

September 9th, 2015 – Sister Norma Rocklage speaking with Professor Mary Ellen Lennon at Marian University, Indianapolis.

Abbreviations

SNR: Sister Norma Rocklage

MEL: Mary Ellen Lennon

MEL: This is Mary Ellen Lennon at Marian University, on September ninth, 2015, and I am sitting with Sister Norma Rocklage. I am so happy to be here, Sister. Would you like to introduce yourself?

SNR: Yes, I'm Sister Norma Rocklage, and I am a member of the Oldenburg community for which I have been, as of yesterday, sixty-four years, a Franciscan Sister. And have, can truthfully say that I have very grateful that I made that decision, although because of my closest with my family prior to when I came it was a very difficult decision to make.

I grew up in St. Louis, Missouri and who was the second of eight children, I grew up during the Depression and we often talk about the fact that we were poor but we didn't know we were poor, and because of that we never lacked anything. And we had so much love but we never got to go on vacations, we never got brand-new clothes, we could go, we had hand-me-downs from other people. We had little day vacations of some sort, but we often talk among ourselves, we don't know how mom and dad did that.

And when I think about where I am now in the community after sixty-four years, and what has given me life, has giving me joy, has been the ability to serve people, and learning how to do that. Really start it with my mom and dad, you know. As I said my dad held down a job and a half to raise us eight children, during the Depression. But mom and dad always let us know that other people came first. And so sometimes if we were having lunch and the doorbell would ring and the beggars at that time used to come to the back door, sometimes we would think we could go see what we could put together and mom would say, well let's give them something from the table, we always did that. Sometimes we didn't get fresh fruit all the time, but if that's all we had to offer them beside the sandwich that's what they got.

So it sort of it was just like part of this is what you, do and then I went to a Catholic school for twelve years but in which our Sisters had taught the Oldenburg Franciscans, and when I think back what really attracted me to them was the fact they seemed so joyful, they seemed so good, and they also seem to be giving as I reflect now. I didn't know what that was, it was a Franciscan charism but I was kind of catching on to it.

And again the first time I thought of entering the community when I was in the first grade, but all little girls wanted to be like the Sisters in the first grade, that just way it

was. But when I was in the fifth grade I had a dream that I was teaching school, and I was dressed as a sister and I woke up and thought, I'm gonna be a Sister. And I shared that with my mom and dad and they said um-hm, they weren't—Meanwhile my brother who was two years older than I went away to a minor seminary.— studied for priesthood, and I knew they were happy for him, but I during the four years that he was gone he came home every summer and so forth, I still thought about being a sister but, the part of thinking I'd leave my brothers and Sisters and my mom and dad, and might not get to see him very much kind of tore at me. Because at the time I entered you never got to go home except when your parents died, not when they were sick. And I wished my brothers became priests. Well I had four brothers, and I pray they all became priests for the wrong reason, because I, if I had shared I wanted to go home—

Well in my senior year of high school we had a high school retreat in January, and we were supposed to talk thinking about what God was calling us too and I if that kept nagging at me but I kept looking at my classmates and it was a small class, thirty-eight and that she'd be a good one, she'd be a good one, so I'd be some, God, give the vocation to her, give them whatever that was you know. But deep down I knew this what I was going to do. So I said to my mom and dad, they were fine, if that's what I wanted to do, that's what I could do. But and I made all the preparations to come, but that summer, it like every time that would did things with the family I kept thinking I don't know if I can do this, I don't know if I can do this. And in fact I had gone to the Academy boarding school in Oldenburg and won a scholarship, and now I would never recommend that for high school kids ever ever ever, because you you were away from their family at times, you shouldn't. But I think God had me do that because I don't think I could have made the break without having had the experience first, because even my senior year when I had been elected president of the school and I knew that in June in May when I left I was made Christmas school, I cried when I left home because I was going to not see him again until Thanksgiving or Christmas. So I know that if I hadn't had four years of practicing saying goodbye there's no reason ever that I would be able to have done it. And the night before I left for the convent which was on December eighth, 18— 1951, well all my little brothers and sisters were crying because I'll never see her again, and I was crying, and so I said to my dad, you know maybe I my brother was still in the seminary and I was the oldest baby I should just stay at home and maybe get a job and and help support the family. Well he said, I have raised you for seventeen years and I have done very well without you having—he took it very hard when I left he cries but just everybody else at the train station, but don't you dare think you're gonna stay, you know that was my last chance if I thought maybe if he said she ought to stay that I won't go. Then when we got to the train station, well everybody was crying and my dad said if you all don't stop this, we'll have to take her out on a boat, instead of on he was being really, really tried to make it but my mother told me that when he cried when he got home, too. But it was just a heart-wrenching for us who lived at a distance.

Now those who enter the convent whose parents would live close by they got to see everybody for a month, once a month. But I didn't because you know I lived in St. Louis and Oldenburg was a long time away. And so there were those times of homesickness but in all honesty I could say deep down I knew, this is what I was, where I belonged. And I, I came for the reason try to become very holy and I soon found out that the reason for coming to the community— was really to live in community and to serve with other people. It wasn't me and God, it with me and everyone else. But as we learned about the Sisters in our history of our community, again that deep down feeling that wanting to serve, really became very dominant in what I really like, and that in fact we use the term when we were sent out to do work, you're being missioned, and so no matter where you went you are being missioned.

