

Religious Sisters in Health Care: The Conspicuous Love of Jesus

Date: 25 February 2020

Interviewee: Rita Mary Wasserman

Interviewers: Beth Heinzeroth White and Patricia E. Ringos Beach

0:03 [Beth White]

Hello, this is Beth Heinzeroth White. Today is February 25th, 2020. We are interviewing for the first time, Sister Rita Mary Wasserman, religious Sister of Mercy. This interview is taking place at Sister's home at St. Bernadine Home in Fremont, Ohio. This interview is part of the Religious Sisters in Health Care: The Conspicuous Love of Jesus project, and it will be archived in the US Catholic Special Collection at the University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio. Thank you, Sister Rita Mary for interviewing with us today. We've been looking forward to talking with you.

0:43 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Well, and you're most welcome. I feel honored and appreciate your time and your interests. Saint Bernadine Home is a retirement for, for the Sisters of Mercy. And at the present time, the residents are all Sisters of Mercy. And we expect sisters from another home to move in with us within the next year. So our numbers will increase. Our home accommodates thirty-five sisters, and we now have seventeen. So we have room for additional retired Sisters of Mercy is our, it's our goal and our - what we are here for. And it was built in 1970 by our sisters who had far sight into the future. The building, as you came up to the property, the older brick building was our original mother house since 1925. And that mother house, now is a retreat center. Since we have this, we've built this home and we took occupation in 1970 for ourselves. So that's what we're so fortunate and appreciative that we have it. And that the sisters in the sixties could look this far ahead. You know that showed very thoughtful women - doesn't have to be high education - but they were thoughtful as Catherine McAuley would be to look to the future. And so we are honored and appreciative of what we have and you've seen a little of it since you had a little time.

3:11 [Beth White]

It's a lovely facility.

3:13 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Yes, it is.

3:14 [Beth White]

Well we're going to continue to ask you to think back. Now, to your early life. What experiences lead you to the decision to become a religious sister?

3:26 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Well, I went to a Catholic school at St. Joseph's School here in Fremont and St. Joseph's High School here in Fremont. And during those years in the forties, we were taught by Sisters of Notre Dame. And I think I saw them maybe as teachers because that's what every class should. They, they were certainly thoughtful and religious, but I did want to be a sister. And I thought about it for many years. And then I graduated, still undecided. And it was World War Two at that time. And most of the friends that I had, and the other girls, most of the boys went off to war. So we were kinda girlfriends. But we of course went to the Camp Perry and we had entertainment with the soldiers from other places, but it wasn't our acquaintance. But anyhow, I still thought about sisters, about religious life. And I had some relatives that were sisters. A few were Sisters of Mercy. And some were Sisters of Notre Dame. And I chose the Sisters of Mercy. I think God sent me. And so one Sunday afternoon, I said to my mother, I'm going out to [Our Lady of] the Pines and talk to one of the sisters. And I told her what about and she said, Well, are you sure? Well I knew I need to talk with somebody. So I, I did visit here. And the sister that answered the door was very hospitable. She had an apron on, I think she was doing dishes and she took off her apron and we went for a walk. I remember we, we walked down toward the cemetery. I don't think we walked that far and it was August. And so September was the opening date for entrance. I said, no, that's too quick. I was still, still praying about it. So she said, Oh you'll lose your vocation. As my mother also said, If you have vocation, you will not lose it. So anyhow I didn't enter until February of 1946. And so I'm celebrating 75 years in the convent this year.

[Beth White]

Golly, congratulations.

7:01 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

And things proceeded once I made up my decision to enter in February. And I – at first, it was a transition from the walk of life that I came from and to the community where we had rules and a schedule to follow. And we - nothing that difficult, but things were much different. And we had our novitiate days and we had two and a half years to accommodate us, to [inquire?] and to make certain this is what we wanted. And so on profession day in August. Gosh, I can't think of the date, but August of one - whatever year. Probably '48 or '49. And then I made my vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. We were in the original habit that you see in many pictures. And maybe you saw it in our dining room. Did you have tea today or coffee?

8:43 [Beth White]

No, not in the dining room.

