

Religious Sisters in Health Care: The Conspicuous Love of Jesus

Date: 15 June 2020

Interviewee: Joan Manion

Interviewers: Beth E. Heinzeroth White and Patricia Ringos Beach

0:01 [Beth White]

This is Beth Heinzeroth White-

0:06 [Joan Manion]

[In Toledo it's?] important because the Grey Nuns have been a part of my life, I think, I mean, actively since I was probably eleven years old when I started working in the kitchens.

0:17 [Beth White]

Oh, my gosh. Let me tell everyone that this is Sister Joan Manion. She is a Grey Nun of Montreal. And today is June 15th, 2020. This is the first time we've interviewed Sister Joan, and we're interviewing her via phone interview from sister's home in Massachusetts to our home in Ohio due to the COVID-19 recommendations. This interview is part of the Religious Sisters in Health Care: The Conspicuous Love of Jesus project and will be archived at the U.S. Catholic Special Collection at the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio. Sister Joan is from Toledo. And what experiences, Sister, led you to become a religious sister?

1:01 [Joan Manion]

Absolutely has to be the call of God. Thank God I heard, because to me it can only come from God. There are many people that I've met throughout my life that wanted to be a nun but it just wasn't in the cards and my whole thing has always been, if you're trying to do something God wants you not to do, it's not going to work.

1:25 [Beth White]

Were you quite young when –

[Joan Manion]

Words of wisdom!

1:28 [Beth White]

You know what you're talking about.

1:33 [Joan Manion]

I had a wonderful life. Who was that, a movie? *A Wonderful Life* with somebody?

[Beth White]

Yes. Yes. Uh, Jimmy Stewart?

1:41 [Joan Manion]

Yeah. Oh, yeah, there you go. Yeah.

1:44 [Beth White]

What experiences led you to the decision to become a sister? You said you worked in the kitchen at St. V's is that right?

1:55 [Joan Manion]

Oh, yeah. Oh yeah, I worked there and then I worked at Woolworth. I had a varied background, but I have worked ever since I was in the eighth grade. As soon as I could start because I wanted to get some spending money I wanted to be out and about. But to me there is something deep within you that never leaves. And I think it must be something like that when two people fall in love with each other and I fell in love with God.

2:31 [Beth White]

That's beautiful. How old were you when you entered the order?

2:36 [Joan Manion]

Nineteen, I think, nineteen or twenty. I was old enough. I had two years of training and I worked, as I said, I worked since I was twelve years old, so it was time.

2:50 [Beth White]

You were sure and you knew. When you think about those early days of -

2:55 [Joan Manion]

Oh, sorry back up there just a minute.

2:57 [Beth White]

Oh, certainly.

[Joan Manion]

I knew that if I wasn't sure I could always leave. There was nobody chaining me to the convent.

3:05 [Beth White]

That's fantastic. I don't know that those of us who aren't sisters understand that.

3:13 [Joan Manion]

Do you understand - are you married?

3:16 [Beth White]

Yes.

3:17 [Joan Manion]

Do you understand why it's your husband, that is your husband?

3:22 [Beth White]

Yes. I see. I see. Okay.

3:28 [Joan Manion]

It is a mystery. It's a mystery to be lived. And not a problem to be solved. That's Hubert van Zeller, if you ever see any of his books, pick them up.

3:45 [Beth White]

That's very nicely said it says a lot in those few words, when you think about those early days of your professed life, and now, what are two things in society that you think have changed the most and how have those changes affected your life as a sister?

4:07 [Joan Manion]

Well, my life as a sister, I've been a person that has more than likely been ahead of the curve a little bit. And sometimes had to wait for other people to pick up or to catch up. And I'm talking about from my perspective now, I can tell you that certain people that I'd refer you to that said, Oh she was out in left field from the day she was, you know. And that's true. But it doesn't mean that everything I thought of was right or the proper thing at the time. But it was worth a try. And I've only had the experience and many people have said, Why are you going to a French congregation? Yeah, I never looked at it as French. So the foundress was French. So what? Notre Dame had German superiors. It doesn't matter what nationality you are, has the call come from the Word of God, and are you willing to accept it?

5:16 [Beth White]

What year did you take your final vows?

5:21 [Joan Manion]

Oh golly, I don't know. 1950, I think, '57.

5:29 [Beth White]

Okay. So since 1957. And now, what are two things in either the church or society in general that have changed the most for you as a sister, have changed the most?

