



**Sisters of  
St. Francis  
of Assisi**

**November 2011**

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Dear Friend,

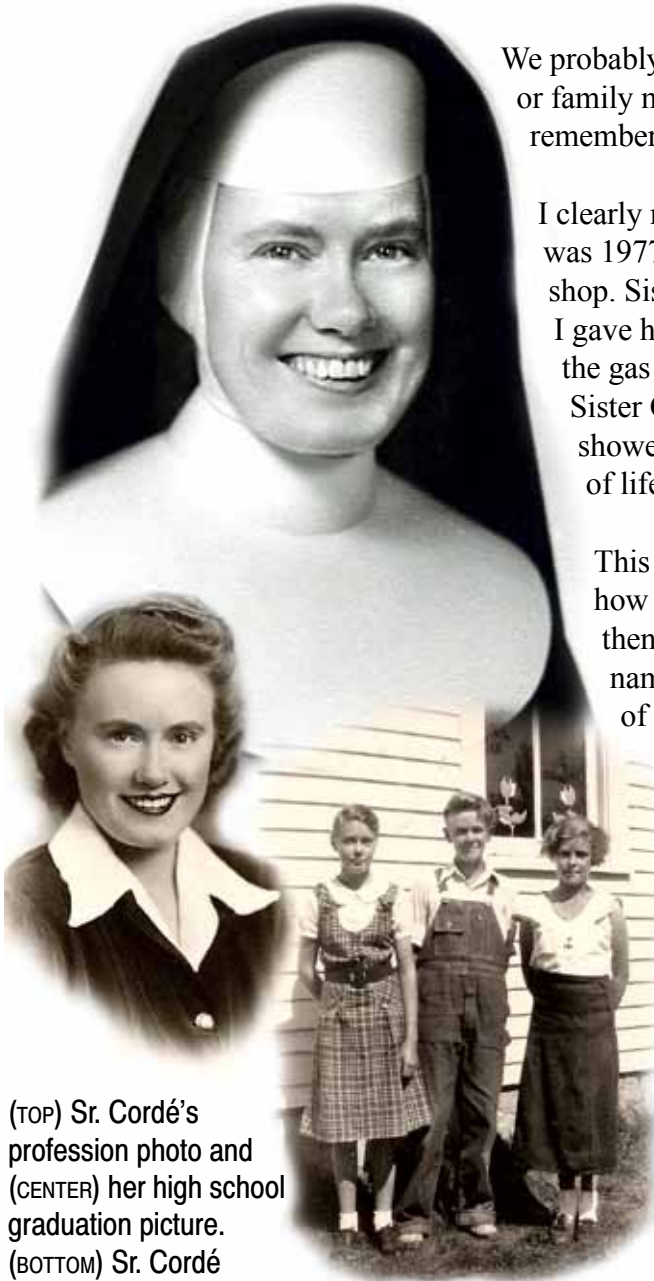
We probably all hear many interesting stories about how a friend or family member met someone for the first time. And we tend to remember those meetings because of the impact they had on us.

I clearly remember my first encounter with Sister Cordé Rea. It was 1977 and I had driven to North Carolina to teach a workshop. Sister was in charge of the car fleet and when I returned I gave her an air filter that had been changed en route because the gas station attendant had said it was dirty. Lo and behold, Sister Cordé held a lit light bulb in the center of the filter and showed me that the air filter was not very dirty; it had plenty of life left in it!

This is only one of many examples I might relate about how Sr. Cordé gets to the heart of the matter. How fitting, then, that when she became a novice, she received the name 'Cordé' because of her devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Her name is unique because it is not derived from a saint, as is the usual case in receiving a religious name, nor is it a proper name. But with the help of Sr. Albertine Durr in searching for a name, the name 'Cordé' was requested. 'Cor' means 'heart' in Latin.

Sister Cordé Rea was born November 25, 1921, on a farm outside of Holcombe, Wisconsin, the middle child in a family of seven children, two boys and five girls. She was named Mildred but preferred to be called Mili. Her father was a farmer and a carpenter. He built barns and houses and other structures. Her mother had been a teacher before she married, and a family story recounts that Pike's Peak in Colorado had been named for her mother's uncle.