8:45 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Well, anyhow we were in the original habit which was very enclosed. But, you know, it was our life, it's what we chose. So we add three more years to temporary profession. And during that time we could change our still change our mind. But after three years of temporary profession, we have final vows. And that was a very special day. I can remember

my family being there with us. They made the long trip from Fremont to Cincinnati. In those days no expressway. And I'm the oldest of eight children, so they had a car full of brothers and sisters. And they, they, they told the story of stopping at Eden Park and changing into their good clothes. So they wanted to look proper. So anyhow we had a lovely visit with the family. And at the time of prayers, our visitors were excused, and we went to prayer, and the usual schedule for the day, which was our life. And it's a memory that you continue to have as you would have your wedding day and memories of small things but great things. So that's my entering religious life. I, I was out of high school more than two years before I made that decision. When the war ended, we all scurried for our future. And, and mine was the community, was religious life.

11:19 [Beth White]

It's great to hear. When you think back from those early days of your professed life and onward, what are two of the biggest changes you've noticed in society? And how did that affect your life as a religious sister?

11:40 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

I think in society at that time people were - I think just as you are - and Sarah, you were, as adults. You are very open to other people's needs. It wasn't like me, mine and ours, you know, I think neighbors were good neighbors. We played together, we did things together. Today I see, and we just had a conference, we just had a meeting before you came, where not every parent, but there are parents out there who, who don't respect their own children and probably not others either. As the way I was hearing it I just couldn't believe the things that are happening out in society to young people who need guidance. So their guidance takes them to drugs, other things, other activities that are really not part of their faith and from whatever faith they come, it doesn't necessarily have to just be Catholic. But I think our society is me, me, me. And you know, even our, our, our government today is just - we don't hear about the things they're doing to help us as citizens. But it's more what they're getting. What, what are, what, what is this in - in it for them? And I think that kind of goes from the top right on through all of us. Unless we're very careful and listen to our faith from whatever religion we attend. It does - Catholic would be mine. But I think there's many faith orientations. And in my work over the years, I, in Willard, I attended every church in town. It was either for a funeral or a wedding or a celebration, or invitation for something. And I was with all colored and uh, denominations as well as white. They were all part of, of my ministry outside of the hospital. And it was dealing with the other faith orientations. And then that helped me in my work because I would speak with the patients and they would share their faith with me. And this way, I also, on the outside was able to share their faith and their church. Funerals. Mostly funerals, a few weddings, other celebrations that they would hold. But that's how we, as sisters, bring the community into what we're doing and why we are where we are. If we, if we are attentive to their interests, their, their, their basis of their faith and their love of God. And they see it in us if we, if we attend to it. And my first years, I don't remember succeeding questions you might be asking me but, years, in my early years, we were very work oriented. Even as sisters, we had a very rigid schedule to be on duty at a certain time and to be off for prayers and to be off for meals and with the sisters and all of that was part of our work. But it was our day and we, we, we, we were present in those early days. I don't know. Some of you might remember. I'm sure the Grey Nuns would have

been the same. We were there for breakfast. We made sure that every patient had what they needed and what they wanted. We were there for their noon meal and their supper. We served three meals to patients. And that gave us a real close connection in a very small way maybe. But then that grew as our society. What should I say their needs and their wishes change too. I think someone needed more time than others. I had a gentleman, he's just admitted and I went past his room and I went in and I said, Good morning, George, and he is very stern and he looked at me. I was in street clothes that, that time I was not in the habit. And he looked at me and I said, I'm Sister Rita Mary. And he said, I don't want any of that stuff. That's not what I came for. I said Well, we respect that and I hope that things go well, let us know if we can help you, and I left. Well, the next day I went on my rounds and I went by and I just didn't go in and I just went by the door and I said Morning, George and I kept walking. Well after two or three days, I ventured in the room, you know. And he turned out to be the best friend you'd ever want. But it doesn't happen. Like right now. For any of us. Lay people as well as the sisters. It's not a now thing. It's, it's how we grow into it, into relationship.

19:42 [Beth White]

I remember hearing that you were a teacher for a very short time and then became a nurse.

