Sister Mary Lonergan, OSF

Professed 1961

"I did my best—let God complete it!" —Sr. Mary Lonergan



Sister Mary Lonergan (formerly Sister Mary Aidan) lived a life filled with faith, adventure, curiosity, and a remarkable willingness to follow wherever God called her. Born Mary Bernadette Lonergan in Ballylooby, County Tipperary, Ireland, she grew up in Our Lady of the Assumption Parish. She entered the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia in 1958 and professed her first vows in 1961, beginning a journey that would take her across continents and into the lives of countless people.

A gifted educator, Sr. Mary spent much of her religious life in Oregon, teaching mathematics, serving as a principal, and helping students discover their potential. An exceptional math teacher at Central High School in Portland, she was beloved by her students, many of whom remembered her long after graduation. Years later, one former student who became a successful businessman expressed his gratitude through a generous donation to the congregation's capital campaign in her honor. Her ministry also took her to Zambia, Africa, where she spent approximately 17 years teaching in a school and seminary, and to Guatemala, where she served in pastoral and peace ministry for four years. Her compassionate service included supporting victims of domestic abuse. She later shared her gifts through retreat ministry, administration, and spiritual formation.

One of the most remarkable stories of Sr. Mary's life began just a month after she entered the congregation in Mallow, Ireland. While reading a history of the community, she discovered she had joined the wrong Franciscan congregation! She had intended to enter the Franciscan Sisters for Africa, founded for missionary work in Uganda, but had confused Mount Olivet with Mount Alvernia. Exactly 20 years later, she learned she had been chosen as one of four sisters to pioneer the congregation's first mission in Africa. Looking back, she laughed: "Apparently God knows what God is doing—even if we do not know what we are doing."

Those years of missionary service became among the most meaningful of her life. In a recent interview, she shared that the people she encountered in Africa and Guatemala "taught me what it means to stop—really stop—and listen." She recalled an African headmistress who challenged her to see beyond problems and projects to recognize the person standing before her. It was a lesson she carried throughout her life, discovering that true service begins with listening, understanding, and allowing ourselves to be changed by others.

Sr. Mary received numerous awards and commendations throughout her teaching career, but two meant more to her than all the others. One came from fourth- and fifth-graders who thanked her for helping them love mathematics and have fun learning it. The other was from high school seniors who credited her with helping them believe they could achieve things they had never imagined possible. For Sr. Mary, there could be no greater reward.

A lifelong learner, Sr. Mary delighted in exploring new ideas and engaging in deep, meaningful conversations. She welcomed differing opinions and enjoyed a good debate, always eager to learn from another perspective. Her interests included poetry, history, archaeology, mythology, and the writings of medieval and modern mystics. She loved music, writing, researching, and crosswords, and her adventurous spirit led her to backpacking, caving, pilgrimages, and travel. She was always ready for a new experience, describing her religious life as "a truly fascinating life, meeting fascinating people in fascinating places."

Amid her many travels and ministries, family remained at the heart of Sr. Mary's life. She treasured time with her loved ones and willingly undertook long journeys to be with them, even while ministering in Africa. No distance was too great when it meant being together with family.

Sr. Mary was deeply grateful for the opportunities, encouragement, and friendships she found within her Franciscan community. She credited the support of her sisters and congregational leadership with helping her trust that she could walk by faith through any difficulty or unfamiliar place. She believed that even failures could become accomplishments when met with humor, compassion, humility, and love. Perhaps her greatest hope was that her life reflected what she called "humanity touched by divinity," a continual invitation to grow in Christ and make life better for those whose paths crossed her own.

Sr. Mary, you followed God's call across oceans and continents, touching lives and allowing your own life to be transformed along the way. You did your best, and now, dear sister, may God bring to completion the beautiful work begun in you.

All services will be held in Ireland on Friday, October 30, and Saturday, October 31, 2026.
Her Funeral Mass will be held at Our Lady of the Assumption Church in Burncourt, Co. Tipperary, Ireland, at 1 P.M. Ireland Time, 9 A.M. ET.
Sr. Mary's Funeral Mass will be livestreamed from Ireland.