

by Jana Kiely
a friend of Frances¹
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Frances Cunningham RSCJ (1917- 2004)?

Of all the true saints I have known and count among my friends throughout life, Frances Cunningham RSCJ stands out as one of the most powerful and the most radiant. She is always with me. There is not a day I don't pray for and with her, and through her for others.

I shall never forget how we first met. It was spring 1964. I was finishing my PhD in Genetics at Harvard University and applying for a teaching job. I was determined to teach part-time, so I could combine teaching with family life. I applied to ten women's colleges in the Boston area. Only two answered. One told me that in spite of my credentials, I could not be a serious biologist since I wanted only a part-time job. The other, Newton College of the Sacred Heart, thanked me, but informed me that they did not need anyone at the present time. A few days later I got a phone call from Mother Cunningham, RSCJ, who as I found out later, was a PhD in Cell Biology from Fordham University, and chair of the Biology department at Newton College of the Sacred Heart. She told me that she had read my application with interest and was particularly intrigued by the fact, that in my research I was using one of the newest techniques at the time: electron microscopy. As a cell biologist who kept up with current scientific literature, and published in the most prestigious journal in her field¹, she was interested in this new development for her own research¹ as well as for her students. She explained that she was a cloistered religious and therefore unable to come and visit me in my laboratory, but asked

¹ Frances Cunningham RSCJ, *Journal of Cell Biology*, v.23, (Nov.1964) p.237
A study of the effects of cigarette smoking on the epithelial cells of the mouth, using as her population the students of NCSH

whether I might be willing to give a demonstration of the electron microscope to her students.

A week later a delegation of about fifteen students and two lay teachers from NCSH appeared in the Harvard Bio Labs on Divinity Avenue in Cambridge. They filed with great excitement past the laboratories of James D. Watson² and E.O. Wilson³, among others, until they arrived in the room where I was working with the electron microscope. We had a delightful session. I thought most of them were very bright and would be fun to teach. As they were taking their leave, one of them, wearing immaculate white gloves, handed me a box of chocolates as a thank you from Mother Cunningham.

A week later I received an invitation for an interview with Rev. Mother Gabrielle Husson RSCJ, president of NCSH. I met her together with the dean Mother Mary Quinlan RSCJ, in the president's office.

"We are doing a novena," they announced, "to find out how to proceed in this situation. We would love to have you come and teach here, but we do not have an opening." At that point Mother Cunningham walked in, veiled like her colleagues, in the full nineteenth century garb of the Sacred Heart Religious. Turning towards her Mother Husson added in lieu of presentations: "Of course, Mother Cunningham thinks it's all the Holy Spirit and it will all work out." A week later, the two lay professors "decided" to go back to school for further study, and I got a job.

When the fall semester of 1964 started, the NCSH biology department consisted of the chair, Mother Cunningham, a cell biologist, Mary Day Albert, PhD from Brown University, whose specialty was comparative vertebrate morphogenesis and me a geneticist. It was a small group but we put together an exciting, cutting-edge curriculum, requiring math, physics, and chemistry as prerequisites. We did not have large classes.

² James D. Watson, discoverer with Francis Crick of the structure of DNA

³ E.O. Wilson, Harvard biologist world renowned for his studies of the ants and his advocacy for environmentalism

The prerequisites and the long lab afternoons were daunting for many students. Those who did sign up however, were truly interesting and bright. It was a joy to teach them and several of them eventually did very well in their field.

Christmas brought a terrible tragedy. Mary Albert was involved in a car accident, which left her paralyzed from the neck down. Her story of unimaginable strength and courage has to be written separately and in detail some day. Here I only wish to note Mother Cunningham's role in Mary's extraordinary recovery. She was then still a cloistered nun and therefore could not go and visit Mary in the hospital. I did the visiting. Mother Cunningham prayed. Her trust in the Lord's healing power was total. We both took over Mary's classes and taught according to her instructions. First, while she was still in traction at Mass General Hospital, Mary insisted I bring her the exams the students took just before her accident and correct them with her. She wanted the grades to be in on time, and they were. After one of my visits, a MGH psychiatrist asked to speak with me. "You are doing your friend a terrible disservice," he declared, "by supporting her dreams of going back to work. She will never even sit up, let alone teach. The sooner she realizes this, the better it will be for her."