Well my first year as a postulant, because they knew me from the Academy I was only there a month and I was already sent out to help out for us, some being sick, and so at that time we wore black dresses and we were a black veil but you could see through, and so I became the sister whose hair shows. Four weeks at one place and six weeks in another, at teaching it somebody had me showed me how to use the books and so forth primary grades. And then the second semester of my postulant year I stayed back in Oldenburg. But again I had gotten a taste of not only teaching which I really think I loved, but in both places I was exposed to families who were having problems and although I never thought we Sisters would do anything much about them except listen, that already was inside me.

I think this is something I know I'm gonna like, because we were very not only strict with family but you couldn't go out after six p.m. by you couldn't go out by yourself. The —he had given us rules as though we lived in a cloister, and the cloister is a type of community living where you spend the time mostly praying and you know maybe altar crosses so forth, but you just don't go out. You don't do active work, people could buy the groceries for you, you tell them what they need. You know it's very much enclosure, like a St. Clare had, and we're almost making us pretty much like this except that we can go out and teach, so you get all these rules and regulations. So if parents might have shared something with you ever, they did it for you to pray for them but they never expected you nor did I ever expect that I could put hands on work. Yet it's just different and so I'd say for the first fifteen years of my life I you know I taught first graders and second graders for three years at a little country parish at North Vernon and just fell in love with the first and second graders.

My first year I had fifty-six first and second graders and they—but at that time just to show how things have changed, of the fifty-six children fifty-five of the mothers were home mothers, stay-at-home mothers. Fifty-five of the children had the same biological moms and dads, there was only one woman who was divorced, and she— and fifty-six of the parents including the divorced mother thought the teachers were correct. So I mean there was that we had one meeting a month it was in then I was sent to a little place in Portage, Missouri and that time I got to see my family a little bit closer but of

course they were you know if they were only about an hour to St. Louis. And I had three grades and kind of learned there from others, how you respond to the needs of others.

But I began to see even as a young age, that there were differences in like a little town like North Vernon, and the country places. And part of it was that some of the children in this country places parents have never had beyond the eighth grade you know, and some of them had high school, but there were kind of cultural poverty you know had to kind of dealt with. And then I got a call saying that it was going to go to St. Louis University and study for my masters and doctorate, but I was going to do it while teaching in an inner-city school. So I taught for four years at Holy Trinity School which is right now in one of the most dangerous parts to St. Louis, and I cannot tell you how much I loved it.

Every afternoon after school I'd go down to study Latin and Greek, but the children in this school just needed us so much you know. I mean on Saturdays they'd be climbing in through the windows to talk with you because they don't think you know, they this school was all of that it was and I had my first year they told me we feel sorry for you that we're going to give you this class because, this was a seventh grade homeroom, they've been the worst class in the whole school and you're gonna have discipline problems and you're studying Latin and Greek so we don't—And so I made up my mind, I'm not going to handle this if they don't behave and so I said to them the very first day, until you proven to me else differently, I will consider you the best class in the school. And honestly they responded. People couldn't believe you know, I would I also was playing at the organ I wasn't — played at the organ— and sometimes I would have to get over to church, with it earlier for me and I'd say alright and you're going to get in line, and I don't I'm going to put you in your honor, I do not want you to be talking. Well they used to knock each other over besides not talking. Any other Sisters were saying to come up, where's Sister Norma? She went over to church early, and she said because she had to get something set up. They I cannot tell you, they were so and I kept saying you're still the best class, you're still the best class.

And it proved to me that when you work with people who everybody else looks down on, but I couldn't have made it if I know—I think is my last semester maybe I had to leave two hours, an hour earlier every day. And the teacher who took my place they were just horrible, and so I had to say to them, you know I'm starting to give up on the fact you're the best because I heard what you did the Sister so-and-so. Well I don't want any excuses, I heard what you to the Sister so-and-so, again they respond and I still hear for them after all these years. I still hear from some of them. Some of them got into trouble when I had them in the sense that they'd be caught shoplifting or they'd be caught—and they people would ask them never big things but you know the police would correct them, and they'd say they gave my name as a character reference. And I remember my superior at that time saying your name is on more police records well it wasn't that much. But I tried to explain though there's not a father in this home and this is what he thought he'd think you know, and they weren't they weren't they were petty things, little

things like stealing coal or stuff like, but that I mean they should not have done it, I'm not excusing them at all for that. But again I felt that there was that it was feeding something inside of me, that this is maybe what we're called to do besides teaching. Well after I got my Masters and Doctorate in four years and then I was told I knew what I was getting ready for, that I had was going to Marian. And when I came to Marian I thought to myself I am going to hate it, I'm gonna hate teaching college, I know I'm going to hate it because I love I had all eight grades, I've had experiences—and you taught the child, you didn't teach the program. And so when I got to Marian even that first night I shed a few tears but the very next morning, one of the Sisters who had taught me and she, up in English department, Sister Rosemarie said, Norma I go every Sunday to the Indiana girl's school, and we try to have Mass for them and we do a good religion class. Would you want to do it with me, go with me? Oh yeah, so my very first day full day here was to be involved in some outreach.

