

Religious Sisters in Health Care: The Conspicuous Love of Jesus

Date: 19 February 2020

Interviewee: Mary Thill

Interviewers: Beth Heinzeroth White and Patricia Ringos Beach

0:00 [Beth White]

A Franciscan, help me the order of St. Francis -

0:03 [Mary Thill]

Sisters of St. Francis Sisters of the Congregation of Our Lady of Lourdes. And we're familiarly known as the Sylvania Franciscans.

0:13 [Beth White]

Tell me that one more time. I want to put that on the tape.

[Mary Thill]

Sisters of St. Francis of the Congregation of Our Lady of Lourdes.

0:25 [Beth White]

And it's pronounced "Lord," not "Lords"?

0:28 [Mary Thill]

Some people say Lords, but the French is Lord.

0:31 [Beth White]

It is. Okay. And Sister Mary Thill. And today's the 19th am I right?

0:38 [Mary Thill]

Correct.

0:39 [Beth White]

Okay. Patti, ready when you are.

[Patricia Beach]

Uh huh. We're actually taping, go ahead.

0:44 [Beth White]

We are?

[Patricia Beach]

Yeah.

0:45 [Beth White]

Hello. This is Beth Heinzeroth White. Today is February 19th, 2020. We are interviewing for the first time, Sister Mary Thill, a Sister of Saint Francis of the Congregation of Our Lady of Lourdes. This interview is taking place at Sister Mary's office at St. Vincent Mercy Medical Center in Toledo, Ohio. This interview is part of the Religious Sisters in Health Care: The Conspicuous Love of God project and will be archived in the US Catholic Special Collection at the University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio. Sister Mary, thank you so much for agreeing to talk with us today.

1:24 [Mary Thill]

Well, you're very welcome, my pleasure.

1:26 [Beth White]

What experiences lead you to the decision to become a religious sister?

1:31 [Mary Thill]

I have wanted to be a sister since I was in the first grade, since I met my first grade teacher Sister Sienna, who was one of the sisters from the order that I belong to now. And when I was young, I used to play sister. And I have a picture here of me dressed in a habit that I made. I was about nine or ten years old, at my grandma's house. I used to stay with my maternal grandmother in the summer for a week or two. And then after my grandpa died, I would still go every weekend and stay with her because she was so sad. I couldn't figure it out though because they never talked much while he was living. But she sure was sad when he was gone. And it's to my, to my teachers that I credit my religious vocation. And it's to my, my grandmother that I credit my interest in comfortable, comfort, comfortableness in working with older people because my grandma was my grandma, she was my best friend. She spoiled me rotten. But I understood her as a person. She didn't - she wasn't this little old lady that some other members of family weren't too happy with. She was kind of a curmudgeon. And an aside - my friend Sister Marsha's mother Annabelle, one day I'd met her, talked with her, we had dinner with her many times, played cards with her many times. I don't play cards, but I played with Annabelle. On the way to her house one day I'm thinking, Oh that's why I get along with Annabelle, she's like my grandma. And we have that same relationship, it was just really kind of cool. So I told Marsha that and I told Annabelle that, that was kind of neat. Yes. So that was my teachers that helped me want to become a religious sister.

3:27 [Beth White]

And you are starting to say when you were thirteen -

3:29 [Mary Thill]

I came when I was thirteen. Fifty of us came that year from grade schools that our sisters taught at in Michigan and Ohio and Minnesota.

3:39 [Beth White]

Oh my golly.

3:40 [Mary Thill]

I came to Sylvania where our mother house is on the train that came from Minneapolis, because I was born in St. Paul, but I lived in Minneapolis 'til I was thirteen. And on the train, it stopped in St. Paul and picked up a girl from St. Paul who was coming to the convent, Sandy and we became best friends like immediately. We were just the bestest of friends. Unfortunately, her father didn't want her to come, so she had to go home. But we were good friends for a while. Bunch of - a lot of us came back in the fifties.

4:15 [Beth White]

So Sister, you're thirteen years old, your family's living in Minneapolis and you come to Sylvania -

[Mary Thill]

On the train, unseen, unheard of. Well, we did - the sisters did come out there with a slideshow and show pictures. And then one of the postulants, one of the young girls that was coming from - she was from Minnesota, Sister [Juleta?]. She came with her and then we got to know them a little bit. You have to know in my class there were only eight of us. I went to a very small school in Minneapolis, there were only eight of us in the eighth grade, five girls and three boys. And when Sister said, Who's the guy from public school came to have kids fill out their applications. I didn't move I sat in my desk and she goes, Well Mary, what are you doing? I said, I'm going to the convent, like she was supposed to know. So then she got the ball rolling to finally do that. But I had always said, you know, Father would come to class, "Who's going, who's going to be a sister?" I'd raise my hand. But when it came time to do it -

5:17 [Patricia Beach]

I always tell Beth because I went to Catholic grade schools too, that in second grade, we all wanted to be nuns. But that's different than what you experienced because obviously I wanted to be a nun but that didn't take hold. And it's different for you.

5:33 [Mary Thill]

One of my nieces asked me, she's in her forties now. She had a girlfriend when they were younger teenagers. There must have been talking about sisters because I was coming home to visit or whatever. And I said, I said, well, what's the big drawback? Why don't you want to come? We won't be able to wear makeup.

5:56 [Beth White]

So you came to Sylvania. Did you finish high school here?

[Mary Thill]

Yes. We went right into high school. I came in June. So we went right into summer school. And we finished high school in three years because we always went every summer. So we're able to finish our high school in three years.

6:14 [Beth White]

Where did you go to high school?

[Mary Thill]

We had an academy, St. Clair Academy on the campus out at the motherhouse. Right? Yeah. And what's interesting about coming to the convent, filling out my application. It said well why did I want to be a sister? I just wanted to be a sister. And so I put down because this is what it said in one of the books I read. You come, you become a sister to save your soul and the soul of others. So that's what I wrote at thirteen. And you know, it's, it's served me well. I didn't come to wear a habit. I didn't come to teach, I didn't come to nurse. I came to be a sister. And by the way, did everything else.

