



Golden Jubilee, 1994

Sister M. Valerie Zielinski, OP
Born to earthly life: February 12, 1926
Religious profession: August 4, 1944
Entered eternal life: March 23, 2018

“This is the miracle that happens every time to those who really love: the more they give, the more they possess.”

Rainer Maria Rilke

(Chosen by Sister Valerie for her memorial card)

Sister Valerie, named Clara at birth, was the daughter of Anna Jastrzemska and Ignatius Zielinski of Detroit, Michigan. She attended the school of her home parish, Nativity of the Lord. “I was especially fond of my fourth grade teacher, Sister Geraldine [Martin],” Sister Valerie wrote as she celebrated her seventieth jubilee in 2014. “I eagerly anticipated going to school just to hear her greet me by name with the endearing phrase: ‘Good morning, Clare! The beautiful bird greets this day.’ She inspired me to become a sister.”

She entered the Racine Dominican community on August 30, 1941, and on August 4, 1942, received the Dominican habit and the name Sister M. Valerie of the Precious Blood. During the second year of her novitiate she was sent to teach in the primary grades at Holy Angels in Milwaukee. The following summer, on August 4, 1944, she pronounced her first vows, and after that was assigned to Holy Cross in Kaukauna for two years. She was next missioned to Saint Luke’s in Plain, Wisconsin (1946 to 1947) and then for three years to Saint Rita’s in Racine.

During the summer of 1950 she celebrated her final profession at the motherhouse. Assignments followed at Saints Peter and Paul in Green Bay (1950 to 1956); Saint Rose in Racine (1956 to 1963); Saint Francis in Ottawa, Illinois (1963 to 1964); Holy Name in Kimberly (1964 to 1966); Holy Cross in Kaukauna (1966 to 1969); Saint Mary’s in Janesville (1969 to 1971); Saint Edward’s in Racine (1971 to 1975); and Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monona, Wisconsin (1975 to 1978). In the summers of the intervening years she pursued her own studies, earning her baccalaureate degree in education from Dominican College in 1960 and

her master’s degree in the same field from the University of Dayton in 1970. To these she would add a doctorate in education from the International School of Education in 1976.

Meanwhile, she taught at Sacred Heart School in Eau Claire (1978 to 1984); Saint Ann’s in Somerset, Wisconsin (1985 to 1987); Saint Mary’s of Redford in Detroit (1988 to 1994); Saint Francis d’Assisi in Detroit (1994 to 2000); Saint Cunegunda’s in Detroit (2000 to 2004); and East Elementary School in Detroit (2004 to 2006).



About 1960



About 1947

It was during her tenure in Eau Claire with her dear friend, colleague, and creative partner Sister Roslyn Skaletski that the two of them created the Leap-Learn System, a



1968

“Christian educational community where human culture and knowledge illumined by faith is shared in a spirit of freedom and love.” The innovative system’s philosophy is shaped by five life competencies: 1) *valuing*, a process of educating children to be spiritually and psychologically strong enough to express their personal beliefs; 2) *choosing*, within the learning environment, from activities unique to the appropriate maturity level; 3) *relating*, wherein children help one another learn desirable interpersonal skills, also dealing with feelings and attitudes; 4) *creating/inventing*, motivating and



Valerie and Roslyn in their kitchen



Leap-Learn

sustaining both learners and teacher as children uniquely evolve toward maturity; and 5) *learning how to learn*, with incremental stages to help children eventually form their own plan of study.

Valerie and Roslyn would develop and implement their program over the ensuing years, eventually settling into the former Saint Francis d’Assisi Convent in Detroit and from there serving as consultants to teachers wishing to profit from their insights and experience. Valerie, who had supervised many beginning teachers, modeled and encouraged rethinking, re-imagining, and

reforming traditional schooling. “She gave me real desire as a teacher; she was creative and so spontaneous with the children,” recalled Sister Karen Vollmer as she told of the eggs in Sister Valerie’s classroom that later hatched into turtles under Sister Brenda Walsh’s bed!

In August 2017 Valerie fell and fractured her leg. By mid-October, problems with infection necessitated her move first to the hospital and eventually to Lourdes Rehab Center in Waterford Township, Michigan, where the humor, kindness, love, and sense of gratitude she radiated quickly earned the affection of the staff. By late December her doctors, convinced that the wound would not heal, suggested that she consider being put on a “comfort care” program, a recommendation which Valerie embraced, saying, “Whatever God wants.”



Diamond Jubilee, 2014

Roslyn continued to support her friend until Valerie’s quiet death on March 23, 2018, after which her body was brought to Siena Center for her funeral and subsequent burial in the community plot at Holy Cross Cemetery in Caledonia.

At the Remembering Service, story upon story cited her great capacity to love. Former students from her primary classes recalled how special and confident their teacher made them feel with the unconditional love and enthusiastic support she showered upon each of them. In her ninety-two years, Sister Valerie accumulated more wealth than she ever could have imagined—not because she coveted such wealth, but because, as a person who instinctively loved and laughed and gave of herself, the “more she gave, the more she possessed.”

Roslyn wrote in tribute:

To know Sister Valerie is to know in her that charismatic core of light exploding in the many-faceted services she exemplified in her educational ministry.

Sister Valerie was the Mother Teresa of children, a holy tornado of determination and compassion. She saw God in their beautiful faces. Her true gift was finding the goodness in the hearts of children and teachers and inspiring them to pursue their dreams.

Sister Valerie had incredible talent for *reaching*, not just teaching, the children entrusted to her care. She instilled self-confidence, along with the desire and indeed enthusiasm to learn and grow. Her inclusion in the 2006 “Who’s Who Among America’s Teachers” as well as the award for “Teacher of the Year” in 2001 are just two examples of well-deserved recognition for what she was able to accomplish in her classroom.

In her many years as a Racine Dominican, Sister Valerie expanded her vision of a system of learning, that would give students the power to learn. Monitored by the professors of the International School of Education, she needed to demonstrate ten competencies in conducting action research, toured schools around the United States, studied the British Primary in Oxford, England, evaluated existing programs which led to setting up the “Leap-Learning School Community,” a one-of-a-kind educational adventure for children ages 5–11....

In her final days, as I sat by the bedside of Sister Valerie, I thought about all the children she had taught and comforted in their need. I thanked her for being love in the world to hundreds of children and people. I thanked her for being a mentor, a leader and an irreplaceable friend.

In her smile and grateful look in her eyes, she lifted both arms from beneath the white sheets and with great difficulty gave me a hug with the words “thank you.”