And I would have to say, that for the next I guess four or five years we went every Sunday, to teach kids you know, and hopefully you get a quiet talk teaching and afterwards then I got permission after the first year that I could come on Monday nights and bring some students with me for an hour. And they would meet in their little rec-room and so forth, and so our guys and I could bring guys with me too and we would do like making posters collages and the kids would just talk for an hour. They did more than I did, and I have to say they start making—the kids did—got so much more from them because they expected me as a Sister to say, act a certain way. But with the kind of kids a little few years older than they, they found that was wonderful. So I was able to do that for about seven or eight years, even when I was teaching Latin and Greek and I had done that for five years and then it was the problems on campus, there was a division between the President and the Dean, and a lot of—it was over something totally different, someone had not done well and was going to be removed from that granted tenure.

Legitimately, the Board and the President did with the Dean had said that the Dean got upset with the President and I won't go on all the details on this, but it boiled down to people people think it was all because this professor had adopted a black child. And so we had a tempest in a teapot in 1970, it was, black panthers came on campus and it was just—I just got in touch with something that I knew since I was in grade school. It was like a call to be a peacemaker, and we didn't have damage on campus, we had a frightened, something frightening when they came, but we were eventually able to solve things like I said it wasn't other than relationships being ruptured. But I felt, I really felt called I was one of the probably one of the key people calling us to peace and as a result of that I became the the Dean for Academic Affairs because the Dean and President couldn't work.

Which to a certain extent curtailed what I had liked to do in serving you know because—and I prayed a lot over this but with the exception of thinking that you know what I can do now is maybe kind of share with the faculty and staff what I think could be done and,

I also learned that even though I had been a proponent, we're helping the black people and we don't have racism on campus, I didn't find out that I was racist deep down until one of our older he became a board member too later, older students, he had been in the army and he was black student, came to me once and said you know, Sr. Norma, there's this racist workshop just to help you kind of get in touch with feeling racism, and and we were wondering if you'd like to go to it? And I thought well of course I'll go, I don't need it because I don't have a racist bone in my body. And so I said sure, I'll be a good sport. Well, I wasn't there two hours and I thought you do have racial tendencies, just think they would say such as, if you were walking down the street and you saw a group of black youth coming towards you. And they were black, white on the other side but you feel initially tempted to go on the other side for fear you'd get hurt? And my initial thing was yeah. And if you saw some black students coming into school would you automatically think they probably need more academic help than anybody else because they wouldn't be capable? My feeling was yeah, so I realized that so when we came back on Monday he said, well how was it? And I said, well I didn't know I needed it, but I did. But he always says to me Norma, don't tell people what I said to you, and I said well I want them to know it because he said, yeah, we knew you didn't know but you did need it. And I said it to a lot of people when I mentioned his name then, and I said it was true, I want people to know that you can be without knowing it. I wasn't outwardly, but yeah, I had thoughts about things like that too. So that really made me aware if I continued being Dean that we had paid more attention, we had a group called UBI, United for Black Identity, which we still have but at that time it was very active because there were so many things that needed to be corrected.

Well then in 1974 I was elected to be leader of one of the council members of the congregation and again I swam out of here because by that time I had loved, learned to love Marian enough I'll never come back. And I became a member of one of the first the first time we had full-time counselors prior to that you had the Reverend Mother and the Assistant Mother and then everybody else was counselors and did it part-time. Well by '74 the Sisters had all communities that just begun to pay attention to Vatican II. And what — I came to the council liaison to say what are we going to do to really change? That happened some years before about ten years before, but by the times trickled down and so forth, but one of the things that my feelings of awe, I'm gonna go back, was the fact that in the Vatican documents which we had been studying since 1970, it said that we had to renew ourselves so that by going back to our origins there was number one, but secondly, in order to meet the individual needs of each sister physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and psychologically, I thought what? In 1971 while I was still Dean of Academic Affairs I was told, want you to be in charge of all the younger Sisters in profession, so I had a balance being Dean for Academic Affairs which I love doing the academic work, and I would have loved just to do a lot of creative things but I had it but I also had to take care of seventy-five young Sisters in contemporary profession who are out doing mission work but I would bring in every two months or so.

And trying to see how do you respond to the individual needs and they begin to see how we had not done that before, because everybody it seems like a cookie cutter, everybody did the same thing, and so my feelings at that time were sometimes really torn. I was torn between wanting to give so much to the college because I think we had such potential, but then I knew there was certain amount of time I had a give to the younger Sisters. And so I wanted to really meet their needs, and they were helping me too because they were a lot freer than I was, a lot freer. I always kept the rule perfectly and that's why they chose me to be that one of the teacher decisions. I did, I went overboard.

You can't believe how I went overboard with rule—keep the rule, the rule-book make you a saint. And boy I kept that rule and I did more than any one person because I was gonna be this great Saint, you know. Like we didn't eat meat three days a week, I didn't eat four days a week. We read twenty minutes a day in spiritual direction, I did thirty minutes of it. You know it was all about me being this holy, and so they saw me being such a perfect person keeping silence all the time, she'll be a good one to train the Sisters. Well I think that what God got nervous and thought I can't have—neurotic Norma was around. And so I was said to make a thirty day retreat when you have total silence. And in the the second week I got exposed, the Lord stripped me and let me know that all the things that I was doing to become holy was all for the honor and glory of Norma's holiness.

