For Irish immigrants Frank and Catherine (Harper) McDonnell, July 4 became a day on which to celebrate much more than their adopted country. It was the date in 1927 that their daughter Colette, the future Sister Francis Elizabeth, was born.

Frank had come to America from County Mayo, Ireland, while Catherine was from County Wexford. The two met in Chicago, where Frank worked for the Chicago Athletic Association, an exclusive men’s club, as a chauffeur. Apparently, when notables came to the club from elsewhere, it was his job to take them around the city.

“Because he had that job we never had to go on the ‘bread line,’” Sister Francis Elizabeth said in her life story, referring to the Depression years of her childhood. “We weren’t rich but we weren’t poor.”

Colette was the oldest child of what came to be five siblings; the others were Francis, Mary Helen, Bernadette, and James. What would have been Frank and Catherine’s fourth baby died before birth.

The family lived in Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish on Chicago’s North Side, and Colette attended the parish school from kindergarten through eighth grade. The school was staffed by the Sisters of Mercy, and Sister Francis Elizabeth recalled that once when she was in eighth grade and stayed after school to help one of the Sisters, the Sister said to her, “Wouldn’t you like to be a Sister when you get older?” Her reply was, “No, I don’t think so.” Her dream was to work in a florist shop.

When it came time for high school, she first attended what was known at the time as St. Constance High School (renamed Cardinal Stritch High School in 1947). But getting to and from school took a long time each day, and the decision was made to switch schools. She chose St. Joseph Academy after a summer visit facilitated by Sister Francis Gerald Broderick, who was related to Catherine.

“We came here and the first person we met was Mother Gerald [Barry],” Sister Francis Elizabeth said in her life story. “… Before I even had a chance to greet her, she said, ‘You’re going to be an Adrian Dominican!’ I thought to myself, ‘That’s what you think!’"

All three McDonnell girls ended up attending the Academy, and it was during her time there that Sister Francis Elizabeth changed her mind about becoming a religious. She had seen the joy the Adrian Dominican Sisters always seemed to have in their lives and knew she wanted to be one of them. And on June 25, 1944, at the end of her junior year and just shy of her seventeenth birthday, she entered the Congregation.

She received the habit and her religious name the next January. After her canonical novitiate year was complete in January 1946, she stayed in Adrian to begin her college studies at Siena Heights College (University) before being appointed to Precious Blood School in Detroit that August. She was at Precious Blood for two years (1946-48) before returning to Adrian to teach at St. Mary High School for the 1948-49 school year.
The rest of her life in ministry was spent in Florida, beginning with helping open the new Little Flower School, along with four other Sisters, in Hollywood. When the Sisters arrived, they discovered that they did not have a suitable place to live and that they had no books and the desks had been held up in Jacksonville until there was enough cargo to send a train their way. “Somehow, this group of determined, committed women managed to make it work and the school grew,” said Sister Rosemary Asaro, Chapter Assistant for the Holy Rosary Chapter, in her eulogy at Sister Francis Elizabeth’s wake service.

Sister Francis Elizabeth was at Little Flower for the 1949-50 school year and then was assigned to Rosarian Academy and St. Ann School in West Palm Beach until 1953. Next came St. James School, Miami Beach (1953-55), Assumption School, Jacksonville (1955-61), and St. Monica School, Palatka (1961-63).

She completed her bachelor’s degree work at Barry College (University), majoring in biology, in 1955, followed by her master’s in school administration and supervision, also from Barry, in 1961. With the latter in hand, she was assigned to be principal and superior at Holy Name School in Gulfport, Florida. Once her six-year term was up, she was sent to be principal at St. Anthony School in Fort Lauderdale, where she also taught one class as well as religious education. She ended up staying at St. Anthony’s for thirteen years, from 1969 to 1982.

When it came time for her to move on, she left St. Anthony’s and was spending the summer at Barry when the pastor at Holy Name Parish asked if she would come back to be the principal again. She did, and remained there for the next sixteen years, from 1982 to 1998.

From August 1998 until May 1999, she was the volunteer director at DePorres Place, the literacy center established by the Congregation in Riviera Beach, Florida. She then did pastoral work at St. Mark Parish in Fort Pierce, Florida, from 1999 to 2006, and finally ended her time in active ministry as a volunteer at Rosarian from 2006 to 2010. At that point, failing health led her to a stay in a care facility in Florida for several weeks before she returned to Adrian to live at the Dominican Life Center.

Sister Francis Elizabeth died on August 26, 2019, aged ninety-two. She had been an Adrian Dominican Sister for seventy-four years.

Sister Rosemary Asaro, Chapter Assistant for the Holy Rosary Chapter, said near the conclusion of her eulogy at Sister Francis Elizabeth’s wake service:

As I reflected on Francis Elizabeth’s life it was obvious how committed she was to the education of children and their families; how strong her commitment was to community living, seen in how flexible she was in so many different living situations; her many, many pictures that speak to her love of her family and friends and how she cherished contact with them (I think she kept every single picture she ever received); her love of the Congregation as expressed in her yearly annals and her willingness to be of service wherever she was needed.

Sister Maria Goretti Browne, who preached the funeral homily, remembered Sister Francis Elizabeth as someone who was prayerful, inclusive, and “able to spot people in trouble. … She loved children – even the difficult teenagers!”
… However, this quiet, gentle person was also a top educator, a librarian, even a principal for many years. She was principal in one place for fifteen years and in another place for sixteen years. You know she had to be good or she could not have stayed at either place so long. But besides that quiet, gentle person, there was another side. Did you ever play Scrabble with her? Then you know!

One of her friends said this of her: that “she was a good Dominican.” What a tribute!

… Francis knew that if she gave herself to Christ, Christ would never fail her. If she remained faithful to him, he would remain faithful to her and eventually take her to be with him. She knew that without suffering there would be no crown. I wonder what went through her mind these past five years. What we are certain of is that she did not abandon God and God did not abandon her. She was a woman of prayer all through her life, so I am sure there was much prayer in that peaceful mind. “If we have died with him we shall also live with him. If we hold out to the end we shall also reign with him.” Francis’ whole life was an example to us of walking worthy of the One to whom she dedicated her whole life. Now, at last, she is reigning with her God.
From left: The McDonnell siblings with their father, Bernadette, Sister Francis Elizabeth, Francis, Mary Helen, James, and Frank (father). From left, Sisters Hyacinth Adelson, Francis Elizabeth McDonnell, and Marie Dolores Neckel at St. Anthony Parish in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 1979.
From left: Standing are Sisters Mary Jean Clemenger, Francis Elizabeth McDonnell, and Ann Rose Kelly with seated Sisters Beatrice Chabie, Margaret Mary McMahon, and Jean Edward Selcke. Sister Francis Elizabeth, center, with her siblings, Francis, Mary Helen, Bernadette, and James.

From left: Sister Francis Elizabeth, center, with two of her fellow Gulfcoast Mission Group members in 1996, Sisters Mary Jean Clemenger and Frances Barfield. In 2011 in West Palm Beach, Florida, are Sisters Patricia Janowicz, Mary Jean Clemenger, Francis Elizabeth McDonnell, and Anne Liam Lees.