19:49 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Well, we'll go back to when I was first professed, first day took my vows. And my assignment always came on a little piece of paper. And we would go to the communion rail and get our paper. And that told us what we were gonna do for the next year. So I went and got mine, and it said the teacher's college. Well, that didn't sound too bad because I wanted to be a teacher. And so I kept my teacher's college in my mind. But the day I was supposed to register, they called me to the mother provincial's office and said the car is waiting to take you to Toledo to teach school. So I got in the car and we went to Toledo. No interstate, it was a long ride. And I got there and it was dark and next morning it was still dark. And they showed me my classroom. Fifty-four children. And so yeah, that's what I had. I, I really look back on and I don't know how I did it. But I got them in church for Mass. And when we got back after Mass the, the children all said, Good morning, Sister. And I thought, What do I say to them? And that's how I, that's –

[Beth White]

You were a real novice, huh?

21:58 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

I was a novice. So I pulled a little sheet of paper out and it's told me what I should say. So - and that was my beginning. And I had one year of teaching. And then I was really all for it. I wanted to be a teacher. So that summer, anything anybody threw away, I kept. I thought next year I'm going to really be prepared. I'm going to have the nicest bulletin boards and I had all kinds of dreams of what I would do. And when I went and got my new assignment, it said Mercy Hospital School of Nursing. So a nurse, I am.

22:55 [Beth White]

You've had a very long and distinguished career in health care, doing many, many different things. Can you describe a little bit of how your career progressed and how it was that you were, you made sure that the things that you did made your, your setting distinctly Catholic?

23:21 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Okay nursing. First of all, it was a School of Nursing was when I was - and that was study with other students. And when we graduated then, I was given an assignment as a supervisor of second floor Mercy Hospital. And one day I was a student and the next day I was supervising the whole bunch of them well, they know me pretty well by then. And so I think my, my asking them or requesting them, maybe pretty firmly, to do certain things, not doing another thing again. And then I often found myself working with them. It was my pleasure, I guess. Although I didn't look on it as a pleasure then. It was, it was a calling to get in there and work, work with others. And I think I had a card this week from someone. I should have brought it. And I haven't heard from her for years. And she thanked me for the, for the example. And the, what should I, what did she call it? That it helped her to know what we meant by mercy. And we had gone to a new hospital in Willard that time, I was asked to go to, and I didn't know where it was or what it was. But we talked about it and I did accept the assignment. And I was there twenty-five years. Well, it's a little town and there's not many people in town who didn't know me because of the opportunity I had of either caring for them in the hospital, being with them in the emergency room. They would - my physician is in that hospital and now my family physician and this one man stopped me who I didn't recognize. But he said, You're Sister Rita, and I said yes. And he said you were with us when my wife died. And I didn't remember him. It meant something to him. That as a Sister of Mercy, not as I was a Rita. But as a Sister of Mercy, I was there to minister at her last moments with the family. And he - as I said, I didn't recognize him but he stopped me and said, you were with us when my wife died. So I think we give to others and we demonstrate to others because it's in our it's in our blood, it's in our nature. It's what we've, it's what we've been praying and studying. All these years and this year at seventy-five, I've been retired for about five years. I retired at 86, I guess it was a little longer than that. 1986 we had built a new hospital. The old one that we acquired was falling apart, and always we'd have to turn the electricity off of one machine. So we could operate the other, things like that. You know it was out, it was, it was outdated. So I was part of building the new hospital they have now in Willard. And they opened it in May of 2012, is it 2012. Yeah. And another sister, Franciscan, was working with me taking my place when I retired. And the two of us - How do you transfer patients that are really sick from an old building to a new one physically they needed? So she stayed in the old hospital and I went to the new one and then she prepared them. And that is mercy, which - She now writes me a note and she'll say, I have mercy that you gave me. I don't know how I gave it to her, but she got it because of what she saw. And I didn't do it because I wanted to say you know put this in your pocket and remember. But she said, you gave me the spirit of mercy. But anyhow, she was at the old hospital preparing the patient and the family for their ride to the new hospital. And I was at the new hospital and I received them and then I went with them through their new room. So that's how we do things. Mercy. It's hard to put it in letters, but it's, it's how we, how we function, how we operate, and how we anticipate needs that maybe are not anticipated or known by the individual. I think I rambled a little bit here.