5:46 [Joan Manion]

Well, you know, I think for think for a lot of people it was the - have been willing to stand up and speak. But I've been doing that all my life.

5:59 [Beth White]

Is that what you meant when you said sometimes you are ahead of the curve?

6:04 [Joan Manion]

Someone that cared for me said, Why do you stand up to be shot down every time? I said, Because what I said had to be said.

6:16 [Beth White]

Can you give us an example? It sounds like a fascinating story or more. Can you give us an example of what that person might have meant?

6:27 [Joan Manion]

Well, I mean, probably for some changes that - I was the first person in this province to be out of the habit. Because I don't - I used to say the dress does not make the woman any more than the uniform makes the soldier.

[Beth White]

Right. Yes. But that was a big change.

6:51 [Joan Manion]

Well, it's what I was supposed to be. I believe I responded to God's call for what He wanted me to be.

[Beth White]

God love you.

[Joan Manion]

You got that, huh?

7:04 [Beth White]

We caught that right away. Very quotable. Yes. Did you write that down? Yeah. Yeah. Now, have you always been in health care since you've been a sister? Have you always worked in healthcare?

7:19 [Joan Manion]

I've been in healthcare since I was eleven years old when I started working in the kitchen at St. V's, washing dishes. I'd go in and pick up the tray and some of the patients were so nice and some were so sick, most were very nice. Once in a while you had an ornery curmudgeon but not often.

7:43 [Beth White]

And we're gonna read your bio of course, when it comes but did you - I'm sure you did other kinds of things in health care. I know you did, other than work in the kitchen. What kinds of work did you do in health care?

7:58 [Joan Manion]

Pediatrics. Pediatrics. Pediatrics. I used to say it takes a good nurse to be a good nurse but really to be a pediatric nurse. You gotta be outstanding.

8:12 [Beth White]

Where did you go to school?

8:14 [Joan Manion]

St. Agnes School in Toledo and St. Vincent's.

8:17 [Beth White]

Oh, you're a graduate of St. Vincent's?

8:21 [Joan Manion]

Not a graduate, two years, and I said, I keep getting this call to go to the convent. And I didn't want to leave, you know, and my mother didn't want me to leave. Yeah, so that was a double whammy, but I said, Mom, I've gotta go now and if I don't like it, I'll come out. That was how many years ago. Oh my Lord. See if I'm ninety, that's seventy years ago.

8:47 [Beth White]

So you didn't stay and graduate and become a registered nurse?

8:52 [Joan Manion]

Yeah, I did. I left when I was a junior. And in those days, they didn't send us back to our hometown for a mission especially a young sister because they thought we'd lose our vocation. And I said if we're going to lose it from that, we better get out now. I mean, really, I finished at St. Peter's General Hospital in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

9:20 [Beth White]

Oh, okay.

[Joan Manion]

And it was fortuitous, I went back as administrator some years later.

9:26 [Beth White]

That is fortuitous. Yeah.

[Joan Manion]

It was like homecoming.

9:31 [Beth White]

Did you take care of children in the hospital or did you move into administration?

9:36 [Joan Manion]

Pediatric nurse from my core. Pediatrics was always my calling and always my longing, to be in that. Pediatrics and children. I mean, you've got to be smart to try and understand a sick adult. But try understanding a sick baby.

9:56 [Beth White]

You know, I'm a pediatric nurse as well and I also graduated from Saint - I also graduated from Saint Vincent.

10:02 [Joan Manion]

Who am I talking with?

[Beth White]

That's okay. This is Beth White.

[Joan Manion]

Don't I know you, Beth?

10:06 [Beth White]

I'm sure we do know one another. My maiden name was Heinzeroth, and I went to St. Vincent. But I worked in pediatrics in different places.

[Joan Manion]

So you know my sister, Mary Kay Ryan?

10:23 [Beth White]

I do know Mary Kay Ryan, yes. Yes.

10:27 [Joan Manion]

That's my older sister. We've got nurses from stem to stern in our family, yeah, we love it.

10:39 [Beth White]

When you were working in pediatrics, how would you have said that your unit was distinctly Catholic? That you could tell that the care that the children received was definitely distinctly Catholic?

10:57 [Joan Manion]

You know, I'm not so sure. This may sound - heresy. I'm not so sure that the most important thing.

[Beth White]

Tell me more.

11:11 [Joan Manion]

I think that the loving care of that little baby or child or adults, for that matter, hopefully brings out the best in most of us. And I don't know, you know, I used to be - they used to say I was a heretic, I used to say, I think they get just as good care at Toledo Hospital as they do here, maybe better.

