

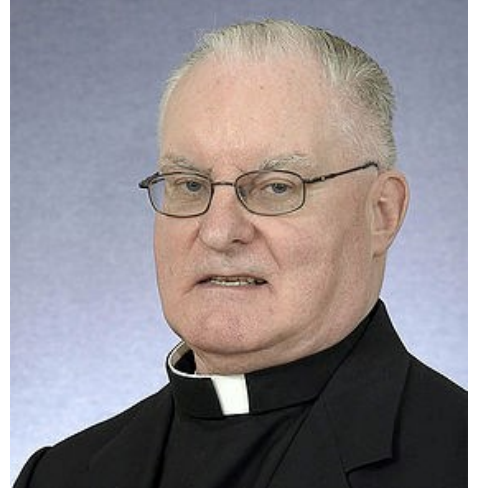
NOTRE-DAME-DU-CAP PROVINCE - MONTREAL

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Francis G. Morrisey

Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate

1936 – 2020



Francis Morrisey – Frank to his friends – was born February 13, 1936 in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. He was the eldest son of Edward J. Hodgson Morrisey and Lucy Rita Coady. His father, a graduate of St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, had chosen a military career and at the birth of this first son held the rank of colonel. The family will have four more children, three boys and one girl. In 1939 his parents left Charlottetown for Ottawa because of the outbreak of the Second World War and his father's position in the Army Command, which was headquartered in the federal capital. Young Francis was only three years old at the time.

1. Years of training

Most of his childhood was spent in Ottawa and, consequently, his formative years were spent there, first with his family and then in the schools he attended. It was a well-to-do family, able to provide all its members with a comfortable but at the same time well-regulated living environment, as the presence of a father who had made a career in the army suggests. It should be noted, however, that after the war, like many of his colleagues, he joined the public service, where he enjoyed a fruitful career.

In terms of his primary and secondary education, Francis attended St. Theresa's School, which was part of the Ontario Catholic school system, from 1941 to 1947, and the University of Ottawa High School from 1947 to 1951. The latter choice deserves an explanation. First of all, he owes it to his father. Not only because it was a Catholic school, but also because it was possible to study in French, which was his father's fervent wish, even though his son was totally ignorant of the language and would have to work very hard at it. What his father did not say, but certainly thought, as did many senior civil servants at the time, was that the day was not far off when you would have to be bilingual in order to reach the top echelons of the civil service. One can only admire the foresight of this father who had the future of his children at heart. Francis therefore did his secondary school studies in French, as well as his undergraduate

university studies. In 1955, he obtained his first two university degrees, a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Philosophy.

It is at this time that he thought of becoming a religious. The community he preferred, unsurprisingly, was the one he had got to know at the University. He knew that his parents would have preferred that he become a diocesan priest, but feeling attracted to a teaching career and, above all, increasingly at ease with the French language, he decided to apply for admission to the Oblates of the St. Joseph Province, to which the University of Ottawa belonged. Based on testimonies gathered from various sources, but especially from Oblates who knew him at the University, as well as on what Francis said about himself in his application, he was accepted at the Richelieu Novitiate which he entered in the summer of 1955.

It is worth mentioning here the description of Francis by an Oblate from the University who obviously knew him well and could have been the one to whom he owed his vocation. The Oblate in question begins by underlining the quality of the family environment in which Francis grew up, a very Christian environment with an excellent reputation. With regard to Francis himself, he first emphasizes what he considers to be his strong points: his seriousness, altruism, docility, constancy, intelligence which he considers above average, his talent for hard work, his good judgement, and his piety, which he considers personal and thoughtful. On the other hand, he reports a certain shyness on his part which could explain why he sometimes tended to stay away from the group or groups to which he belonged. The author in question concludes that the Oblates would be well advised to accept this choice candidate. And he takes the liberty of adding the following as an additional argument: "The fact that he enrolled and passed the French course when he was completely ignorant of our language proves that he possesses an uncommon strength of character." Those of us who have known Frank closely can only agree with this description.

In mid-August 1955, Frank entered the Richelieu Novitiate. He made his first vows there the following year on August 15th. Here is what Father Paul Bazinet, novice master, had to say about him. At the outset, he feels it is good to point out certain peculiarities of the family environment in which Frank grew up: a well-regulated, rather severe environment, where everything is accomplished quickly and well. Frank would have learned there to be independent and self-sufficient. However, he feels that he remains young in character and that he will have a long way to go to achieve the high ideal he seems to have set for himself. The letter that Frank gives to Father Bazinet on the eve of his first vows is not without interest in this respect. Frank states: "I want to give myself entirely to the work of the Congregation." He adds: "I do not like half-baked things." One can easily imagine Father Bazinet's reaction.