This was hard to hear. But Mother Cunningham and I could not let down our friend, a devoted teacher and mother of two, passionately determined to live, and to come back to her family and her classroom. It took a year, but she did return. She taught from a wheelchair. She could drive. To the amazement of the doctors, her whole left side had revived. In the lab and in the classroom, her students became her hands, and many of them were thus trained for serious lab work and for graduate school later. After NCSH closed in 1975, Mary went on to teach at Boston College, was in charge of their biology laboratory and continued to publish the results of her research. The strength and courage of this determined Yankee Protestant were indeed extraordinary, but she was the first to admit that she could never have done it without the support of us all, the willingness of the College to sustain her hope by

leaving her post open, and beyond all that, the power of prayer of Mother Cunningham and the RSCJs.

Vatican II was in full swing and the RSCJs, like all the other orders were reviewing their original charisms. Mother Cunningham, now Sister Frances, explained to me that although the Sacred Heart Schools had traditionally trained the children of the elite, the original idea of Madeleine Sophie Barat was to serve the poor. At that time I was teaching catechism at St Paul's parish in Cambridge and most of the children came from a low- income housing. Mother Cunningham organized a summer camp for them. The grounds of Newton College of the Sacred Heart were beautiful, with lots of grass and spectacular trees, and without the students, the space was vast and perfect for the children. With the help of the pastor of St Paul's, Fr Joseph Collins, and one of the young curates, we procured two busses and gathered upward of fifty children, from two to fifteen years old with their mothers. I brought my own two children, who were at the time four and two. Sister Frances somehow managed to provide good food, drinks, art supplies, games, and hoses to let the children run in streams of water, when it got hot. To end the session Mother Cunningham obtained permission to have a mass celebrated in the NCSH chapel. Fr Collins presided. Seeing the congregation, he remembered the Vatican II rubrics he had been reading with great enthusiasm, and with both arms outstretched called out: "You are all invited to communion. Jesus calls you all to himself." And so everyone from the smallest to the oldest went to receive the Lord. It was an unforgettable moment. What I found most touching was the gratitude of the mothers. Many confided to me, that because of divorce, birth control and other such problems, they had been barred from communion for years, and now they felt they had been given a new lease on life. We shared an incredible joy.

But Vatican II brought also some difficulties to Mother Cunningham. She had been with the RSCJs her whole life, having attended their preschool from the age of two and joining the order after college. She loved the traditional habit. It was for her a sign of her dedication to the Lord whom she loved with her whole heart and her whole self. To have to set it aside was like casting off part of herself. Besides, the smaller communities where the Sisters lived now, managing everything and cooking for themselves, were difficult for her to adjust to. It must have seemed to her almost like joining a new order. She was then about fifty. She began to have problems with her eyes and with her back. One time I ran into her unexpectedly and thought she had lost her mind. She was talking to herself and did not at first recognize me. Then I realized she could not see me. When I came closer and she did recognize me, she began telling me how hard things were for her. But in a few minutes she stopped, smiled and never complained to me again. When later that year my mother came to visit from France, she remarked on how elegant Sister Frances looked in her new clothes. They were hand-me-downs from family members and well-to-do alumnae, but she knew how to choose them and put them together with taste. Though she had never seen the inside of a kitchen before, she discovered that she loved to prepare meals for others and became a resourceful cook. I still use some of her favorite recipes.

Through all this she always retained her slightly nineteenth century manner. I remember the first time my father met her. He was very impressed by her. "She is a true lady." He said to me. He was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and had been a diplomat in Paris before the war. His standards were high. He was deeply moved by her manifest faith. Along with his great hero, John Paul II, she was an important factor in his return to the Church, which he had left during his youth.

To some who did not see beyond the surface, she seemed quaint and naïve. She was often reviled because she refused to bend to the fashions of the time. For her counsel, she went

straight to Jesus. She was a feminist by nature, having simply done what she felt was right, irrespective of what women should be allowed to do. She had a will of iron and a sharp intelligence. But the new, angry feminist jargon was not her style. "We have always educated leaders," she used to say, "women to lead in society, faithful to the heart of Jesus."

