Sister Joanne Patricia Gwizdala, OP
1927-2016

Child of God

Sister Joanne Patricia Gwizdala was born on March 8, 1927, in Bay City, Michigan. She was the fourth of five children born to Ann (Wazbinski) and Joseph Gwizdala. Both of her parents were born in a Bay County rural township: her mother in Linwood area and her father in the Fisherville area.

In her autobiography, Sister Joanne shared the following about her family.

*Dad was orphaned at the age of nine and lived with his uncle on the farm. When he was older he moved to Bay City, Michigan, to live with his oldest brother [until at] the age of seventeen when he enlisted in the army and was sent to Europe in the First World War. Mother helped on Grandpa’s farm and later moved to Bay City and did housework for some of the lumber barons who had large estates.*

*They both enjoyed music and dancing and met during the “Big Band Era.” They were married in 1920 in Bay City. When they were getting married, my mother said to my father, “Joe, I don’t care where we live, but don’t buy a farm!”* My dad worked at Pete’s Packing Company and delivered meat to stores in the “Thumb” area.

*I have two brothers and two sisters. My brother Marion was a Navy pilot in the Second World War. He was killed at the age of 33 while testing one of the planes used for teaching cadets in Pensacola, Florida. My brother Leonard was in the Army division. My older sister Eugenia was better known as Gene and my older sister Edna was about six years younger.*

Joanne was educated at St. Stanislaus School, which was staffed by the Felician Sisters. When she began high school at the Felician Academy in Detroit, she said she had “every intention of becoming a Felician Sister.” She entered the Felician Novitiate in Lavonia, Michigan, in 1945, received her religious name, Sister Mary Roland, and following first profession in August 1947, was assigned to study full-time at Madonna College for a year.

By 1948, she had acquired her teaching certificate and was sent to Detroit to teach at Assumption School. This marked the beginning of Sister Joanne’s thirty years of teaching at eleven elementary schools, primarily in Michigan. Her only teaching assignment outside of Michigan was her year at St. Stanislaus School in Toledo, Ohio.
During the summer months she studied at Madonna University in Lavonia, Michigan, where she received her bachelor’s degree in social studies in 1955. Her graduate studies were at the University of Detroit, where she earned a master’s degree in administration in 1973.

The years between 1963 and 1973 marked a period of change. Sister Joanne wrote:

Something exciting was happening in the church. Many changes and renewals were taking place in religious congregations. I felt that standing still and not moving with the directives of Vatican II was not the way I wanted my life to go. I needed my mind and body to move together – to keep tuned with each other. So in the summer of 1972, Sister Jean Jesiolkowski and I met with Sister Rosemary Ferguson, Prioress of the Adrian Dominicans, and asked to be accepted into the Adrian Dominican Congregation. Letters, communications, permissions and preparations had to be taken care of through the two congregations and Rome.

Sister Rosemary [Ferguson] and her councilors went all out to make us welcome and knowledgeable of our new family. I will always be grateful for their efforts and love. I accepted the Adrian Dominicans as my community in the fall of 1973.

Joanne and Jeanne, now Adrian Dominicans, taught at Immaculate Heart School in Lansing, Michigan from 1973 to 1977. During their last year at Immaculate Heart School, the pastor of Holy Trinity Parish in Bay City, Michigan, invited them to come to his parish to direct the parish religious program. They accepted and ministered at the parish from 1977 to 2007, when they both retired.

In her autobiography, Sister Joanne wrote,

We lived on the parish grounds for thirty years and Father Bert let us stay there until we came into Adrian. In all those years we worked under seven pastors. We also worked with St. Hedwig¹.

When she and Jeanne retired in 2007, Father Bert, the pastor, wrote several articles in the parish bulletin.

With grateful hearts and warm wishes, we take time to honor Sr. Joanne Gwizdala and Sr. Jean Jeziolkowski as they step down from their service to Holy Trinity Parish and School. They have touched the hearts of countless parents and children through their dedicated and caring service to this faith community. We pray that God will continue to bless them as they move into their retirement years.

