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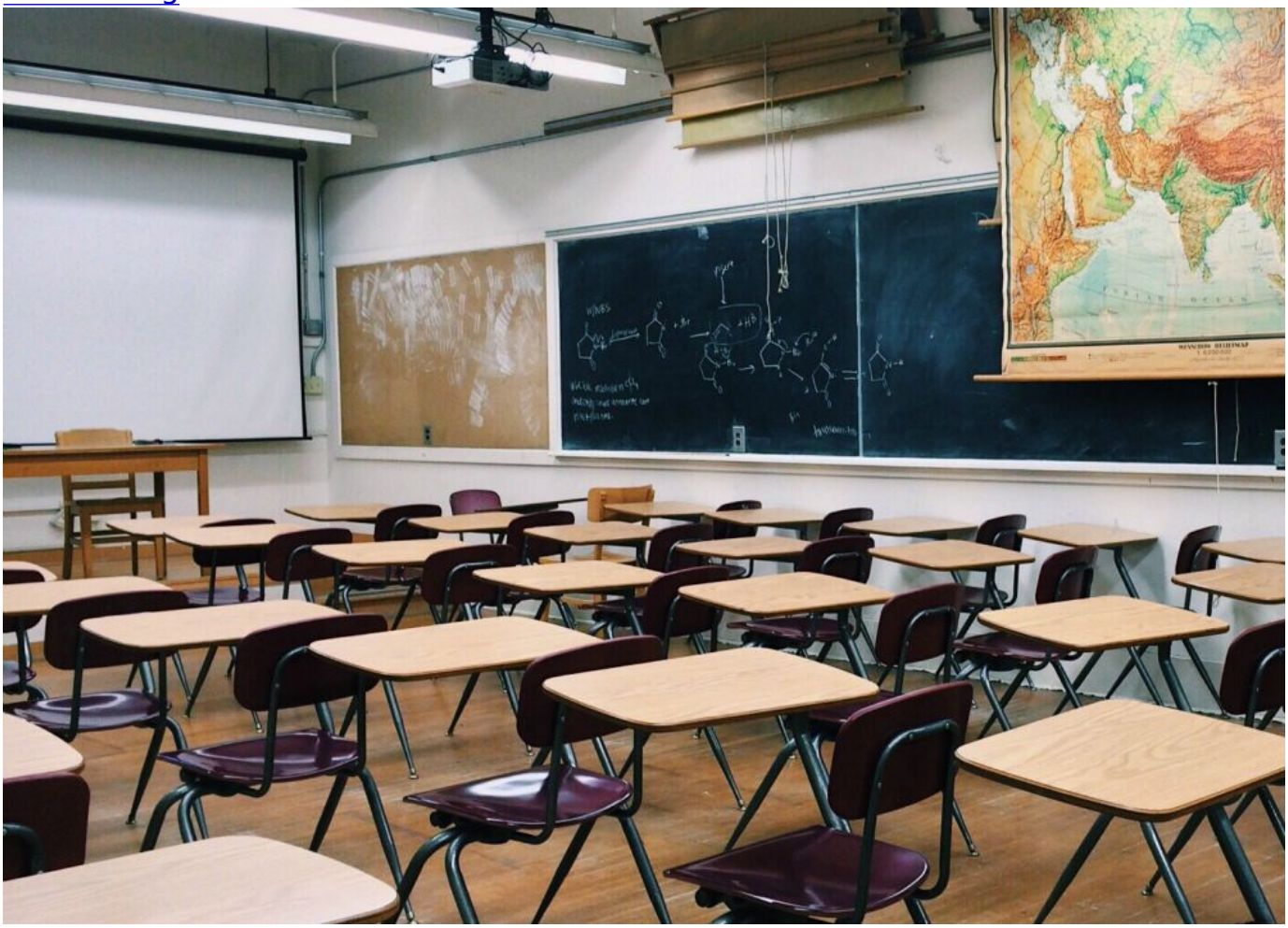

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by Sr. Francine Dempsey

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Neither stiff-starched wimple, long black habit, love of study, nor a brand-new English Bachelor of Arts degree protected an introverted 22-year-old sister on her first assignment: teaching science and geography to 45 eighth-grade boys segregated by sex from their female counterparts at an inner-city parochial school.

