vows in 1958.



In the meanwhile, her brother Tom graduated from college with a degree in music and education. He realized that he, too, had a vocation to serve the Church, entered the seminary and was subsequently ordained for the diocese of Cleveland, much to Sr. Ellen Jane's joy.

In 1966, after some years of teaching first, fourth and fifth grades, Sister was asked to get her Master's degree in special education and to set up a program at Rose Mary Center, formerly a school for handicapped children. She attended Cardinal Stritch College for her degree, and then taught at Rose Mary Center. She found these children were a great source of inspiration. Nonetheless, the desire for a more contemplative life grew in her soul and 1970, with the blessing of her Superior, she began to explore the possibilities of a transfer.

In the spring of 1970 she visited our Carmel in Latrobe, PA and made immediate connections to the vocation she seemed to be perceiving. Before she entered, her parents and her priest-brother took her one last family vacation - a trip to Ireland. It was a time of special memories. On her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday she entered Carmel.

Carmel and contemplative life presented unexpected challenges to our former teacher and people-person. The transition from talking all day and working with others to working alone and spending her day in silence asked much of her. From once being the principal of a school she was again in formation with young women half her age. Her deep faith in God, her humility and her determination kept her rooted in what she felt God wanted of her. A year after her entrance she received the habit, and on October 11, 1975 she made her Final Vows.

Sr. Ellen Jane worked in many areas of the house: altar bread production and shipping, food service, sacristan, councilor and one term as Prioress. She never refused a job, though many of these assignments were works she had to learn from the bottom up and were not easy for her. She always persevered in her efforts and gave it all she had.

Sr. Ellen was thrilled to discover that her birthday was on the feast of our Carmelite lawgiver, St. Albert of Jerusalem. One year, on that day, the sister who was doing the shopping saw a small bunch of yellow roses, Sr. Ellen Jane's favorite flower. She bought them and brought them home. As we released them from their plastic wrapper, we discovered that they were marked "product of Mt. Carmel, Israel" and the wrapper was adorned with photos of Haifa and the Monastery there. They were a special seal on her birthday celebration.

Sister is remembered in the community for her ability to compose songs for Sisters' anniversary celebrations, birthdays and other special occasions. They were always cleverly written and brought her Sisters great enjoyment and amusement. She was generous with her Irish sense of humor and did much to make recreations cheerful. When we began using guitars to accompany the hymns, Sister became one of the guitarists. If the organist was absent, she would give pitches for the hymns at the Liturgy and try to accompany the more simple ones. Even when her voice, pleasant and clear, became scratchy and diminished, she would carefully mark her music books and sing the best she could to praise the Lord of her heart.

As she entered her elder years, it was evident that her memory was failing. She was aware of this and it was a great penance for her. Her faith and trust in God sustained her and she became an inspiration to our community by her acceptance and acknowledgement of her state and her humble admissions of "I don't know," or "I don't remember." Gradually she had to resign her turn as hebdomadary, her turn as portress and other things she knew were a great help to the community.

Some years ago she was prescribed a blood thinner. Because her skin was paper-thin she would bleed profusely from even the smallest scratch. More than once we would follow a trail of blood to her room where a scary amount of blood would be found. Sr. Ellen Jane would be unfazed by the whole scenario, as though it were a natural and expected occurrence.

After her fall on June 24, she spent some hours in the local emergency room where she failed the test to walk with her walker and was admitted to the hospital. In a few days, she went by ambulance to our local Catholic nursing home, St. Anne's, to begin therapy. She was only there for a day when one of the Sisters was visiting her and thought she showed signs of a stroke. She was taken to the hospital in Greensburg and from there, life-flighted to University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in Pittsburgh for further assessment. They determined her left side was paralyzed and she could not swallow. Her eyes were closed but she would respond to directions from the doctor and to the Sisters who visited her. We would catch movement of her right hand on her left arm under the sheet and asked her what she was doing, afraid that she was scratching herself and would have a serious bleed. She told us she was making the sign of the Cross on her paralyzed

arm and offering her "crosses" to Jesus. She did this over and over. No matter what was done for her, she managed to voice a "thank you" around the tubes. Sister was always a grateful person, this virtue always shone in her. But, her last illness proved how deeply it was rooted.

The young intern who took charge of her care loved Carmelites and became attached to her and to the Sisters who visited her. We would pray with her and sing hymns, which she participated in with her usual "all." One of her favorite ejaculations was asking God that "she could keep on keeping on," and we would encourage her with her words. When the doctor questioned her about her care in our presence, her response was always "Whatever God wants" to the amazement and consternation of the hospital personnel. When it became clear that nothing further could be done for her in the hospital we began to make arrangements for her to be brought back to St. Anne's so she could be closer and we could visit and spend extended time with her on her final journey.



Her beloved brother, Fr. Tom, was able to visit her in the hospital on Independence Day and again at St. Anne's shortly before she died. No one could have had more spiritual care than she in the days before her death. The nursing home chaplain, who was from Cleveland and for whom she had prayed, visited her daily. The Benedictine Fathers who knew her when she served as sacristan visited and prayed. Two Hospice nurses who were caring for her sat by her bed one day and sang the Mercy Chaplet for her. On the day her brother visited, she finished the day by having been anointed three times and receiving the Apostolic Pardon twice. Each day the Eucharistic Minister would stop by her bed with the Blessed Sacrament during her rounds and bless her with the Jesus we told her she would soon see. When we visited we would often pray the Mercy Chaplet and the Rosary and end our designated time by singing the Salve Regina. Until the last few days, she would try to join us by mouthing the words.

In the end, she quietly faded into eternity. We expected she might die on the feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, but she waited until the next day, the feast of the Martyrs of Compiègne. It was only then that we learned from her friend in the Sisters of the Humility of Mary that it was the feast of the Humility of Mary and the exact day of her 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Profession.

Two of the Sisters were with her, and though they called us when they thought she was dying, the rest of the community were a few moments too late to be with her at the end. We stayed around her bed and sang the Salve, then prayed with the chaplain who came in and blessed her. The nursing home has a custom of covering the body with a pall on the gurney and process singing through the halls to the front door, where some prayers are prayed and the body is blessed before it is put in the hearse.

Her wake and funeral were a beautiful reflection of her life. Some cousins were able to come from Cleveland and Canada. People who had been touched and helped by her prayers came. Our Bishop stopped in during the wake and Fr. Jude Peters OCD was in the area and able to be here to celebrate the Funeral Eucharist with Fr. Tom and give the homily. Five Benedictine Fathers, including the Prior, joined us for the Mass. At the end of the Eucharist, Father Tom spoke briefly about his Sister. Fr. Earl, the Benedictine Prior, asked for a few moments and commented on Sister Ellen Jane's daily prayer at the Eucharist, thanking God for the Priesthood and for the Benedictine Fathers.

When our time comes to leave this earth, none of us would be surprised to find Sr. Ellen Jane in the welcoming committee at heaven's gate, greeting us with her big Irish smile. Some of us might even expect it.