Sister Mary Schmagner was in first grade at St. Philip Neri School in Chicago when a Dominican priest visited her class to tell the children about being a missionary in China. It so inspired the little girl that not only was she ready right then to become a missionary and go to China, but she even wrote a composition for class stating, "The Navy says, ‘Join the Navy and see the world.’ I say, ‘Join the Dominicans and save the world.’"

Her zeal only lasted until second grade, however, because at that point she discovered boys and "there was no more thought of religious life until my senior year at Aquinas," she wrote in her life story.

Mary Elizabeth Schmagner was born in Chicago on August 15, 1930, to John and Elizabeth (Sorauf) Schmagner. John was born in Hurley, Wisconsin, of German immigrant parents, while Betty came from Ironwood, Michigan, the child of immigrants from Trieste (which today is part of Italy). The two married in Chicago and settled on the city's South Side in St. Laurence Parish; three years later, Mary, who was to be their only child, was born.

"Ours was a happy home," Sister Mary wrote. "Since there were no siblings to rub off the raw edges, my parents supplied a formation with love and discipline to prepare me for life's challenges. I like to think of myself as SPOILED with love but unselfish."

"Example is the most powerful teacher," she wrote next, and she certainly had fine examples in her parents. John, a World War I veteran who helped countless other vets as a commander in the American Legion, was active in the parish and helped found the Legion of St. Dominic in Chicago to help the Adrian Dominican Sisters in the city. Betty was active in the Women's Club, enjoyed helping others, and often played piano for the family and their guests. "Warm hospitality and fun were always present in our home," Sister Mary wrote.

The family traveled every summer to northern Wisconsin where John, a master craftsman, had built a cottage on Stone Lake. It may well be there that Sister Mary's artistic eye began to develop, for she refers in her life story to seeing "Nature as designer" first-hand there.

When it was time for kindergarten, the Schmagners' "favorite and only child," as she put it, went to St. Philip Neri School, given permission by the pastor of St. Laurence to enroll there instead of at St. Laurence because of the dangerous street crossings that would have been involved. Sister Mary spent her entire elementary education at St. Philip Neri, and greatly loved school and the Adrian Dominican Sisters who were her teachers.

At the same time, where her parents were concerned, "nothing was too good for the Sisters!" she wrote. John used his carpentry skills on the weekends to build items such as bookcases and Nativity cribs for them, and drove them where they needed to go – "chocolate sodas included."

Sister Mary did not have to travel far for high school, attending the Congregation-operated Aquinas High School adjacent to St. Philip Neri. She was active in school and social activities and formed many lasting friendships there. In her senior year, there were "rumors abundant regarding who was entering" the Congregation. "Not I, Lord, for sure!"
Clearly, the Lord had different ideas. One day after school, she stopped at Sister Ellen Loretto Harmon’s classroom as Sister was teaching crafts to a disabled student, and Mary and Ellen Loretto visited for a time. “I found myself expressing gratitude for the Creator’s goodness to me and my desire to reciprocate by offering my life in a special way. The MYSTERY of it all!” she wrote.

Her parents, though they were mystified by it as well, readily gave their assent, and Sister Mary entered the community in June 1948. She received the habit and her religious name, Sister John Elizabeth, that December.

After her canonical year, she was assigned to Presentation School in Detroit in January 1950, and was there until the end of the 1952-53 school year. From there she was sent to St. Luke School, Flint, Michigan (1953-55), earning her bachelor’s degree in English from Siena Heights College (University) during her time there, and then to St. James School, Miami, Florida (1955-61), where she taught at both the elementary and high school level. She completed her master’s degree in English at Barry College (University) in Miami Shores, Florida, while she was at St. James.

In 1961, she was missioned to Rosarian Academy in West Palm Beach, Florida, and then, the next school year, she was appointed superior and principal at Escuela Parroquial in San Juan de la Maguana in the Dominican Republic.

Those six years “were among the hardest and happiest in my life,” she wrote. “It was a real immersion experience, believe me. And a FAITH one – I went with a heart full of love but with little preparation in language and otherwise.” But six years later when her term as superior was up and she returned to the States, “I had worse culture shock than when I went to Santo Domingo. Life lessons (invaluable) had been learned – I am so grateful.”

Her next major challenge came with her very next ministry, as she was appointed Vicaress of the St. Rose of Lima Province. The beginning of her term, 1968, coincided with the beginning of the Congregation’s Chapter of Renewal, and in her two years in office she signed the paperwork for many friends who left the community.

