

The Life of Sister Francine Mc Donald

By Sister Francine

I was born in Grand Rapids Michigan to Nina and Walter McDonald, on April 17, 1930. I was the youngest of 15 children; the first 13 were boys and the last two were girls. My parents lost 4 babies including my older sister. My parents were married in Chicago and lived with my paternal grandparents who came from Ireland. My Mom converted to Catholicism when they were married. When my oldest brother was about 5, my grandmother took him to Vespers. During Benediction, Grandma whispered to Jim, "That's Jesus up there and you can ask Him for anything you want," so he asked for a bike. When this was told to my Mom, she was furious as they couldn't even afford to feed an extra mouse, so where would they get the money to buy a bike. She scolded Grandma for telling him this. A few days later there was a knock on the door. A man said, "Lady do you want this bike?" My Mom said that was sure a wakeup call from the Lord saying, "Now do you believe?" After my 6th brother was born the family moved to a farm in Grand Rapids as my Mom was afraid my brothers would grow to be another Al Capone.

Being the youngest of 15, my oldest brother was 28 years older than me. He was married before I was born and had a girl. Her mother died when she was 1 years old so they came to live with us. Even after my brother remarried, she still stayed with us until she was about 10. **Birdie** was the sister I never had. We remained very close until her death.

The first love of my life were the horses. This was in the days before we had a tractor. Even before I went to school, I would ask my Mom if it was time and if she said yes, I would run to the field where my brother was working with the team. He would put me on the broad back of one of the horses so I could ride in. I really thought those knobs above the collar of the harness were put there just for me so I could hang on. I was in my glory and life was so sweet.

Then came the dreadful day when I had to start school and my carefree days were over! Of course, we attended Catholic Schools. I was taught by 3 different groups of Sisters: the Franciscans, the Dominicans and the Notre Dames in grades 1-12. My favorite were the Franciscans.

While growing up, my brothers had the patience of Job in allowing their kid sister to tag along. It made no difference if it were swimming, skating, tobogganing or the movies, I soon learned the power of water: all I had to do was cry, and they would relent and say, "Oh, all right you can come." Growing up with all these boys, I thought I was the queen. At about the age of 17 my Mother dethroned me fast. I soon learned you never sassed her back, nor did you tell her "No" if she thought you should do it. She would take all kinds of teasing, but not any disrespect. My brothers were different, they carried me on a silver platter; and after I entered the convent the platter went higher.

I was the closest to my brother Frank as he was 4 years older than me. As a teenager my Mom asked him why he was so good to me, and he replied, "Ma, she is the only sister I have." It was through him that I saw so much of the West sight-seeing and visiting relatives.

My Dad would often ask me if I wouldn't like to be a Sister. I would reply "Did you ever see one riding down the street on a horse?" He would reply, "Of course not!" Well, case closed. Even though I liked the Franciscans, I wasn't ready to make a commitment to join them. I loved my horse and the farm work. Even after high school I worked on the farm for 3 years.

Then came the turning point in my life. My Dad died suddenly in September. He must have done some fast talking to the Lord as I knew I wanted to enter in October. St. Francis was calling me. I told my Mom of my decision but didn't tell my brothers. She told them. They were shocked and replied, "She won't last 2 weeks." When Mom told me that, I was determined to stay 3 weeks even if it killed me.

I was still in the Novitiate in 1954 when my Mom lost her first leg. Of course, I wasn't allowed to go home. Then in 1955 a tornado hit the house and barn. The chair she was sitting in was embedded with glass, but not a scratch was on her. She thought for sure she was going to see her Lord. She had fire insurance, but not wind. That meant rebuilding again from scratch. She was a woman of strong faith.

I taught school in various states for 44 years. In the fall of 1997, I knew it would be my last year of teaching. I couldn't hear the children. I had 27 students that year, and I had to get right in their faces to hear them. I knew I had to retire.

Time has taken its toll on all of us. All my brothers are gone, but I have tons of nieces and nephews. I guess that happens when your Mom thinks she is Abraham and her descendants shall be as numerous as the sands on the shore of the sea. God has blessed me with good health, even through two bouts of cancer. Those 3 weeks that I was determined to stay has now extended to over 75 years. My Dad got his wish; his girl became a Sister. God is so good.

Had her father lived several more years, he would have seen a nun riding across an open field in full habit...and it would have been his little girl...Sr. Francine. The Allen family lived kitty-corner from St. Michael's church and school. The Allen girls had horses, and one afternoon while riding down the road, Sister asked if she could ride. Reluctantly, one let her ride. To their surprise, she jumped up on the horse and galloped across the field in full habit! Periodically, they would stop by to let her ride again.

She was one of five postulants when she entered. Trudy Comba and Sr. Francine were extremely close. When Trudy decided to leave religious life, it broke Sr. Francine's heart. In those days, you didn't keep in touch with someone who left. Years later another member of their group who had left organized a reunion of former sisters. Trudy came, and she and Sr. Francine picked up where they left off years before.

After the reunion, Trudy invited Sr. Francine to come to Hawaii where she ran a bed and breakfast. So off went Sister...and her dear companion, Sr. Joan of Arc. That was the beginning of 12 trips across the Pacific to spend glorious times in the tropics sight-seeing and reminiscing. They even survived an earthquake on one trip!

Trudy also took Sr. Francine to the Holy Land, which was one of the most precious and meaningful trips of all, followed by the trip to Ireland where they rented a car and toured the entire Isle of Green. She even kissed the Blarney Stone! The threesome had ship tours to Alaska and the northeastern part of the USA. They were women on the go.

Sister taught for 44 years in various Catholic schools. One of her favorite activities with the class was to hatch chickens. She experienced more joy in watching the children watch the eggs hatch and the chicks to grow.

Many a dinner we had lessons on various types of chickens, which ones lay eggs, why they were banded, and when it was time...well...to be part of a dinner!

After retiring from teaching, she volunteered at our Spirit and Life Center helping in the kitchen. She, Mimi, and Johannah would make meals for the retreatants while enjoying each other's company. As you heard, Sister was Irish and German. Once you put her in the kitchen...she was Lithuanian-Irish. She made the best Osukis (fried cookies), Kugelis, cold beet soup and potato pancakes. Two of her specialties were any kind of soups and macaroons! She was like her mother: "I'll read the recipe, and do as please." And she always pleased!

Sister's sense of humor and shining blue-eyes attracted people to her as did her dear friend, Sr. Joan of Arc. They attracted a woman at Aldi's one day shopping, and thus "The Other Francine" came into their lives and has been a dear friend and benefactor ever since.

Family was very important to her. She kept in touch with most of her 40+ nieces and nephews...and many in the next generation. It was always a delight when they would come to the Motherhouse or Nativity for visits...laughter and storytelling was a constant. Her family extended and included Sr. Joan of Arc's siblings and nieces and nephews whom she enjoyed visiting. She delighted in all of them.

Her fellow teachers and school parents have kept in touch with her over the years. Just a few weeks ago, a group of teachers from Holy Trinity School came to spend time and share stories and laugh at all of their shenanigans. She was loved by so many!

Sr. Francine was a very spiritual woman. She often was in the chapel for adoration. She and her dear friend, Sr. Joan of Arc would pray the rosary in the afternoons. After Sr. Joan of Arc died, Sr. Francine would spend every warm afternoon on the porch swing praying and in cold weather in our chapel. Her faith was deep!

Up until her final days, she would be praying the Office the rosary.

The biggest compliment that Sister received was from Brenda, the Hospice nurse who stated: "I have never witnessed such a spiritual death."

God is so good! Yes, very good!! Rest in peace, my dear Sister.