

## Sister Francis Cordis Bernardo

Sister Francis Cordis Bernardo dedicated her book, *Through Mary's Eyes*, "to all women who have allowed the Spirit to work in them and through them." Sister Francis could surely be counted among such women. With great humility, gentleness, and generosity, Sister Francis invites and allows the Spirit to work in and through her as she continues to live the mission of charity.

Sister Francis Cordis, whose baptismal name was Joan, was the only child in a devout Catholic family. She was born prematurely and weighed only one and a half pounds at birth. Her survival was extraordinary for that time, perhaps a testament to her parents' steadfast faith. As a child growing up in a diverse Newark neighborhood, Francis walked five blocks every day with her grandmother to attend daily mass at their Italian parish church. The entire family life seemed to center around the Church; her father headed the Holy Name Society and her mother headed the Rosary Society.



Both in elementary school and later in high school at Saint Vincent Academy, Francis was taught by the Sisters of Charity. Their example and the faith of her family nurtured the seeds of a religious vocation. Sister Francis remembers, "I saw that the Sisters, who had very little, seemed very happy and very close to one another. I thought, this looks like a good thing!"

Following graduation from high school in 1957, Sister Francis entered the Sisters of Charity. Her religious name, Francis Cordis, reflected her devotion to Saint Francis and her family's devotion to the Sacred Heart. ("Cordis" is Latin for "heart.")

Sister Francis became a Sister of Charity at a time of change for the Congregation. Her entering band was the first to wear a veil instead of a bonnet. In a departure from the earlier practice of sending new Sisters out almost immediately to teach, Sister Francis and her band spent a year as postulants, a year as novices, and were given an additional year of education at the College of Saint Elizabeth before embarking on their first missions. Final vows were made after seven years.

The journey to her first mission at St. Ann Elementary School in Jersey City was particularly memorable to Sister Francis because she was transported there in a Hudson County police car. Sister Francis explains, "Sister Mary Gerard, who was the principal, didn't have a car at the convent, so any time she needed to do something, she called the Police Department or the Fire Department." Times have certainly changed!

Sister Francis was excited to begin her mission. At St. Ann's, she was assigned a class of 80 first graders in a room with eight neat rows of ten connecting chairs. She recalls that the children were well behaved, though "it did seem to take all morning to get everybody lined up and use the bathroom!"

From St. Ann's, Sister Francis went on to teach first grade at three other elementary schools. She enjoyed teaching the young children, joking, "At least they were shorter than I was!" During those early years, Sister Francis was very grateful for the mentorship she received from the older sisters. "They gave such wonderful example, and they were so welcoming and loving. I still think of many of them."

Throughout her time as a classroom teacher and later as a reading specialist, Sister Francis was also active in the life of her parish, visiting the sick and teaching in the parish religious education program. With her strong interest in religious education, she welcomed the opportunity to study for a Masters in Religious Education at LaSalle University. Her studies at LaSalle evidenced a new awakening to the role of women in scripture and in the Church. “This was Vatican II time, ‘wow’ time, and I came in contact with many, many different people from all over the world. It really broadened my perspective and just woke me up!”

The Masters from LaSalle was one of three Masters Degrees that Sister Francis had the opportunity to earn to further her ministries. Over the years, these ministries included serving as a teacher, principal, religious education director, parish minister, director of the pastoral care office for the Congregation and pastoral care chaplain to the elderly sisters in Saint Anne Villa.

Among the many ways that she served in ministry, Sister Francis says that “what I loved most of all was being involved in the RCIA program. I would develop a team and we worked very hard with those preparing for the sacraments. To be at the Easter Vigil, to clothe the catechumens in their robes and see them receiving the sacraments was just the most marvelous experience I ever had!”

A special time in her spiritual journey occurred for Sister Francis while on sabbatical shortly after her mother died. She recalls, “I was looking at the scriptures, meditating on them, reading them, and thoughts just started coming into my head. It was obviously the Holy Spirit, because it wasn’t me.” Sister Francis recorded her thoughts in reflections that were later published by Paulist Press in a little book titled, *Through Mary’s Eyes*. She says, “I always believed that by placing Mary on a pedestal, we made her not human. I believed that Mary went through the same things we did. She knew what it was like to suffer. She had doubts. She was confused. But she did believe that God would direct her.”

Sister Francis has also written a yet unpublished set of reflections on Peter, who has always been a favorite of hers. “Peter was very human, and we can identify with him. He put both feet in his mouth, but he was also so passionately in love with Christ!”

Although Sister Francis no longer serves in full time ministry, she continues to be active in volunteer ministries and sponsors three Seton Associates. Among her activities, she is working with other Sisters to help people come to know more about Blessed Miriam Teresa and to share in her spirituality and the depth of her prayer.

Sister Francis has a deep love for the Congregation’s spiritual founders - St. Vincent, St. Louise, Mother Seton, and Mother Xavier – as well as a profound appreciation for all that Sisters of Charity have done for others through the years. She is confident about the future of religious life, even though the form of that life and the opportunities for laity may be totally different in the future.

Sister Francis Cordis recently participated in a program to help seventh and eighth grade students learn more about religious life and to discern their own vocations. She shared the story of her own family, her call to enter the Sisters of Charity, and her religious journey. The students were privileged to be offered a remarkable witness of faith, as Sister Francis concluded:

Throughout these 59 years, I have met many wonderful people, made some lasting friendships, and was rewarded many times over for my work with children and adults, the well and sick, the lonely and sad. To this day, I am still trying to learn more about myself, and am continuing to grow in my relationship with God.