Sister Cordé went to a one-room country grade school for grades one to eight, and, depending on the season, she walked or skied the little over



(TOP) Sr. Cordé's profession photo and (CENTER) her high school graduation picture. (BOTTOM) Sr. Cordé (left) was one of only three students in her 8th grade class at Buck Creek school in 1935.



Mili Rea as a postulant in 1950.

two miles each way. Near their farm was a beautiful trout stream that ran a mile to the Chippewa River. From this stream she caught many beautiful brook trout while she was growing up, and she still fishes to this day whenever she has the chance.

Sister Cordé said, “When I was 13 and in the 7th grade, I had polio. I missed three months of school and then took the 7th and 8th grades together. No doctor was helpful. To alleviate the pain, my mother took flour sacks and sewed them into the shape of long cylinders, probably five to six inches in diameter. She filled these with shelled corn, put them in the oven to heat them, and then packed them around my legs to alleviate the pain.”

When Sister Cordé was in the 8th grade, she wrote to the superintendent of schools for help in finding a family with whom she could live and work for room and board while attending high school. After everything was arranged, she told her parents that she was going to attend high school in Chippewa Falls. In the summer, she picked wild raspberries and blackberries and sold them for 10 cents a quart to earn some money for school needs.

Her work for the family in Chippewa Falls consisted of taking care of two children, cooking and cleaning. All of this was in addition to going to school and doing homework. She missed her own family a lot, especially in the summers when she couldn't go home because of her work obligation.

Sister Cordé graduated from Chippewa Falls Senior High in 1940 and started an office job that summer with the Farmers Home Administration (FHA) which gave real estate and chattel loans to farmers. After three years in this position, Sister Cordé asked for a transfer to the War Department, specifically the Army. She was sent to Seattle for one month and then to Prince Rupert in British Columbia where she did clerical work for two years. From 1945 to 1950, she went back to the Farm Security Administration in Rhineland and Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin.

Who could imagine that an appendectomy would be the catalyst for a religious vocation? While in the hospital, Sister Cordé met Father Louis Dunningan, OFM. Through this meeting she became interested in the Catholic faith. Later Monsignor C. W. Gille in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, gave her instructions, and she was baptized on June 13, 1946.

After meeting the sisters in Necedah and experiencing a very pleasant visit with Mother Madeline Heimann, who told some jokes during their time together, Sister Cordé asked for admission into the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi. She entered the postulate in February of 1950.

Always willing to learn new skills, Sister Cordé ventured into areas such as gardening and car maintenance. She said that as a kid her gardening experience was limited to weeding as a result of bribing by her brother. Later she would learn by doing how to grow a garden. One memorable learning experience for her was that, after the first picking of green beans, she pulled up all the plants only to learn that they would keep bearing! The next year she had several pickings from her patch of green beans.

Where did her interest in cars come from? After graduation from high school, the first car she bought was a maroon Impala which she nick-named “Sweater Girl.” But after accidentally driving into a pole, she had to buy a second car. Later in community, Sister Cordé was put in charge of filling requests for the use of a car by the sisters.

She learned how to do minor car repairs from the brother of one of our sisters. A ramp at the side of the power house on the Motherhouse grounds enabled her to do oil changes. When a car went in for maintenance or repair, she would watch the men work, and they would give her tips and advice, sometimes sending her out to buy a part at a better price than the shop could offer. Sister has a certificate from General Motors for a mechanics class.