11:45 [Beth White]

You said that out loud? Did you say that out loud sister?

11:49 [Joan Manion]

I certainly did.

11:50 [Beth White]

Oh, for heaven's sakes.

11:52 [Joan Manion]

I don't whisper much.

11:56 [Beth White]

You know, that's an interesting approach that we've not heard before.

12:03 [Joan Manion]

That's right. There's only one Joan Manion and there will only ever be one.

12:08 [Beth White]

Well, and I am delighted we have a chance to talk to you. This is great. You know that health care has changed a whole lot since you first went into health care. What changes do you think have had the biggest impact on Catholic health care, do you think?

12:23 [Joan Manion]

I think our continued care for the poor, and if we ever lose that we'll get out of the business. We shouldn't be in it if we're not going to take care of the poor. Simple.

12:39 [Beth White]

Has that changed much since you became a nurse?

12:43 [Joan Manion]

I don't think so, but a lot of people do. I said just because you don't - I don't know if you see it or what, but I think we still care for the poor. I think we can always do more. But I think we also have to be wise stewards and be sure that we have a balanced budget and can stay in business. But that the patient should always come first, must come first or we've lost our way.

13:18 [Beth White]

And when you were first a nurse, the budget was far less important than it is now. It's -

13:25 [Joan Manion]

You know, I don't even remember hearing about the budget. But with all the government controls, how you have to qualify for certain things. I don't second guess our - I mean, I might question some of them but second-guessing them and saying they made the wrong decision unless it's blatant. I support our people in administration.

13:53 [Beth White]

They have a very hard job, don't they.

[Joan Manion]

Oh it's awful, awful trying to please the board, I mean, the doctors, God help us, there's a group that'll make anyone insane. I used to tell them that and they'd laugh. I'd say don't laugh.

[Beth White]

Oh, oh, my gosh. Well, you know, there are fewer sisters around in hospitals and other healthcare facilities. Do you think that the presence of sisters is a vital part of assuring Catholic identity is part of every -

14:32 [Joan Manion]

No.

[Beth White]

Ok, tell me why.

14:34 [Joan Manion]

I think it's the care of the poor, and standing up for the poor and that doesn't mean I don't want sisters around. I certainly do, but I think we're known for our care for the poor and the day that stops, get out of the business.

14:52 [Beth White]

So you think that the visibility of the Catholic identity and health care hasn't weakened as there are fewer sisters in administrative positions, and at the bedside?

[Joan Manion]

Oh I don't think so. I don't think - I can name two or three lay men that had been administrators of hospital in the various states where I served, that, far outweighed many a sister.

15:21 [Beth White]

Can you tell me - can you give us an example or a story about one or both of those men?

15:31 [Joan Manion]

I think Darryl Littman in Toledo was one of them. He used to be concerned about the poor. And I had Peter Davis in St. Joe's Hospital in Nashville. He tell me you look out for them where are, they let me know if you need something, and he meant it.

[Beth White]

Okay. You know, if you could give advice to lay leaders that are charged now with sustaining Catholic identity in American health care, other than taking care of the poor, what would you tell those lay leaders?

16:13 [Joan Manion]

Be good administrators, be prepared, and never lose sight of the poor. I believe it's a major call of the Grey Nun.

[Beth White]

It sounds like it.

[Joan Manion]

I hope, yeah.

16:38 [Beth White]

I think you've told me a little bit about this, but I wonder if you had an example about seeing Catholic identity implemented at the bedside, or at the staff level like the management level? It was interesting, Sister, that you said that hospitals that are not Catholic can provide just as excellent care as a Catholic hospital. How do you see, or do you see, that Catholic identity in health care is implemented in taking care of patients, in healthcare?

[Joan Manion]

Care of the poor. And remember when people are flat on their back in bed, in pain, frightened to death maybe, they are the poor. It doesn't have to be financially. But I think one of our major responsibilities, is care of the financially poor. But I don't mean that doesn't mean we should scratch for every penny, for the people that should be paying, and aren't. I think we have to continue to do that for the poor.

17:56 [Beth White]

Sister I love what you just said about not just financially poor, but emotionally poor, maybe spiritually poor. Those are the people that you're - that the Grey Nuns focus on. Is that right?

18:10 [Joan Manion]

For people in need, yes. We get so hung up on the almighty dollar. I mean, we have millionaires that are committing suicide. I mean, no, money is not, money is the root of all evil.