¹ Today Corpus Christi Parish in Bay City is the result of merging of Holy Trinity Church and St. Hedwig Church.
During the wake service, Sister Maria Goretti Browne, Vicaress of Holy Rosary Vicariate, said,

Several years ago Joanne became a “special Child of God.” In so many ways her memory failed her. She, a very independent person, had to become dependent on others. She remained her feisty self; that did not change. She loved to do word search puzzles, and almost daily one would see her pencil circling letters to make words. She also liked to do jigsaw puzzles and loved it when someone would come along and help her. Joanne, you will be – are already – missed. You made life on the Garden Level very interesting and kept the staff on their toes. You are now our special “Child of God.”

Sister Joanne Patricia Gwizdala died on August 19, 2016, at the age of eighty-nine.

Edna, her sister described her sister as a very happy person who came from a large family. She thanked the Sisters for their care and support for Joanne.

Joanne’s niece, Sue, spoke lovingly about her aunt’s firmness in her convections, her readiness to help and willingness to participate in many group activities.

Sister Joann Plumpe, pastoral minister at Corpus Christi Parish\(^2\), gave the homily during the funeral liturgy. She began by referring to one of the readings\(^3\) selected for the liturgy. She said:

\begin{quote}
Jesus knew that his death would leave his disciples devastated. So he spoke to them in reassuring terms. “In my house there are many dwelling places. And I go to prepare a place for you.” Jesus was trying to help his disciples understand that death is not the end of the story; rather it is the transition from life to another. A life filled with his presence where all are welcomed.
\end{quote}

Joanne clearly understood and believed this. She was known for reaching out to young and old alike. She was a loving companion to many children in the religious education program from pre-school to high school and when they were adults to some of her children’s children.

She was a faithful companion to Sister Jean Jeziolkowski. As one former staff member stated, “They made a great team.” She was a faithful companion and was so very proud of her own family members. Joanne exemplified how God provides for people – which Isaiah tells us.

\(^2\) Corpus Christi Parish includes Holy Trinity Campus and St. Hedwig Campus
\(^3\) Isaiah 25:6-10; 1John 3:102; John 14:1-6
One of Joanne’s favorite ways of greeting an individual was to address them as “Child of God.” Not a bad thing to be reminded of as St. John tells us in our second reading. John assures his readers since God sent his Son to us, we can all be called “children of God.” One parishioner told me if he received a phone call and the person on the other end started with “Child of God,” he knew he was going to be asked to do something. He also knew that he would be unable to say, “no” to Sister Joanne. In faith we believe Joanne is now hearing God say to her, “Welcome home, my child!”

Father Jim Hug, SJ, offered the following prayer during the liturgy:

May God bless us all with a full and generous share of Joanne’s
Gracious hospitality and gift for preparing God’s “rich food”
Love of family and strong, generous, and lasting friendships
Deep prayerfulness, inner peace and love of the Eucharist
Dedicated in nurturing the life of her faith communities.

God, Who has destroyed death and wipes away the tears from all faces
Jesus, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and
the Holy Spirit, Who is uniting all Children of God into one loving family.

Left: Sisters Joanne Patricia Gwizdala, Magdelaine Hill, and Jean Jeziolkowski. Right: As Sister Mary Ronald, CSSF.
Left: Sister Genevieve Jeziolkowski, Associate Carolyn Jeziolkowski, and Sister Joanne Patricia. Right: Sitting with her mother (Ann), father (Joseph), and brothers and sisters.

Right: Pictured with her family, from left to right, Eugenia, Leonard, Marian, and Joanne – sister Edna not born yet.

Sister Joanne Patricia sitting with her sisters, Eugenia Balwinski (standing) and Edna Kubiak (sitting, left) in 2010.