[Beth White]

Did everything else. And after high school –

[Mary Thill]

After high school we entered what was called the novitiate. Well, first we had canonical, we had a year of study at Lourdes Junior College at the time. So we started with a college education just one year. And then we entered the novitiate where we couldn't study anything except religious topics. So some of them still counted towards our degree. We still just went to Lourdes Junior College. Then when I was a second-year novice, you are a novice for two years, you've got the habit that was part of being a novice with the white veil. And you didn't make any vows yet, you just wore the habit. I'm not sure why we did that, but we did that and we loved it. I loved it. Didn't have to put bobby pins and curl my hair anymore! So then the second year, half of my class, there were like twenty-one of us. Half of the class went out to teach or go to nursing school, and the other half of us stayed in the college, and I was so happy. It didn't occur to me until the novice mistress said, give me a holy card. One of your favorite holy cards and I'm gonna put it on there, what your obedience will be for your next for the first or second year novitiate, and I was praying it

wouldn't have to go teach. I didn't want to teach. I hated school until I got to college. But anyway, so I picked up my card and it said stay in Sylvania for one more year to continue your education at Lourdes. Thank you, Jesus. And I was so happy. But then when I took my vows the next year, we all had to go do something for a living. So we went - then I went and taught St. Hyacinth's in Toledo, Ohio.

8:51 [Patricia Beach]

My dear, how long were you at St. Hyacinths?

8:53 [Mary Thill]

Fifty-six third-graders. My very first class. I was at St. Hyacinth's for four years. Mm-hm. Fifty-six. Literally wall to wall kids. You could hardly get in up in between the aisles. And I had five Jeff - four Jeffrey's in-class, none of them spelled their names the same way. And about a couple of weeks before Christmas last year, I get a call and I come to my office and someone on the phone says I left a message. Sister Mary Thill, I know you, I think I knew you as Sister Robert Frances - that was my religious name. I'm one of your students from St. Hyacinth's from my first class, he was here as a patient. I went to see him. He's a pharmacist. He's in charge of Rite Aid pharmacies in this whole region. He's married, has three beautiful daughters.

9:55 [Patricia Beach]

Is he a Jeffrey?

[Mary Thill]

He's a Jeffrey. One of my Jeffrey's. What a great story. That was fun. They were great kids. We had lots of fun. Yeah. I enjoyed them.

10:08 [Patricia Beach]

You brought up teaching without a college degree in teaching.

10:14 [Mary Thill]

Well, most of us most of us didn't have degrees. And that's true from public school teachers to Catholic school teachers for decades until things got to be firmed up. And then we began to work in - yeah, I took teaching of math. After I taught about six to seven years, I took teaching of reading. After I taught for about six to seven years. You would just went in and did it. Yeah. Somebody gave me the manuals for the books that the kids were using. Well, the good thing about teaching of math, the new math came out that year with the, you know, 01, preparing people for computers. I think. Well, I never knew the old math very well. That's one reason I hated school. So I was fine. I was learning it right along with the kids. And we had a great time. I understood exactly what they were going through. So we got along fine.

11:07 [Beth White]

That's a great story. And thinking about those early days in your professed life, and now, can you think of a couple of things in society that have changed the most? And how do you think those changes affect your life as a sister?

11:20 [Mary Thill]

Well, I have to say because I am a sister, the Vatican II, changed our lives profoundly as religious women. And we took it very seriously. Nobody else in the church did. The bishops didn't. The priests didn't. They're still fighting over it, did we have a Vatican II or not. But we did. And what they what they had told us to do in their documents that they wrote, the boys, was, go back to your charism. Yeah, they're in Vatican II - I know practically some women were able to observe, but had no real voice. So we took it very seriously, went back into, well, why were we founded? What were the Sylvania Franciscans? What were we about, what were Franciscans about, because we're part of the Franciscan family. And then what were we as a particular community? We were founded in 1916. Our sisters came from Rochester, Minnesota. The sisters that helped build the Mayo Clinic. They are, they are our grandmothers, we call them. And we came here because the bishop asked for sisters to come and teach in the Polish neighborhoods. And they had a significant number of sisters who knew, and came from the Polish culture in Minnesota. So they, they came about, twenty to twenty-two of them came here and Lagrange, and Dexter and Lagrange, and Toledo is where they started. So we came, we came as teachers, but then there was a - was it, I think it was a flu outbreak. Not in Toledo, but in the surrounding area, Genoa or somewhere like that. So our sisters, no, no nursing training, no whatever, went and helped out in Gypsum, some little town called Gypsum, Ohio. And when they went there, when they got there, nobody died and none of them got sick. They all survived the flu. And that's how we got into healthcare. And then priests, I guess this is how they did it back then. Priests and bishops would write or call our mother foundress and say, Do you have some sisters who want to open a hospital here. So she'd find a couple sisters and give them fifty bucks and pack a bag and get on the train and go wherever. And I've, I've talked to many of our pioneer sisters because many of them were living when I came and we took care of them later on. But I said, Well, what did you do when you got to Liberty, Texas? And they said, well, somebody met us at the train and they took us, took us in and it occurred to me later on, people felt so sorry for them that everybody like, same thing happened to the Mercy, the Grey Nuns when they came here. People helped them out because here they came to help us and they've got nothing. So the Ursuline Sisters helped them and laypeople, they gave them a place to stay, gave them food. And all of a sudden, there's these hospitals going up. It's, it, it was really when you think about it, miraculous, especially in light of what happens these days, when you have to plan everything to the last dollar and then some and no rules and no regulations. You just went in and helped people.

14:33 [Patricia Beach]

Just built a building and took in sick people.

14:36 [Beth White]

And how does that - because when you read historically, there is a lot of anti-Catholic sentiment also, but the sisters, do you think they were sort of immune to that, or like did people see them separately?

14:56 [Mary Thill]

Well, as long as we were here, like with the Polish people, they really appreciated the sisters, they kind of understood who the sisters were from wherever they came, for they had sisters in Poland. But when we went to other places where there weren't sisters, even with Sylvania when we first came there, the story is that there was a cross built, burnt on our campus. People were not real happy that we came there.

