



**Sisters of  
St. Francis  
of Assisi**

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Since 1849

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Dear Friend,

The internal clock of an early morning person is so intriguing. This motivated me to sit down and talk with Sr. Valerie Jarzembowski to see what I could learn about the life of an early riser!

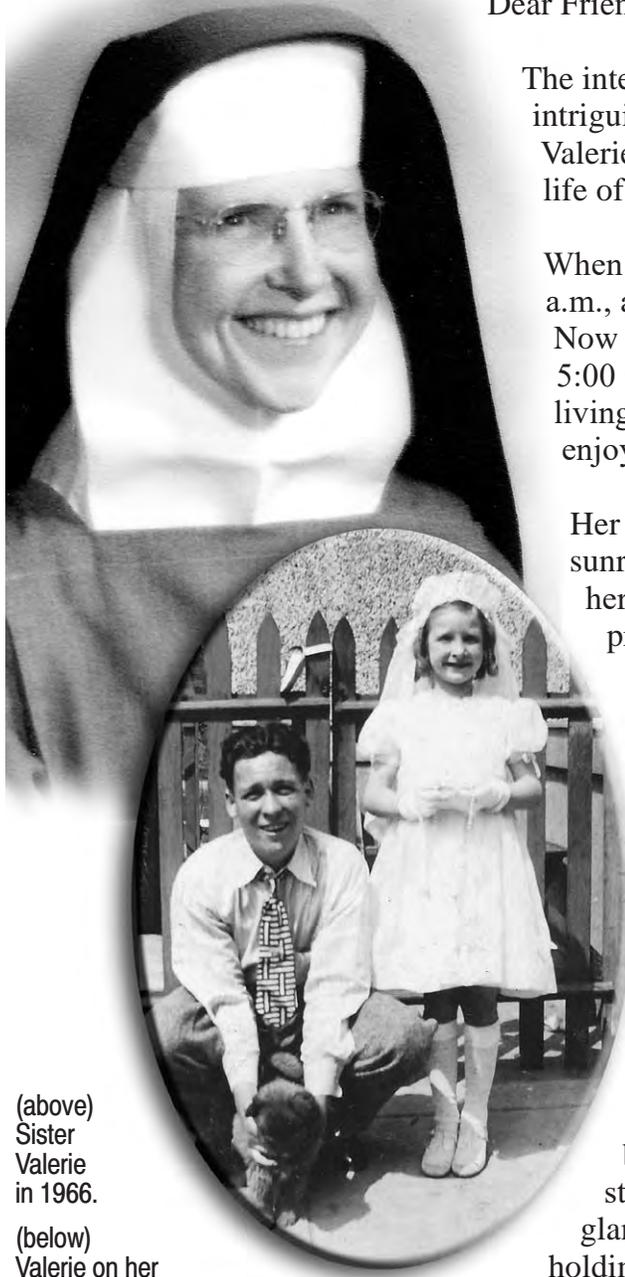
When I first met Sr. Valerie, her usual rising time was 4:30 a.m., and she got the coffee going in the convent kitchen. Now in retirement, Sister Valerie said she gets up about 5:00 a.m. and, due to the reconfiguration of the sisters' living space, she makes her own breakfast and coffee, and enjoys the sunrise from her second floor window.

Her love of nature is fed each day, not only with the sunrise, but also with the trees and birds that are a part of her view. In this setting, the first prayers of the day are presented to God.

Valerie was born on November 14, 1935, in Queens, New York. From early on, she had definite opinions. What were her favorite subjects in grammar school? Spelling and math. In high school? Gym, Latin, French, English, math and science.

And what about the least favorite subjects? Those dislikes were formed because of poor teaching that didn't engage her. For example, the history teacher in high school read aloud from the text book while the students took notes. This was boring, so Valerie began to practice writing backwards; she demonstrated this skill for me by doing a sample. At first glance, the message seemed to be gibberish, but by holding the paper up to the light to see through it, I could read: *How are you today?* (See this sample at the bottom of

the next page.)



(above)  
Sister  
Valerie  
in 1966.

(below)  
Valerie on her  
First Communion  
Day, with her brother,  
George, and Chummy the dog.



(at left)  
Sister Valerie -  
circa 1977, at St.  
Francis School -  
is working with  
Nicole, helping  
her to say sounds  
and words.

Though the learning experience didn't endear her to history, it proved to motivate her later in life to teach in an interesting and engaging way.

By the time Valerie was seven or eight years old, she knew she wanted to be a sister. The attraction grew out of her home environment, which she described as prayerful, and she loved visiting churches.

