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Fr. Roderick O'Brien

Who shall find a valiant woman? far and from
the uttermost coasts is the price of her.

Proverbs 31:10 (Douay-Rheims)

This is a great joy to you, even though for a short time yet
you must bear all sorts of trials; so that the worth of your faith,
more valuable than gold, which is perishable even if it has
been tested by fire, may be proved – to your praise and
honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

1 Peter 16-7 (Jerusalem)

Early Years: Foundation In Faith

Jeanne Alida “Jan” O’Herne (18 January 1923 – 19 August 2019) was born in Java, in the fourth generation of a Dutch colonial family.¹ “Ours was the most happy family, and I had the most wonderful childhood anyone could imagine.” Jan praised her loving parents for the gift of the Catholic faith. “They brought me up in the true Catholic tradition, sending me to Catholic schools and college. My parents, especially my father, implanted in me a great and strong faith and a love of prayer and Holy Scripture, and the Mass. The Mass was very special to us.” But the area where the family lived and ran a sugar factory, Mass was celebrated only monthly by a visiting priest from Semarang. Personal prayer was important, and again Jan was taught by the example of her parents. “Another memory is of seeing my father at prayer, on his knees by the side of his bed. To us children, it seemed as if he was there for hours and, getting impatient, we used to jump on his back as he tried to finish. This image of him at prayer has been an example and an inspiration to me all my life.”

Jan’s school days began at the Franciscan primary school in Semarang. The school was run by Franciscan sisters, and here Jan was grounded in a Franciscan spirituality which stayed with her all her life. When she was once a naughty student, the principal instructed her to learn a passage from St Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Jan never forgot this. Decades later she wrote: “Trust a Franciscan to give me a punishment such as this, laying the seed for my great love of scripture.”

After finishing high school (secondary education) Jan trained as a teacher. She attended the Franciscan Teachers College, adjacent to her former primary school. “The Franciscan nuns,” she wrote, “had a great influence on

1. The principal source for Jan’s life is her own autobiography *Fifty Years of Silence*. Unless specifically cited, the material comes from her book. Jan Ruff-O’Herne, *Fifty Years of Silence: The Extraordinary Memoir of a War Rape Survivor*, (Australia: Random House Australia, 2011)/

me.” Jan considered joining the Franciscans, and living her faith in their tradition.

Years Of Suffering: Faith On Trial

War began in Europe, and on 10 May 1940, German armies invaded the Netherlands. While the Dutch in Java worried about relatives in the Netherlands, the war seemed far away. But soon war came to their door. The Japanese forces, who had already invaded China, began extending their empire southwards, aiming to control the oil resources of the East Indies. In a short campaign (February to March 1942) the Japanese defeated the defending forces, and soon the Dutch civilians were assembled in camps. They could only carry a few items, and Jan included her Bible, a book of saints which had been given to her after a recent retreat, her prayer books and a crucifix. Jan was to spend the next three years in captivity in a camp at Ambarawa. “Communal prayer,” wrote Jan, “was our great source of strength. Each evening, we met in small groups and prayed together—the Rosary, novenas, or whatever was in our hearts. It was good for us to pray together, for we could express and share our loneliness, fear, hurt, and despair.” “It was prayer that helped us survive three and a half years of captivity at the cruel hands of the Japanese.

In January 1944, Jan reached her twenty-first birthday. In February all the single girls in the camp, from seventeen years and up, were ordered to line up. Ten girls, including Jan, were selected by the Japanese officers. Six other girls joined them from another camp.

The Japanese military had a policy of establishing “comfort stations” for their troops.² The reputational effect of atrocities, especially the “Rape of Nanjing,” were one factor in establishing these stations. The military established stations in various occupied countries, and recruited in Japan and those

2. Yuki Tanaka “Introduction,” *Maria Rosa Henson, Comfort Woman: A Filipina’s Story of Prostitution and Slavery under the Japanese Military*, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999) ix-xxi.

countries, especially in Korea.³ Forcible recruitment—sexual enslavement—existed across the Empire.

