

Reflection on the Life of Sister Francine Hasenbein, OSB 1924-2011

Given by Sister Madeline Contorno, OSB, on the occasion of Sister Francine's funeral, August 30, 2011.

After a death, people return to us---not in body, of course, but in their essence. In death we see more clearly who people were in life. The pearl in the shell, so to speak. The buried treasure in the field of a lifetime. The great question in life for all of us: How do I give witness to the love of God for me, what life values will I instill in the hearts of those I leave behind?

Sister Francine has left behind a unique witness to God's love, and many precious values to cherish and integrate into our lives. How could I possibly capture the essence of her life, a life so well lived as a Benedictine and follower of Christ? I want to thank Father Marcus for the wonderful insights that he has already shared and that dovetail quite a bit with what I am about to say.

Our Community, her family, her friends---we each have a story to share about Sister Francine, and unique memories to treasure. We all need to share those stories with one another, now and in the months and years to come. I think Francine appointed me to this task today because she knew I've loved her, and she was right. My words will be inadequate for the task, but please hear the love behind them.

My story with Sister Francine began at John Carroll High, in 1968, where she was ministering as librarian during my senior year. I frequented the library in those years, and so was frequently helped by Francine as a teenager. I can see now that whether at John Carroll High, Southern Benedictine, St. Bernard Prep, Sacred Heart Elementary, Holy Family in Ensley, or here at the monastery, Francine loved library work. She was always involved with books, with history, with her family's genealogy, with archival work. In fact I just recently learned that she was the Community's first official archivist.

If her life were like a trunk of a tree, one ring of the tree would certainly be the love of learning and library science. I can see in retrospect that in her heart she always wanted to be at the service of learning, and her love of learning. Her quest was one for rootedness in history, in family, and in community, to find her stability and identity in God, to be rooted in Christ. She once wrote a poem, "The Old Oak Tree Speaks," describing an oak tree with roots deep in the soil, growing and gaining wisdom with each passing year, and witnessing the events going on all around it. In the poem I think she was describing herself, the tree planted by running streams, here at Sacred Heart Monastery.

Many years ago Francine was involved in an accident that gave me an opportunity to really get to know her. The story illustrates her fierce determination, or what some would say her stubborn streak. It was August 1979, and Sr. Francine was librarian at Sacred Heart Elementary here in town. She was determined to ride her bicycle to work each day to save on gas, not tie up a car, and get some exercise. I'm not sure the administrative team at the time liked the idea. Keep in mind she was probably around

55 at the time, and had never been that athletic. I happened to be the interim Infirmarian at the time.

About a week into her bicycling venture, she fell off the bike on the street close to the monastery entrance, and when the paramedics finally arrived, they were telling me she had a badly broken ankle. In the ambulance on the way to the hospital, she was pretty much in shock, but remained brave and cheerful even through the long hours in the emergency room where she was in obvious pain, reassuring me all the while that I didn't need to worry.

As I helped take care of her through the many months of rehab following her broken ankle surgery, I learned so much from her: about her early years, her family, her ability to roll with the punches. She spoke fondly of her carefree years before entering the convent when she worked at the War Department in Washington, D.C. and had good times with her friends. Entering at 24 years of age with several years of work experience under her belt, she was considered a late vocation at the time. But she was convinced that the work experience and being out on her own had been valuable to her lifelong vocation.

After her recovery from the broken ankle, Francine and I became lasting buddies. She never forgot my help and care, and certainly all of you know that she was a loyal friend. She would pray for you and your intentions without fail, send humorous handmade feast day cards, warmly greet you whenever she saw you, and listened "with the ear of her heart" to what was going on with you. We would often laugh about her escapades, and she seemed to accept her limitations and weaknesses with good humor and humility. Characteristically slow and one step behind everyone else, at heart she wanted to be a risk-taker and have a piece of the action.

And in so many ways she did have a piece of the action! St. Benedict teaches us "to make peace our aim and quest," and indeed peace and justice was one of the core values of her life. For some years she worked at Holy Family in Ensley, reaching out to the African-American community there; she tutored Hispanic children here in Cullman; she worked with and encouraged volunteers; she organized a "Lunch and Learn" program at the Cullman library; she assisted with the Adult Daycare Center; she recycled everything, perhaps a little more than necessary; she marched locally for peace; she gave to charities from her personal monthly budget; she kept abreast of the justice issues of the day. She was a "quiet radical"---radically simple and radically kind throughout her life.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention how much Francine loved her family. Born to a family with 16 children, she cared immensely about each family member's temporal and spiritual welfare. She had lost her twin sister at birth, and she herself was not expected to live. I think that early story of tragedy formed a keen awareness in her of "being her brother and sister's keeper," forging a great sense of responsibility for her family's well-being, and indeed the welfare of the entire human family.

No one could have loved or provided for her mother more tenderly than Sister Francine. As a young Sister, I was so impressed to see the sensitive care she gave her mother,

Mrs. Hasenbein. Every Sunday she brought her mother to Mass and lunch here at the monastery until Mrs. Hasenbein's death at 92 years of age. As the years went by, Francine often told me how hard it is when you are from a big family and must watch your siblings die one by one. She carried a lot of sorrow and grief in her heart, perhaps from her earliest memories.

And we all know of Francine's simplicity. She took almost literally the Gospel verse from Luke, "Do not worry about your life and what you will eat, or about your body, and what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing." Both Sister Francine and our Sister Fidelis, of happy memory, stand out in my mind as extraordinarily committed to Gospel poverty and simplicity. I think most of us would agree that what she wore and what she ate were really secondary to Sister Francine. The Prioress who gave her the name "Francine" certainly named her well, for the spirit of St. Francis imbued her life.

I feel the fruit of her simplicity was a deep prayerfulness, a gentleness of soul, and a certain playfulness of spirit. She was a contemplative among us. Often I would find her praying in her room or as she walked about the monastery. Even the neighbors took notice as she walked the monastery grounds and streets, rosary in hand. Some have commented that they felt blessed whenever she passed by. And she was always ready to convert anyone to Catholicism! I once witnessed her evangelistic fervor at the hospital, when from her sickbed she was convincing her nurses they needed to attend Mass sometime soon.

Sister Francine died the way she lived, with a sense of acceptance and courage. She decided to stop further cancer treatments when she received a poor prognosis, and entrusted her future to God instead. She wanted to stay active and a part of community life as long as she could. She wanted to die at Sacred Heart, and I am so grateful she did.

Like a tree planted by running streams, Francine gave witness to a life well lived as a Benedictine and a follower of Christ, embodying for all of us the treasures of faithfulness, prayerfulness, a desire for peace and justice, love of community, family, and church, a love of learning, humility, simplicity, kindness, and courage. We will all deeply miss her. I will remember her best on the feast of St. Francis or whenever I pray the words which in so many ways could sum up her life:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.