Science? Of course. My high school science grades were 34, 64 and 79.

Geography? A new subject in the curriculum. No textbook. No wall maps. Vintage purple ink from an always-breaking-down mimeograph machine.

Did I mention that I had zero practice teaching, zero educational psychology courses?

Day one, I stand at the bottom of the school steps as sister principal lines up a gaggle of uniformed students behind me. O, the mountain I start climbing that day! Sing it, Sister.

Taking my measure, my street-smart eighth-graders call me not Sister John Constance but Francine, put doodles instead of answers on tests, talk, walk around, yell out the window, drag chalk along blackboards, do God knows what in the cloakroom.

Every day a new game of "Make Sister Cry."

In January, my entire seventh-grade religion class flunks the diocesan religion exam. I called Sister Rosemary, teaching that subject at Sacred Heart.

"All my kids passed the exam. Easy one, actually," she said.

Everyone. Easy.

"But, Sister," my red-faced superior/principal shouts at me the next day, "*no one* fails religion."

She isn't comforted when I defend myself by saying no one told me there was a religion syllabus, that I taught religion with my heart. She simply changes my students' current grades to their sixth-grade ones. Thank you, dearest, kindest Sister Ann Therese, for saving my life.

Almost.

That June, just before the last day of classes, news leaks out that the diocesan school office will review the eighth-grade science exams: no switching grades this time.

"Sister, do your students know their science?"

"The girls' class [angels in comparison with my boy monsters] some; the boys, nothing."

For two days, both eighth grades squeeze into the kindergarten classroom. Father pastor stands guard in one back corner, sister principal in the other, while I teach the science syllabus from start to finish.

At least I learned something that year — but no one ever asks me why we always see the same side of the moon.

My attempt to teach children of poverty-trapped families in Albany, New York, failed because of my middle-class origin, my ease of learning, my ignorance of the learning and living struggles of my seventh- and eighth-graders.

That was "Failure 101."

Now let me tell you about "Success 101."

As my first year of teaching went on, I eventually could neither eat nor sleep nor laugh. During supper, especially during silence meals, I would sometimes simply sit and cry.

In response, my superior, a caring woman but one still in the worldview that psychology was suspect, threatened me with a trip to a "head doctor."

Under my breath I replied, "I'll go if he will give me something to make me sleep."

Finally my undiagnosed depression and emotional and physical exhaustion hit me so hard that, lying in my bed, sleepless once again and thinking about showing up one more time for my daily torture session, I pulled a large scissors from my sewing box. For an instant, I thought about plunging it into my chest. Immediately frightened to my core, I rose from bed and moved the scissors as far away from my reach as I

could.

I had a dream. I'm unsure if it was that same night or later on. I stood in the center of a circle of people. One by one, I recognized them as people who loved and cared about me: family members, even my father who had died the year before, only 50 years old, and about whom I dreamed almost every night; friends from college and from formation; childhood and school friends. All stood side by side in a wide circle, facing me.

One by one they turned away until a sole figure remained. It was God. I remember so clearly those dream images and God's giving me a silent message: "I am your strength." God was my strength. Somehow, for the first time, I knew that my students, so poorly taught by me that whole wild year were, as I was, in God's hands. I and my failure were not the be all and end all of their lives. Or my life. God was and always would be.

I have never doubted that God was real in my dream that night.

And if I recognized my own humanity that night, I also recognized the humanity of the sisters I have met in 60 years of religious life. In a short story, "Remnant," I wrote a "Litany of Tribute" to the human beings we are:

Blessed are you workaholics, blessed are you woolgatherers; blessed are you prophets, blessed are you psychotics; you isolates and you merrymakers; you homosexuals and heterosexuals; vegetarians and junk food freaks; chapel addicts and TV addicts; Shakespeare buffs and Harlequin buffs; alcoholics and abstainers; lovers and haters.

[Sr. Francine Dempsey is a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, Albany, New York. She is a retired educator, longtime justice advocate and a contributor to NCR's Global Sisters Report.]

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