



**Sisters of
St. Francis
of Assisi**

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Since 1849

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Dear Friend,

How do we achieve inner peace? Today this is the question on the mind and in the hearts of so many people. We each have to find our own answer to the question but sometimes it helps to hear of someone else's experience in this. So let me introduce you to Sister Valerie Sepenski and see how her life unfolded with a sense of peace.

She was born in 1937 to Stanley and Valeria (Saszewski) Sepenski, and received the name Phyllis at her Baptism. As a child, she lived in Racine and Milwaukee, and initially attended grade school at St. Cyril and Methodius. Later, at St. Gerard Parish, she met the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi.

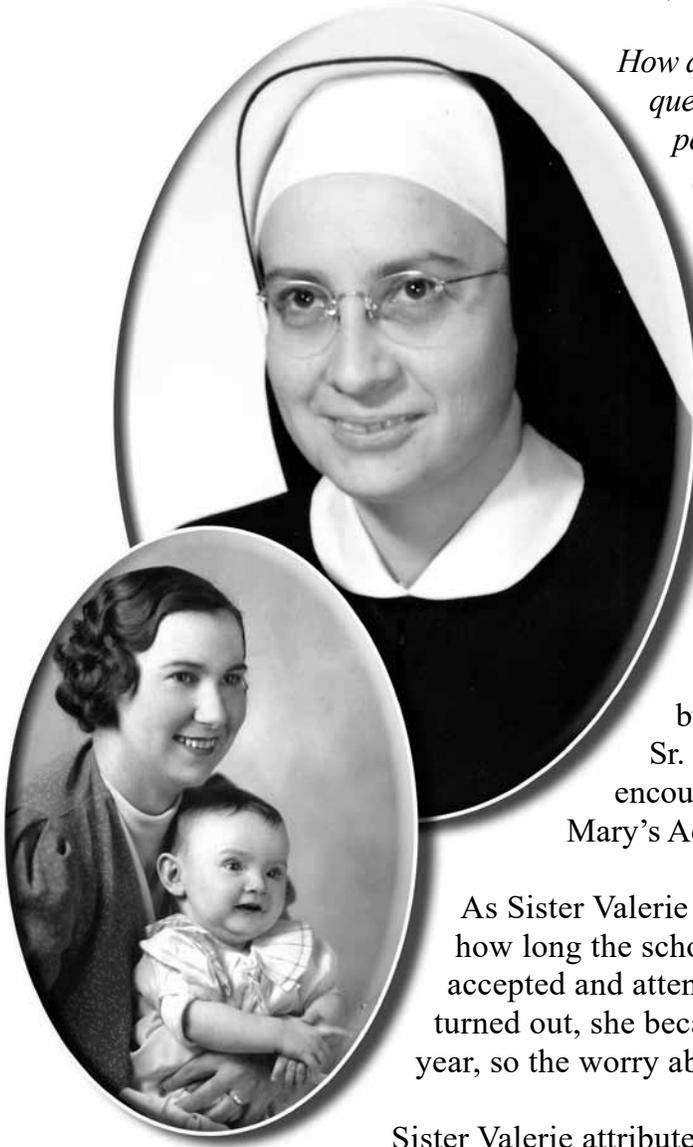
When it came time to go to high school, Phyllis wanted to attend a Catholic high school, but the family didn't have the funds for tuition. Sr. Laurita Hahn (†1992), who was the principal, encouraged her to apply for a scholarship to St.

Mary's Academy and she received one.

As Sister Valerie looks back, she said she didn't know for how long the scholarship would last, but felt that once she was accepted and attending school, the rest would work out. As it turned out, she became an aspirant in the community in her junior year, so the worry about the scholarship was laid to rest.

Sister Valerie attributes the influence of her grandmother in great part for her call to religious life. As a small child, she remembers sitting very often on her grandmother's lap singing Polish hymns and saying prayers in Polish. As an only child until she was eight years old, there was a great deal of solitude in which she used her imagination a lot. And then there was her first retreat!

Sister Valerie (ABOVE) and (BELOW) as an infant of the lap of her mother, Valeria.



At the time of her First Communion at St. Cyril and Methodius Parish, the first communicants were to prepare by keeping a retreat day the day before. The directive given to them was to find a quiet place in their houses to stay. In a small house, this proved to be challenging, but she kept the retreat day.

