



Name: Sister Jessica Zwarra
Date of Birth: July 19, 1933
Place of Birth: Watertown, Wisconsin
Parents: Hubert J. and Lucille M. (Phillips) Zwarra
Religious Profession: August 15, 1953
Date of Death: May 25, 2025
Age: 91
Years Professed: 71

Reflection by Sister Natalie Binversie, Community Director

Virginia Lee Zwarra was born on July 19, 1933 in Watertown, Wisconsin, to Hubert and Lucille (Phillips) Zwarra. She was baptized at St. Henry Catholic Church in Watertown, on July 30, 1933 and made her First Holy Communion there on May 14, 1942. Virginia received the Sacrament of Confirmation at St. Therese Church in Appleton, WI on April 27, 1947 by Bishop Bona.

Virginia and her older brother Don, despite having been born at the time of the Great Depression, were blessed with loving parents and having all of their needs met. Daily meals included prayers for their Dad to keep his job as a telephone engineer. Favorite enjoyments were swimming in Rock River in the summer and skating on its frozen streams in the winter. A special joy every summer was to spend time on the farm of their four cousins, their Aunt Mayme and Uncle John Kampschoer. One of the cousins was Lillian who entered the Convent and became Sister Mary Bernard.

Virginia began learning about being a Sister when she accompanied her Mom, who was the chauffeur for the Notre Dame Sisters. In the fourth grade Virginia transferred to St. Therese School in Appleton, that was staffed by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. After completing the 9th Grade, Virginia attended Whitefish Bay High School. Her desire to be a Sister continued to grow. In her Senior Year of High School Virginia wrote the following letter to Mother Edna dated February 24, 1951:

Dear Mother Edna,

For quite some time I have been thinking seriously about a religious vocation. It has been in my mind ever since grade school, and now in my Senior year at High School, the calling seems to be more fervent than ever before.

I have a cousin in your order, Sister Mary Bernard, and on every occasion possible, I go to see her. She is so completely satisfied with her choice of Religious Life, that it has moved my entire family to seeing God's side of life here on earth.

My background, Mother Edna, is as follows: I was born July 19, 1933, at Watertown, WI, and baptized at St. Henry's Catholic Church of that city. I attended St. Henry's Grade School for three years until my family was transferred to Appleton, WI. In Appleton, I completed the ninth grade under the supervision of your splendid Sisters at the St. Therese School. In 1949, my parents were transferred to Milwaukee and I attended Whitefish Bay High School, from which I will graduate in June.

Could you please, Mother Edna, give me some information regarding entrance in your order? May God reward you for your trouble, and may He assist me to obtain a Religious vocation.

*God bless you,
Virginia Zwarra*

The following letter, dated August 17, 1951, was sent to Mother Edna:
To Mother Superior:

According to the best of my knowledge, Miss Virginia Zwarra, a member of Holy Family Parish, has all the qualifications necessary for a person desirous of entering the religious stage.

Rev. George H. Wollet

Virginia was accepted and entered Holy Family Convent on August 23, 1951. As a Postulant, she attended Holy Family College. Virginia was accepted into the Novitiate of the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity on June 13, 1952 and received the name of Sister M. Jessica. She continued her College education before professing her First Vows on August 15, 1953.

When Sister Jessica and her classmate, Sister Florita Schneider, registered for their second year of College, the Registrar, Sister Rosamund, told them that the Community wanted them to take specific courses. Sometime in September, since Mother Edna was gone, Sister Agna, Vicar at the time, asked to see both Sister Florita and Sister Jessica. Sister Agna told them that the Community was thinking of sending them to Dental School. They needed to apply to take an aptitude test from the American Dental Association before being accepted into a Dental School. Sister Jessica and Sister Florita were given a day to think about this. They had just professed the Vow of Obedience, so their answer was 'yes.' The aptitude test took all day. The Sisters never found out the results, except that they must have shown enough aptitude to be accepted into the Marquette School of Dentistry in the fall of 1954. Both Sister Jessica and Sister Florita earned their Doctor of Dental Science Degree from Marquette University on June 28, 1958 with a Major in Dentistry and a Minor in Science.

In August 1958, Sister Jessica and Sister Florita opened their general practice of dentistry at Holy Family Convent in the basement right next to what was the diet kitchen and a storage room. Since that time, the Community has been blessed to have dental check-ups and dental care done at Holy Family Convent. Over the years both Sister Florita and Sister Jessica expanded their services beyond serving the Sisters to the elderly and the poor throughout the area. They have acted as consulting dentists to St. Mary's Home in Manitowoc and St. Paul's in Kaukauna and at Holy Family Hospital when they had an extended care unit. Sister Jessica also volunteered at St. Joseph's Medical Dental Clinic in Waukesha. An extracurricular activity enjoyed by Sister Jessica, was preparing and presenting, a unit on dental health to local first grade students.

In her Jubilee Reflection Sister Jessica wrote, "For the many Sisters who have blessed me with their smiles to polish, restore or crown, Thank You especially for those brave Novices who came to Marquette University Dental School, to be patients for Board exams, so many years ago. Sister Florita has been the friend and partner everybody wished they had. She is a true friend, a rare treasure who has my eternal gratitude."

The terminal illness of her parents brought Sister Jessica to live in Florida to care for them, and for her brother, Don. While being a care-giver, Sister Jessica believed that she was able to spread the Community's Franciscan Charism through the Coalition for the homeless in Orlando. She helped prepare meals and served in the main shelter, working with the 3rd Order Franciscans. Sister Jessica joined the Orange Blossom Family Health Clinic, a division of the Homeless Medical Association, and continued her ministry from the dentist's chair, serving the indigent and poorest in the Orlando Parramore Area. The Apopka Loaves and Fishes Center and The Christian Sharing Center in Longwood found Sister Jessica working in the food pantry and giving out clothing. When she volunteered in the free pregnancy and ultrasound center in Orlando, she gave out baby clothes and gave assistance to pregnant Mothers. Sister Jessica was involved in the Bereavement Ministry Program at Annunciation Parish in Altamonte Springs. She helped to prepare funeral liturgies, visited the bereaved and worked in a bereavement support group.

Sister Jessica always had a positive, cheerful disposition. Sister Jessica never met a stranger and said that she met many awesome, good people. She was especially thankful for the people she helped to sponsor to become a member of the Catholic Church. She prayed in gratitude to God for her family, her Sisters in Community, her care-givers and for the blessings received through the Community. In every conversation with Sister Jessica, she always expressed deep gratitude to the Community and assured her commitment, to daily prayer, for the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity and for all her care-givers, especially Patty Bush.

Thank you, Sister Jessica, for the up-lifting joy you gave to others when you talked about sports, especially the Green Bay Packers, the wisdom of Charlie Brown and Companions, or your ice-skating adventures. Thank you for your witness of faith, commitment and generosity. You are praised across the country, by other dentists, who have recognized your excellent dental skills. You always gave the praise back to God, for the gifts He gave you to develop and use. Most of all, thank you for saying yes to being our Sister, a Franciscan Sister of Christian Charity. May you rest in peace in the loving presence of God.