In 1970, the pastor of Holy Family Parish in St. Petersburg, Florida, asked her to become a pastoral associate there and create her own ministry. That appealed to her, she wrote, and fit in with the "signs of the times." It was perhaps the first such program in the state and one she continued at St. Jude Cathedral, also in St. Petersburg, from 1971 to 1978.

What she described as a “joyous” ministry included home and hospital visitation, crisis advocacy, counseling, facilitating a variety of support groups, and much more. Along the way, she studied pastoral ministry and related fields at several institutions and earned her certification in pastoral counseling.

A sabbatical year taken in part to be closer to her aging parents opened a whole new door for her. She had previously taken an evening pottery class and discovered she loved being creative, and now was able to pursue that more fully at a studio in Sarasota, Florida, and at Loretto Heights College.

She then went to work as an employment counselor at Snelling and Snelling in Sarasota for just under a year and a half (September 1979-January 1981) and then, in July 1981, became a counselor/case manager at Senior Friendship Centers, also in Sarasota. “It is most rewarding to assist others to self-actualize and help themselves when possible, to establish realistic goals and affirm their value,” she wrote.
Sister Mary ministered there until mid-2002, at which point she retired from active ministry but continued to live in Sarasota until 2015, when she moved to Casa Maria retirement center in West Palm Beach, Florida, for several months until returning to Adrian to live in December 2015. She died at the Dominican Life Center on August 12, 2019, aged eighty-eight and in her seventieth year of religious profession.

Among the stories Sister Rosemary Asaro, Holy Rosary Chapter Assistant, told the assembly in her eulogy for Sister Mary was of the way several years earlier that Sister Mary had answered the question “What are your hopes for the future?” The answer was:

*Today I continue to have gratitude and joy for what is and what will be. To be in concert with my Adrian Dominican Sisters is a privilege and a process. As a Congregation we have always been prophets and trail blazers fired into action through prayer, contemplation and study. With Dominic’s legacy we go into the future together with hope and bravery. Looking back we have accomplished so much; looking ahead, we know there are more mountains to climb and dreams in the making.*

“We thank you for sharing yourself so generously with us, for your example of graciousness, for reminding us that ‘the other’ is more important than ‘the me,’” Sister Rosemary said.

Sister Carleen Maly preached the homily for Sister Mary’s funeral Mass. Reflecting on the Gospel passage selected for the Mass (Matthew 25:31-40), she said:

*As I prayed with this Gospel passage … I was reading her autobiography. I was touched and in awe by the first words describing her parents, John and Elizabeth. Mary said, “My parents showed deep faith through actions.” … There it was: they lived the Gospel: “What you have done for them, you have done for me.” Mary grew up learning to show her faith through actions in selfless service.*

*… Throughout her life Mary’s giving heart has been filled with joy and generosity, deep, deep faith and love for her Creator, overflowing into action. Her spirit was filled with graciousness – always other-centered and inclusive. “What you have done for them you have done for me.”*

*… And Jesus said, “Mary, I say to you, what you have done for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine you did for me. Come now and rest in me.”*
Right: Sister John Elizabeth (Sister Mary) as a novice, 1949

From left: Sisters Susanne Hofweber, left, and Mary Schmagner, right, with a Red Cross nurse, leave the troop carrier Wood County at the Port of Cataño, Puerto Rico, during an evacuation of the Dominican Republic, 1965. Sisters Carol Coston, left, and Mary Schmagner with Sister Mary’s parents
From left: Sister Mary Schmagner and her parents pose with people from San Juan de la Maguana, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, where Sister Mary was ministering. Sister Mary and Father Brendan Lawler celebrate Sister Mary’s Golden Jubilee, February 15, 1998. Sister Mary worked in Father Brendan’s parish for six years.

Right: Sister Mary, seated, celebrates with friends and co-workers at Senior Fellowship Center, Sarasota, Florida, July 1997.
From left: Sisters Carol Coston, left, and Mary Schmagner at Santuario Sisterfarm, an ecological center in Bourne, Texas. Members of Sister Mary’s Mission Group are, from left, Sisters Mary E. Waldron, Joseph Eilese Hukle, Arlene Scott, M. Joan Loeffler, Grace Henneberry, Carol Jean McDonnell, and Catherine O’Brien.

Right: Members of the 2008 Diamond Jubilee Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Nora Brady, Marie Geraldine Brownell, Celestine Dunne, Alice Riegel, Patricia Wiley, John Norton Barrett, Mary Schmagner, and Therese DeCanio, and front row, from left, Sisters Mary Helen Mack, Joan Sopha, Mary E. Quinn, Dorothy Thielk, Margaret Urban, Patricia Ann Hurley, Marion O’Connor, and Judith Mary Singer.