Frances enjoyed her new-found freedom. Not only was she able to visit sick friends like Mary, but also her married sister and her family whom she felt very close to. She became very close to my family too. She was a sort of unofficial godmother to our children. She consecrated each one in turn to the Heart of Jesus. To this day I can see her kneeling by the altar in the Newton chapel, carrying one year old Jan in her arms, and lifting him up to the Lord.

She also liked to explore. One summer, we rented a cottage on a cove in South Wellfleet, on Cape Cod. As several of our friends confirmed, it was not easy to find. Only a narrow dirt road led to it and the connection from the highway was difficult to detect. But Mother Cunningham was not going to be daunted. We had three small children at the time. Our youngest Christina, was only eighteen months old and Frances who loved all of them, especially enjoyed this cute roly-poly baby. She persuaded her sister, Ruth Cunningham RSCJ, to drive the community car. Dirt roads notwithstanding, they arrived in time for a seafood feast, which they both relished. Sister Ruth was pleased to talk to Bob who like herself, taught English literature. And Frances chatted with me and watched the children. As they were leaving we mentioned how hard it must have been to find the way. "O, not to worry," was their response. Later at the corner store, we heard stories of two ladies in a large car, riding up and down the highway, and to the astonishment of onlookers, suddenly crossing the double line and disappearing into the maze of dirt roads.

Soon, however, it became clear there was much more for Frances to worry about than dress and cooking and highways. The school had been doing well and growing. In fact, during

Mother Husson's administration the college more than doubled its enrollment and established many new interesting programs. But the sixties were unsettled times. Many questions were arising about future direction. Catholic families no longer automatically send their daughters to Catholic colleges. A stiff competition for students was developing. Many small Catholic schools were closing or going co-ed.

A firm was hired to study the situation and give advice. After many days of speeches by the advisory group, endless meetings and discussions, the final advice boiled down to the following: "Get rid of the Sacred Heart in the name of the school, hire more men as teachers, and get a male president and dean." Unimaginably, the school leadership, women from an order whose foundress braved the French Revolution and Napoleon, and sent four women alone with Rose Philippine Duchesne into the midst of native tribes of the American West to start the first RSCJ settlement in this country, bowed to the patriarchal, secular business spirit and followed the advice of the "professionals." Mother Cunningham was asked to retire and three part-time male teachers were hired to replace her. It was even made clear to her that she should not have anymore contact with students, because her old fashioned ways could have a negative effect on recruitment. "But this is my vocation, Jana," she told me, "if I do not have contact with students, I lose a crucial part of my vocation."

Vocation was central to her life. She had always lived it fully and reflected on its meaning. One of these reflections stayed with me always and became central to my life. One day as an unexpected meeting was called after one of my classes, I was wondering what I should do, since I wanted to know what was going on in the school, but also needed to return home. "My dear Jana," Mother Cunningham declared, "we all have to keep our priorities straight. For me, it is prayer first, teaching second. For you, family first, teaching second. Go home." This has been enormously helpful to me to this day. I passed it on to many of my students both at NCSH and at Harvard University, where my husband and I were co-masters of

Adams House for 26 years. Many women who were able successfully to combine family and career, thanked me years later for passing on to them Mother Cunningham's rule of life.

In 1975 Newton College was bought by Boston College and became the Boston College Law School. Frances lived in the Downstairs Community, as it was called, on the grounds of the Sacred Heart Academy, next door to the College. On the basis of her research, she obtained a job with a group of dentists at the Lahey Clinic. With its longstanding culture of specialized teams directly available to individual patients, and a work ethic that combined the highest competence with the utmost compassion (as the Lahey clinic describes itself,) Lahey Clinic, a physician-led nonprofit group practice was unique among medical centers and teaching hospitals. □□Frances admired this approach and was glad to be part of it. The care with which she approached her cytological studies was what the team needed and it was a happy match for many years. At first some of the sisters in her community gave her rides, but soon she figured out public transportation and went on her own.