In 7th and 8th grades at St. Gerard's, Phyllis remembers that the sisters kept the idea of a vocation to the religious life before the students. At one point, she was given the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis to read. Now Sister Valerie just shakes her head because, though the book is viewed as an introduction to the spiritual life, it is very complex. But then, as with the retreat in preparation for First Communion, she dutifully read the book and God did the rest.

At reception as a novice in August of 1955, Phyllis received the name Valerie in honor of her mother whose name was Valeria. As a second year novice, her ministry of teaching began in the primary grades at St. Agnes School in Milwaukee, Wis. In August of 1957, Sister Valerie made first profession of vows and this year, 2017, is her 60th jubilee of profession.



1959 - Sr. Valerie with her brother, Jerry, and her sister, Eleanor.



1959 - Sr. Valerie with (FROM LEFT) Uncle Al, her mother, and her step-father, Mack Kruszka.

Sixty years of ministry is a long time. Some memories are strong, and others have faded away. From the time she was a primary grade teacher, her skill as a teacher was exercised in whatever area in which she was engaged. This skill, combined with her college degrees in English and theology, gave her a solid knowledge base for her work in formation with women entering the community, as a parish director of religious education, then as a pastoral associate, and finally, as the director of our Associate Relationship Program.

Musical ability is another of Sister Valerie's skills. She was often a substitute organist and, in Rockwell City, Iowa, she was the organist in addition to her classroom teaching. One of her favorite ways to participate at Mass has been as a cantor. After moving back to Milwaukee, she became a member of the Bel Canto Chorus for eight years.

Some of the strongest memories Sister Valerie has of her years in ministry are the memories of inspiration from the persons with whom she worked. Religious education volunteers come to mind first for their dedication and generous giving of their time. They took on a task in which they were very interested because they had children in the programs. Although they may have felt insecure about

sharing their faith in the classroom, the religious education they wanted for their own children was what they wanted for all the children in the parish.

One mother, when she brought her son with special needs to class, offered to explain what he needed to learn and to relate well with the teacher and the other students. As a result of this, the class stayed together from grades 1 through 6, providing support and care for one another over the years. The volunteer religious education teacher went on to become a special education teacher.

Then there was the gentleman who was a Mass server who offered to train a boy with special needs. He so wanted to serve Mass, but needed one-on-one instruction. The patience and persistence on the part of this man paid off, and a new altar server was added to the roster after many weeks.

Working with our associates, Sister Valerie was again in a formation role, and edified by the desire of these men and women to grow in their relationship with God. Being close to God is not only for religious but for everyone.

I asked Sister Valerie about some of her favorite books. The one at the top of the list is *The Practice of the Presence of God*, a collection of letters dating back to the 1600s. Author Brother Lawrence shares his insights about the loving presence of God. Second on her list is *The Divine Milieu* by Teilhard de Chardin because of the message that God is so close we miss Him.

Now in the slowing down of retirement, Sister Valerie finds herself more aware of God's many gifts. "Saying 'thank you' is more frequent and doing for others is very rewarding. Retirement is definitely a time of

(AT RIGHT) Sister Valerie with 1st and 2nd grade students in Rockwell, Iowa.



(ABOVE) Sister Valerie in her role as Pastoral Minister.

(BELOW) Father Richard Paddock, pastor of St. Gall Parish, Elburn, Illinois (LEFT), and Sister Valerie (RIGHT) with RCIA candidates.



letting go, which allows God's presence to be experienced more deeply."

Sister Valerie expresses so well the spiritual gifts that retirement brings. Another side of retirement is the physical and material needs for her and each of our retired sisters. They live simply in community and ask for very little, but with frailty come greater health care issues.

This is where you can be an inspiration for our older sisters. They never had the chance to save for retirement because retirement benefits were not paid to sisters in years past. Your generous support lessens the worry that they are a burden to the community, and God will reward your generosity.

Tracing Sister Valerie's life, it is evident how she used so many opportunities to cultivate a sense of inner peace. I am sure that you also try to develop a sense of inner peace. Our sisters pray for you each day. May those prayers touch your heart with a sense of peace and a desire to help as much as you are able with a donation to benefit the sisters who are praying for you.

Thank you so much.

Marcia Lunz, of

Sister Marcia Lunz, OSF



(ABOVE) Sister Valerie with her Mom at the Motherhouse.

(BELOW) As Director of Associate Relationship, Sister Valerie (UPPER LEFT) visited associates across the U.S. On this trip to Colorado, she also visited with area Sisters Rosa Suaso (UPPER RIGHT AND IN FRONT, LEFT TO RIGHT), Margaret Jo Brown and JoAnn Schmitz.



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