



Sister Mary Constance Fitzgerald, CSJ

November 13, 1913–DECEMBER 28, 2020

Over a century ago on November 13, 1913, MONICA ANNA FITZGERALD was born to Anna Genevieve Ryan and Francis Joseph Fitzgerald. She was the third of nine Fitzgerald children, although an older brother, John, and a younger sister Marceline Rosalie, died in infancy.

Although born in Spokane, Washington, most of Monica Anna's youth was spent in San Bernardino, California, after the family's move due to her father's asthma. They would have preferred San Diego, since most of her mother's relatives had settled there, but San Bernardino was drier. The homestead was large and welcomed almost yearly summer visits from her relatives, many of whom were religious: two CSJ aunts, and two priest uncles, Father Lawrence Ryan, and Monsignor John Ryan. The latter was described as a socialist since he was significantly involved in Roosevelt's New Deal, and worked for justice for the working man.

Monica was an engaged child with a love for books, as were the entire family. Each week she traveled to the library, returning with an armload of books. She and her brother were intrigued with books on magic, and both acquired enough skill to give magic shows. She loved sports, especially basketball, and enjoyed watching high school football games. Monica attended schools staffed by the Immaculate Heart sisters. In her senior year, she described being "zapped" by God during a school retreat with a call to religious life. She was willing to follow the call, but having no desire to be shut up in a convent, she wanted to wait a year, especially since she had just "fallen in love." She did not want to be a Sister of St. Joseph, however, because all her CSJ relatives, two aunts and her older sister, Catherine Anita, then in the Novitiate, had taken that path. In keeping with her life-long spirit of independence, she decided to seek entry with the Immaculate Heart Community. On her way to the interview in Hollywood, she stopped off at the old St. Mary's to see her sister. As she walked through the door, she knew it was the place she was meant to be. In writing her letter of request to the Provincial, she expressed her desire to work in an orphanage. What a surprise she received in reply: If she did not wish to do as she was told, she should stay home.

Enter she did on September 18, 1930. She received the habit on March 19, 1931 and was given the religious name Sister Mary Constance, although she and her sister, Anne Gertrude, called each other Mon and Mary throughout their long lives as CSJ sister Sisters. She professed her first vows on March 19, 1933, and final vows on August 15, 1936.

Her early life as a religious was a series of acts of obedience. The day after her first vows, on the morning of March 20, 1933, the Provincial appeared at the dining room door. Constance was told to take off her apron. "You are going to school this morning." With heart pounding, she joined the others in the car going off to St. John Chrysostom in Inglewood. She was being sent to teach the sixth grade with no preparation other than her act of obedience. Constance maintained that, without the help of Sister Roberta who coached her during recess, she could never have gotten through the daily math lesson. Finally June came, as did her evaluation as a CSJ. There was only one negative: she was too independent. For those who knew her, this comes as no surprise.

Constance spent 23 years of her "wild and precious life" in elementary schools, for the most part teaching seventh and eighth grades. She happily spent most of those years away from Los Angeles, including assignments in Tucson, San Diego, San Francisco, Vallejo, and Oakland. One experience she has recounted of those years gives a glimpse of her teaching skill. A first grader she taught at Holy Cross refused to come up to join the "Bluebirds" reading group. When Constance went to get him, he threw himself on the floor and began to kick his feet. She tried all the standard techniques for getting compliance, but nothing worked. Then she had an inspiration: she asked him to be her helper. She soon had this defiant lad eating out of her hand. Constance was a born teacher, blessed with imagination and creativity.

Sister Constance then spent 29 years in high schools, primarily teaching English and writing, again with little formal preparation. When assigned to study for a master's degree, she enrolled at USC for a couple of classes, then withdrew because the assignments took time away from her preparation for teaching, something she judged more worthy of her time and effort.

No matter what level she taught, Constance was the consummate teacher, inspiring and empowering her students, many of whom continue to this day to maintain contact with her. One of her favorite missions was at St. Joseph Academy in Tucson, which was a boarding school. She loved the glorious beauty and vastness of the desert, and this for her far outweighed the challenges and physical demands of being in charge of boarders ranging in age from 5 to 18. Because she had to be with the students at meals, at recreation, after supper and at bedtime, she had little time for preparing her lessons. She wasn't much older than the students themselves, two of whom were Pat Sears and Anne Marie Gerber, the former with whom she became a close friend. Constance was called to replace Pat in April of 1942 when Pat, who was then a postulant, became seriously ill.

