

Religious Sisters in Health Care: The Conspicuous Love of Jesus

Date: 15 June 2020

Interviewee: Theresa Rousseau

Interviewers: Beth E. Heinzeroth White and Patricia Ringos Beach

0:08 [Beth White]

Thank you. Okay. We're going to audio tape this. Okay.

0:15 [Theresa Rousseau]

Okay.

0:16 [Beth White]

And I will go ahead and get started. Patty is in charge of the technology and I'm in charge of talking. Okay? So I'm going to introduce you and then ask questions. And after the introduction, it will mainly be you answering questions, okay.

0:32 [Theresa Rousseau]

Oh, okay.

0:33 [Beth White]

Good. Okay. Patti, are you ready?

0:36 [Patricia Beach]

Yeah. I think we're recording.

0:38 [Beth White]

Okay, good. This is Beth Heinzeroth White. Today is Monday, June 15th, 2020. And we are interviewing for the first time, Sister Theresa Rousseau, Grey Nun of Montreal. This interview is taking place via Zoom teleconference from Sister's home in Massachusetts and my office in Ohio due to the COVID-19 quarantine recommendations. This interview is part of the Religious Sisters in Health Care: the Conspicuous Love of Jesus Project. And the interview will be archived in the US Catholic Special Collection at the University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio. Sister Theresa, thank you very much for joining us today. Our first question is, what experiences lead you to the decision to become a religious sister?

1:32 [Theresa Rousseau]

As a sister, I worked mostly in business offices in quite a few of our institutions. And that was my whole life.

1:48 [Beth White]

When you think about the early days of your professional life and now, what are two things that you think society has changed the most and how do you think these changes affected your life as a sister?

2:02 [Theresa Rousseau]

What has changed the most is the way we are living now. When I entered, we lived just sisters in community. Now, we live with lay people as well.

2:20 [Beth White]

Ok. And how has there been, when you think back at the very beginning, when you lived in a rather closed community and now you're much more open. How does that affect your life as a sister?

2:35 [Theresa Rousseau]

To me, it makes me feel as if, though I'm retired, I still have contact with people and can help them.

2:46 [Beth White]

That's good to hear. Okay. Did you work in health care at all? In business?

2:53 [Theresa Rousseau]

I wasn't directly in the health care. I worked in hospitals. I worked in rest homes. I worked in nursing homes, but always in the business office as an accountant.

3:09 [Beth White]

That's an interesting approach. I'm so glad we're talking to you because many times we've talked to people that are doing direct care or we're talking to people who supervise those in direct care. So you didn't have direct contact with patients. You were concerned with how the money came in and how the money went out?

3:30 [Theresa Rousseau]

That's correct. And I paid the bills.

3:32 [Beth White]

And you paid the bills, that's good. Kept the lights on. And we certainly needed that, and still do. How did you come to work in those fields?

3:43 [Theresa Rousseau]

Well, my - as a lay person, after I graduated from high school, I was hired by the Grey Nuns at St. Joseph's Orphanage in Nashua, New Hampshire as a house mother, with children ages two to eight years old and that's how I got to know the Grey Nuns. And a year after I had worked with them, I decided to join the order.

4:20 [Beth White]

Okay. So you were a year out of high school and you had worked a year before you decided to join?

4:27 [Theresa Rousseau]

That's right.

4:28 [Beth White]

Okay.

4:29 [Theresa Rousseau]

I didn't know the Grey Nuns at all until then.

4:32 [Beth White]

Can you tell us a little bit more about that? What was it about the Grey Nuns that made you want to take that, that very clear direction in your life?

4:43 [Theresa Rousseau]

I had studied with the Sisters of the Assumption who were merely a teaching order. And I wanted a community that had a variety of works so that I wouldn't be teaching all my life because I didn't feel that was my field. And so they did all kinds of work. They worked with children, they taught, they had hospitals and nursing homes and all that. So it gave me a broader opportunity to work.

5:23 [Beth White]

Okay. That's fantastic. Now, did you request to be an accountant or did, or were you assigned that work and sent to school?

5:35 [Theresa Rousseau]

When I - they did assign me to accounting, but I did take accounting in my high school years.

5:43 [Beth White]

Okay. Okay. So you've had some background with that. Okay. Okay. Good. Now, when you think back at the various positions that you've held and the organizations that you've been in, how would you say that you knew they were distinctly Catholic, or if somebody who wasn't a sister would go into those organizations, how would you say they were distinctly Catholic?

