



**“You have done great things for me;
Holy is your name.” – Luke 1:49**



SISTER M. JOEL BAMBENEK, SSND

November 24, 1921

July 22, 1943

July 20, 2010

Our beloved Sister M. Joel Bambenek, 88, died at 7:10 p.m. on Tuesday, July 20, 2010. After she fell in early June and broke her ankle, she experienced several medical complications and entered hospice in early July. Her response at that time was, “Now I am entering a sacred journey.” Her niece, Mary Lou Stone from California, spent the week prior to Sister Joel’s death with her at Good Counsel.

The funeral Mass for Sister M. Joel, with Father Bernard Steiner as presider, will be on Monday, July 26, at 10:30 a.m., in Good Counsel Chapel, followed by burial in our cemetery. The vigil service will be at 7:00 p.m. on July 25. Loving sympathy to her sisters Connie Kiedrowski and Martha Wilson, her sister-in-law Patty Bambenek, her nieces and nephews and their families, her former students and colleagues, and her sisters in community, the School Sisters of Notre Dame. She was preceded in death by her parents, Joseph and Mary (Wicka) Bambenek, her sisters, Sister M. Felicia, SSND, and Sister Marilyn, SSND, and her brother Raymond.

Sister Joel, the fourth of six children, was born on November 24, 1921, in Winona, Minnesota. At her baptism at St. Stanislaus Church, she was given the name Mary Margaret. At the age of six, she entered St. Stanislaus School, and had fond memories of her primary teachers. As a fourth grader, she made her First Holy Communion. She recalled that, “It was the custom then for children preparing for this sacrament to make three days of retreat prior to our first confession. Some of us found it difficult to keep the required hours of silence and recollection.” Her First Communion day and subsequent enrollment in the Scapular Confraternity were very happy occasions.

Mary attended Cathedral High School, staffed by the Rochester Franciscans, and graduated in 1939. She related her vocation story in this way: “After graduation, I worked as a filing clerk in one of the city offices. As I walked to work each morning, I often found myself asking, ‘Is this all there is to it?’ After visiting my two Notre Dame sisters, Sisters Felicia and Marilyn, at Good Counsel Hill, I was attracted to their way of living. They encouraged me to meet Sister Merici, the postulants’ directress, who encouraged me to visit the Candidature. She also suggested that I get measured for a postulant’s garb. Returning home, I discussed my intentions of going back to Good Counsel in August. Permission was granted by my parents. I entered the Candidature on August 27, 1940.”

As a second year postulant, her first teaching assignment was fourth grade at St. Matthew School in St. Paul, which she described as “more than challenging.” She taught 66 students that year! She summarized that year, “Fortunately for me, those students were well-behaved and had been well-taught in the primary grades.”

At her reception into the novitiate in 1942, she received the name Sister Mary Joel. She wrote, “My disappointment was in hearing that my patron saint would not be St. Joseph, but the prophet Joel. But after reading more about him and reflecting on the Book of the Prophet Joel, I became a fan of his.”

As a newly professed sister in 1943, she and three other SSNDs opened a new mission in New Haven, Iowa, that had formerly been under the care of the Sisters of Mercy. During that year, because of a combination of circumstances, Sister Joel taught six different grades at various times. This was the beginning of a forty-year teaching ministry, a ministry that Sister Joel loved. An excellent teacher, she taught at all grade levels – primary, intermediate and junior high. In addition to St. Peter, New Haven, schools that benefitted from Sister Joel's teaching expertise included St. John Cantius, Wilno (1945-46); St. Adalbert, Silver Lake (1946-49); St. Philip, Minneapolis (1949-56); St. Stanislaus, Winona (1956-59 and 1968-82); Crucifixion, LaCrescent (1959-62); St. Joseph, Silver Lake (1962-63); and Blessed Sacrament, Waterloo, IA (1963-68). During this time, she earned a B.A. in English from the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, and an M.A. in remedial reading from St. Thomas College in St. Paul.

While stationed at St. Stanislaus in the 1980s, Sister Joel was also able to care for her elderly mother and was given a leave of absence from teaching for this service. Sister Joel was very grateful for this opportunity. She later used these caregiving skills with her sisters, Sister Felicia and Sister Marilyn, at Good Counsel.

In 1983, Sister Joel came to Good Counsel in the role of community service, with special emphasis in the Learning Center. She continued as a tutor through the 2009-10 school year, and only her broken ankle kept her from the 2010 summer session. She commented about her work in the Learning Center: "Since reading is one of my best-loved hobbies, I am happy to share my love of reading and books with students of all ages."

Sister Joel also enjoyed traveling. "I have many cherished memories of my summer in Rome, followed by traveling in Poland and England. Visiting the holy and hallowed places in Rome was a grace-filled experience." Intensely proud of her Polish heritage, her days in Poland were a treasured time. With their Polish heritage, she and her SSND sisters were part of a group that would sing Polish hymns at the funerals of Polish sisters. She used her singing ability as a long-time member of the Good Counsel Chapel Choir.

In addition to her love of reading books on all topics, Sister Joel was well-known for her love of wit and humor, especially puns. Jokes, book lists and recipes were found in her room. Several of the get-well cards sent to her contained jokes and puns.

The Friday before she died, via an announcement in the dining room, Sister Joel invited sisters to come to her room. Many sisters accepted this invitation and visited with her during the next few days. She also realized that she would not reach her 90th birthday in 2011, or even her 89th birthday, but was cheered by the idea of a huge birthday party in heaven with her friends and relatives who had already died.

Sister Joel's autobiography sums up her life as a School Sister of Notre Dame: "I am thankful to God for having called me to serve Him as a School Sister of Notre Dame. I loved living in a convent, I loved belonging to a group of women who loved what I loved. My vocation to become a School Sister of Notre Dame was, beyond measure, the most priceless adventure of my life."

May Sister Joel now continue this "most priceless adventure" as she says to God face to face, "You have done great things for me; Holy is your name!"

Sister Mary Kay Ash