And that I was judgmental of others, that I was you know I did all these things that everybody else did and I wouldn't dream of saying that I was judgmental but I was. Well I would come in every day to see my director and say, I'm so terrible. And he would respond mm-hmm, never got mad. He said, told me later I didn't know what to do with you but just sit in your pain, which was the best thing, mm-hmm. And I remember the Friday of that week I was kneeling in chapel and thinking I can't I can't be in charge of the under-Sisters when I go back and let me talk I can't, I'm not good, I just I'm just not so self-centered. And maybe I shouldn't even be a Sister because at that time I thought Sister should be holier than everybody else. And I'll never forget this, I felt and heard the words in my heart, Norma, my power is made perfect in weakness. And I literally, I literally felt strength coming through me, and that has become one of my favorite passages and it was the first time that I knew what it meant to be a loved sinner.

I knew I was loved but frankly I thought God should love me, it's horrible to say this, I don't—I wouldn't have questioned why wouldn't God love somebody like me, who keeps all the rules and whose concern for others and god, I can't handle this.—All these things I was doing extra was fine if I did it for the right reasons. And so when I became the director of the Sisters and this was still while I was Academic Dean, they often would say to me Norma you never seem shocked by anything I tell you. And I wasn't, it wasn't because I tried not to be shocked but I really knew. Given different circumstances, there you were Norma, and that really helped me. So that when I became a the director of, elected to leadership, someone else said it to, you know

become director of Sisters, but I began to see that a lot of the Sisters had not felt free to talk about some of the problems they had too, and so I missed being able to have hands on working with the poor, I really did. And I kept thinking, should you really spend your whole time just trying to help Sisters, you know. But I began to realize the more you help Sisters, you help other people.

And then at that time I also had the experience but wanted to the Leadership Conference of women religious, and that is global. It stretched me so much to know that the issues are more than the Oldenburg Franciscan issues and all the places where we went. We had enough issues from things working with the poor and so forth. But to be able to see ways in which before I would have never dared agree honestly, to think our United States was sinful and I began to find out we are doing things that we shouldn't. And not only am I finding out we should be taking some steps we should be speaking out and see I'm never part of my perfection was that you offered it up and you didn't say anything, you didn't.

And I for the first time to get to realize the church is oppressive and I never would have been able to say that before. And so being with these women who had greater global perspectives for the next eight years really was very powerful for me and I became several times the heads of some committees, to be working — when we celebrated our 225th anniversary here in Indianapolis I was a chairperson of that and able to prepare and get people involved in it. And again what I really appreciate knowing was that being in leadership isn't, you have to be very careful, but isn't just being navel-gazing taking care of the Sisters, one has to have the courage and one has to have wisdom and the friends to know how do you stretch them. And how do you listen to them, and I certainly found that with the Sisters the younger Sisters because as I said I was so rule-bound that when I work with them and that helped me working when I was a counselor and I still work with some of them, they would say, but why we do it? Well because we because we always did it, but they challenged, and I had to defend the younger Sisters a lot and I—it's strange like I would never have changed anything what we were wearing before we had the chance to do it, I just wouldn't. But sometimes the Sisters would come in to see me both the younger Sisters and others, and they wouldn't be wearing their veil, or laugh at this, people wearing white collars before we were allowed to. I didn't even recognize this and so afterwards someone would say to me, did you correct them for not wearing their veil? I didn't remember —

Honestly I didn't notice it, I had just been listening to them. Of course that happened to me in grade school. My kids would have their full uniforms and the principal would say, no I really didn't know, if they didn't have them—I just didn't notice things like that. — I would just pay attention to the person and I'm not saying that was good, but I did but again, I learned from the younger Sisters and when I was able to then to share with some of the the professed Sisters the goodness of arguing for Sisters and their way wanting to do things differently, wasn't because they weren't finding their rule but because they were coming from a different area. And way of life and that going back to

the signs of the times, going back to our beginnings when the community wore the ordinary dress of the ordinary person, so if they wanted to change it wasn't it wasn't the habit. That maybe— but I remember as a member of the council speaking I'm talking about the change in the habit, not knowing I was going to I was just speaking contrary to what the former Reverend Mother had said and people came up to me afterwards said, Norma can we have a copy you had a paper in your hand? I said, I was holding on the paper because I was shaking, the skirt and I just got up and said what I needed to say. And so I did. But I think during those eight years that we Sisters were there we were able to help bridge the gap the working on community and to really learn the community comes not when you're all being really quiet and not recognizing elephant in the room and pushing things down. You've really pushed a lot during our eight years to learn to speak up, to share what your feelings are, to know that you have to go through the pain and facing things sometimes if you're never really going to trust one another, you know. You really have to.

And we did a lot of work with communications and so forth and we laugh at it now as we taught people how to say, here's how I feel, but they hadn't spoken up before you know. And so I felt at the end of our eight years that we had kind of laid the basis for us to continue you know that and then even our leadership you know, we had a — when I was on — we had a leader, the Reverend Mother was still Reverend Mother, the Assistant Reverend Mother and then it was the three of us counselors. And we tried to work as a team, but after we left after we moved out we had passed in our council preferences and also the chapters, that we would no longer call the Reverend Mother Reverend Mother, that we would call her Congregational Minister and she would be one of a team. Now Rome had to have one person to talk with, but I think it took us eight years to help people know we are a community, and not just those who have been in a long time have a right to safety, but we all need to do. So I felt felt good about that. And then the Lord led me to become involved with working with young men wanting to be priests, you know at the the Franciscans, and I was the first woman that they know of any religious order, that had a woman coming in to be part of the formation team. And they had observed me for a year working and right after I got office it became part of a retreat group learning—you had to give Franciscan retreats. But I was doing it with the Franciscan friars, and so I became—others did it afterwards but I became the first one on actually on the team that I actually had input whether or not they should make profession and so forth.