15:19 [Patricia Beach]

So you have these people helping you -

15:21 [Mary Thill]

But then you have those who were not real glad to see you. Yeah. Wow. Yeah. And I used to go to the Sylvania Senior Center, the old one, when it was in the Burnham Building, and I never felt comfortable there, with those older people, there was a certain prejudice there against the sisters. Even then. Since Mayor Stough has been our mayor he's been wonderful to us and there's a better feeling, I think, among in the community. But then they didn't know us because we had a fence around us. Hardly anybody came in. So they didn't really know us. We weren't really part of that community until the College got a little bit more known and people were out there. Yeah. So took some time. But another of the things that changed was besides Vatican II, which made us change our whole life, is the awareness of the environment. And especially in our, on our campus, in our order and as Franciscans, St. Francis, you know, he's the patron of ecology, Francis of Assisi. And he truly believed that all nature is so precious that it - besides people are precious, so is, so is nature. We can't just abuse it and use it up. We have to be conscious of that. We, we as a community have worked on that very hard since about Vatican II time, if I remember correctly. So that changed, just changed our lives terrifically. Gave us more freedom in one sense, we weren't tied to hospitals and schools. But we, because we were aware, I remember teaching third grade at St. Raphael's in Garden City with Mary Fran, she had second grade and we'd sit there correcting papers on Sunday going, This is stupid. Why are we sitting here correcting these silly papers when there, our neighbors need help and there are adults in this parish that need our help. But we were tied to the school and we had to do it, we needed to do for the kids. But we it was an awareness that was coming as we grew -

[Beth White]

With Vatican II.

17:27 [Mary Thill]

There was a need for, there's other, other things besides health care and teaching that needed to be a lot of it connected to it. But we began to reach out to other things.

17:43 [Beth White]

You taught for a while and -

[Mary Thill]

I taught for ten years.

17:46 [Beth White]

Ten years. And then how is it that you came to become involved in health care?

17:51 [Mary Thill]

Well, I taught elementary school for ten years. And then the last year that I taught, I went to [Hamtramck?] Michigan to establish residency because that was, they asked me to run our new brand new retirement home, which we were just building, Rosary Hall. It was called back then. Now it's Rosary Care Center a four-story building. It really was a retirement community, we had very independent sisters living there, assisted living in what we call the infirmary, the nursing home piece. We had - took in our relatives. We weren't licensed. We took in relatives that needed help. We took in the Visitation Sisters. They used to come there. So it was quite the interesting community. And they had asked me would, they knew they were going to build the building and they asked St. Lucilla and the dean of the college at the time, which of the sisters would, should we educate to run the place? And she knew how, how good I related to older people because I worked a couple summers just with our older sisters. We did activities and we did trips and we just had a grand old time. So she said, she suggested my name to Sister Miriam. So then she looked up to there were only two schools in the country that offered gerontology programs. USC out in California, and good old Michigan in Ann Arbor. So of course I went to Michigan and because it was closer, but I loved it. I loved it, just loved it, so I established residency to have to pay less tuition. They had me go to [Hamtramck?]. So one day I applied, I just re-read the letter the other day as I was looking up some things to prepare for this, from Sister Lucilla. She said, No, right to, right to Ann Arbor. She gave me a person's name and follow-up and do whatever you need, any help I'll help you out. So that's exactly what I did.

So they invited, they accepted my application. I got an application, I got accepted. I went there to find housing. It took me an hour to get to the campus and an hour to find the building that I needed on that campus to find housing. I could not find any housing on campus. The convent, St. Thomas, was full with other sisters who came to study. I went to the Newman Center. They had some housing there, but not very much for the sisters, and that was all taken. So everything was taken. So I ended up going into the graduate dorm, which was housing up on the North Campus, up on the hill. And I requested a private room, but I didn't get it, they told me I might try the second semester. So I shared a room with a lovely lady. What was her name, Gretchen? Which I think it was, and my name was Sister Robert Frances. So I got there after she did, she had already moved in, gone over to the campus to register. I got there, signed in. And when she came into the room and I had everything all set up and she was so glad to see a woman because it said Robert Francis, Sr. She thought it was Robert Francis, Senior. Well, we became fast friends. We just got

along really well. She was in social work and I was in education. So it was kinda fun. I didn't have a car. And all my classes were on campus and I was on the North Campus but they had buses that ran all the time. So I would just jump on the bus and away we go. But I didn't have, I didn't, I didn't enjoy living there because we had other people in the building. One gal used to cook everything with onions and garlic, so the whole place reeked of onions and garlic. We had one refrigerator to share and my milk tasted like onions and garlic. So, and then the girls next to us, we shared the bathroom with two other girls. They come in at two o'clock in the morning showering, singing, having a good time. I mean now that's not gonna work. So I went to I went to - I was in class with another sister from Indiana, from Illinois. And she said we have room at the convent at St. Thomas because somebody had dropped out. So I called the sister, the IHM sister at the time she goes, well, yes, we have room up on the third floor and she said, If you can send me a letter from your mother superior that you're in good standing with the community, we will be happy. So I called Sr. Miriam right away that night she wrote the letter and they used to laugh at me - from Wednesday, I found out on Wednesday, by Saturday I was in the convent eating bacon and eggs for breakfast that morning because I hadn't had any since I got there. It worked off find somebody roommate says to me, How did you get out of the lease for the, for the apartment? I said I don't know, I went down to talk to the lady. She said fine, she's can I borrow your habit because I was just wearing the smaller, the shorter veil at that time. Can I borrow that? Maybe they should let me out, 'cause she wasn't happy there either. So that's how I got into aging formally into working formally with elders.

22:59 [Beth White]

And then after you graduated from the University of Michigan, what kind of work did you do in health care and the work that you did, how would you describe that it was distinctly Catholic?