In that time of enslavement, with sexual abuse and rape day after day, Jan kept her faith. Afterwards she wrote: “Each of us had to find her own way of dealing with the situation, trying to keep up strength and hope at the same time. My inner strength came from my faith, from prayer, and from God. I never said to God: ‘Why did this happen to me? Why me, Lord?’ I knew that it must all be in God’s plan and everything that happened only strengthened my faith. When I had nothing left, when everything had been taken from me, there was only God and me, so I needed God more than ever before. I totally depended on God alone and this knowledge brought me very close to Him, a thing that doesn’t easily happen in life. But it did happen for me under those circumstances.”

Finally, for reasons which Jan did not know, her period of enslavement was ended, and she was taken to a camp in Bogor. There were over 100 young Dutch girls in the camp, all war rape victims of the Japanese military. Mothers of the rape victims and other children in their families were brought to the Bogor camp. But Jan was unable to really talk over with her mother what had happened to her, and Jan felt that it was the same for the other girls in the camp. Thus began her years of silence.

Years of Silence: A Hidden Faith

The surrender of the Japanese military in 1945 brought a new and difficult time in the history of the Dutch East Indies. Dutch personnel came

3. *Kono, Yohei (August 4, 1993)*, Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the Result of the Study on the Issue of “Comfort Women,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, last modified July 9, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140709022903/http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/women/fund/state9308.html>.

to restore the colonial regime. But the Japanese, in the last days of their occupation, had encouraged the local people to seek independence. Arms were readily available, and fighting broke out across the islands. The Dutch, only beginning to recover from the occupation of the Netherlands by German military, had too few resources to deal with the surrendered Japanese and reclaim their colonies. British troops came to help and to guard the camp, and Jan met a soldier who assisted her in visiting her mother in hospital. Tom Ruff could use an army jeep, and protected Jan from the violence which had engulfed the islands. Jan and Tom became engaged.

Because of the dangerous situation in Java, Dutch people were being shipped to Holland. The critically ill and the elderly were first, and Jan's mother and youngest sister were the first in their family to go. In late February 1946, Jan and the rest of the family arrived in Holland. From there, Jan travelled to England and married Tom Ruff. Thus, began years of marriage and family life during which time Jan gave no outward signs of her past. Two children, emigration to Australia, a career as a teacher, nursing Tom for twenty years until his death, can all be grouped under her "fifty years of silence."

While even her children could not see the wounds that she carried, all could see her express her faith in an active life in the Catholic Church in Adelaide. She taught in Catholic schools, including the Dominican School at Semaphore and especially at St Joseph's School at Kingswood, conveniently near her home. She counted Archbishop James Gleeson as a "very dear friend," and the Archbishop celebrated the funeral Mass for Tom. Jan was a member of the Second Diocesan Pastoral Council.⁴ In 2012, she was an Ambassador for the Year of Grace. She was particularly active in her parish community, and helped to start a choir. Jan also continued her commitment to Franciscan Spirituality as a member of the Secular Franciscans.

4. Robert Rice, "*James William Gleeson: Archbishop of Adelaide*," (PhD diss., Flinders University, 2019), 333-335, last accessed April 17, 2026, <https://theses.flinders.edu.au/view/3628d5f2-1355-4692-97b1-8e7740825fe7/1>.

Faith in Art

Jan was a gifted artist. Her autobiography contains pictures of the life in the camps, and her drawings of the other girls who were enslaved with her. Then in her parish life in Adelaide, Jan found a wonderful way of expressing her faith in art. Between 1978 and 1989, she made a series of banners for the parish church, covering the Church's seasons through short texts of scripture and illustrations from the liturgy or from nature. Some of her liturgical banners were photographed and collected into a book titled *Peace Love and Joy*⁵. The title refers to a banner which she prepared of St. Francis of Assisi, and his message to spread peace, love, and joy. This banner, expressing her Franciscan heritage, is used for the front cover of the book. The banners are still held by Our Lady of Dolours Church in Adelaide, and are still used regularly for adornment of the church. In the book, her daughter Carol summed up: "The banners in this book are reflective of my mother in every way, being joyful and colourful, wise and devout."

