



Birth

June 9, 1920

Baptism

June 27, 1920

Profession

July 17, 1941

Death

January 23, 2015

Burial

Notre Dame of
Elm Grove Cemetery

*Precious and blessed is
the death of the faithful
before God... for
they die in union with
their dear Jesus, in the
grace of God, in peace.*

Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger
Foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame
Letter 11, September 10, 1831

In Loving Memory

Sister Mary Helen Francis Small, SSND

Sister Helen Francis began her wonderful life in Chicago, the oldest of four children born to Francis J. and Florence Helen (Lawson) Small. She was baptized Margaret Mary Alocoque at St. Rita of Cascia Church. Her brother James was born 16 months later, followed 8 years later by Joseph and 12 years later by Dorothy Jean. They were a close-knit family.

Her first teachers were the Dominicans, and then, she said, “the SSNDs took over in the upper grades and high school.” She noted, “I feel that I received a fine education, most particularly at the Academy of Our Lady. (The) dedicated faculty motivated us to high academic achievement.” She belonged to Chicago Inter Student Catholic Action (CISCA), a youth organization for Catholic high school and college students that provided training for lay and religious leadership and introduced members to programs such as Dorothy Day’s ministry. She was so committed to this apostolate that she found it hard to leave it. With this experience, she felt called to “dedicate herself completely to God as a religious teacher.”

She entered the School Sisters of Notre Dame following her graduation. In 1940, as a novice, she received the religious name Mary Helen Francis which honored her mother and father. She professed first vows on July 17, 1941. Sister Helen received her bachelor’s degree with a major in social science and minors in history and English in 1950 from Mount Mary College, Milwaukee. Her master’s degree in sociology was completed in 1965 at Loyola University, Chicago. She earned a Ph.D. in sociology in 1973 from McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

The story of sister’s ministry is an amazing evolution, drawing her on to the fullness of her potential. For example, on her first mission in Menasha, her superior and principal was Sister Annunciata, who carefully tutored her on classroom management and planning of lessons. She quickly goes on to say that she was consequently able to help other teachers when they came as beginners. Sister Helen served in elementary education for 16 years, teaching elementary students in Wisconsin at: St. Mary, Menasha; Holy Angels, West Bend; Holy Cross, Milwaukee; and St. Joseph, Milwaukee.

From 1957-1965, she taught secondary students at Academy of Our Lady in Chicago. She said, “I was overjoyed to find myself assigned to my alma mater, the Academy of Our Lady in Chicago.” During the summer months, she worked on her master’s degree in sociology at Loyola University in Chicago. After she received her master’s, she was asked to teach a course in the summer school session at Mount Mary College. Toward the end of that summer, Sister Canisia in the sociology department became very ill. To fill the gap created, it was decided that Sister Helen should stay on at the college. Within the year she was appointed as a full-time staff member.

When Sister Caroline Marie Sloane became the chair of the sociology department in 1965, she was eager to have someone go on for a doctorate in sociology. Sister Helen was invited by McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada to join their doctoral program in sociology. There were ten students chosen from around the world and she was the only woman. She arrived

continued

In Loving Memory



*Sister Mary Helen Francis
Small*



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**School Sisters
of Notre Dame**
Central Pacific Province

TRANSFORMING THE WORLD
THROUGH EDUCATION

there, in 1968, dressed in the traditional long habit. She was well accepted by everyone and loved the whole experience. She lived during the next five years at the SSND motherhouse in Waterdown, just a 20 minute drive away. The second year she changed from the habit to a suit. The subject for her dissertation was to examine “Enclosure Changes and the Secularization of Religious Women.” Sister Helen set out to demonstrate the process of change from withdrawal to involvement in the secular milieu by religious women. Her theory centered on the coexistence of the sacred and secular tradition of religious communities. It took her two years to complete the over 500 page document. After her defense of the dissertation in July 1973, she returned to Mount Mary.

Sister Helen’s spirituality was enriched by a major involvement she had in Canada with the Charismatic Renewal. She and several sisters started a prayer group at Mount Mary for faculty, students and lay people in neighboring parishes. This ministry influenced her spiritual life. She relayed how it made her “far more vibrant ... and God-centered than before I joined the Renewal.”

During her 35 years at Mount Mary, the sociology department changed its name to behavioral science department. It was enlarged to include anthropology and psychology courses. A full major in social work was also added. In 1975 Sister Helen became chairperson of the department and filled two 5-year terms. In 1983, she introduced a minor in gerontology. Sister Helen also served on the honors committee, faculty development and the Faculty Senate.

Sisters Helen and Caroline retired from Mount Mary and moved to Notre Dame of Grove in 2000. A short time later, Sister Caroline became ill and died rather suddenly. Sister Helen grieved the loss of her colleague and friend but bravely went on with her retirement activities. In 2011, she joined Our Lady of the Angels community in Greenfield, Wisconsin, where she continued serving through her prayers and presence. She was a delight to everyone there because she was filled with such a joy. When she could no longer put sentences together, she could still sing. It became her favorite thing to do, along with walking; and then wheeling. She would go in and out of offices, stay as long as she liked, collecting sweets and smiles along the way. She stopped all this and her eating only a few days before she went home to God. While we waited with her, many of the workers came by and said that she meant so much to them.

Her last words in her biography are, “For this (the Charismatic Renewal) and for the multitude of blessings that have been mine, particularly since Sister Caroline Marie invited me to teach at Mount Mary, I thank God from the bottom of my heart and ask (God) to bless all those who have been so kind and helpful to me.” We thank you, Sister Helen Francis, for the joy and excitement about life that you brought to each one you met. We pray that we may be gifted with sharing our Gospel Joy as willingly as you have.

Sister Mary Helen Francis Small is survived by her brother Joseph Small, her sister Dorothy (William) Sweeny, sister-in-law Josephine Small, nieces and nephews, other relatives, friends and the SSND Community.

*This remembrance is compiled from SSND archival information
and the eulogy presented by Sister Mary Elise Zettel, SSND*