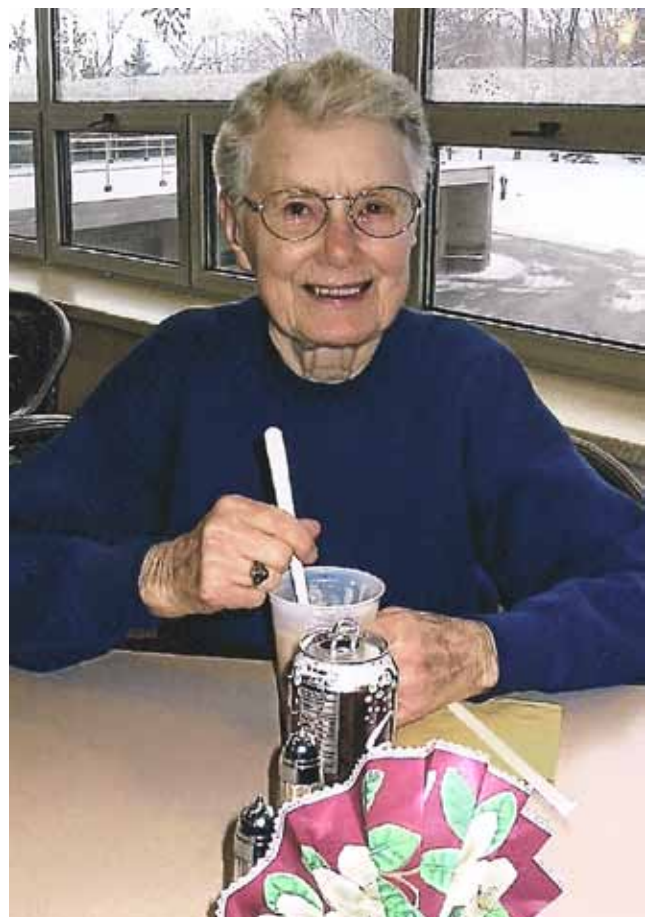
One of her success stories with the cars has to do with driving a car back to Milwaukee from Palos Park, Illinois. The condition of the car was such that, if she stopped, the engine would die! So the nearly 100-mile trip was made successfully without a stop by employing maneuvers such as going around a block to avoid stopping for a red light, and on the open road, it meant staying in the right lane doing 35 to 40 miles per hour.

Sister is pictured here babysitting sheep with Sr. Mary Francis Heimann near Verona, Wis.



ABOVE: Sr. Cordé at her retirement party in 1996.

BELOW: Sister enjoys a party at Clare Hall in March 2011.



In retirement, Sister Cordé continues to do some gardening and fishing. For many recipients of her emails, she forwards pertinent information on current issues that impact poor persons, inequality in our society, and other topics. Or they may be inspirational or humorous. Conversations with her center around significant topics that are informative and interesting. Her interests in life are boundless.

Sister Cordé's last position in active ministry was in the finance office of the congregation. At that time, she was well aware of the retirement needs of the sisters. As the number of retired sisters increases, the monetary need also increases. If you would be able to help with a financial donation, Sister Cordé and all of our retired sisters would be very grateful. None of them wants to be a burden, and with your help, they will be much more at peace. And peace is at the heart of the matter.

May you know God's generosity in your life. We are very grateful for your generosity.

In St. Francis and St. Clare,



Sister Marcia Lunz, OSF

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**From a Franciscan Postulate magazine – May 1950**

*Description of Mili Rea, later known as Sr. Cordé*

“The Postulant with the turned-up nose and flying fingers,” is a fit description of Mili Rea from Holcombe, Wisconsin. Mili is busy during the day in the various offices of Cardinal Stritch College, but relaxes in the evening by typing assignments for her sister Postulants. This heaven's gift of swiftness to the Postulate became acquainted with the community through the mission at Necedah, Wisconsin.

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# Reflection

by Sister Cordé Rea  
March 14, 1955

Each day is a passing page in the Book of Life for each of us. Each day tells part of the story, the conclusion of which may take a long time in arriving at, or which may unexpectedly stare us in the face before we are aware that we have reached the end.

We are all printers and print a page a day in this Book of Life. Some of us do a good job of printing, some not so good. Some of us have good days and bad days in our pages of printing.

But we are all really apprentices in this business of printing. Each day should teach us to do better the next. When our trade has been learned, and our Book printed, then the Master will review our work that we may receive a grade. Some of us have printed short stories, some modern thrillers, some a book of a Saint, others just mediocre books. But as we have printed, so shall we be graded.



As Franciscan women with a commitment to caring for all of creation, the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi use environmentally friendly or post-consumer paper and soy ink whenever possible.

