

Sisters of St. Francis

o f M a r y I m m a c u l a t e

Late Saturday night, September 6, 2025, Sister Helen Zulka went home to God from her residence at Villa Franciscan Place. At almost 98 years of age, Helen leaves a legacy of uniqueness. Even her last place position in an alphabetical listing of community members was prominently perpetual. After all, who could follow Zu...!

When Helen was born in Toledo, Ohio, on November 24, 1927, to John and Helen, she was embarking on a long journey that would include interactions with two brothers, many cousins and friends, broad education in a variety of fields, ministries of educating and caring for others, and endless efforts to make others laugh.

After graduating from Central Catholic High School in Toledo in 1945, Helen came to the College of St. Francis in Joliet, Illinois. In her junior year, she was drawn to the sisters there and, after at first fighting the idea, she joined the Joliet Franciscan community just before turning twenty-one. The BA she received in 1949 from CSF was followed by studies at the Institute of Gerontology in Ann Arbor, Michigan. These studies would serve her well in a later ministry after years of teaching. But Helen wasn't finished with her education, as schools in Indiana, Wisconsin and Florida can testify.

Known then as Sister John Edward, Helen returned to Ohio to begin her teaching career. After teaching third grade in Mansfield and Worthington, she began a 20 year experience in secondary education (1955-1975) in Ohio, Illinois and Florida. She especially enjoyed teaching art and home economics classes, among a variety of subjects.

Alleluia!



Sister Helen Zulka, OSF

Teaching in schools was followed by pastoral ministry, religious education in parishes, advocacy for the elderly and bereavement counseling. Reaching out to residents in nursing homes was something Sister Helen (nicknamed "Helcha" by her community members) loved to do. She always had time for people. Some years ago, a sister was teaching adults in a parish in Arizona and a winter visitor from Ohio, when learning she was a Joliet Franciscan, asked her if she knew Sister Helen. It turned out that his first wife had died of cancer in a facility in Ohio where Helen was a hospice chaplain. He deeply appreciated her support and care and wanted to continue to be in touch with her.

Looking back on her vocation, during an interview in 1981, Helen reflected on what drew her to the Franciscan Sisters in spite of her reluctance. She became friends with them while in college and this helped her to realize that sisters are women first, then Christians, then sisters. "I could see their life as something human," she said. "I was caught up with their sense of humor and could feel their Franciscan joy." A sense of humor was something Helen appreciated because she had it too. She often sought to make people laugh. Her technique

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was to tell stories with a straight face so you didn't know if what she was saying was true. "At times you would take her seriously only to find out she was pulling your leg," said a sister who knew her well.

Even her writing could be humorous. It is customary, when a sister is preparing to celebrate her Jubilee, for her to be asked to write a brief autobiographical piece that can be sent to newspapers in cities where she has ministered. Responding to the archivist's request, Helen wrote, "Well Marian, what a life's review...all on a ½ sheet of paper." She added a note to Marian at the end of her submission: "I see this as a way of advertising vocations... 'Hey, look, we're still operating.' And it's part of the history of the Church. Not an ego trip."

Whether as a teacher, a pastoral minister, a crisis line volunteer, or an advocate for the elderly, Helen loved to sit and chat with people. Even when her aging moved her to a ministry of presence, she could be seen parking herself at the entrance to her assisted living residence so she could meet and greet any visitors who came and went. Helen had a listening ear and a helping presence. A sister, whose own blood sister was a member of the community for a while, remembers the friendship Helen and her sister had. When this woman left the Joliet Franciscans, her sister who remained was inconsolable. Helen helped her through that very difficult time.

On the Joliet Franciscans' website, a daily prayer is published. On the day Sister Helen died, the prayer said, "God, fill me with positive ways of looking at things so that I won't be overwhelmed by the scary. Show me how to rise above what threatens my peace." When Helen felt the call to religious life and found it scary, she looked to the women she would be joining and saw their humanness and their joy. She rose above her fear and met the calling with her own strengths: a helping heart, a listening ear, a sense of humor, and spirit of prayer.

Dear Helcha, as you meet the God who helped to raise you above your fears, our gratitude for your life accompanies you. Alleluia! Alleluia!

**Alleluia Letter written by
Sister Karen Berry, OSF**

Sister Helen Zulka, OSF
November 24, 1927—September 6, 2025

<i>Born:</i>	November 24, 1927
<i>Parents:</i>	John Zulka and Helen Karnikowski
<i>Postulancy:</i>	September 6, 1948
<i>Novitiate:</i>	August 12, 1949
<i>First Profession:</i>	August 12, 1951
<i>Final Profession:</i>	August 13, 1954
<i>Entered New Life:</i>	September 6, 2025

Ministry History

1951-1953	Teacher: Grade 3-4, St. Peter, Mansfield, Ohio
1953-1955	Teacher: Grade 4, St. Michael, Worthington, Ohio
1955-1960	Teacher: Religion, English, Library, Foods, World History, Art, Library, Diocesan Voc. Rep., Christian Family Living, St. Procop High, Cleveland, Ohio
1960-1962	Teacher: Religion, English, Guidance, Typing, Home Arts, Ss Peter and Paul, Chicago, Illinois
1963-1964	Teacher: Home Ec., Art, Typing, Marybrook Academy, Maumee, Ohio
1964-1975	Teacher: Art, Home Ec., English, Handmaids of Altar, Cardinal Gibbons High, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida
1975-1976	Teacher: Home Ec., St. Francis, Joliet, Illinois
1976	Activities, Visiting, Our Lady of Angeles, Joliet, Illinois
1976-1978	Catholic Service Director, Catholic Social Service, Toledo, Ohio
1978-1979	Pastoral Minister to Aged, St. Joseph, Dover, Ohio
1979-1980	Searching Ministry, St. Peter, Mansfield, Ohio
1980-1982	Parish Minister, Catholic Of Immaculate Conception, Fort Wayne, Indiana
1982-1986	Pastoral Associate, Catholic Of Immaculate Conception, Fort Wayne, Indiana
1986-1988	Coordinator—CCD, St. Alphonsus, Lemont, Illinois
1988-1989	Pastoral Associate, St. Monica, Mishawaka, Indiana
1989-1991	DRE/RCIA Director, St. Monica, Mishawaka, Indiana
1991-1993	RCIA Director, St. Monica, Mishawaka, Indiana
1995-1996	Hospice Chaplain, William and Fulton Counties, Bryan, Ohio
1996-1997	Bereavement Coordinator, Hospice Care of Williams County, Bryan, Ohio
1997-2000	Volunteer: Residence, QUADCO, Bryan, Ohio
2000-2005	Volunteer, Joliet, Illinois
2005-2016	Stamp Coordinator, Hospice House Greeter, Joliet, Illinois
2016-2020	Stamp Coordinator, Our Lady of Angels, Joliet, Illinois
2020-2022	OLA Presence, Our Lady of Angeles, Joliet, Illinois
2023-2025	Ministry of Presence and Prayer, Villa Franciscan, Joliet, Illinois

<i>Interment:</i>	Resurrection Cemetery, Romeoville, Illinois
<i>Predeceased by:</i>	Her parents, John Zelka and Helen Karnikowski and brothers John and Edward Zulka
<i>Survived by:</i>	Many devoted cousins and friends

Rest in Peace, Sister Helen!