18:29 [Beth White]

I think I've heard that before.

18:30 [Joan Manion]

Yes. But we sure would like some more.

18:34 [Beth White]

Isn't that the truth? That's the dichotomy of money, isn't it?

18:37 [Joan Manion]

Yeah. Yeah.

18:40 [Beth White]

Patti, do you have any questions?

18:43 [Patricia Beach]

Boy, Sister, I do not. I would be interested to just circle back from the time that you were working in the kitchen, and then you became a pediatric nurse? How long did you stay at the bedside, Sister? And then what did you do after that? Just in general. Yeah.

[Joan Manion]

That's okay. But my preference was at the bedside. Did you know, Mary Kay Ryan?

19:22 [Beth White]

Yes.

19:24 [Joan Manion]

Yeah. Well, that's my older sister. She was my head nurse. Oh, yeah. You can't beat that. You know, when I used to get a little agitated, I'd like to be whistling and screaming at them, but I'd be humming along, you know. And some little student nurse said Mrs. Ryan, your sister is so happy, and she said, I'm not sure.

19:53 [Beth White]

That's very funny.

19:56 [Patricia Beach]

People that know you.

19:59 [Beth White]

Now, did you go back to school to learn how to do leadership roles after nursing school?

[Joan Manion]

No, I went to Boston College to get my master's in nursing. And I had the privilege of going to St. Louis University and I got my degree in social work.

20:16 [Beth White]

Oh my goodness, I've heard wonderful things from nurses at St. Vincent about St. Louis University. They were –

[Joan Manion]

Top of the class, yeah.

20:25 [Beth White]

Yeah. So you have an MSN?

20:28 [Joan Manion]

I have a Masters in Social Work. I wanted to broaden out.

[Beth White]

How do you like that? So you started at Boston College and finished at St. Louis?

20:39 [Joan Manion]

I have a - I have a bachelors in nursing from Boston College, but a Masters in Social Work from SLU.

20:46 [Beth White]

Oh, for heaven's sakes. You know, actually, it makes a lot of sense. And when you finished your MSW, what were you - what was the ministry you're assigned next?

21:01 [Joan Manion]

I don't know. Where did I go after St. Louis? Oh, I think my favorite I think I went to Tennessee and worked in the boondocks down on the Mississippi River. They were poor, oh dear God. And they were the country poor. But their babies and mamas were just as beautiful as they were up north.

21:33 [Beth White]

Of course, they were. So you worked as a social worker and a pediatric nurse in that area and sounds like?

[Joan Manion]

Pediatric nurse. I didn't work as social worker ever, I mean, really I did a lot of social work 'cause I had too. Sure. We didn't have them all over. But, no, I did more nursing than social work. But social work was – you know what it was? I started to yearn for more knowledge. And it came from within me and I sat down with my superior and I said, What do you think? She says, Where do you wanna go? I thought, Oh boy!

[Beth White]

Did she really? Oh, you are fortunate.

[Joan Manion]

I was so blessed. And I went to St. Louis and fell in love. Beautiful, loved it.

22:29 [Patricia Beach]

Yes. Sister, you know, Beth and I, as we've talked to other sisters too, have been struck by, you know, like what you said about, you know, good care is not just exclusive to Catholic hospitals. But I do think that the sisters always, always recognize the social determinants of health care. Whereas others would try to say, Okay, we'll take care of you physically. But you know, the little bit, like - like Sister Dorothy told us stories about, you know, St. Marguerite d'Youville, and Blessed Catherine McAuley. I mean, these were women who saw something in need and understood that it wasn't just physical. And all the sisters we've talked to have said that. Not all of them have gotten an MSW, but they have all understood that.

23:29 [Joan Manion]

Yes. Yes.

23:31 [Patricia Beach]

And I don't know if you can say a little bit more about that or not in your, in your work or what you have seen?

23:42 [Joan Manion]

You know, not right off the top my head. It's been a wonderful life. I'm with what's his name on that. What was his name?

24:01 [Beth White]

Jimmy Stewart. Yeah. That's right. It's a wonderful life. You know, Sister, I am really interested in your take on the moms and babies that you took care of in Tennessee and the moms and babies you took care of in Toledo. You said they were just as beautiful both places. What were the differences that you thought that made it especially good that you were there, with your appreciation of the poor?