23:11 [Mary Thill]

Well it was very Catholic, it was working only with our sisters. I ran, I ran, I was the administrator of the new building. I was thirty years old and I was the administrator my very first time, but part of my education at Michigan. Instead of writing a term paper or a thesis, you we could do with something called a field experience or field placement. So I went to my dear advisor, Natalie [Traeger?] at Michigan was so helpful. She hooked me up with the Adrian Dominican Sisters and I did a fifteen-week experience, like a clinical with them. I went through the whole system. I spent time in every department in their building. I went for nurse aid training because I didn't have any nursing background. So, so, so I can be a nurse aid there, how people eat and help people be whatever. I passed making beds. I learned how to make beds five times. I'm super good at making beds and that was great and I got to, that's where I learned a lot about what it was I was going to do. Now, I didn't learn anything about writing policies or a handbook because our place was brand new. They were well-established already. The sister I worked with was just great she was so helpful. And I would stay right there with them. They had a hall, a residence hall that some of the workers stayed in. So I stayed there with them and on weekends I'd go back to Sylvania. No car, this whole time I had no car. So it was a beg, borrow, and steal from everybody, but people were very kind. So I got, I got a Master's in Education. I built on my other degrees from [Merriman's?]. I had two bachelor's. Most of us graduated with two

bachelor's from Merriman's, because we went to school for ten years part-time. So we had plenty of credits and then I built on my education there.

And then I took, I was part of what was called the Institute of Gerontology. And those were courses designed just for working with elders, wonderful professors, some of the pioneers in retirement preparation for the world were our professors. One guy, Howard McClusky, I loved him. He was an elderly who was in his seventies. He was teaching courses in education, gerontology with just, just the most I mean, the, the professors I had and the people I met were just top-notch across the board everywhere I went. Yeah. And I was still wearing the habit, so people would go, Hi, Sister, Good Morning Sister, or they would ignore you either one way or the other. And one day I was coming across the quad by the library, walking to my house. The students around there would go, Oh, Sister, don't go this way. You want to go that way. I thought why? Cause somebody's streaking in the quadrangle, oh okay we'll go that way. But the people at the bookstore took me in like I was part of their family, the Christian bookstore, they were so cute. Come and have lunch with us, Sister. They were very, very kind, yeah. I just really had a good experience. I was only there not quite a year and it was just the best experience. I don't know what USC would have been like but in our groups it was just as wonderful. Just fine.

26:41 [Beth White]

You've brought up a couple of things that have made Patti and me smile. One is that you just built a home for the elderly sisters to live, but you had no regulations and policies and all of that. Health care has certainly changed a great deal in the past few decades. How do you think these changes have had an impact? Large impact, significant impact on Catholic health care in healthcare organizations that you've been affiliated with?

27:12 [Mary Thill]

Well, as far as working in the field of aging, that's a whole another world. And people in, in acute care think that you can just do anything the same way with older people. And it doesn't work that way. Especially if you're working with the gerontologists who goes, No, this isn't a hospital, this is their home and this is what we do here. The sisters that I had work with me as part of the staff were all from hospitals. So they tried to run the place like a hospital. And I'm trying to run it like a good nursing home. So it was kind of interesting. We did do some preparation, we did do some education orientation for each other, another sister had a good - she was a nurse, had a good background in working with the elders. So the two of us did some workshops with them. We went around the whole community, talked about retirement, preparing the sisters to start thinking that you're not going to be working all your life. So what are you going to do? That scared the mother superior. So she put the kibosh, she didn't want us to think we could retire at fifty. When most of us are working now, I'm seventy-six. That why would you want to retire at that age? So anyway, she apologized years later. She said I wasn't ready for it, so I guess I thought nobody else was either. And now she's kind of sorry we did that because people are not retiring with really good preparation. But that was one of my courses at the university. And we moved from - this is our home, Rosary Hall was our home, back in the - let me see. How long has it been now? I think in the nineties, we became a licensed facility. Okay. So we now follow the licensures and all that kinda stuff. And I had to prepare the sisters for that because they were used to

just, you know, this is this is our home, and we're in charge and this is what we do. And so then when the rules and regulations from the state came in, they weren't allowed to do certain things and they didn't like that.

29:29 [Beth White]

What, for example, like, did they have to stop doing?

29:32 [Mary Thill]

They couldn't carry their tray. They couldn't go to the counter and pick up their own food and carry their tray. They had to have someone else do that for them. Now these are frail people who probably shouldn't have been doing that. But they were used to doing that, most of their lives. And this just didn't go well with them. They didn't like more and more nursing people coming in and taking over. But the miracle, which is very interesting, the last 10-15 years, when we were able to open it and we were licensed only for our sisters. And then we were able to move the license a little bit, thanks to Teresa [Fetterer?] to bring in relatives of ours. Sisters could bring in parents, brothers or sisters or relatives. At one time we had two sisters, blood sisters who were, are nuns. And two of their brothers who never got married. The whole family was living at Rosary. It was so cool. It was really neat. Yeah. And then the last few years then we would bring in a religious priest, brothers, sisters from other orders could come in, so that opened up that door. And then more recently, anybody we would take in anybody who needs care. So we have a big rehab group that comes in now we have then we built an assisted living separate appendage to the building, which is now just for our sisters, but we see it as a good rehab space eventually. So that's just changed dramatically. Just in that just in that one building. Certainly very Catholic because of some people still come there because they wanted to come to a Catholic place. The laypeople, some of our sisters don't want to come there but the laypeople do. Same thing with Franciscan Care down the road, it's Catholic. It was ours, is ours in a sense, and they come because of the Catholic thing. But when we look down the road far, not too far, we're thinking I'm not, we're not sure if among the elderly - once this generation, there's a couple of generations of elders die off, what will be the purpose, the long-term care in assisted living in retirement communities for people who don't have that religious connection anymore because their religious connection, it was really very strong, as you know, from these kind of places. But once people are losing that, that's a big change in our culture. The religious piece. You know, we have empty churches.