The search for a religious congregation led her to the Franciscan Sisters of Baltimore. Her first encounter with them actually happened in Harlem, New York, when she visited the sisters who were teaching at Resurrection School. Her next meeting was a visit to see the Motherhouse in Baltimore.

By the time she was a senior in high school, her mind was made up, but now she had to tell her family. On a shopping trip with her mother, Valerie kept saying 'no' to her

mother's suggestion that she get a new coat. If she was going to the convent, why would she need a new coat? But her mother didn't know yet of her decision. After the third insistence from her mother that she get a coat, Valerie finally blurted out, "I don't need a new coat; I'm going to the convent." Her mother was so stunned and speechless that she sent Valerie home on the bus even though they had driven downtown.

After graduation from high school in January, 1955, Valerie entered the community on February 2, 1955. The sisters saw her potential and told her she would be going to college to prepare for teaching. Valerie's goal had been to work with orphans, and in her forthright manner, said "No, I will wash floors, but I don't want to go to school." That conversation happened in the first two weeks of being in the convent and, to this day, she is astonished that she wasn't promptly sent home!

How are you today?

"How are you today?" - written backwards in cursive by Sr. Valerie.

As a sister, Valerie was known as Sister Raymond until she went back to her baptismal name after Vatican Council II. Her first teaching assignment was seventh and eighth grade in Norfolk, Virginia, at Christ the King School, which had a large population of children from families stationed at the Naval Base.

From here she was transferred to Resurrection School in Harlem, where the students were all African-American. Several more teaching assignments followed until 1989, when Sister Valerie and Sister Mildred Rothwell initiated establishing a home for AIDS babies. The proposal was presented to Catholic Charities and accepted, but the sisters were responsible for locating a house for this endeavor. Not only did the house have to be suitable, but the neighborhood residents had to agree to have this ministry in their locale.

Several times a suitable house was found, but neighborhood resistance necessitated starting the search all over again. Finally, a house was found, and with the help of some key neighbors, the neighborhood accepted the ministry with the condition that no teens would be living there. That wasn't a problem because the upper age for the babies would be age three.

The house was sound and up to code for utilities, but the yard was way overgrown and the basement was stacked with junk. Undaunted, the two sisters, with the help of other sisters, started on the yard. They discovered a lovely porch enclosed with windows in the front of the house and a fence in the back yard! Their efforts impressed the neighbors.

The basement proved to be the biggest challenge. Needless-to-say, piles of accumulated items meant disinfestation in addition to filling several truckloads for the dump. But when it was all done, the first babies arrived,



(above) Sister Valerie with her mother, Anna, on August 22, 1957, the day of her First Profession.

(below - l to r) Siblings – Bernie, Jean, Monsignor Ray (her brother), George and Sister Valerie in Texas in 1989.



and Sister Valerie was finally doing what she had longed to do for many years. And she got to do the early shift most of the time!

After her ministry with the AIDS babies, Sister Valerie had several different assignments ranging from being principal, to special education teacher, to Motherhouse coordinator, to working in St. Elizabeth's School finance office. In 2012, she retired and shares life with the sisters at Clare Court in Baltimore.



(at left) Sister Valerie (center) with her sisters outside of Clare Court Convent.

Bernie (left) and Jean (right) came with their red hats, and one for Sister Valerie, to celebrate Bernie's miraculous recovery from her three heart attacks that occurred in a single day.

I asked her how she views all the changes that have occurred in her life. Her response was that the Spirit has always been her guiding star, because she believes that the Spirit moves all the time, and we will hear the Spirit if we listen. Things sometimes rub the wrong way, but as life will have it, an 'eraser' will either smudge or make things clean.

After supper, the competitive bent that was active for her in grade school in all those spelling and math bees is still alive today in a good card game of Hand and Foot. And all the math skills are well used keeping score. When the sky goes dark at night, you can find Sister Valerie looking through her window at the stars and moon with the aid of her binoculars. Nature unfolds for her at all times of the day.

Sister Valerie and all of our retired sisters spent their lives working to improve the lives of everyone they met in their ministries. They worked in situations in which sisters were compensated minimally, and sometimes not at all. Retirement funding was not considered at all. Therefore, we turn to you to help us with their escalating costs of health care and daily living needs.

The sisters worked hard during their active years, lived simply and often in very poor conditions. We hope that you will see it in your heart to send whatever you can afford to help our retired sisters. The last thing they want is to be a burden to anyone. Your generous gift can give them a sense of security and peace of mind. In turn, you can count on their prayers for you.

With a grateful heart  
on behalf of our retired sisters,

Sister Marcia Lunz, OSF



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