Sister Mary Frances Coleman
(1916 – 2014)

Sister Mary Frances Coleman was the first Adrian Dominican sister to die in the year 2014.

A study of her life reveals that, above all else, she was a woman of prayer, one who brought her troubles and needs to God. The dissertation that she wrote for her doctorate was on the mystics, as Sister Nadine Foley told the assembly at the wake. “She was excited about the mystics, especially Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Her enthusiasm was contagious, and I learned much from her.” Her love of prayer was also mentioned by Sister Jean Hughes.

On October 3, 1916, Mary Frances was the first child born to William and Josephine (Hedderman) Coleman of Chicago. As time went on, two sisters (Madlyn and Eleanor) and a brother (John) followed her into the family. Both parents were Catholic and immigrants from Ireland, William Coleman from Tipperary and Josephine Hedderman from County Clare. William Coleman worked on the Chicago surface lines and provided a good life for his family.

When it was time for school, the Colemans were living in St. Rita Parish and sent their children to the parish school. When the family moved into St. Nicholas of Tolentine Parish in 1925, Mary Frances finished her elementary years at St. Nicholas of Tolentine School. She completed eighth grade in 1930, and continued at St. Mary High School with the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs). In her autobiography she wrote, “I will be forever grateful to those women for the superior education I received from them.” She graduated in June 1934.

She was attracted to religious life, which is not surprising since she had four priest cousins and three cousins who were religious sisters, but at that time did nothing about it. Deciding to experience secular life, she found a job with a music publishing company. After several years, she made the decision to enter the Dominican Congregation at Adrian. She was also attracted to the BVMs; “but,” she wrote, “what helped make my decision was the white habit of St. Dominic. The Holy Spirit moves in colorful ways.”

On June 27, 1939, at the age of twenty-two, she became a postulant in Adrian. With her group, she received the habit and her religious name (Sister Mary Williamine) on January 4, 1940. On January 7, 1941, she professed her first vows.

Within a short time she was sent to St. Mary School in Rockwood, Michigan, where she taught until October 1942. At that time she was brought back to Adrian. After serving as a substitute teacher on the fifth and sixth grade level for a short time at St. Mary School in Adrian, she continued work on her degree at Siena Heights College (now University). In June 1943 the College conferred a bachelor’s degree upon her, with a major in commercial education and minors in Spanish, education, and philosophy.
She began her high school ministry in 1943 at Dominican High School in Detroit, where she spent a year teaching religion, teaching shorthand, typewriting, and Spanish. In the summer of 1944 she began work as a full-time student on a master’s degree at the Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and continued her studies until 1946 when she received her master’s degree with a major in Spanish and minor in education. She then started to work on a doctorate in the Romance languages. Her mother’s death in 1949 brought deep sorrow into her life, and also to her father and siblings.

During these years, besides study for her degrees, she was also involved in other work. She wrote:

*I worked with the Secretary General of the University in the Affiliation Office. Catholic high schools and colleges applying to become accredited with major accrediting agencies were eager to have Catholic University’s sign of approval first.*

At the wake, Sister Nadine Foley spoke more about Sister Mary Frances’s work in this office.

*At the same time [that she was studying], she was assigned by Mother Mary Gerald [Barry] to head the Affiliation Office. ... What it involved was correcting stacks of papers that came in from various schools. In 1946 I was assigned to help her. At that time I was also pursuing a degree. There was only one person in the office, Sister Mary Frances, and I was her assistant. We hired students to help us.*

*She had finished her course work and was working on her dissertation. Father Rubio, a Spanish priest, was directing her in her work on her dissertation. Father Rubio went back to Spain, and there was no one to direct her dissertation and she couldn’t complete it.*

Sister Mary Frances left the Catholic University in 1951, assigned to Colegio Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. There, she taught French, business subjects, and English and finished her work on her doctorate at the University of Santo Domingo. She received her doctorate in 1952 with a major in Spanish and minors in French and Italian. She remained at the Colegio for two years.

She then served for five years at Barry College (now University) in Miami, Florida, as a teacher of Spanish and business law. In 1958 she returned to Santo Domingo as principal/superior at the Colegio, as well as teacher of French and shorthand. In 1961 a return to Chicago was necessary, to attend her father’s funeral and to console her siblings.

When her successful term as principal at the Colegio was finished, Sister Mary Frances was brought back to the States and assigned to St. Dominic College in St. Charles, Illinois, to teach Spanish, English, and accounting. In 1966 she became Academic Dean of the college. When it closed in 1968, she returned to Adrian and served the Congregation as Director of Education for two years, after which she was again in Santo Domingo as Vicarress of Adrian Dominican Latin American Missions (ADLAM) for two years.
Sister Mary Frances was again in the States in 1972 and ministered for a year as Director of Ministry for St. Dominic Province, with its office in Hometown, Illinois. She spent the next year as a full-time student at St. Paul University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, studying theology and scripture. In 1974 she was in Rome for five months, doing research on St. Catherine of Siena, and she continued this work at the Motherhouse in Adrian for eight months.

In 1975, Sister Mary Frances returned to Illinois. All of her ministries from that time on were in Chicago. At Aquinas High School, she taught for a year and spent two years as treasurer and business manager. The year 1978 saw her as Associate Director of the Chicago Cluster of Theological Schools. She held this position for a year, then returned to Aquinas High School as teacher and office manager for four years.