6:10 [Theresa Rousseau]

They really related well with the sisters and I related well with the laypeople as well, because I mostly work in the office with laypeople. And I learned a lot from them and they felt they learned from me.

6:30 [Beth White]

Okay. That's good. So you have, you know, we've heard a lot about Vatican II and how the importance of laity has taken on a much, much stronger position in the last fifty or sixty years. And you did that every day, didn't you, you worked with laity every day. And they had a chance to be with a Catholic sister in their work-life every day?

6:55 [Theresa Rousseau]

Yes.

6:56 [Beth White]

Okay. Good. Now, you, you know as well as I that health care has changed a whole lot from the first time that you were assigned to a business office until now. What do you think are changes that have had the biggest impact on that sense of Catholic identity in the healthcare organizations you've worked with?

7:22 [Theresa Rousseau]

Right now I have been out of employment working with people for ten years because I'm retired and I'm in an assisted living complex, but daily, I interact with lay people that live

with me. And when I worked, I always had a positive attitude and open to what they offered me and we worked well together.

7:56 [Theresa Rousseau]

Okay. Good. Do you see or did you remember thinking there was any difference in the way the accounting, the accounting was looked at in the whole time that you were in health care? In other words, was there a bigger emphasis on money and making a profit as time went on?

8:18 [Theresa Rousseau]

No, the emphasis was to take care of the poor, and they maintained that attitude as well. They wanted to serve the poor and that's what we did.

8:33 [Beth White]

And that's what you did? Yes. Okay. Now, we know that there are fewer and fewer sisters that are directly involved in health care. Do you think the presence of sisters is an important part of making sure that the health care system has a Catholic identity?

8:52 [Theresa Rousseau]

Yes. And what the - our leaders did is, they established a lay system to take over when we would no longer have sisters to be in administration, to lead the people.

9:09 [Beth White]

Okay.

9:10 [Theresa Rousseau]

And we did form that system. And it has become the public juridic person of all the institutions that we had.

9:22 [Beth White]

And they are responsible for carrying out the mission.

9:26 [Theresa Rousseau]

That's right and we also made sure that the mission would be followed. So each institution has a person who is assigned to make sure that the mission is carried out in the institution. And that's a lay person.

9:45 [Beth White]

Oh, okay. Okay. Good. Just to piggyback on that. And the comment that you made. So do you think that the visibility of Catholic identity and health care has been the same, or weakened or strengthened as fewer sisters are in administrative positions and as the person has taken over.

10:08 [Theresa Rousseau]

I think that, that the mission is still very, very much alive. We have some of our sisters that are in our nursing home operated by lay people. And I visit our sisters as often as I can and it gives me a chance to interact with the nurses and housekeepers and people at the entrance and I see how they welcome people. And they try to live the mission that we tried to instill in them, while we were working close with them.

10:56 [Patricia Beach]

Sister, how many institutions, how many facilities do the Grey Nuns have now with this juridic person?

11:06 [Theresa Rousseau]

Let me see.

[Patricia Beach]

Are they all nursing facilities or are there hospitals still too?

11:13 [Theresa Rousseau]

There's, there are hospitals, nursing homes and assisted living.

11:19 [Patricia Beach]

Okay.

11:20 [Beth White]

Okay. Are they all in Massachusetts now? Are you out of Pennsylvania and Ohio?

11:26 [Theresa Rousseau]

No, we are in Maine, we are in New Hampshire, and Massachusetts, three states.

11:33 [Beth White]

Okay. So you're in the, on the East Coast, the Northeast. Okay.

11:39 [Patricia Beach]

I didn't know that. That's interesting. Thank you, Sister.

11:43 [Beth White]

Sister, if you could give advice to the lay leaders who are charged with making sure that the mission is followed, that Catholic identity is sustained in American health care, what would you tell them?

12:05 [Theresa Rousseau]

Let's see. I would tell them, just follow the directives that are set by Covenant Health System, which is the system we established. And then make sure that there is a mission person who trains the personnel per the mission of the Grey Nuns.

12:29 [Beth White]

Okay. Do you have any stories to tell us of how laypeople have helped take over the role that the sisters had in making sure that the mission was followed?

12:43 [Theresa Rousseau]

I would say that they are still very fond of the Grey Nuns, although we're not there. Every year, Covenant Health Systems makes sure that they give us a report of what is happening so that we're kept up to date and see if the mission is observed or not. And then we can make recommendations.

13:13 [Beth White]

Okay. So what kinds of things in the report do you look for?