But there remained for her the problem of the lack of contact with the students. With her faithful prayer life and attendance at mass, she came to know the liturgical team in charge of the chapel on the Newton Campus. She trained to be a Eucharistic minister and she became chaplain for the students in the infirmary, located on the Newton Campus. She was completely happy again, and from other sources I know how much she meant to the students. They thought her prayers had an extraordinary power and I certainly could understand why.

In 1977, I returned from a sabbatical in England, pregnant with our fourth child. Mother Cunningham (We always called her that in our family) came to visit and as we were talking, she said to me: "I have been praying that the baby would be normal." "Normal?" I thought, what a strange

thing to say. The doctor in England did point to some possible problems, considering my age, but my own obstetrician dismissed them. A few months later Maria was born prematurely, with hyaline membrane complications and a large bleed in the brain. She was treated for a month at the neonatal clinic at MGH. It was a newly founded project. The doctors were wonderful, very excited about being able to save children that only a few years before were doomed to die. The final outcome however was still unpredictable. With each child they were learning something new. Mother Cunningham told me: "I always pray for the doctors, that they would know what to do and be happy with the work accomplished." After a month, Maria was sent home. But we were told that in a few weeks she would have to return for an operation on her brain to prevent hydrocephaly. In order to know when the time for the operation was right, a nurse came to measure her head every other day. When we asked whether the doctors believed Maria might be normal enough to go to school, our pediatrician, Dr. Robey answered: "Well may be not to Shady Hill," where her brother and sisters went," But she might be able to attend some school some day."

Soon after we brought the child home, Mother Cunningham arrived for a visit. She entered the room where the baby lay, took me by the hand, brought me to the crib and said: "Recite with me." It was the Memorare. For a second, I was transported to the first time I gave an exam at NCSH. As I was distributing the tests to the class, the students suddenly stood up and began to murmur a prayer then unknown to me: The Memorare. I thought it was quaint, sweet, maybe a bit old-fashioned and definitely too elaborate. This time I could hear none of that. The words expressed instead a bold confidence. "Remember most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to Thy protection, implored Thy help, sought Thy intercession was left unaided. Inspired with this confidence, I fly unto Thee O Virgin of Virgins, my mother. To Thee I come, before Thee I stand sinful and sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate! Despise not my petition and in Thy mercy hear and answer me!"

I still see Mother Cunningham and myself, standing there on each side of the crib. Maria never needed the operation. She developed normally, in fact, appeared as time went on extremely bright. I decided never to tell any teacher about her early problems so she would not be considered different from other children. And I never did, until after she graduated from Harvard in 1999.

Childlike confidence, unshakeable trust in the love of Jesus, which He gives to whom He pleases, particularly through his Mother, is what the Memorare expresses. That is what Frances Cunningham possessed. It was the same prayer that Saint Francis de Sales in the seventeenth century credited for releasing him from a potentially catastrophic depression. It was that same childlike confidence that turned Therese de Lisieux into a saint.

1982-83 the year which marked fifty years since Frances Cunningham joined the Society of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, was also the year that my husband and I were going with our whole family to China to teach at the University of Sichuan. Frances wished to celebrate her life as Religious of the Sacred Heart with all her friends at a mass in the chapel of the Newton Campus. She began planning months in advance and told me she would wait for us until we came back from China. And so upon our return the big celebration took place. But not before something strange happened. Feeling unusually tired, my husband went for a physical exam and received a „tentative“ diagnosis of serious leukemia. Not wanting to alarm our children and friends, we told only three people and asked them to pray. One was Bob's aunt, a religious of the Cenacle and one was Mother Cunningham. In October, her jubilee took place as scheduled. The church was full of family members, students, friends and their families. The mass was beautiful, the music and the whole atmosphere full of joy. There were several speeches. Bob, my husband, fully recovered from what the doctors later called a mysterious

virus, read Gerald Manley Hopkins' poem, *Jesu, dulcis memoria*. Sister Frances had told the celebrant what her central theme was and that she wanted him to base his homily upon, the words: „Per Ipsum, et cum Ipso, et in Ipso“ „Through Him, with Him, and in Him.“ Indeed those words summed up her whole vocation and her whole life.