[Beth White]

Say more about that because that's exactly right. There are fewer sisters now, and the presence of sisters has been an important part of what has helped call an organization Catholic, right? How do you think the presence of sisters or the declining numbers - you said you weren't really sure how the religious affiliation would continue in the future as the number of sisters decreased. Do you think that Catholic identity is going to be weakened or stay about the same as fewer sisters are involved in the running of these organizations?

[Mary Thill]

I think as long as the sisters are involved and I don't know about the new people coming into orders because as I said, we don't, we don't have them except the one that came back. She's very, very much into, you know, this is, this is who we are and this is what we will continue to be until we die. But she's sixty-six, so it doesn't give her a whole lot of time to help us out. It will change it has to change significantly. We're also living through a terrible time in the Catholic Church, of the sex abuse scandals. Just this constant battle between - there was a Vatican II and there wasn't a Vatican II. That, that's certainly has affected all of us. And it has to trickle down into health care and education look what happened to schools. But as I read just recently from Sister, I think it was Sister Nancy Shreck said this, we are as we look at ourselves, what are we supposed to be now? No, we don't have schools to run, we don't have hospitals. What are we supposed to be now? Well, we move from being a labor force in the church. A cheap one as a matter of fact, to here we are elders, mostly older people. A lot of our communities are, I think our average age is pushing to close to eighty. We just had another sister die today. And she was older though, but we've had two younger ones die, one only sixty-seven, a year ago in January. What, what, what, what is our call now? Many of our sisters, are too frail, to be out there, out and about doing things. So the movement in the religious life is to tap into our contemplative life. And I would say our contemplative life is what drove us to be the good teachers and nurses and administrators all this time.

And it has always bothered me since I got into healthcare, especially since I came here to the hospital and to look at our hospital system that we had. We did things a certain way because of who we were, who we are. And now we invite lay people to come in who may or may not have a religious sense of values, may or may not have a prayer life, may or may not have made a retreat, may or may not have gone to a workshop where they learn how to grow and develop. And we have done that all our lives and we expect them to come into, run the place like we did, not realizing, I think that all that helped us do what we did the way we did it. I'm not saying lay people can't do it. But how are we giving them the skills and the tools? And I think there's a big - CHA certainly does a lot of that, tries to prepare people for that. Here at St. V's we have the RISEN program, which I took when I first came. And it was wonderful. I thought, oh my gosh, this is what we need to do, but we need to constantly do it. Constantly because that's what we do, we have in our community, in our rule, we must make a five-day retreat every year. There's no option. You make a five-day retreat. That's a chance for you to fill you. How can you give if you don't have - how can you continue to give if you give it all and then you never fill up again. You've got to refill, refill, refill. So that to me is the spiritual piece of that is what would save on which will keep, I think Catholic health care, Catholic. The emphasis on the spiritual life of people. And there's a great interest in the spiritual life. Everywhere I see it. It's wonderful.

I don't work with too many young people. I love them when I see them, I just get a big kick out of them and they love to tease me and stuff, but I don't know them really well. I read about the millennials and they read about the nuns. Then the N-O-N-E-S. Who interestingly enough, are interested in the N-U-N's because they're working on they're going to some of the convents and experiencing living with the sisters for awhile. But those are sisters that lived a certain way at a certain time and though our life has changed, we still, we still have a certain way of doing things that probably another generation would just throw out. But it's good for them to experience that. And some of them like it. Some of them go to Mass with their little doilies on their heads and they say the rosary every day, which is wonderful, I say

the rosary. I mean, it's, we threw out a lot of stuff that I'm glad the young people are finding. Some of it though, I'm not so sure. It was so good for them. It's going to be so good for them, but they need something - you can't, they're in a vacuum. Religiously speaking, spiritually speaking, religiously speaking they're in a vacuum, spiritually they're looking and they're hungry. I hang around every month with a group of Muslim women. Muslim, Christian women, see my Quran there next to my Bible. They are the most wonderful people. I did a dialogue, a workshop with them out at Lourdes was called - we use St. Francis as the hinge because St. Francis of Assisi, in his day visited the Muslims. He almost got killed. He went to visit the Muslims. He wanted to stop the war. So he walked into the camp and talked to the Muslim leader and they actually found out that they had a lot in common. They respected each other. And he got out alive. And that is, since I met these people, oh my god, they're wonderful, wonderful men and women. And every month, we've been doing this for three years. We did the workshop one, and we liked each other so much we didn't want to stop. So we've been meeting now, this year it will be three years that we meet at the mosque school out on Alexis and talk about what we have in common. We know, we don't worry about the differences. We talk about what we have in common. And there's so much, they're kind, they're loving. They pray five times a day. They're just, just great people.

39:17 [Patricia Beach]

So, so they are Christian, or - ?

[Mary Thill]

Oh no, they're Muslims. We're the Christians, yeah, Muslim-Christian group. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That was the purpose to bring the two together, to see how we what we share, what's in common. Not what not what we'd fight about, right.

39:35 [Beth White]

You brought up an important point. And that is that the, the spiritual piece, the part that you can't really quantify is what has made Catholic health care, Catholic. If you could give advice to lay leaders who are today charged with sustaining Catholic identity in the presence of fewer sisters, what kind of advice would you give them? You mentioned the RISEN program. You mentioned a retreat every year. If you could give advice to a lay leader about how the workforce in a hospital like St. Vincent, for example, could sustain Catholic identity with fewer sisters, what advice would you give?

40:20 [Mary Thill]

I would give the people in charge the challenge to provide for their employees and not just top managers, but as many as possible. That sense of workshops, opportunities for them to be like the RISEN program. As a good example of, people get away from work, they get paid while they're going. The issue often is they can't get out of work because they're short staffed there's not enough people, but those who come are profoundly changed by it. They really are for the most part. I've heard a few complaints and it needs to be updated because it's over ten years old, but that's a whole other story. But that opportunity alone to take the

Myers-Briggs and find out what kind of person you are. I took the Myers-Briggs when I was a novice. And I was so off the charts for introversion, they couldn't even tabulate it. And then I took it again as part of a faculty member at Lourdes. And then I took it again. And by the way, I taught Lourdes, at Lourdes for twenty-two years, I taught elementary school and then from sixth grade. I went to teach in college. And I called the dean and I said, Sister Andrea, I'm here trying to make a syllabus for my course in gerontology. What should I do? What do I need to put in there? She goes, Take nothing for granted. I said, Okay. So that's what I did. So twenty-two years, I developed associate degree, a bachelors in a BSE. They called it a bachelor's in something. Or they could bring in any kind of bringing their courses and put them together and make a bachelor's out of it, including gerontology, then we had a pure bachelor's degree.