But the novice master said these young men have to learn that women played a role in the Church, and we're gonna start right now. And some of the older priests were really upset and I remember Father Joe saying that some priest said, how you going to explain if someone asks you how come how come they're telling her things how come they're talking? We said, well all I'm gonna say is, well she was scrubbing the floor they asked her a question and she's stops scrubbing the floor, starts talking—but then others began doing it too. And then again it, we did volunteer work we went to a poor place once. We—where I really found my service was to help these guys learn the role of

women, to break down some of their prejudices, and to be really honest to help some of them who had joined the order, because they were gay and not because they wanted to jump into bed with someone, but because they didn't feel comfortable with their gayness. And so they want to be with guys, that they were the other guys, they felt comfortable. They really weren't doing, but as I listened and prayed with them and work with it to help them young—that's not going to—that's not a vocation, you know. You can't be escape. And so dealing with those painful things to help them know some of them could accept it—I said you've got to accept the fact that you're gay, I mean that's what it is, and it's God created you that way, but religious life isn't an escape and it was hard sometimes to really help them really know that.

And one of the things I could kind of share, one time when I was working with the younger Sisters I had been talking to a priest whom I admired very much and talking about how I couldn't make them feel better, that sometimes they were in such pain and he said, well Norma, you know what your problem is, and I said am I talking about—I didn't specifically say what their problems are, and he said, you don't like to see people suffer and I said, well of course I don't. He said, get over it. Well then — his idea was she missed her people from pain too soon and they never deal with it, so I had learned with our Sisters too, it's going to take time.

Well I didn't know that I made—I did things with my hands when I talked about it and I would say you have to sit in her pain, and so one day after I had talked to someone, he went outside and he called Paul, I can go for a walk now. And Paul responds, okay, you talk to Norma yet? Did she give you the finger? And he said, yeah. I've—and I said, I have never given the finger to anybody in my whole—how could—he said, Norma you do it all the time, you say sit in your pain. Did Norma make you sit in your pain? So what I'm going to say is it had becomes so much a part of my being so why I learned to talk with my hands behind my back to get over it. But I could tell that funny story now but it explains it. I don't like to see people suffer, I really don't.

And I've had to learn you know after I worked with—I did that for four years, and then was asked to come back again to the community. Being honest— but was that I could avoid pain sometimes in myself and others, by trying to prevent us really facing it, by trying to make it better it sooner than ever. And I realized I can't do that, I have to learn to be more confrontational in a good sense. And so when I came back to the Mother House after I've done this for four years, to replace somebody for a year, I didn't know what I was gonna do after that but then they asked me to come back here in a Marian and become part of a—I became the first mission effectiveness person. And what I had learned from working at community and working with the others and giving retreats was that you know we're all broken people, and one of the ways in which we have to deal with that brokenness is to acknowledge it in ourselves, that's the first thing. And deal with it and then try to help people acknowledge it with one another, and I don't think I was very successful in empowering the virtue of the value of reconciliation because it's really hard, people don't want to. But I've learned more and more that if I can't handle

situations which I had to do as mission effectiveness person, and deal with issues that sometimes I could help with others. And then as mission effectiveness person, it just opened up to me there were so many ways in which I was able to open up the college to working with Latinos, trying to get more Latinos in, working with the homeless, or things if they had done before to try to make it more of an institutional— and so I thought I can't do myself. I don't have the time to do it, but hoping that maybe sometime I would.

And then after a number of years and the President wanted—I was asked not to be mission effectiveness anymore, and that was very painful for me to deal with that. I really thought I'd been a total failure but as I prayed through that and thought what can I do this year, I don't want to birth programs, I don't—. So when I it was just a blessing, I was able to go like for example, I went to Appalachia, one of the poorest areas we work, and I worked there for about three weeks with our Sisters. We really being with the poor, you know. And one of the Sisters had said to me when I got out of office, Norma, I don't know what you're gonna do but I hope you had the privilege of working with the poor because you deserve it.

I'll never forget she loved the poor so much. And so I thought, I wrote to Mary and said Mary, I understand what you mean because I got to work with them. And then I went to St. Louis, Missouri where we have a house but we had – house working with the black people and one of the most dangerous areas. You know the first night I was there, I thought I was hearing firecrackers and I just said is there special feast or something coming up? And they said, Norma, those are guns going off you know. So in that area, but they were like a haven for the black women there, and so I had a chance to do that and then I had a chance to go to Papua, New Guinea. I have a chance to go El Salvador, and spend time there.

So what that year before the President invited me to come back, a little bit of pressure that's okay, I came back. I had had an example of really working with different really really poor people. And so coming back I was no longer Vice President for Mission Effectiveness, and I was not involved in any of the important committees or anything like that. It was to develop your own job, what do you want.