In 1985, my cousin Juan arrived with his wife Maité from Argentina. Maité had been treated for cancer in Buenos Aires for several years, but her cancer had moved into the lower spine and the doctors told her there was nothing more they could do for her. Her husband, desperate to find a way to save her, decided to bring her to Boston to consult the top specialists. When the doctors at MGH reviewed all the facts, they said there was indeed nothing else that could be done. She had at the most six months to live. We were all crushed. Maité was so kind and beautiful and seemingly so full of life. I could not but start talking about Cunningham and Juan immediately asked if they could see her. She invited us for tea. We had a pleasant visit in the living room of the downstairs community. Mother Cunningham asked about their children. They had a daughter aged twelve and a son, aged five. When we were about to leave, Mother Cunningham moved over to Maité, put her hand on her arm and said: „What do you want to ask for?“ „That I may live until my children grow up.“ „Then I shall pray for you every day, but you two together must also pray.“ On their way back to Argentina, Juan and Maité stopped in Miami to visit Juan's sister and her family. There they found a doctor who was willing to take her on a give her an experimental drug. They returned to Argentina. I received a beautiful letter from Juan about the new closeness and hope that their daily praying together had brought them. Maité lived for ten years more until her son was fifteen and her daughter graduated from college.

Frances' power of prayer became proverbial among our friends. We joked that if anyone wished good weather for an event, all they had to do was invite Mother Cunningham. The most difficult test was the wedding of my eldest daughter Anne to Tim Richards on August 12th 1989. Weather was not the only thing we were concerned about. In June as all the preparations were in full swing, the Tiananmen Square uprising took place. Our son Jan, was in China on a Yale China fellowship and for over a week there were no news of him. Mother Cunningham's prayerful support was again precious to me. On the weekend of the wedding, there was a terrible rainstorm, which eventually went on for three days. Amazingly all the guests, including my mother from France, cousins from Canada and Miami, and Tim's cousins from all over the country, arrived on time, and our son had returned safe and sound from China. Miraculously, after the mass, a clearing in the storm occurred. It lasted for eight hours, long enough for the reception to take place outdoors, as planned, in the Adams House courtyard, our home. Mother Cunningham, who loved Anne and always thought her very beautiful, was very happy for her. "I have never seen so many handsome young men, have you?" she asked, as the groom, his twin brother as best man and all the ushers, including Jan, lined up to be photographed. I keep in my room a picture of my mother and Mother Cunningham, standing in front of the happy couple, and greeting each other at the reception. It reminds me of the Pontormo Visitation in Florence.

Frances Cunningham believed very strongly that as baptized Christians we each had an apostolic role to play. She often talked about it as a "must" for herself, using the word "apostolic." She liked my mother very much and felt a deep respect for her, but she was troubled by the fact that my mother did not go to church. In their youth my parents had rejected the imperialist Church of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which subordinated the Czechs to their Austrian overlords. Later, during our exile from Czechoslovakia, my

sister and I, as students in Paris joined the Catholic Church, to my parents' great surprise. It was the post war French Church, radiant with renewed faith, worker-priests and saintly, learned theologians who chartered the road to Vatican II. Through us, my parents became interested in their faith, but never acted on their interest.

At the end of one of my mother's visits from France, Mother Cunningham said to me. I want to do something special for your mother. I am trying to figure out what is the best thing I could give her. My mother loved and respected Mother Cunningham. She was grateful for her friendship and care for me and my family.

One day Mother Cunningham invited us to tea. She explained to my mother, that she had thought a long time about what is the best thing she could give her and found the answer. She wanted to give her Jesus. She had a priest ready in the next room to talk to my mother, hear her confession and receive her back into the Church. Knowing it came from a heart full of profound love, my mother agreed. She resurfaced from her rebirth happy and never missed a Sunday from then on. The neighbors in the French village on the Suisse border where my parents lived rejoiced and so did the village priest. Père Jolivet cried profusely, as he reconciled my father to the Church before his death and gave a moving sermon about the high intelligence and deep faith of this noble and cultivated man.

My mother lived until the age of ninety two. By then Père Jolivet had died and the village church was closed. The itinerant priest brought her the Eucharist to keep. She made a little chapel for it in the room where she was writing her memoirs and Jesus was her most faithful companion in the house where she was finally dying alone. That was the apostolic gift of Mother Cunningham.