And the last thing I developed was a bachelor's in nursing home administration when they closed the - what it used to be just down the street from here by Mercy College. The Toledo - it was put together by the Union Toledo, something something, had two hundred residents and they closed two weeks before Christmas. I was furious. So I did something about it. I knew the guy down the Department of Health down in Columbus who was in charge of nursing homes. And I said, I gotta do something. He's said, said what do you want to do? I said I wanted to develop a degree in Nursing Home Administration. He said, well, tell me what you got, show me what you've got and I will. We had a business program in college. At the college, we had the gerontology program and we had lots of other courses that would be helpful. So I put it together sent it down to him. He said good, go for it. So we did it. But the colleges, but the college, my dear beloved Lourdes, changed - dropped the gerontology program after I left. If I was still there, they'd still have it. They couldn't get rid of me and they knew it. But I left. One of my former students took it over. She went and got her Masters and started doing the teaching. So it's gone and everybody kept saying to me, why would they close it, if anything, we need it now more than ever. When I studied at Michigan in '73, '74, the professors kept saying we're not talking about some people that are going to be born someday. We're going to take care of them. These people are alive already. Now how are we preparing ourselves to, to do whatever they need? And gerontology wasn't, isn't just healthcare, it's housing, it's retirement, it's leisure time, so that was, it was a very general program. So I did that for twenty-two years while I was trying to figure out how to run Rosary Care Center at the same time, at the same time.

44:16 [Beth White]

You know, one of the things I enjoy hearing about is the work that you do here at St. Vincent. You have some work with palliative care, advanced directives, and so forth. And you also mentioned that you wander around the hospital, looking at patients and needs on units and maybe visiting those who you think look they might need to be visited. As you're doing that, how do you see Catholic identity being implemented at the bedside, by, by nurses and lab personnel and people that the patient comes into contact with?

44:51 [Mary Thill]

We have a wonderful, wonderful staff here. We really do. Our chaplains are, I think, I are really top notch. One of them the other day was that we have, we have what we call mercy rounds. That's another good thing for people to be exposed to. It's a chance for people to

come and look at a case or an issue in the hospital and for the people who are involved in it to tell you about it. And then the emphasis is, how did you feel? How did it feel to treat this? Like we just had one last week. It was about the repeater that comes back to the emergency room sometimes six times a day. One guy was coming or one lady. And two docs talked about and it was wonderful to hear them say. I have to constantly remind myself, even though they're swearing at me or spitting on me or hitting me I have to remind myself that they're human beings and it's not me personally that they're mad at, something else that's going on. And they said we have to remind ourselves of that pretty often. And sometimes it's really hard so that they learn. They rely on the social workers and they, they praised the social workers for how they - one doc that I don't know how you ladies find these resources for these people, but eventually they'll, they'll sit down together and they'll work until they find a home for somebody who needs a home. Or if they don't like, don't want to be put into a home anywhere because they don't like the rules and regulations. Then somehow how do you find the resources to keep them from freezing to death on, on the streets or melting in the summer time. So a lot of that, Michelle Isaacs is a good example of someone who works very well. Comes out of the mission all the time. She kind of amazes me because when I first met her I went, What are you doing here? But anyway, she is, she's got a really heart, good heart for people.

And then there's one chaplain stood up at the, at the, the meeting the other day. And he said he was involved in this. And then he said, and I have to tell you, I love and I've heard him say this before. I love working at St. V's because the people here are so aware of the dignity of other people. They're - so he said, and I, I can, I can pray with people who want to be prayed with. I just feel, I feel so accepted as a chaplain by the staff. The staff will call on you. Yesterday I had my own experience. I was upstairs on one floor filling out my little form. I don't use the computers, so I write a note and then poor Don the chaplain has to put it into the computer. I could do it, but if somebody else wants to do it fine. I can visit more people because by the time I figure out the forums. Anyway. This nurse came up to me and she looked at my name tag. I'd never seen her before. And she said, she did, she didn't say Sister Mary, she just goes, Oh, she said, I wonder if you can help me. There's a lady in this room here. She's says she's dying and she is sick. You know, she's not well, but she, but she talks like she's, she's almost trying to die and it was just bothering her, it just bothered her, she didn't, she just didn't think that was right. So she said, Could you go in there and talk to her? So seems that her family is here, she's really, really bad and really dying. But this morning she said I went in there and she was got herself up out of bed, went to the bathroom, came back in bed, sat down. So there's something going on there. So I said, okay, I'll go in but the fact that she saw me, saw my name and was looking for somebody. A lot of people think I'm a chaplain because I'm a sister. And I don't necessarily make the distinction. I don't have to.

One time they call me because there was no priest to go down to the emergency room to give last rites to some poor man who was dying. So he says there's a sister here we'll send her down. So down I went. And I prayed with him and his daughter, and he did die. And I'm, I'm okay to do that. But that's something else. Because some of it is because I'm a sister, some of it is because they know who I am. And our chaplains would be happy to. I mean, there are - people can be trained to do some of these things. So that's my hope that, that's that in a way maybe we got in the way of people being aware that they had the same gifts we did, to go and help people and treat people kindly. And that's what Francis did, that's.

