



Sisters of the Holy Cross

**Sister Mary Jean Klene, CSC
(Sister Zita Marie)**

September 8, 1929 – December 1, 2021

Entered the Sisters of the Holy Cross from Quincy, Illinois on January 29, 1949

Initial Profession of Vows on August 15, 1951

“The path of the just is like shining light, that grows in brilliance till perfect day.” (Proverbs 4:18) That perfect day arrived for Sister Mary Jean Klene during the first week of Advent when she died in Saint Mary’s Convent, Notre Dame, Indiana. She was not alone. Her sisters in Holy Cross and extended family kept vigil with her to the last. The Saint Mary’s College community has lost a distinguished professor, long retired, but not forgotten.

Mary Jean Loretta Klene began her journey of life in 1929 when she was born in Hannibal, Missouri, two months before the Great Depression, when the world was suddenly hit by economic collapse. Mary Jean’s parents were natives of Quincy, Illinois, 30 miles north of Hannibal. Her father, Othmar Carl Klene, was a baker and later a dealer for Kaiser-Frazer automobiles. Her mother, Ada Blanch (Ridder) Klene, raised their four children, Donald, Alberta, Betty, and Mary Jean. Hard economic times may have been the reason for Mary Jean having attended several different Catholic schools in Illinois and Iowa before returning to Quincy, where she graduated in 1947 from Notre Dame High School, now known as Quincy Notre Dame High School.

Mary J. Klene then enrolled at Saint Mary’s College, Notre Dame, Indiana, sponsored by the Sisters of the Holy Cross. She did so with the encouragement of her brother Don who was a student at the University of Notre Dame. Financial assistance from the college enabled her to be a staff student working in the dining room. Sister Maria Pieta (Scott), CSC, her supervisor, wrote, “Mary came to us with the idea of the religious life definitely in mind.” Sister Maria Pieta described Mary as “an attractive, refined, dignified girl” who had a positive influence on her peers. Mary’s mother and brother were fully supportive of her religious vocation, while her father initially found her call difficult to accept. After three semesters as an art student, she entered the Sisters of the Holy Cross in January 1949 on the same campus. Fifty-one years later, in 2000, Saint Mary’s College recognized Sister Jean Klene for her excellence in teaching. Fittingly she received the Maria Pieta Award given to “one who has dedicated the last 35 years of her life to teaching at Saint Mary’s.” The citation quoted one of her students who wrote that Sister “perfectly embodies and fosters the Catholic character to which this college is dedicated.” She remained on the college faculty through May 2005 when she was advanced to the rank of Professor *Emeritus*.

Sister Jean Klene did not enter the convent thinking that teaching at Saint Mary’s College was going to be her primary ministry, especially when she was unable to complete her bachelor’s degree in English from Saint Mary’s College until 1959. She had thought of herself as an artist but majored in English at the direction of her superiors. She was known as Sister Zita Marie when she taught both English and art

at elementary and secondary schools from 1952 to 1965 in Virginia, Indiana, and Michigan, of which two years she served at the motherhouse working with postulants from 1961 to 1963. She was asked to prepare herself for teaching in higher education and in 1965 she was assigned to Saint Mary's College while studying for her master's in English at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, graduating in 1966. In 1970 she graduated from the University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada with her doctoral dissertation on the concept of honor in Shakespeare. To quote the *South Bend Tribune* in May 2005, "Sister's name is synonymous with Shakespeare at Saint Mary's College."

Carol Ann Mooney, Saint Mary's College president, in 2005 conferred the President's Medal on Sister Jean Klene, praising her for bringing "to the teaching of literature an artist's eye for visual drama and a poet's ear for the way in which language fires the imagination." The would-be art major was creative in interweaving art and literature. "From the printed page to the living stage, she stresses the need for reading speeches aloud, viewing film, and attending performances...." Sister Jean organized trips to Shakespeare festivals so that her students were able to experience and reflect more immediately on the human condition. Her courses were famous for rigorous "investigations" and quizzes that were challenging but involving. Sister Jean's students admired her for her "incredible knowledge" and her "wonderful sense of humor." She not only helped develop the intellectual life of women in their young adulthood, but she continued to be remembered fondly by them years later. Author, writer, television producer Adriana Trigiani, former student of Sister Jean and 1981 alumna of Saint Mary's College, claimed Sister was "my nun, my nun" in her 2003 Commencement Address at her alma mater.

Sister Jean had a way of engendering excitement because her life as a scholar grounded her as a woman of deep faith in Jesus Christ. She did not ascribe to Macbeth's lament, that "life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." She enjoyed the comedy and satire found in Chaucer's image of a diverse group of travelers on pilgrimage in *The Canterbury Tales*. Both teacher and student joined the pilgrims and listened to their stories critiquing social and ethical norms during a period of great civil strife. Then and now the world has often been topsy-turvy and upside-down, or as Chaucer put it in Middle English, "up-so-down." Sister once lectured on non-violence using the writings of Erasmus. Literature and humanistic studies were always relevant to Sister Jean, promoting critical thinking and analysis. She was passionate in raising the deeper questions of what it means to be human.

A Lilly Faculty Fellowship and another from the National Endowment for the Humanities gave Sister Jean opportunities to improve her use of art history in her teaching. Visits to museums, plays, and cathedrals in England, France, and Spain were overwhelming experiences for her. When she resumed teaching she noted, "Students seem alive to learning this semester, but it may be that I may have come alive more," thanks to the fellowships. Sister Jean used to joke about one NEH project that made her, as Professor Klene, the world's authority on Lady Anne Southwell, a 16th-century middle-class English woman who became lesser gentry when her husband was knighted. Sister Jean's decade-long research on Lady Anne's commonplace book, revealed the gentlewoman's poetry and observations of the times, as well as listed the household accounts and business records. Sister considered Lady Anne "an independent, feisty, creative and learned" woman who was one of the best women authors of the Renaissance. Like the obscure Lady Anne, Sister Jean was described by a colleague as "very unpretentious, even offhand about her own learning, but she is learned indeed...."

By the end of 2008 Sister Jean had retired to Saint Mary's Convent where she was available to tutor Holy Cross sister students whose second language was English. Despite failing health and vision loss, Sister

Jean was a good conversation partner, engaged in community life and prayer. At one time she and Sister M. Jacinta (Millán), hosted a Monday afternoon coffee hour, known as JJ Café, as a way to bring people together. Sister Jean Klene was a gracious host and guide, another wonderful soul, who walked with us on our common journey home to God.

--Sister Catherine Osimo, CSC