After 52 years of teaching in various CSJ elementary and high schools, as well as two summer sessions at the Mount. Constance accepted an invitation from the Diocese of Fresno (initiated by Sister Maria Angela Mesa), to teach English as a Second Language and to be part of the Hispanic ministry outreach to migrant farmworkers in the diocese. She taught them English, and they helped her learn some Spanish. About this work she shared: "The people I met had so much love in their hearts....I cried so much when I had to leave them."

Following that ministry, Sister Constance served as Director of a men's shelter in Guaymas, Mexico. Upon her arrival there, she immediately began to care for the elderly residents who had no homes and no families. Very soon after coming, she received word that the Franciscan Sister she was to have assisted had suffered a fall, and would not be returning to Guaymas. Constance took over all the care of the men. She fed them, shaved them, drove them to appointments, and prayed with them. She said that praying the rosary with them gave her the opportunity to practice her Spanish.

In the spirit of obedience that characterized her life, Sister Constance served six years as regional superior, offering support, guidance and wisdom to the sisters in her assigned region. During those years, perhaps mindful of her own desire to be able to act independently, she chose to respect the individual wisdom of a few sisters who preferred not to interact with her in her role as superior. Whatever her ministry, Constance's desire was to be of service and to make a difference in the lives of others.

After her service as regional superior, Constance enjoyed some time traveling with her sister Anne Gertrude, and then joined and became a very active member of the community at #22 on the Doheny campus. Constance was a member of that community for about twenty years. During that time, she worked in the Mount's Learning Resource Center, formed relationships with Mount personnel in maintenance, security and food service (many of whom she assisted in learning English and by whom she continues to be dearly loved), was always a vital participant in local community life, including serving as bookkeeper and shopper, occasionally making waffles on Saturday mornings, and dutifully doing her charge, cleaning inside and outside stairs. She lovingly took her turn preparing meaningful community prayer. During those years, Constance offered a creative writing program for the sisters in Holy Family Community, which she called "Write-O". She inspired the group to write about their lives, about current events, and to create their own poetry and stories. She generously gave of her time and writing skills in many other ways. She wrote the necrologies for countless sisters. For years, she regularly drafted letters related to a variety of peace and justice issues to be sent by the Provincial Council to persons in positions of power and influence. Daily, she spent time at the computer contacting those in positions of leadership, advocating for persons who are marginalized or oppressed. She was a prepared and invested member of her cluster, did her homework, and suggested topics for consideration. At the same time, any honest accounting of her community life will acknowledge that it had its challenges—for herself and others. Her penchant for independence included an attachment to her ability to drive—which she continued to do long after others began to have concerns. At ninety-five, her license was renewed for five years! She continued to drive until it expired when she turned one hundred! And her clear sense of right and wrong at times found her coming to judgment—and voicing it—a bit prematurely. When that happened, her regret was swift and moved her quickly to apology. In those moments, she often alluded to the nearly century-old admonition of her novice mistress: "Mother Paul told me my mouth would get me in trouble!"

Throughout their long lives, Monica and Mary thoroughly enjoyed a close and loving relationship with their younger brother, Fr. Bill. Whenever Fr. Bill came from Brazil for home visits, he stayed with the community at #22, much to the delight of all who enjoyed those times of fun, frolic and celebration of the Eucharist. After his retirement, Fr. Bill joined the Redemptorist retirement community in Missouri. Before his death in 2017, his sisters were able to visit him there.

For many years, December 28, the Feast of the Holy Innocents, was a celebration day of homecoming for the sisters of the province. On that day, at the age of 107, Constance celebrated her final homecoming.

Sister Constance loved life and lived it to the full all of her days. She quoted poet Mary Oliver to describe herself and her embrace of life: "Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" We celebrate what Constance has done with hers. May we be encouraged by her example. Rest now, dear Constance, in the fullness of life.

~ Written by Sr Annette Debs, with assistance from Sr. Sandra Williams