[Theresa Rousseau]

Pardon me?

13:20 [Beth White]

When you read the report, what kinds of things tell you that they're doing, what you, what you want them to do in terms of the mission.

13:31 [Theresa Rousseau]

We can see what they are actually doing because they give us a report, a report once a year.

13:38 [Beth White]

Okay. Okay.

13:41 [Theresa Rousseau]

They come and meet with us because most of us now are retired. There are none under seventy.

13:48 [Beth White]

There are no Grey Nuns under age 70. Sister Theresa, that's funny. I mean, it, doesn't that just make you shake your head.

13:57 [Theresa Rousseau]

Most of them are retired.

14:00 [Beth White]

Okay. Okay. There are some Grey Nuns that are still working, you say?

14:04 [Theresa Rousseau]

Well, they do mostly volunteer work.

14:08 [Beth White]

Okay. Okay. Okay. Yeah. You know, I like the story that you told that when you go to the hospitals from the people that greet you at the front door - and all the way through -

14:20 [Theresa Rousseau]

[indistinct] And they're always happy to see a Grey Nun.

[14:23] [Beth White]

Now, do you, you said that you sometimes make rounds in the hospital and talk to the nurses and so forth. You can tell that the nurses are different in your hospitals because of the Catholic identity. That's what it sounded like you meant, is that, how do they act differently? Do you think then a nun or a sister - excuse me, how do they act differently than a nurse who would work in a non-Catholic hospital, do you think?

[Theresa Rousseau]

I see them as very, very caring and the person means something to them. And I can see the care that they give, well it's not just a, well, it's a job I do it and that's it they care and they're interested in the in the patient.

15:14 [Beth White]

Okay. Good. Okay. Do you have any other questions for Sister?

15:20 [Patricia Beach]

You know Sister, I wanted to backup with one of the comments that you made about how Covenant Health System is always glad to see the sisters and to keep in touch. I must tell you that it's the same at St. Vincent's in Toledo, Ohio, even though we're not part of Covenant Health. And, you know, Sister June has been gone several years now. You know, when you start talking about the Grey Nuns, very fondly remembered, really a big part of our history, even though we are Bon Secours Mercy Health. Now, you know, you talk to the people at St. Vincent, we are still the Grey Nuns. Kinda interesting.

16:06 [Theresa Rousseau]

That's right. And we still have contact with St. Vincent.

16:10 [Patricia Beach]

Oh, do you?

[Theresa Rousseau]

Yeah, This one from St. Vincent's that comes once a year.

[Patricia Beach]

Yeah. Michelle, Michelle Isaacs. Yeah. That's right. Yeah.

[Theresa Rousseau]

So it shows that we have left a legacy that's still living.

16:31 [Beth White]

That's right. She speaks so fondly of the times she comes to see you and sort of invited us to come along in August, which we would have said yes to if it hadn't been for this COVID-19.

16:43 [Theresa Rousseau]

Yeah. Yeah. We'll see what happens.

16:47 [Patricia Beach]

That's what she said too, that's what she said too.

[Beth White]

Thank you for sharing this time to tell us about your experiences in Catholic health care. Uh, we'd like to know if you have any questions for us?

17:01 [Theresa Rousseau]

Not at the moment.

17:04 [Beth White]

Okay. Do you have any stories you'd like to share with us about things that you saw when you were working that showed how important it was for the Grey Nuns to be part of the organizations you worked with?

17:18 [Theresa Rousseau]

Right at the moment I can't think of any.

[Patricia Beach]

Of course as soon as we hang up, you'll think of twelve of them. And that's how we'll be too, you know. Oh, my gosh.

17:33 [Beth White]

We appreciate that.

17:35 [Patricia Beach]

And we're sorry we weren't able to come visit in person. Really that you worked through the technology and were still able to tell us some of your background. We, we very much appreciate it.

17:50 [Theresa Rousseau]

Thank you.

17:51 [Beth White]

Thank you. And I'm impressed that we both were able to effectively figure out Zoom.

18:00 [Theresa Rousseau]

Yes.

18:01 [Beth White]

Yes. Ok. Well, thank you very much. I think we'll end the call now. Is that okay with you?

18:08 [Theresa Rousseau]

Yes.

[Beth White]

Okay. Okay. And thanks again. Yeah.

18:11 [Patricia Beach]

Thank you, Sister, take care.

18:13 [Theresa Rousseau]

Yeah, you too.

18:15 [Patricia Beach]

Okay. Bye-bye. Thank you.