So I developed educational director of educational formation outreach, and I've been able through this that although I miss sometimes being on the key committees and so forth, but I never really do as much as I have done for the homeless had I not been, had this freedom. I never could be all that I've been able to do for and with the Latino people if I had been able to be involved in this. I never would have been able to be the public advocate for people who have no jobs and so forth, and I had the time to do this. I didn't I didn't realize that people see me as an activist but because I don't think what I'm doing. But there has been for me to find new ways to keep responding to I think something that started when I was just a child, that you know, to be really happy and to feel that you're fulfilling what you were called to be. You need to do service to others,

your own Sisters, determine you teach, and then to others who get it to be able to work with. And not to do it to be recognized so forth, but just to do it with people.

And one other thing that I have felt I have grown so much since I've been back here at Marian and particularly the twelve or thirteen years I haven't been in in ministry to office, was to be in touch with so many lay people men and women. And I am so in awe, I am so in awe. Pax Christi meets here once a month, and I just but these persons do have full-time jobs and so forth and there they just enrich me so much, they do. I get so and you know. And then going to Hispanic meetings and trying to help them and they just see what I'm really like, but I'd say other lay people because I'm a lay person in community. They just enrich me and see if I still was in an administrative position I think my which would be right, my call with the administration you know but now I'm not, you know I could do something else. So as I think was thinking about it yesterday on sixty-four years I think good grief, Norma, it's been that long. And I just felt so blessed, I've had so many opportunities of joyfulness, I've had periods of darkness, and learning how to embrace darkness. But learning that embracing the dark, sitting with it you break through to something new you hadn't known before.

And so, in the retreats and workshops and talks that I still give I always hope sometime not to talk about myself, but because I've gone through it to be able to share that with others you know. So that's where I am right now. I hope I haven't talked too long.

MEL: No not at all, thank you, Sister. Do you still have a little bit of time?

SNR: I just want to say is that I also feel that I am growing more and more appreciation of our Franciscan charism, which is, much like Pope Francis says, is to be serving others, and to be doing it with others behind the scenes. I thought about yesterday with Sister Joel. She never sought nor did she receive any recognition for what she ever did. She's like so many of our retired Sisters, who just do so much and they all say, Sister Norma, you're such a gift to the community. You're such a gift you know, people know.

And I think, okay okay I'll accept that. But I'm not more a gift than you, and so again I was praying about it whole weeks when Sr. Joel died, that how many Sisters are like her, who day in and day out. And I think they reach eternity they're gonna find out that they are such a gift. You know Joel used to say, I'm fine and dandy, and I said to her the last time we spoke with her the Wednesday night before we really got a good conversation with her, and I said you know Joel, you always said you're fine and dandy and nobody believes you. And she's kind —, and I say God knows you weren't telling the truth. And she grinned and I said, you know I think when you close your eyes and you open it up in eternity you're gonna hear God say, oh my fine and dandy Joel, welcome. And then you're really gonna know all that you were. You're gonna find out I'm right, I'm not always right you know that, but pretty right this time. And so I think about other Sisters in our community and so I've grown more and more in appreciation of how gifted I have been to be with them. I really do. And their you know their their willingness and it's fine if I'm acknowledged I always say I accept it in the name of our Sisters.

And my favorite my final thing thing would be my favorite passage in our spiritual document is, where there is one sister there is the entire community. There is the church, there is Jesus. And so, when I feel sometimes a little guilty that I've received honors and I'm recognized what I did, because what you do is something that caught the attention of people. But to say, okay but I'm with all the other Sisters who are doing things behind the scenes and so I could be with them too. And I tell them, you know you know your prayer of support, so I hope they know that too but I I just think so many Sisters are, have been it's so easy to think that they haven't done anything, because they've just been who they are. And I—they'll know when they get to eternity just like I know. I used Joel now is an example as someone who's really finding out you know, how much she was and how many people's lives she touched. And I do believe my final thing is I really do believe we touch one another, even after we've died.

I think there's a real bond, and I know I often talk to my mom and dad and like that's my Sisters and brothers so who have to have died. I think they know what's going on. I feel that their presence at times, and I know in the case of my younger one niece who is now ten. When my sister, she's a daughter of my second my sister's second oldest son, who had three—two sons and then they had three miscarriages and then right before she died they were pregnant with little Tori. And she she knew the baby was coming and so but she died in February, and Tori was born in August. But skip ahead two and a half years. One day Tori's outside naming all the flowers that her mother says to her, Tori who told you the name of the flowers? And she said, grandma. She said, oh she did not. Think it's her grandma was here in large when Ben made his first communion, and there weren't any flowers to it. Not that grandma, grandma Clara, and she points to my sister's picture. And my brother-in-law called and said, what do you think? I said I think Clara came and told her what the names of the flowers, and a two and a half year old child does not question. And so I really do, I mean that was just one example to me though I believe—I think, wonder whether she believes it now, but I said, why would she say that? And by the way who would have taught her the flowers? So I think she was there, chalk it up to Clara said she's making contact with her so—I just want to use this example, but a tangible one, but I do believe we touch one another.

And so I grow in my own awareness of wanting to be of service to others but know that those have gone before us have been of service to us, and still are. And I hope that is what we can continue.

MEL: Thank you, Sister. Um, do you have—may I ask you to speak a little bit more? I was wondering, Sister, so much of what you talked about was the power of community. I wondered if you could reflect on your prayer life and either just one moment of prayer or reflecting on how it's changed over your life?