But most of the early founders did. Catherine McAuley, Marguerite d'Youville, they were - Catherine McAuley and Marguerite, they were ordinary women who started, they didn't intend to start a religious community. It just happened as they, other people were drawn to what they were doing. There were other women that wanted to teach children. There were other women that wanted to nurse, help people. So they joined them. Really the, I think the church usually forced them to become a religious community. Otherwise they were just a good group of people that would help people. And that's, I think what we all need to do these days. If we live in our little enclaves, it doesn't, it doesn't always work that way. So, yeah, I have no idea what religious life will be like in the future. I won't be around all that much longer, fifteen to twenty years. And, and I keep telling people, Don't you worry about the religious? No, that's not my job. That's God's job. God's the one that called us. He made all these people. God's in charge. That's His problem. We'll help where we can. But we're not in charge, you know, really. It's up to the good Lord. I did read something. I don't know if you know about Richard McCormick, Father Richard McCormick. He was a Toledo boy, priest, moral and ethics and theologian. He wrote something just before he died, that he didn't think Catholic health care would survive because of mercy killing, euthanasia, and abortion. He didn't think that we would be strong enough to fight those things. That was his educated opinion.

51:28 [Beth White]

What's your take on that?

51:30 [Mary Thill]

I think we have to broaden our vision. We know our bishops are so focused on abortion that they forget that there's people in prison, there are refugees, there are immigrants. There are other ways that Catholic health care is more than the beginning and end of life. There's all the stuff in between that we also need to work on. So I think we have plenty to do. I don't know that it would die off, but made, it made me stop and think though, that if that could become so powerful –

[Beth White]

If that becomes the biggest focus.

52:09 [Mary Thill]

Yes. Then we'd be in trouble. Yeah. Because I know we have our hospital in Sandusky closed because we got closed out of the insurance. There'll be insurance companies wouldn't pay for the care we were giving Providence, Providence Hospital was ours. Okay. That was one reason. I don't know all the implications but I know that was one. They got we got closed out of the of the system and that's the threat. You know, if you don't do the, if you won't do abortions and you won't kill people then we won't give you any money to take care of the poor. I mean, that's the government. Could, government could do that especially with certain people in charge. Now, you know, it's really, it's really scary. It can be very scary and threatening when you think about what's what has happened. It can go the other way too. If

we can get, we can have enough good people that wanted to do the right thing and make it better for everybody.

53:15 [Beth White]

Sister Mary, it's been a pleasure to talk with you and to, to, to hear your insights. Are there any other comments or stories that you wanted to share that we haven't had a chance to ask you about?

53:31 [Mary Thill]

I think we covered most of it. Oh, one thing that I need to tell you about is about how we how we will survive, how will health care, Catholic, Catholic identity survive. Our sister, Patrice, who was a wonderful mother superior we had back in the days when we were changing, when schools were closing and people who are going into different ministries. And the sisters were upset that we were closing schools. Well, we weren't but the parish or the bishop was. And she said, Well, we've got good people coming in. If we, if we did our job right, if we taught people right, then we don't have to worry about it because they'll come in and just take over as beautifully as we did. Sister June said the same thing, Mercies, our Grey Nun, she was the last of the Grey Nuns that worked here officially, she was in charge, she was vice president of mission. She hired me. And then a year later she left and went gee, thanks a lot. She told me she's and she said the same thing when she was leaving every little party we had for her. She said to the people, if, if people said what's going to happen to St. V's now that the last of the Grey Nuns is gone and she goes, if it dies off, then we didn't do our job. That was her thinking, same thing that Patrice said. Yes, if it dies off if the Spirit can't continue. We missed out somewhere and people do, people are really those that know her. Now the thing is people that don't know the Grey Nuns, there are very few of them left, if any. Yeah, I think some still knew them. They still talk about them with much admiration and great love. We just had John Sinkovic die back in January. He worked here fifty years. He was one of the orphans. We started as an orphanage, he was one of the orphans. They took him in, gave him a job. He ended up being chief of radiology. Before he - radiology didn't even exist when he was born. He was there fifty years working and then he was twenty-five years here as a volunteer. Just a great guy. Last week. I'm sorry. I got a letter in my mailbox. A package from a lawyer in Sylvania, I go oh my God, what did I do, I don't like lawyers. And in here was this little package addressed to me with John's handwriting.

56:05 [Patricia Beach]

That's John's handwriting. Okay.

56:07 [Mary Thill]

And they must have found this in his possessions because there was a note. "Dear Sister, just a little note to thank you for all that you do for, for our St. Vincent's. Our St. Vincent's. I love I have always enjoyed my time and that I had working with the Grey Nuns from day one, 1943, that was the year I was born. What when they and Sister Marguerite, St. Marguerite too much took me under their wing and did nice things for me. Each and every

one of them were to me, a mother away from home. St. V's is my home." He sent me a rosary because he knows that like the Blessed Mother. He used to give money to charity that asked him to give money. And then you get all these little gifts with them. He'd bring them to me every once in a while. That was one of them. I thought that was real sweet. Yeah. And then the lawyers said this was just something we've found already addressed and they sent it. So I read that to Sister Marcia the other day to let the Grey Nuns know. And he was here, he broke his hip before Christmas, was here as a patient and then ended up at Heartland of Perrysburg Nursing Home. Couldn't go home. I saw him New Year's Eve and he said, Sister, I can't go home anymore. And he was active he was driving, he was kayaking, he was hunting, he was fishing everything until maybe the last year or two. And he said, But I got everything arranged. I got all my friends, my hunting friends, who's gonna get the kayak, who's going to get - his kids. Boys didn't, weren't interested at all in sports. But he was in hunting and fishing. My, my guns and my, my bow and arrow and my fishing gear. And I've got that all for my friends. But not till I die. He died on the 13th. I think it was. this was the first yeah. So he was a good man and everybody knew him we're trying to think of some way to honor him here. His buddies at his club that, the Moose Jaw club, named as the conference room after him. I've pictured with the big sign over his head. But then we had, did have a lovely party for him two years ago this summer for his ninetieth birthday. And we had a big party for him here. But we wanna do is - I don't know what plaque or something. Jennifer and I have been talking about what can we do? You know what we have such good people like Vanessa, you heard about Vanessa. What are we going to do for her? Dr. Luskavan's already got a plan. Yeah. He said I'm going to the name of he said I'm going to name the group room in her honor, but the trauma, and the trauma center which she helped write the grant for put together. That's how I met her, saw her around all the time. She was part of the mercy rounds committee too, she was really big on people needing to feel, and that's what they do with them. How do you feel having to do this? And we get some wonderful responses from people. And then how do you cope with it? How they share each other, how they tell each other, how they cope with some of the tough things that they have to deal with, like babies dying and people coming back to the emergency room six times a day.