24:34 [Joan Manion]

I think that what struck me, someone else asked me that a long time ago. And I said, you know, the poor are poor wherever they are and they need care and we should be available to care for them. It's almost as simple as that for me and I've been privileged to have superiors that, you know, let me practice like that. And when I said I wanted to go, I forget how I got down south. My ninety year old brain here, is not –

[Patricia Beach]

I don't know it seems to be doing pretty good. So, so yes.

[Beth White]

You're doing very well. But we haven't found any problem yet.

25:24 [Joan Manion]

But I know that wherever you're poor, you need some kind of help. And that doesn't mean you're not a millionaire. I mean, I can be a millionaire and be very poor and lonely and nasty whatever, you know. And I think it helps if there's someone like me whom I've done two or three times, kinda yank somebody's chain like many people yanked mine to straighten up and fly right. And look, look ahead and see what you can do for others.

26:06 [Beth White]

That's very beautifully said. You know, sister, we can't thank you enough for taking the time. You've talked with us for over forty-five minutes.

26:21 [Patricia Beach]

Sister, I was going to ask you one thing off, off the script here. Beth and I were talking about this when I was doing the palliative care work, I worked on a supportive care coalition and [M.C.?] Sullivan was part of that board with me. Yeah. Where is she at these days, do you know?

26:45 [Joan Manion]

Remind me, who is she?

[Patricia Beach]

She worked with - I think that she worked with - she was an ethicist, a nurse, and a lawyer, and she worked with Covenant Health, and then when she worked with the Archbishop about, around palliative care issues, do you - is she with you at all anymore, or you haven't seen her either?

27:15 [Joan Manion]

Oh, no, I haven't seen anyone from Covenant for years. I mean, I you know, we bump into each other, but I mean, to be involved or to visit with them, I haven't had that privilege.

[Patricia Beach]

Okay. I just wondered. Anyhow, the - you know, the work that was done with palliative care through that group as well as, you know, the, the coalition was, was really good work. I thought in those - at that time.

27:49 [Joan Manion]

I have good memories of her.

27:55 [Patricia Beach]

Okay. Is there anything else you think we should know, Sister, before we disconnect here?

28:15 [Joan Manion]

I have hardly ever regretted one of the, you know, one of the more serious decisions I've made in my life. And I think that's because I'm spoiled by God. I mean that. I mean that. First of all, He gave me - She, She - gave me a family gave me a family that is second to none, friends that I'll never be able to thank Her for. And I'm honored to be a daughter of Marguerite d'Youville. It's fantastic. That's after what, seventy years. I'm ninety and I entered at twenty, I think.

29:08 [Beth White]

Alright. Well, Patty and I are grateful that you've spent time with us today.

29:17 [Joan Manion]

I've enjoyed every bit of it, dears.

29:20 [Patricia Beach]

Sister, if I would, if I talked to Terry and she would like to hear this interview, do you have any problem with me sharing it with her?

29:29 [Joan Manion]

You can put it over national television.

29:34 [Patricia Beach]

That's what the consent is all about. I know, but you know, Terry was - she was excited about when Aunt Joanie, she called you and I said she may want to hear the whole interview. I don't know, you know.

29:47 [Joan Manion]

You can do whatever you want with it.

[Patricia Beach]

Well, we are going to try to honor it in the best way we know how, Sister. We, we thought a couple of things like maybe sharing some of these interviews with the board, like I said, because even though we are Bon Secours Mercy Health now, there is still such a connection with the Grey Nuns, especially at St. Vincent yet.

30:13 [Joan Manion]

How can you - don't ever sever that.

[Patricia Beach]

I know. And I saw, I think some of these stories, some of these, gee, how is Sister Joan doing, how is Sister June doing? You know, I think we don't want to lose that. And there may be some, some call to, to write up some of the stories, the bios or "whatever happened to" sorta stuff, you know, and we're gonna see what's out there once we get done with the interviews and hopefully once we can open up some travel, maybe we will still be able to make a trip out, out east.

[Joan Manion]

We'd love to see you.

30:52 [Patricia Beach]

We would love it too, Sister. Thank you. Thank you again for your time this afternoon. Like Beth said, and it was it was a delight.

31:03 [Joan Manion]

Thank you for your time, and do whatever you want with whatever you have.

31:08 [Patricia Beach]

Okay. Thank you, Sister. Have a good day.

31:11 [Joan Manion]

My best to everybody.

[Patricia Beach]

Same here. Thank you. Bye, Sister. Bye. Bye.