When Aquinas High School closed in 1983, Sister Mary Frances became office manager at the Eighth Day Center, a position that she held for five years. In 1988 she asked for a sabbatical, which she spent as a full-time student at Mundelein College for nine months, resulting in a certificate in Christian spirituality. She then served the Archdiocese of Chicago as a secretary for almost a year.

In 1990 Sister Nona McGrail of OPUS asked her to do research on the history of the Dominican Order in the United States, and she spent much time in libraries. This research resulted in a paper recounting “[our Dominican brothers’] journey from Spain to Santo Domingo and up the coast to North America … between 1510 and 1526.” Her paper, entitled “A Prelude: Friars from Spain Preaching Justice,” became the first chapter of Dominicans in a Young Nation, a book on Dominican history that OPUS produced.

Sister Mary Frances was living in Carmen Marine, a building owned by HUD, and the tenants learned that if they became legally incorporated they could become owners of the building. They organized, became incorporated, obtained funds from the government, and bought the building. She wrote, “Our efforts have made it possible for low and moderate income people to live at Carmen Marine.” This was a six-year effort, which was rewarded by success in 1994.

Also in 1994, Sister Mary Frances was asked by the editor of the Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions to research the life and work of Raymond Breton, a French Dominican who ministered in the French West Indies from 1635 to 1651. This she did, and the paper she produced became a chapter in the book.

In 1995, she began ministering as a tutor at Grace House, a residence for women ex-offenders. She worked with those who wished to obtain a GED (General Education Diploma), which shows successful completion of a high school program. She returned to Adrian in 2002, and became a resident at the Dominican Life Center/Maria. After several years of struggle against sickness, God took her to eternity on January 13, 2014, at the age of ninety-seven.

A wake-remembrance service was held for Sister Mary Frances on January 17 in St. Catherine Chapel. Sister Maria Goretti Browne, Vicaress of Holy Rosary Mission Chapter, extended sympathy and summarized Sister’s life and ministry. She added:
Serious though she was, Sister Mary Frances always made time and space for fun — crackers, sardines, and play. Sister Cathryn Deutsch said that Sister had a “Dominican soul,” that she graced everyone she met, and that she was revered.

Sister Rose Ann Schlitt had lived with Sister Mary Frances in the Dominican Republic. She recounted four memories: that she had made her final vows to Sister in 1960, of the tumultuous time toward the end of the Trujillo regime in 1961, of Sister’s contribution to “Project OPUS,” and of her visits with Sister here in Adrian.

*Sister Mary Frances wrote with a keen sense of justice and outrage. She would be in her chair, raise her arm, and demand, “Con que derecho? (With what right do you do this?) [Commit injustice against the native population in violation of their human and sovereign rights.] This was outrage coming from this deep, unpretentious woman.*

Sister Suzanne Hofweber had also lived with Sister Mary Frances in the Dominican Republic. She recalled an incident that had happened with Angelita, the daughter of Trujillo, who was a student in Sister Mary Frances’s French class. Sister caught Angelita cheating, and asked her for her paper, with no results. She finally sent for the principal, and Angelita gave up her paper. “An international incident was avoided.”

Sister Jean Hughes, another Sister who had lived with Sister Mary Frances in Santo Domingo, remembered her as a prayerful, contemplative, brilliant person. “No one has influenced my life like she did! … She extended herself to those who were in trouble.”

Sisters Teresita and Margarita Ruiz, friends of Sister Mary Frances and former students at the Colegio, also sent a remembrance. They wrote of her as one deeply admired by the people of Santo Domingo, a woman of profound wisdom, prudence, and a keen sense of humor. Sister Mary Frances developed friendships with people in many levels of society and ways of living. “She had a great capacity to love all of God’s children. We will never forget her, and are grateful for her ability to identify and respond compassionately to the needs of our people.”

Sister’s nephew, Larry O’Connell, spoke of her sparkling eyes as the “windows of the soul.” He told of an experience when he visited her in Santo Domingo. During the night, there was banging on the front door. When Sister opened it, there were three soldiers with machine guns. “Those big brown eyes cowed those men. They dropped their eyes and their guns.”

Bob Dougherty, who ministered with Sister Mary Frances at Aquinas High School and Grace House, remembered being a member of a group who listened to Sister’s interesting stories of her life, and jokingly offered to write her biography and call it “Sizzle.” Later he decided the story should be called “Sparkle.” “Her eyes did sparkle! I saw this when Sister Mary Frances volunteered as a tutor with the women of Grace House, a residence for formerly incarcerated women. Her sparkle helped reinforce their commitment to move forward with their lives.”

Sister Mary Frances’s funeral liturgy was held on January 18. Father James Hug, SJ, was the presider and Father Robert Coleman, Sister’s cousin and pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish.
in Chicago, concelebrated. Sister’s niece, Sister Maureen O’Connell, was the homilist. She ended her homily by saying:

*Whether it was correcting applications for Catholic school accreditation, doing research on Dominicans in the Americas, sharing life with her beloved friends in the Dominican Republic and in Chicago, organizing tenant groups, or, as she did in these past years, watching the birds and squirrels here in the lobby of the Dominican Life Center, Sister Mary Frances never lost sight of the fact that Holy Wisdom, the Spirit of God, was the treasure of her friendship with God.*

After hearing her niece’s beautiful homily, Sister Mary Frances’s relatives and friends bade her farewell as she was laid to rest in the Congregation cemetery.