Faith to the World

Then in early 1992 her new life started. Jan responded to the plight of so-called "comfort women" (she rejected the term) from Korea, whose situation was discussed on television. She wrote: "That's when it really started. I had this strong feeling inside me: I've got to be with those women. I've got to back them up." In late 1992, she received an invitation from a Dutch friend inviting her to be a witness at an International Public Hearing in Tokyo in December 1992. Jan took up this invitation.

First, Jan had to tell her daughters. She wrote her story by hand, to each of them. (That became the basis for her book.) Then in Tokyo, along with survivors from Korea, the Philippines, China, and Taiwan, she gave her testimony. Later, Jan laid a wreath at Tokyo's memorial park to an unknown

5. Jan Ruff-O'Herne, *Peace Love and Joy*, (Sydney: Frangipani Productions, 2013).

soldier, and concluded the ceremony by praying the Peace Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi.

There was no looking back. Jan realised that rape in war continued to be a way of soldiering, and she was particularly affected by contemporary events in Bosnia. Turning 70, she reached out to the world with her story, and her message of love and forgiveness. She went to Holland, and back to Java. In April 1995, she took part in a forum in Sydney and spoke after the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali.⁶ In 1997 she spoke out in Northern Ireland. She visited Japan again in 2000 for the ‘International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery,’ and in 2003 for an Agape Reconciliation Pilgrimage. In 2007, aged 84, Jan gave evidence to a Congressional hearing in Washington.⁷

A Valiant Woman

From Java, Jan went to the world with her story. She wrote: “I saw everything through a clear light. All my wartime suffering had a meaning, a purpose, it was all in God’s plan for me. I was God’s instrument. God had asked me very late in life to do something special for him – to spread the message of peace and forgiveness.” The papal award of Dame Commander of the Order of Saint Sylvester was conferred on Jan in 2002, and the citation was ‘in recognition of her outstanding Christian virtue and faith when confronted by systemic sexual abuse, and her unfailing loyalty to the church and her life of holiness.’ Responding to this award, Jan wrote: “The church and my faith have always been the core of my life, and my heart embraced this gesture.”

6. Jan Ruff-O’Herne: “Fifty Years of Silence: Cry of the Raped,” *International Humanitarian Law Magazine*, (Australia: Australian Red Cross, 2014) 2, 6-7.

7. Jan Ruff-O’Herne, *Statement of Jan Ruff-O’Herne AO, Friends of “Comfort Women” in Australia*, last modified February 15, 2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070228195049/http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/ohe021507.htm>.

Michael M Honda, *Comfort Women*, US Congress, last modified March 6, 2007, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CRECB-2007-pt4/html/CRECB-2007-pt4-Pg5590-4.htm>.

In a television interview in 2001, her parish priest, Fr Anthony Kain, said: “Jan is a person of deep faith. Which is quite an amazing thing and most of us would struggle like crazy with God and even be bitter about God or blame God.”⁸

Jan died in Adelaide in 2019. She was ninety-six years of age, a valiant woman, beyond price.

She was a woman of faith.

The Enduring Message

Was there anything unique about Jan Ruff-O’Herne? Certainly, her experience of sexual slavery was not unique. Across Asia and the Pacific, perhaps 100,000 women were forced or tricked into sexual slavery. For English-language readers, the slavery of Maria Rosa Henson in the Philippines has been recorded there, and provides another window on dire suffering.⁹ Nor is Jan’s great faith unique. Philippine President Corazon Aquino wrote of Maria Henson: “We are greatly enriched by this story and inspired by how one woman can overcome such epic suffering and still have such compassion and faith.”¹⁰

What is unique in the life of Jan Ruff-O’Herne is that we have available a richer picture of her life of faith before, during, and continuously beyond her experience of sexual slavery.