SNR: Sure. When I talk about being a rule-bound person, I would have to say the first fifteen years of my religious life I was very much rule-bound according to my prayer. You said certain prayers and I had certain prayers I wanted to say everyday and I wrestled with God a lot. When I would read in Paul, reads that you have to pray always,

and because my definition of prayer, up into the my fifteen years in religious life was what was in the Baltimore Catechism. Prayer is a lifting of our mind and heart to God. Which is beautiful thing, but I thought, you thought about God. And so I used to argue with God, how do I think about you all the time when I got fifty-six first and second graders. When I have to do this, when I have to do that. I put—Sometimes the only prayer I said when I had my fifty-six first and second graders with God, was don't let me wring their little necks, and I didn't. And then I get disturbed because I pray office. At the end of office I would say I just planned my phonics class, you know how do you pray always.

Okay and then until the turning point was when my father was dying and I went into the hospital, and my mother was sitting there holding my dad's hands. And I, I just felt I didn't want to disturb her. And all of a sudden she looked up and she said, oh I didn't know you were there. And I said, well mom I thought you were praying, she prayed a lot. She said, oh no I guess I should have been. She said I was just sitting here mom and daddy, and thinking of the forty years we had together. And I said, I said no Mom no Mom, that was fine, that was fine, loving daddy. It's perfectly fine. And you didn't have to be praying. But I felt like I was in the adoration chapel when the Sisters would pray before the Blessed Sacrament and they'd be so lost. Well later that day all eight of us were around my father and we said the Litany of the Dying, we said the Rosary for the Dying, and then one of my brothers said, someone told me once that hearing is the last, and we said I heard that too. So my father was known for telling jokes. I mean, no matter what conversation you were in he'd end with the joke, corny as ever. But they were jokes. And so my older brother leaned over and said, hey Dad, did you hear the story, repeated one of my dad's jokes. And he got choked up and the other three brothers all did the same. And we four girls cried, and my mother sat there and held his hand. And when it was finished I thought, God that was holy. And then I thought, Norma, we were telling jokes. But you know, but I just felt the whole hospital could have collapsed.

Well my father did die. I would come back to Marian, I'm Dean at the time. And a woman comes in to tell me that she's gonna drop her theology course because she missed three weeks. And I'm starting to say, oh Theresa don't worry about it, I'll get somebody to help and she broke in two. I was saying, and she said you don't understand, I can't sit in theology class. I'm just so angry, I'm so angry with God. I think God's punishing me. She, they had no children, her husband he had cancer of the brain—which affected his bowel. She'd clean him up, he made a mess again. He didn't know her, he it just broke her heart and she felt she didn't feel like praying, she couldn't get to church. And she said I'm just awful and I can't sit and think about God because I'm angry at God. And so I said to Theresa Theresa don't worry about it. God understands, you know you couldn't go to church—so just don't worry about it.

So when she left, I was really angry, I was angry at God. I thought why when they went to pray can't you pray? And why did I, I thought, I just thanked her, you're third or fourth

best you know. You did the best you could, and God will take that. And I thought it's not right you know. So a couple months passed after that, and I was making my annual retreat and I started to complain to God again. I don't know how you pray always when da-da-da-da-da and I finally shut up. And I heard deep inside me, Norma, what you do to others you do to me.

Prayer is a lifting your mind and heart to God, when you think of me. But when I reach out to others. And then I thought my mom was praying to God when she was loving my daddy for all that they went through. And we were telling jokes—. And I couldn't wait to get back to, sometime say to Theresa, your prayer was so beautiful. It had nothing of self in it, you know. And so that began to change my prayer to know that it's not so much what I give to God, it's what God helps me do. And so my prayer became less bound by saying certain prayers and so, other than the office my prayer began to become more and more based on scripture which it still is, I love to read scripture and just how the words come back to me. And the last few years in particular it's been not so much that I take the initiative, I know what I—I don't pray for things, I can pray for and tell God that, for me—say what I want, but it's more being quiet, letting God speak to me.

And it's not just head, but I really believe inside myself. And a few of the words from Romans, when we can't pray the spirit prays within us, because the spirit knows far better thing than what we need. And so my prayer is kind of like a continuous thing, I feel like like I feel it now we're talking about prayer but this was a prayer to share with you. My nephew called—trying to get me at ten o'clock, no about eleven o'clock this morning. And we talked for over forty-five minutes. He's a doctor and we were talking all kinds of things. There are other, somebody people were coming and I was saying not now, I'll see them later which is fine.

But I really, I really felt that was a prayer you know. And when I prayed with my little great nieces and nephews and so forth, and you're you're being present to them. So I have to say that my prayer is trying to be present to the present moment, whomever or whatever I'm doing I'm really present to it. I think I'm experiencing God. And I long for my moments every day to have prayer, besides praying with the Sisters morning and night. I really need to have time every day by myself you know, morning and evening. And to offer God who I am, maybe to read something but then just sit and see what God can say to me, too.

