

## Polonia Bids Farewell to a Great Friend and Supporter Sister Francesca



Sister Francesca Onley, 88, a Sister of the Holy Family of Nazareth for 71 years, passed away April 17 in Philadelphia. She served as the president and chief administrative officer of Holy Family University in Philadelphia beginning in 1981 until her retirement in 2014 at the age of 81.

As the University's fourth president, she led the transformation of Holy Family College into a university in 2002 and added many educational programs including criminal justice, along with graduate and doctoral studies in education. She directed the construction of Stevenson Lane Residence Hall in 2009, the renovation of the Nurse Education Building simulation lab in 2008, the construction of the Garden Residence Apartments in 2006, construction of the Education and Technology building in 2005, the renovation of St. Joseph Residence Hall in 2005, and construction of the University's Campus Center in 1988. Under her guidance, the university also expanded into multiple satellite campuses. Additionally, through the Congregation and Sister Francesca's association with the United Nations International Association of University Presidents (IAUP), Holy Family University established international friendships and successfully reached partnership agreements with universities in Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and China. Her interest in international partnerships also led to the establishment of an English language education programs for seminarians in Vietnam.

During these years of expansion, Sister Francesca's motto was always, "Little by little. You may not be able to do it all at once, but you can do it little by little."

In 2015, the University renamed the Education and Technology Center the Sister Francesca Onley Education and Technology Center in her honor.

Born March 4, 1933 to Edward and Marie (Rice) Onley in Philadelphia, she entered the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in 1950 and professed her final vows with the congregation in 1959. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in business from Holy Family College in 1959, a master's degree in secondary education from Marywood University in 1966, and a PhD in higher education administration from Southern Illinois University in 1986.

From 1953 until 1980, Sister Francesca served at Nazareth Academy Grade School and Nazareth Academy High School, both in Philadelphia, as a faculty member, guidance counselor, assistant principal, and principal. In 1980, she was asked to serve as assistant to the president of Holy Family College under Sister Lillian Budny, CSFN, PhD. In 1981, Sister Francesca was appointed president of the college to replace Sister Lillian upon her retirement.

During her educational career, Sister Francesca was distinguished by her leadership ability and gained the respect of those who worked with her. She earned numerous awards including Woman of Distinction in 2004 by the Philadelphia Business Journal and Outstanding Contributor to Catholic Education in 2000 by the Catholic Philopatrian Literary Institute. Beloved and treasured by many, her loss will be mourned by the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, her family, and the many faculty, staff, and students whose lives she so greatly influenced.

Holy Family University President Sister Maureen McGarrity, CSFN, PhD, noted, "The University was founded to provide women in Northeast Philadelphia with access to Catholic higher education. Throughout her ministry of 32 years, Sister Francesca considered this her compass in the development of facilities, programs, and services to address the needs of changing times and changing populations of students. The value of family-providing opportunities for each person to reach his or her fullest potential was her North Star in every decision. Her legacy continues in the lives of our graduates who have and continue to change our world each day."

The viewing was held Sunday, April 25 from 2:00 - 4:00 pm at St. Katherine of Siena Catholic Church, 9700 Frankford Avenue, Philadelphia. The funeral Mass followed at 4:00 pm. Face masks were required and social distancing protocols were in place. A Message of Remembrance page has been set up at <https://nazarethcsfn.org/message-of-remembrance>. If you would like to donate to our Sisters, you may do so via our website [here](#).

### Final Words from Sister Francesca

Please extend my love to my family, Dave and Blanche and their family and my love to Joan and her family and to all the Sisters whom I loved. I have had a special, privileged community life and I had a special love for all of them especially for all those with whom I lived.

Thanks to all the friends I have had. I love them dearly.

I don't have special words to say with my last breath except that I loved all with an everlasting love.

I am grateful for all the privileges I had and appreciate the blessings and love I enjoyed.

Peace and love,

S. Francesca Onley

*\*Written from her hospital bed a few days before she died.*

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