A key element in the faith of Jan Ruff-O’Herne is her Franciscan spirituality. Addressing the General Chapter of the Secular Franciscan Order in 2021, Pope Francis called attention to some elements of the Franciscan

8. Caroline Jones, *Australian Story*, (20 August 2001), (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, August 30, 2001), last accessed April 17, 2026, <http://sunnycv.com/steve/st/~kelliej/ruff.html>.

9. Maria Rosa Henson, See also Sheila S Coronel, “Ma Rosa Henson: Victim – Victor,” *Seven in the Eyes of History*, (Pasay: Anvil Publishing, 2000), 185-216.

10. Maria Rosa Henson, *Seven in the Eyes of History*, (Pasay: Anvil Publishing, 2000), 185-216 back cover.

vocation and mission. According to the Vatican News, Pope Francis urged the Secular Franciscans “to embrace the Gospel as you embrace Jesus. Let the Gospel, that is, Jesus Himself, shape your life. In this way, you will take on poverty, littleness [It: “minorità”], and simplicity as your distinguishing marks before all.” “You are part of the outgoing Church,” the Pope said, adding that “with this Franciscan and secular identity of yours, your favourite place is to be in the midst of the people, and there, as laypeople - celibate or married -, priests and bishops, each according to his specific vocation, to give witness to Jesus with a simple life, without pretension, always content to follow the poor and crucified Christ, as did St Francis and so many men and women of your Order.” The Pope then encouraged them to go out into the “existential peripheries of today, and there, to make the word of the Gospel resound.”¹¹ There is no doubt that Jan Ruff-O’Herne lived out, in the midst of the people, that charism.

Jan Ruff-O’Herne is a model, not only for Franciscans, but for all who experience abuse. Her resilient and faithful response to abuse, her faithful search for justice, and her faithful message of forgiveness are all necessary today for the victims of abuse, especially sexual abuse.

Jan Ruff-O’Herne is also a model for those who continue to seek the protection of the victims of war, especially those who are most powerless. Jan was conscious not only of her own experience, and the experience of other sexual slaves of her era, she was also alive to the continuing abuses, such as those in Bosnia. She was supportive of the efforts to implement international humanitarian law, though legalisms were not her priority.

Of course, it is clear that Jan Ruff-O’Herne is a powerful model for women, but also a powerful and attractive model for men who seek to build a

11. “Pope calls Secular Franciscans to Closeness, Compassion, Tenderness,” *Vatican News*, November 13, 2021, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-11/pope-franciscan-discourse-franciscan-order-general-chapter.html#:~:text=The%20Franciscan%20charm,word%20of%20the%20Gospel%20resound%22>.

world that is faithful to the teachings of Christ and faithful to the deepest respect for others.

Finally, Pope Francis has more recently reminded Franciscans to live as members of the Church.¹² All her life, Jan Ruff-O'Herne lived in communion with the Catholic Church. she experienced that communion in her family of birth, in her schooling, in her attention to prayer and the sacraments even in internment camp, and in her valued life as a parishioner in the Archdiocese of Adelaide and Our Lady of Dolours parish. In extraordinary ways, her life of faith was lived out in "ordinary" participation in our community of faith, the Catholic Church.

We can conclude with Jan Ruff-O'Herne's own words, in a televised interview on the programme *Australian Story* in 2001: "It was my deep faith in God that helped me survive all that I suffered."¹³

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12. "Pope Encourages Franciscans to Live Out their Charism in the World," Vatican News November 29, 2023, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-11/pope-encourages-franciscans-to-live-out-their-charism-in-world.html#:~:text=Francis%20Rule%2C%20Pope%20Francis%2C,Going%20out%20to%20the%20world>.
 13. Caroline Jones, *Australian Story*, (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, August 20, 2001), last modified August 30, 2001 <http://sunnycv.com/steve/st/~kelliej/ruff.html>.