Sister Frances B. O’Connor, CSC

(Sister M. Francis Bernard)
June 20, 1929 – May 21, 2026

These memories were lovingly prepared and written by Sister Joy O’Grady, CSC, who read them at Sister Frances’ funeral on May 28, 2026.

So much has been written about the life and accomplishments of Sister M. Frances Bernard O’Connor, and we have access to so many of her own words, it is a challenge to briefly capture the vast wealth of her many achievements.

I have known Frances as a legend in our Congregation, an advocate and model for speaking powerfully for women’s rights and dignity in a male-dominated Church and society.

I have known her as the superior general of the Congregation, a woman with vision, daring, fearlessness in speaking truth to power, and passion for encouraging and challenging the young women in the Congregation toward prophetic leadership.

I have known Frances as one who, at times, enjoyed praise and recognition for her efforts to support and uplift the poorest amongst us and women of global cultures, and I have known her as a woman who, at times, humbly endured harsh criticisms and negative labels.

Archives tell us that Sister Frances Bernard, (Alice O’Connor), knew as a young girl growing up in Detroit, Michigan, that she wanted to be a nun and serve in missions abroad.

Growing up as the fourth child in a family of 10 and having two sisters who were Sisters of the Holy Cross, I dare say, gave Frances a sneak preview of the joys and challenges, the give and take of living community life.

Frances' father, Francis Bernard O'Connor, worked at Michigan Bell Telephone Co. and her mother, Clara, worked at Montgomery Ward Department Store only after the last of the 10 children left the house.

After joining Holy Cross and completing her bachelor's in history at Saint Mary's College and master's in Indian History from the University of Chicago, Frances was able to realize her dream and was missioned to Bangladesh (East Pakistan) where she spent 20 years as teacher, administrator and principal in our various ministries in Dhaka. Between the years of 1973 and 1989, Frances served in various ministries as general councilor, superior of the apostolate abroad, and superior general of the Congregation.

Serving in these roles, Frances' intimacy with and passion for the global ministries of the Congregation — uplifting the poor, especially women and children, speaking out against the injustices of patriarchy, and courageously addressing the abuses of discrimination and inequality among the haves and have-nots — only broadened and strengthened her vision and conviction.

Frances had a strong mind, a firm will and a beautiful strength in her presence.

Her leadership was not about always having the answer as much as it was about having the courage to act for justice, the authenticity to say what she thought, be who she was, think critically, project a vision, show humility in her mistakes, and always be ready to learn.

Regarded as an effective businesswoman amongst her colleagues, she was also regarded as a woman of warmth and generosity. Sisters have many personal stories of Frances calling them forth with encouragement and shared wisdom. Her classes at Andre Place, Holy Cross Village, were always filled and often had a waiting

list. Her adult students, many of whom were retired professionals, affectionately described her as the “challenging nun” with a listening heart who loved getting a good rise out of her students.

Her studies and research at the Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies at Notre Dame, 1990 to 1997, led to a three-year research project interviewing Catholic women in Bangladesh, Africa, Brazil and the United States. The face-to face interviews, conducted in collaboration with her colleague and close friend, Becky Drury, documented the plight of women on four continents and culminated in the writing and publication of her book: *Like Bread, Their Voices Rise!: Global Women Challenge the Church*, published in 1993.

Frances also penned and published: *The Female Face in Patriarchy*, and a video: *Crumbs from the Table*.

From 1994 to 2010, Frances was a Hesburgh Scholar, giving lectures throughout the country.

Frances’ leadership and courageous voice have been recognized with many awards too many to list, but I would like to mention four particularly close to her passions:

The YWCA President’s Award, which she received along with Eunice Kennedy Shriver, 1991; The Alumni Achievement Award from Saint Mary’s College, her alma mater, 1992; Prophetic Voices Award from the Women’s Ordination Conference, 1993; and the Sagamore of the Wabash Award for inspired leadership in 2000.

Friendship may be one of the greatest accomplishments any of us can achieve, and yet one that usually does not receive a public award. I want to say a word about Frances’ friendship with Becky Drury and with the Congregation of sisters she so dearly loved. I think this quote from William Arthur Ward is apropos. “A true friend

knows your weaknesses but shows you your strengths; feels your fears but fortifies your faith; sees your anxieties but frees your spirit; recognizes your disabilities but emphasizes your possibilities."

The best way I know to conclude this memento is to share some of Frances' own words about herself and life:

"I took office as Superior General in 1984, long after our beginning and far from where we are today. As a history major, I have always been drawn to what we can learn from the prophetic voices that have come before us. Confucius said, 'Study the past if you would define the future.' Kierkegaard warned, 'Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.' And the Buddha prophesied, "No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path."

You have walked the path well, Frances, and empowered many along the way. You have sought to evoke a consciousness and response alternative to that of the dominant culture around us.

I will end with the words Frances used to end the acknowledgement section of her book *Like Bread Their Voices Rise*. Quoting Peter 1:2 "We are God's chosen people, we are a cherished gender, we are a royal priesthood!" May women everywhere continue to rise up and claim their future!

Thank you for sharing the gift of your life with us, Frances. Thank you for always calling us forward, for being our sister, our challenger, our teacher, our friend.

Rest in peace.