So it's much more simple than what it was. And if I'm real tired coming back and haven't prayed office, I'm very comfortable which I wouldn't have been years ago, just to take one psalm sit with the psalm, let the words speak to me. Well, years ago I would have thought I have to, I have to read all the psalms as though God's saying Norma, all three of them right now. So I just don't, God accepts us from where we are, and that's kind of what it is. So it's kind of like a noisy contemplation moving into quiet contemplation, going back to noisy contemplation you know. And I truly think raising your mind and heart to God particularly in the poor, you know when you're doing things with them for

the poor. Which could be students here too, it couldn't, it doesn't have to be physically or materially poor. It's people who are really hurting or something like that. Just being very present, and particularly being present sometimes when people are annoying. And you can hang up on them and so forth. But it's like, you know you stick with it when you're teaching too, there's certain ones you know. But I just think that that's how I that's what my prayer is like now.

MEL: Thank you, Sister. You spoke so much about community and the community of Sisters. I wonder you could reflect on living, living together. The the act of sharing your life and also a physical space with someone and what that means?

SNR: Community. I have to say the main reason for entering religious life is to share your life with other people and it can be very difficult. You don't get to choose but we do a little bit more now, with whom we're going to live. And sometimes rubbing shoulders with people who are totally different personalities—who have strong opinions different than yours, can be very frustrating. But I think I have found that living in community, I love living in larger communities.

Smaller communities who you I mean you notice each other's idiosyncrasies and as well as giftedness better. But you really begin to learn really how patient and good you are, you know. You can pray and feel so good, about what you had in prayer. And then when you get out in community, in living in community somebody's rubbing you the wrong way and I have to tell you, mystics say this all the time. You read Catherine of Siena and Clare of Assisi you know, she was saying living with Sisters is your way of finding out just who you are. You can think you're the most patient person, —. But I think you know years ago before we got in the consul I want about the community then. You weren't encouraged to share how you feel. You kept things to yourself pretty much. And you should even this I would say, that you shared ideas about teaching, but you never shared your prayer. You just didn't—and we all pray the office together but you never shared what was going on in your prayer. And so after Vatican II it was just something so hush-hush, and I think after Vatican II you don't have in the—I would say ten years after Vatican II within the—and again I should thank the younger Sisters for this, they began sharing what things meant to them. But it was so personal and people initially felt like they didn't want anybody to know how they felt toward God. And so that I think that has begun to be much better. But living in community could be hard that way because you're rubbing shoulders with people who are and you don't get to choose.

And sometimes you know honestly, there are persons who entered the convent for the wrong reason and they stayed for the wrong reasons, you know. They didn't want to get married and at one time the way life for you was either you got married or you were as they would say an old maid or entered the convent. Well they didn't want the latter so they entered the convent. And there were some people who never should have entered religious life. They were not community persons, they just made life miserable and I remember when I was on the council talking to a priest about this and he said you know, if they were younger you could say religious life isn't for you, you need to go. Prior to

that, you you had to do something really awful before anybody would tell you you had to go. You know it was just saying this is your vocation, but we had some very very difficult people in the community. We had some people who were mentally ill, and again when we got into the, our office we began taking care of them.

So but then as we and living with a lot of people sometimes you get away from other people too, that was my thing you know. Yeah you'd have to be with them all the time and I love having a lot of people around and then we were, I lived at one time I was living with one at fifty-five when I first came here to Marian. This whole building. And then when we moved in 1989 when I came back, we were we went over to oh, built the two houses and we had like eleven in one and eleven in the other. And that was better in the sense that we became more of a community because you had more opportunities to share, you really did.

And we became much more conscious of each other's needs and so forth, and as we decreased in number become much—. So I would have to say it's a it's the agony and ecstasy of living in community, and living with just two people or three people, yeah that's I've lived with big, my whole family you know, eight of us and my mom and dad I had a an aunt that lived with us for a number of years. But it, they all have their different giftedness and I think when people are, you live with two or three, you begin to know their giftedness a little bit more. And you know things can rub you the wrong way a little bit more if you're totally different. But it's learning really how to love your neighbor as you love yourself, you know.

And it's not that you got into arguments or anything like that. But it's for example living with someone right now who is not an activist, she's not interested in social justice things. Fine if I want to be, but was very comfortable, like wanting to read novels and watch TV. Well arrange your schedule so that you can be with them and still get involved and give each other the permission be able to do that, too. So I don't think I could ever live by myself unless it was a real emergency, because I I am fed very much by sharing the prayer of other Sisters and particularly in the prayer. Very often that's how you got to know people, you listen to what they prayed for—. And I would say the support of Sisters of our community at Oldenburg. When somebody is suffering from something you know, words come out, the power of that prayer. You just feel you know somebody's there for you.

And I would say that I feel sorry for people, older people who get so lonely they have no one to talk with. We do. Community offers that gift and even though it can be difficult running with people of different personalities, you know as I've listened to some married couples that I do spiritual direction with, you know it's very difficult. I mean, I know—it is, it just is. It's off, except that you chose to live with that person maybe realize you hadn't but we initially you know, you were the people you didn't choose to be with. And now you can obviously with your mission where your work is and so forth you kind of choose. So it can be a very painful, but all in all it's a blessing, and I would say even in the painful times you get to know who you really are. And you're really get to look beyond

surface, and get so the depths of who people are. That's what you really find out, you don't pay attention to the surface to, you know.

And I going to Oldenburg I go there frequently is when the joyous thing is to the see them, to really see the Sisters and we read every day, on the booklet that says whose birthday it was and when they died. And when you read over the whose death anniversary it is, some people we know, and it just had kind of brings back memories of good things you did together and it's good. It's keeping that memory every day.

MEL: Thank you, Sister. Um we'll take a break.