

Remembering Fr. Frank Morrisey, OMI

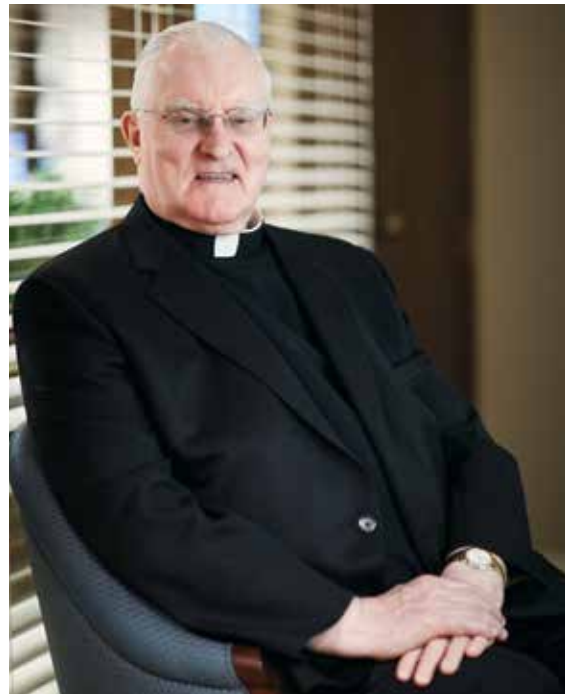
MARY ANN STEINER

One of our most knowledgeable and prolific writers was lost to *Health Progress* when Fr. Francis G. Morrisey, OMI, JCD, PhD died on May 23 in Ottawa this year. Fr. Morrisey wrote his first article for *Health Progress* in 1982, his last in 2016 and logged almost 40 more articles in the magazine within that span of decades. His long bibliography shows that *Health Progress* was just one of many of the publications that offered his scholarship and clarity to its readers.

Fr. Morrisey was a canon lawyer whose knowledge and wisdom about how the ecclesiastical ordinances and regulations of the Catholic Church should be applied in the modern church were unparalleled since Vatican II. That he shared his insights and expertise with several generations of our readers and untold numbers of leaders is among many gifts he shared with the Catholic health ministry. His guidance in the transition of Catholic health care organizations — always a holy and important transition, he believed — from congregations of religious women into public juridic persons was an important aspect of his life's work. As a professed religious himself, his particular expertise in church law that governs religious orders and ministries of the church made him the mentor for religious congregations, Catholic health care institutions and universities that sought his counsel in drawing up new structures of sponsorship within a changing church.

Canon lawyers are not usually associated with adjectives like beloved, jovial, impish, witty and sweet. Fr. Morrisey was all those and more. As keen as his mind, expansive as his knowledge and revered as his wisdom have been recalled in remembrances of him after his death, it is the humanity of the man that mattered most to those who knew and worked with him. We invited some of those people to express their appreciation for Fr. Frank, as he was usually called, and we share a few of them here.

Susan Whittaker, RN, MAHCM, JD, wrote of her interactions with and fond feelings for Fr. Frank over several decades of work for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange and with Providence St. Joseph Health. "Fr. Frank was a soft and gentle voice who spoke vol-



Fr. Frank Morrisey, OMI

umes about church history and its impact on interpreting canon law and structuring transactions within Catholic health care that would maintain fidelity with the teachings of the church in our rapidly changing times. When seeking Fr. Frank's advice, I always loved how he would listen to my description of what we hoped to achieve, and then he would help me reframe the issue around the mission and values

such that we could achieve the desired outcome. In that process I would usually get a theological history lesson that I always welcomed.

“Fr. Frank’s introduction to a presentation in 2016 for CHA’s sponsor formation program wonderfully captures the approach he had to interpreting canon law. He said, ‘While I do not have any pretension of bringing up new concepts, I thought that by putting various notions together in the context of a law that is changing, this might open some windows (and even also some doors) for future possibilities.’ Later in the same presentation, he alluded to these future possibilities when he said: ‘The key point to keep in mind is that there are many ways of being “Catholic,” and no one approach can claim to be exclusive of the others.’ ‘In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places’ (John 14:2), he reminded us.

“Over my 35 years in Catholic health care, Fr. Frank came to know how I loved learning about theology and canon law. When I excitedly shared with him in 2009 that I had been accepted to the Master of Arts in Health Care Mission program at Aquinas Institute of Theology, he congratulated me and then asked when I would pursue a degree in canon law. I told him I was hopeful that he would modify the program at St. Paul University such that most of it could be taken online. He worked with others to make that happen; certainly, he is remembered as a teacher who viewed his calling much as he did the practice of canon law — one that must change with changing times.

“And who can forget that Fr. Frank never sent anyone a bill for his invaluable service?

“I think we have all wondered what Catholic health care would be like if we didn’t have Fr. Frank to call. Thankfully, his quiet guidance was so powerful, it will remain with us even though he has moved on to more heavenly pursuits.”

Sr. Suzanne Sassus and Sr. Kit Gray, both former general superiors of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, met to remember and celebrate Fr. Frank Morrisey and his 30 years of work with them, their congregation and its health system. They sent us the following tribute.

“As we experienced him, Frank was a man comfortable with himself, very even-tempered and totally dedicated to the good of individuals, ministries and institutions of the church.

“Frank was a good listener who responded very quickly to our needs as he worked with us through various health care decisions: a merger of a Catholic and Methodist hospital in Texas; the development of a PJP to sponsor St. Joseph Health System;

and the establishment of Providence St. Joseph Health. He was a true companion on the journey.

“Both of us deeply appreciated Frank’s pastoral approach and application of canon law. He explicitly stated that canon law and its interpretation ought to be in the context of moral theology, and he began his consultation work with questions about what and why you wanted to do something and then proceeded to work on how to achieve that purpose.

“Frank’s work with religious congregations and their health care systems around the world definitively shaped Catholic health care.”

A GUIDING PRESENCE

In June 2019, Fr. Morrisey was given the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Catholic Health Assembly in Dallas. As preparation for his acceptance speech, he took seriously the request that he write a letter to his younger self from his current vantage point. He reflected on his youthful disappointment at not being allowed to become a missionary and being directed to study canon law instead. But at this late date in his career, he said: “I have learned over the years that it is of little avail to tell people: ‘You cannot do this or that. It is against Canon Law!!!’ There are, of course, times when what is being proposed does not have a solid doctrinal base, and cannot be accepted. However, a canonist’s role consists in trying to open some windows, and find other possibilities — in the line of what people were looking for, but within the parameters of church teaching.

“So, at the end of this letter, my message would be: do not be afraid. There is a tomorrow, although we have no idea what it will hold. Let all of us do our utmost to be involved in shaping this tomorrow — which will soon be here. Protecting the dignity of the human person at all stages of life must be a hallmark of our ministry, for it is in this that we ‘find the words of eternal life’ as Christ taught us.”

Fr. Morrisey usually ended his letters and emails with a tagline that his friends and followers used to keep track of him. He’d sign off with, “Saving souls in Dublin,” or Kenya, Rome, Canberra, Los Angeles, or wherever he happened to be. To anyone who didn’t know him, it may have read as the flippant signoff of a world traveler. But in fact he was carrying out his mission according to Canon 1752: “*Salus animarum suprema est lex*” (Saving souls must be the supreme law). Francis G. Morrisey found his way to being a missionary after all.

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