

## **Sister Lillian Yurksaitis, OSF**

Born: February 20, 1932

Entered our community: September 8, 1954

Returned to God: October 3, 2021

Lillian Patricia Yurksaitis, daughter of Catherine Miller and Joseph Yurksaitis was born on February 20, 1932. Her parents had seven children but the two oldest, Catherine and Joseph died as infants. In her autobiography, Lillian wrote of the advantage of being the only girl with four loving brothers who helped her to become the tomboy that she was. Her favorite brother Vinny was born seven years after Lillian and she loved taking him with her on her escapades, climbing trees, playing baseball, and roller-skating in the summer and ice-skating in the winter. Even in these last few months, Lilly spoke frequently about her phone conversations with Vinny and what a great support they were to her in the difficult times with her knee surgeries and her time at Westminster.

Reading Lillian's autobiography several things shine throughout – she loved her family – grandparents who spoiled her with trips to the park and wonderful apple pancakes. She loved both her parents – her mother Catherine with whom she went to Sunday Vespers for the peace and quiet and who spoke of once wanting to become a nun. However, her mom advised Lillian to wait until she was 22 to make a final decision about entering the convent. Lillian wrote so lovingly about her gentle father Joseph who taught her to swim and made Lilly the “best scooter ever” made from a wooden egg crate with roller-skate runners! It must have been a wonderful childhood!

Although her autobiography is lighthearted, Lilly also spoke of the hardships of living in the Depression, having her brothers serve in World War II and contracting Scarlet Fever when she was just seven, which resulted in permanent hearing loss. These events made a big impression on this little girl but she felt safe in her parents' care.

Lillian wrote that going to public schools did not affect her so much since most of her teachers were Catholic and she remembered that during Lent many of them went to daily Mass at the “Irish” church next to their public school playground. However, after high school when she spoke with the assistant pastor about her vocation, he introduced her to our Sister Innocenta who spent time explaining the life of St. Francis of Assisi. Lillian said it was that meeting with Sister Innocenta and then the wonderful apple pie Sister Rita made to welcome her to the convent that convinced her religious life was where she would come to know God.

On September 8, 1954, the Marian Year of the Church, Lillian entered our community and received the name Sister Mary Kateri – the **Lily** of the Mohawks as she would joke. After three years in formation Sister Kateri was assigned to teach first graders at Holy Trinity in Moon Run. The next seven years were spent teaching 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Soon after Vatican II Sister Kateri returned to her baptismal name and became Sister Lillian. In 1965 when she was just 33 years old, she was asked to go to Brazil to teach English as a second language. She was up for the challenge and loved the three years she spent in Brazil. She mastered the Portuguese language and continued to be able to communicate with our Brazilian sisters when they would come to the motherhouse for meetings.

Returning to the States, Sister Lillian taught primary grade students for the next 20 years with a year as infirmary aide and laundress in the middle! She often spoke of the poverty she saw in Brazil and her desire to serve the poor in some way and so it was that she began volunteering at Bethlehem Haven an overnight shelter in downtown Pittsburgh. Later she also volunteered at a women's shelter in Wilmington Delaware, feeling that these women had more to teach her about life than she had to offer them.

In the remarks made at the celebration of Sister Lillian's 50<sup>th</sup> Jubilee, the following is noted: "Sister Lillian shares that her most satisfying ministry as a religious has been with the poor. While studying to be a chaplain she worked at the Jersey City Medical Center, in New Jersey. The Medical Center is known for taking indigent patients who were refused care by other medical facilities. Her chaplaincy duties ranged from spiritual care of patients in intensive care and the emergency room, working with persons with AIDS and assisting with financial problems. This ministry showed her the suffering face of Christ while she was able to show them the compassionate face of our loving God."

In 1994 Sister Lillian returned to the motherhouse to serve as Assistant to the Assisi Hall Director and to do many motherhouse services such as transportation coordinator, driver and postal clerk. She also became very adept with computer skills, especially banner making. Every motherhouse celebration would have her famous wall-long banner announcing the day!

In 2014 Sister Lillian was among the first sisters missioned to the Presbyterian SeniorCare Assisted Living facility, Westminster Place. After a knee replacement, she suffered a severe infection which caused the removal of the replacement and a period of time before she could begin to walk again with the new replacement. Sisters were edified by her pleasant acceptance of this very difficult period in her life.

It is interesting how we all have favorite words and expressions that serve us so well. All of us know that Lilly loved to say "FANTASTIC!" We know that this time in her life was NOT fantastic but she managed to make it so. Fiercely independent through most of her life, she now experienced total dependence on sisters and staff for her every need. Yet she was able to say, everything is fine and I am okay!

It was a shock to receive a call from St. Margaret Hospital Saturday morning that Sister Lillian was in the Emergency Room and was unresponsive with a very low blood pressure. She had been to Mass at Westminster on the previous Tuesday and Sisters who visited and called her that week found her happy and in good spirits. So being with her in the hospital with the doctors telling us that she was very low and would probably die within a short period of time was difficult to hear. We all knew Lilly would do it "her way" so we were pleased that, within several hours after she had been anointed, God called our Sister Lillian to her eternal reward.

We believe Sister Lillian would have been pleased that we chose St. Clare's words for this reflection. We will carry our memories of this feisty sister who gave herself totally to God as a faithful Franciscan woman. We give thanks for her dedication, her many years as a teacher and her service to the poor and our community. May she spend her eternity walking in the presence of her God.

Eternal rest grant unto her O Lord, may she rest in peace.