When he arrived at St. Joseph's Scholasticate, where he was going to prepare for his perpetual vows and priestly ordination, he was asked to enroll in the third year of philosophy, which he would have gladly done without. As his superior at the time, Father Eugène Marcotte, explained, since he was not a speculative person, Francis did not see what profit he could get from that year. Father Marcotte himself may have thought likewise. But Frank obediently enrolled as requested in the degree program, probably devoting only a little of his time to it, other tasks considered far more "useful" being preferred, so that he barely passed the end-of-year exams. This, however, was fully acceptable to Father Marcotte who, it should be stressed, held in high esteem this young scholastic whom he got to know a little better each day. Above all, he found him remarkably gifted for organization, meticulous and methodical, expeditious

and persevering, and he added: “of boundless dedication.” This last trait will be repeated often in the evaluations of his various superiors.

Because of his young age and the fact that he had already completed two years of philosophy before entering the Oblates, in 1957, after only one year spent at the scholasticate, dedicated, as we have seen, to philosophy, he was sent to the College of Rouyn, where, like so many other scholastics at the time, he fulfilled the role of regent, which included many tasks, including that of teacher. Father Jules Bélanger, rector of the Collège, in his portrait of Frank at the end of the year in Rouyn, takes up much of what others had said before him, but insists above all on the fact that he could not say no and that he had warned him about this, fearing that he might at times overstep the mark with all the risks that this could represent. We shall see later that these risks, in Frank's case, were very real and that he will pay the price at certain moments in his life as an Oblate. Father Bélanger also points out that in his spare time, Frank had taken it upon himself to classify the archives of the Collège according to the model provided to him by Father Émilien Lamirande, whom he had known at the scholasticate and with whom he had been a faithful collaborator at the Deschâtelets Archives. It should be noted that he will do so again as soon as he returns to Ottawa. To classify, to put in order: we recognize here another striking trait of his personality.

On his return to Ottawa in 1958, he began his theological studies, and the following year, on September 8, he took his final vows. On September 23, 1961 he was ordained a priest, an ordination for which an indult was required from Rome because he was not yet of age. Having completed his theological studies the following year, he received an obedience for Sedes Sapientiae, the seat of the Ecclesiastical Faculties, where from 1962 to 1963 he did the Pastoral Year that was required at the time of the young priests, and then, unsurprisingly, the following year became secretary of the said Faculties.

2. An academic career

Many remember the dexterity with which he performed this function and, above all, the phenomenal memory with which he was gifted as evidenced by the teaching staff, support staff and especially the students who dealt with him at the time. In 1966, a new obedience, this time for the University Seminary, where he was a member of the staff until 1989, dividing most of his time between accompanying the seminarians and teaching. In 1965 Frank had enrolled at the Faculty of Canon Law, where he obtained the bachelor's degree, the licentiate and finally the doctorate in 1971. He did this while at the same time fulfilling the function of Registrar of the University. Those who lived with him quickly understood that he had found the path that best suited his talents and expectations. What followed would show that this was indeed the case.

In 1970 he became a professor at the Faculty of Canon Law and two years later Dean, a position he held until 1981. He was greatly appreciated by his students, who never forgot the abundant lecture notes in French and in English that he regularly gave them, and which – perhaps they didn't know it – he had typed by himself with two fingers and at a speed worthy of experienced typists. He became known fairly quickly outside the University through the numerous articles published each year in one or the other specialized journals in the field of canon law, or even theology, and then increasingly through the papers given at congresses

organized by the Canon Law Societies in many countries, as well as through the lectures offered to wider audiences on subjects of greater interest to them, and last but not least, perhaps above all, through the expertise he brought to innumerable religious communities at chapters or other types of meetings dealing with both their present and their future. Also worthy of mention is the fact that he was a founding member and then the first president of the Canadian Canon Law Society, and he was for many years a consultant to the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts and to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life in Rome.

3. Retirement years

Having reached retirement age in 2001, he continues to teach one course or another from time to time, but he devotes himself especially to his role of adviser to religious communities, but also and increasingly to bishops, priests and members of religious institutes, of lay people who consult him or ask for his help – which every day represent up to forty telephone calls, e-mails or faxes – correspondents whom he answers on the spot wherever he is in the world, because since 2001 he has become a real globetrotter to the great satisfaction of many airlines. It has been calculated that during the latter part of his life he visited some 55 countries.

+ ++

A workaholic, Frank had very little concern for his health, as his self-imposed, in many ways Spartan lifestyle, which contrasted sharply with his princely regard for others, clearly showed. Not knowing his limits, he faced a burnout in the autumn of 1988, which led to what he humorously called a six-month “sabbatical”. Lesson learned? One can doubt it, as is obvious from the years that followed, during which he was hospitalized several times for various health problems, including a cerebral hemorrhage that was almost fatal. At the beginning of May 2020, a last visit to the hospital informed him that he was suffering from generalized cancer. Welcomed at the Palliative Care Unit of the Élisabeth-Bruyère Centre in Ottawa, he died there on May 23rd. He was 84 years old. At the beginning of the same month, the Board of Governors of Saint Paul University awarded him the Eugene de Mazenod Medal “for his exceptional contribution to the University and to the universal Church.”

Our confrere’s ashes were buried on June 11 in the Notre-Dame de Gatineau Cemetery in the lot the Oblates have at their disposal.

Pierre Hurtubise, O.M.I.

September 2020