

Rev. Mark L. Poorman, C.S.C.  
Funeral Homily for Sister Jean Lenz, O.S.F.  
Mass of the Resurrection  
Our Lady of Angels Chapel - Joliet, IL  
January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012

Once again, on behalf of the Joliet Franciscans and Jean's family and friends, I want to thank you all for coming and welcome you to this commemoration and celebration of Jean's extraordinary life in Christ. These are sad days for those of us who have such fresh memories of a woman who inspired us, taught us, changed us, and loved us – and whom we deeply loved in return. Indeed, there is a hole in our hearts and a hole in the congregation tonight. This is the group that Jean would have loved to be with, to tell more stories, to relive great days, to shine that incredible smile, to simply share the moment, or as she would always say, to “enjoy the local color.” But for all that sense of loss, these are also days of genuine joy that Jean is at last home with God, set free from the limits of this world and now fully immersed in the love that filled her heart for eighty-one years. As we come together this evening around the Word of God that so imbued everything Jean did, and the Eucharist that formed her sense of service and generosity in imitation of Jesus, we recall the gift from God that Jean was – to her family, her Franciscan community, her cherished friends, to students, faculty, colleagues, staff, alums and others connected to Notre Dame, and to the many, many people who came to know her and treasure her through the years. I am keenly aware that I'm only one of hundreds here tonight who could offer memories of Jean and her profound effect on our lives – our sense of what's important, our faith in God, our desire for goodness, our love of others. I will take my cues from the first reading from Sirach, “to praise the godly in their own time, as...their virtues have not been forgotten...” A few of Jean's virtues that will not be forgotten:

Jean was humble. In a world full of self-absorption, Jean was comfortable enough in her own skin that she didn't have to draw the attention, didn't have to press her point, didn't have to make sure she was in the mix. Indeed, she actually enjoyed some of the “hiddenness” of her life. True, she was best friends with the president of Notre Dame, and trustees and lots of influential people sought her out constantly, but she was also best friends with the head housekeeper in Farley, she knew the cooks in the old Oak Room by name, she would carry on with the groundskeepers about the lawns. She could engage the most serious topics with the most important people, but she saved lots of time simply to play with nieces and nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews. She would read a book and have by far some of the most astute things to say about it, but she would always lead with interest in what others thought, what others took away from it. In meetings, she would listen intently before saying anything. (Now there's a distinction we could base her canonization on...) In fact, Jean was the gold standard for the art of listening. She actually listened to people. She wasn't just waiting to talk; she wasn't just gathering her thoughts; she wasn't just trying to create a pause for the sake of drama. She really listened, and because she combined that listening with profound compassion and uncanny intuition, she offered people sacred time and space for understanding, hope and healing. She gave generations of students the room to grow, grow deep and grow up. No one was a better counselor, advisor, confidant, or spiritual director. Humility does that for you.

She was honest -- probably the most striking example of truth practiced in charity I've ever known. Colleagues could carry on for an hour about the dimensions of a particular challenge or mini-crisis in student life, and then Jean would wrap up the discussion in a phrase that would capture the whole thing perfectly. I mean *perfectly*. We would not only have a grasp of what was at issue, we would know what had to be done, whether the path was easy or difficult. She did that truth-telling for colleagues, but she also did it for students, for parents, for friends, for seekers, for the lost and abandoned, for the smug and powerful, for anyone who would care to listen. And she always did it with unfailing charity. Those who knew her well came to appreciate that when Jean found something "interesting," it was code language for what the rest of us would have said in words much more judgmental, dismissive and oppositional. Whenever she would roll those eyes and back up a little bit and pronounce something "interesting," all of us would know that major disapproval had just been exercised. Truth, grace and charity...always in combination.

Jean had the soul of an educator. She loved knowledge, she loved teaching, she loved learning. She asked a million questions and was one of the most intellectually curious people I've encountered. Sometimes that disarming honesty would team up with that love for knowledge and she would ask the question that nobody else would have the courage to pose. When she was lost in a good book or article, you just didn't want to disturb her. I can't tell you how many times I passed her at her signature booth in LaFortune and did not stop to say hello. Why? Because she was totally immersed in the *Chicago Tribune* and I knew it was a moment of unvarnished pleasure for her.

Wouldn't you give a couple university endowments to hear her laugh one more time? That laugh -- full of body language and sparkling eyes and sometimes a very red face! Jean's humor was an expression of a deep sense of joy -- genuine joy -- that few attain. She was so grounded in, and so appreciative of, the human condition that she saw immediately the beauty, the irony, the pretense, the foibles, the connections. And her first impulse was to smile, to light up, to laugh with, to enjoy the gift and grace of it all.

Jean lived in the moment. It explains why so many years passed at Notre Dame without her really counting them. In that vein, please indulge me one more story. When I visited her at Thanksgiving, I found her like many of you did, to be moving in and out of touch with her surroundings. She would sing a love song to Jesus and then suddenly she would talk about some advertisement that was actually on the TV in her room. In the midst of all that flux, I attempted some conversation and said, "Jean, think of all those incredible years at Notre Dame." She immediately shot back "38 of them." Startled, I said "and all the time you spent in Student Affairs. So many years first with David Tyson, then Patty O'Hara and then me." Her eyes widened and she looked me straight in the face and said, "O my God, do you think it's finally catching up to me now?" And then she was back to singing.

She loved Francis and the Joliet Franciscans. She loved her family and was totally animated whenever she talked about Jack and Pat, Ray and Ethel, Trudy and Mike, as well as nieces, nephews and others that were the light of her life. She would return from Lake Wawasee each summer floating on a cloud of great family stories. She loved Chicago. She loved Notre Dame.

She loved all of her students, but dare I say it...in a special way, she loved those women who had joined Notre Dame when it first went co-ed – because she was one of them. The talk in recent times really is not overblown or exaggerated: She truly was a trail-blazer, a pioneer, a legendary figure in the institutional history of Notre Dame. The University had known 130 years of male-only student life when Fr. Ted invited her to come serve as rector of Farley and help move Notre Dame to a new place. 130 years. It was a change, a transformation to “loyal sons and daughters” that only Jean’s authenticity, discernment, wisdom, courage and humor could pull off. In describing those early women she grew so close to, she would tell you with no prompting that they went on after graduation to do such amazing things – distinguished physicians and researchers and judges and wives and mothers who raised beautiful families. She always left off the last part – that they had achieved so much because of her encouragement, her belief in them, her simple, powerful witness that faith in Christ was the strongest foundation anyone could ever have to build a life on. And she cared so much for them individually as they navigated the big questions. As Sheila O’Brien wrote to me a few days ago, “Who will have their arms open to us now?”

Finally, Jean was full of faith. When Jean said she was going to pray for you, you knew it wasn’t a throw-away line...that she was actually going to spend time...in prayer...with God...about you. As he has so often, Fr. Ted said it best, “The time students spent with her exposed them to goodness, fun and deep beauty. Her teaching brought them face to face with the Christ in whom she deeply believed.” Indeed, the time *all of us* spent with her brought us face to face with Christ. At this time of sadness, let’s draw our deepest consolation from a truth that Jean taught with her life – that those who are formed and transformed according to the Way, Truth and Life of Jesus do not die. They live forever with the God who raised Jesus from the dead, the God they have come to know and love. They are welcomed into a Kingdom they have already begun to build. Tonight let’s remember, believe, give thanks and celebrate that even as we pray for her here, she is with God in a place she recognizes well and loves with all her heart. Welcome home, Jean, to eternal company with God, the source and fulfillment of your amazing, blessed life.