

Reflection

Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate

Joliet, IL

Sr. Janet Tucci, OSF

By: Fr. Anthony Taschetta, Thursday, January 8, 2026

We sang it as our response or psalm and it is the motif of her life. "The Lord hears the cry of the poor, blessed be the Lord." Not only did the Lord hear the cry, but my hunch is from a very young age, Janet heard it as well, and responded in a very similar way. Today we come to celebrate a life, so wonderfully powerfully and beautifully lived. Let's pray that we can do it justice.

Janet was born on May 5, Cinco de Mayo, 1934 to Samuel, who came to this country from Calabria, Italy, at the age of 10 and Justine a second generation Austrian, but they were a very Italian family: Tucci. Anglicized to "Tussi" until Stanley made Tucci famous again.

On the first day that I met her, I knew that we would be hard and fast friends for the rest of our lives. There's some things you just know. While she had Austrian blood, she was Italian to the core. Her father was from Calabria, as was my mother. I've got a polo shirt that says Taschetta and underneath it *La Familia e tutto!* The family is everything. And her family was everything. But her family was huge. Not only her brothers and sisters, nieces, and nephews, but obviously the community in which she ministered and the people who she served. And she served everybody. Especially the poor.

"The Lord hears the cry of the poor, blessed be the Lord."

She was a Saint Anthony girl, baptized there, raised there and had eaten many a spaghetti dinner there under Fr. Valente. And obviously, that baptism took. "Are you not aware that you were baptized or baptized into his death..." And

today in the second reading, we heard "Be intent on the things above for you have died with Christ and your life now is hidden with Christ in God. Whatever you do, do it in the name of the Lord. Instruct, admonish one another. (She was really good at that!) Sing greatly from your heart and whatever you do, do it in the name of the Lord."

This had to be deeply planted in her soul because when the Lord called, she not only heard but responded wholeheartedly. All the way. With Janet there were no mealy-mouthed halfway efforts. She dove in with both feet.

Janet came of age right after the second world war and grew up in Joliet, which was not a town that was known for racial harmony. Old prejudices die hard. But not for Janet. Even as a child, she was able to see through the superficiality of the color of skin into the heart of the matter. She once told me that her very best childhood friend was a little "colored" girl and they truly loved each other. That set the stage for everything else she was going to do.

"The Lord hears the cry of the poor blessed be the Lord."

In 1952 Janet answered the call of God and joined the Joliet Franciscans. When she joined them she was able to sing with Ruth, "Wherever you go, I will go. Your people will be my people. Your God, my God." She was open to serve the Lord in whatever way he led her. And lead her he did!

In graduate schools, she worked in the Englewood neighborhood where she got a taste of what it would be like to work with the least of our

brothers and sisters. It was then that she knew that she was being called to be with the Christ hidden always in the disguise of the poor.

Soon she was called to go to Birmingham, Alabama, where Jim Crow was still going and she thought it best to bring the song of the bird to the people in most need of hearing it. And sing she did.

Two days ago I had a chance to speak with Jeff Selma, a student of Sister Janet's who could not sing her praises any higher. He's the man he is today because of her inspiration and her believing in him and in all of the students whom she taught. He told me that the two most influential people that he had ever met in his life was Muhammad Ali, for whom he was a personal chauffeur, and Sister Janet. Both on an equal plane—pretty good.

He told me the story of when they were all invited to a movie house. It was later that Sister Margaret told me that it was actually an opera house. They dressed to the nines, as they always do. If you're going into the house of God, you had better look good. And then were ushered to the very back of the auditorium. Sister Alan, aka Janet, would have none of this. Subtlety was not her strong suit. You know exactly what she was thinking. She spoke in primary colors. Why do you have my children sitting in the back? Bring them to where they belong in the front. And they came.

I met Sister Janet when I was in the rural black community of Hopkins Park, Illinois, and she was finishing up a short stint in Chicago and came down to see what was going on in this largest rural black community north of the Mason-Dixon line. I threw together some pasta with Swiss chard, we ate and the deal was set. She was going to ask the community if she could come down to work in Hopkins Park.

I don't think it was an easy sell because she described her work as it was: being present, being

with the people, experiencing what they experienced, helping where we could help. But most all, learning what they had to teach us so that we can help even more.

We called it the "kingdom." Sister Marge Krieger was the first to come down and then went down to pick up Janet. Every time we drove home from an outing they would sing as Saint Paul told him they were to sing. "Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return and come with singing onto Zion; And everlasting joy shall be upon their hearts. They shall proclaim gladness, joy; And sorrow, and morning shall flee away." What was so exciting was that we believed it, and we lived it, and it worked.

That little parish was founded by one nun, Sister Mary Adelaide. One woman with faith makes a major majority. Not only was Mary Adelaide, one woman of faith, so was Janet!

After she left Hopkins, she did some wonderful ministries with Sister Rosie, our Lady of Angels retirement home, and finally at the Villa Franciscan.

The last time I talked to her was on Christmas Day. I didn't recognize her voice, but her niece Sue told me that she sounded just like her mother when she spoke. I asked her if she was afraid. There was no fear. She was ready.

How happy in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones. And if this woman was anything, she was faithful to the Lord. "When I was hungry, you fed me, naked you clothe me, alone, and you visited me. Come now, enter into your father's joy."

Fr. Anthony Taschetta
Mass of Christian Burial
January 8, 2026