59:37 [Patricia Beach]

Yeah, or taking care of an employee. I remember that from nursing rounds, when a patient is your coworker.

[Mary Thill]

Is your coworker. Yeah. They just had another incident at the Heart Center a couple weeks ago, one of their employees had a heart attack. I don't - I think she made it, I'm not sure. I think she did.

59:59 [Patricia Beach]

Sister, I did want to circle back to one thing that you said much earlier, so it's completely out of sync, but I was kinda struck about how, you know, you mentioned what when you wore the habit up at University of Michigan and the name change and stuff, how did it feel not to

wear the habit anymore or how did you decide to go back to your baptism name? I'm assuming that's what Mary Thill is.

1:00:23 [Mary Thill]

Yes. Yeah. When I got the habit, I loved it. But then the more I wore it, the less I liked it. It was a lot of work. You couldn't just throw it in the washing machine, the old habit. You to take it apart, put it, wash the pieces, and then sew it back together. Well thank God I learned how to do that much sewing. I never learned how to sew the coif that piece that came around our covered, our hair and never had to so I got - I don't know how I escaped that because everybody you couldn't leave the novitiate unless you made a dozen of them. So I think we had lot left over so I didn't have to make, but I was real good at sewing the other piece cause they were straight, they weren't hard to sew because they were just a straight piece and just put a couple of pleats in it. It wasn't too bad. But then the more I wore it see this part of it was interesting, when I talk to my Muslim friends, because a couple of them wear the whole thing, not the black burka, but they wear the head cover up and the long dress. I said, because they asked me they said, Sister, how come the sisters don't wear that anymore? I said, well, I can tell you personally why I don't wear it. I don't wear it, number one, it was extremely hot in the summertime and very cold in the wintertime because all the air would blow up that long dress and we didn't have warm coats and stuff. We had a little shawl they put on us. So it was not real comfortable. And it took a lot of work to keep it going. You only had three of them, so you had to keep them going.

And I didn't like one time, one time another sister and I went to the bus station to pick up the principal of the school. She'd come from Cleveland, downtown Toledo, we were in the bus station with our cute little, whether you call, it, was like a cape and the habits, a full habit. And two drunk Mexican guys came up to us and took my hand and my gloves, start kissing my hand, and I go, Veronica let's go to the car. So we ran to the car, locked ourselves in until the bus came. And every once in a while some people would come up to you and say, Oh, you're a sister, what order are you? I said I'm a Sylvania Franciscan. We had these nuns. They were so mean they beat us on the knuckles - and I didn't do that. You've got the idea about the good and the bad. One time I was at Woolworths and I walked by a counter and the little glass thing that was protecting things from falling, fell. I didn't touch it. I just walked by and it made such a noise. Everyone in the store came and here's the nun standing there. After a while I just found it - like we stuck out too much. And what really bothered me was we represented, and this is definitely true for, for policemen and firemen and military. You represent all that people don't like or do like about you. They don't know you. They just know that - that's why I didn't like it. Did not like it.

After that, I was - a certain amount of freedom it was funny. I changed my name in 1980 from Robert Frances. I asked for Robert Marie but I got Robert Frances. I didn't mind it but people couldn't understand. I mean, people who I worked with, lay people would they'd call me Frances, Sister Frances because it was like a feminine name. Couldn't understand where the Robert Frances came from. And then I would say to people, my name is, my name is Sister Mary Thill. After I went back to my baptismal name, my dad gave me my name, Mary. So I asked him if he would mind if I went back to Mary. Oh, no, he said fine, he was happy that I had Robert Frances, I think, but he hated our interim habit. I - of all my sisters in the community looked the worst in it. Well, because I was such an obedient

person. We weren't supposed to show any hair So I did it so my hair and my hair goes way back too so I looked like I was bald. So I came home one day and my dad said either you go back to that old habit or you start wearing some decent clothes. You look horrible in that thing, he was embarrassed that I was his daughter. So he was a big piece so I went back and then we went back to slowly. I didn't hang on to it. Some of our sisters did. I didn't keep any of it. Some of them did. I didn't, I would just, I was ready to move on, get rid of it. So then one day I get this bright inspiration to get my ears pierced. So I did, went and got my ears pierced. I go home that summer, my mother standing there coming out of the house, waiting for me to come so she can see me. I didn't tell her, one of my third grade teacher, Sister what's her name, Antonella must have told her that she and my mother were good friends. She looks at me, she goes and when did you get those ears pierced? I said earlier this summer. Because I think and in her generation only loose women got their ears pierced. She did the same thing when I, my first pair of glasses I got were readers. So I've worn them the end of my nose, I think she hated them, I go, Why? Because the governor's wife of Minnesota wears them and I can't stand her. That's a good reason.

1:06:12 [Patricia Beach]

And I would just echo - I cut Beth off there. But what she was saying, how much we have enjoyed this past hour or so.

1:06:20 [Mary Thill]

Well, I've enjoyed it too, thank you for being so generous with us. I have a dream someday I'm going to write my biography, autobiography.

1:06:28 [Patricia Beach]

Oh, you should. That's going to be on the cover. Oh yeah. And if you want help with that, Beth would be glad to help, you know, both of would, we try to help people if you really - oh yeah, we would love to.

1:06:44 [Mary Thill]

I've saved my journals, I've got lots of information, different types and the different things I did as well.

1:06:51 [Patricia Beach]

We love that picture as well. Okay.

[Beth White]

Thank you again, Sister, you have given us more insight again about how Vatican II has affected the Catholic health care system and the work that you continue to do and the lives you continue to influence. Thank you.

[Patricia Beach]

So promising.

[Beth White]

Thank you.