30:31 [Beth White]

No that's a great -

30:34 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

I think that's an example of giving mercy to the Franciscan took my place. She's still there. And she, she speaks mercy in the chapel. If you go to the chapel, it's mercy in the chapel. If you go to the floors, she's attentive to where she sees mercy or doesn't see it. And it's because we worked together for at least four or five years. And she saw what I was doing. I didn't say to her now this is what you do. Make sure there's a cross on the wall and do this and that and the other thing. Sometimes patients would take the cross with them. That was all right. We invited them to do that if they wanted it, we'd just put another one up. But anyhow, it's those those kinds of things that we did so comfortably together.

31:46 [Beth White]

Yeah. You know there's so many fewer sisters than there were when you began your career in health care. And I wonder what you think about the laity taking over that, that sense of mercy, that Catholic identity. How do you think that's progressing?

32:05 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

I think it's going well.

32:07 [Beth White]

Tell me more about that.

32:10 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

I think in the picture, they invited me to come back and speak to four or five hundred people about - I can't remember what I talked about, but I had a kind of a long talk. They saw mercy in that. And not only - I should have brought the pictures - but they didn't invite just me. I was the speaker. But they invited all the sisters to come to the banquet. So there were about ten or twelve sisters at the banquet where I, where I spoke. They, they include us periodically, once or twice a year, the management team from the system in Toledo. And they include St. Rita's in Willard. They come here and have dinner with us. And then they tell us about what they're doing. And so, you know, they share with us this is what we're doing, this is what we're gonna do. This is what we're changing.

[Beth White]

And they want your advice. Yeah.

33:40 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Yeah. And do you have any questions? And you know is there something we didn't explain very well? And we have an interchange of the sisters with them. And the college equally does that. They bring the faculty. And there's a picture in our dining room of the faculty that came for noon meal. And after the meal, we all talked and they told us what they're doing and, and so on. We all got in a large group. And we had our pictures taken with the faculty and all of the eighteen or twenty of us that was here. So you see, there's a, there's a continual connection that they, they feel. We didn't say You gotta talk to us once a year.

34:47 [Beth White]

But they understood your importance.

34:50 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Yes.

34:51 [Beth White]

I'm sure you've had a chance to give them advice.

34:54 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

A time or two, we have.

[Beth White]

Can you tell us stories?

34:57 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Oh dear, I'm trying to think – I, I'm trying to think of story. I am lost right now. Maybe I'll find one. Because - well, when they tell us they're getting a new piece of equipment of some sort. Some of us have myself included, have to ask, what does it do and how much does it cost? And I, I'm sure if you talk to the Grey Nuns they would have similar stories. And we know that they also let's see - St. Rita's does not have a sister. Willard does not have a Sister of Mercy. Tiffin has no Sister. St. Charles, I don't think they have a sister. But they come and connect with us. Well, like myself, to get in a car and go there would be very difficult. But they come here to have lunch with us and we make sure that we don't all sit separate. Make sure that some of them some of us, and we can talk at the table. I wish I could remember a story and I'm not able to -

[Beth White]

Your example of asking how much it costs for new equipment that shows your past life as an administrator in a hospital. You're - you so you're helping them remember the important things as they stay in touch with you.

37:04 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Because it's no question that things have changed so dramatically. You wouldn't recognize most of those hospitals coming down the street because they have expanded so, so, so much.

37:26 [Beth White]

Would you say that they still have a strong Catholic identity?

37:29 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Yes. You go in and you see that when you enter the door, there's a Mercy Cross, I think at the desk. When you go do the floors, you and I've, I've been able to do that a few years back. I always felt like I was in our hospital, not just any hospital. And the staff helped you to remind you that we did this. Seems like on St. Charles built a - you can help me - they built an addition that was for behavioral pediatrics, behavioral science.

38:28 [Beth White]

That's right.

38:29 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

And so we had questions about that and some of us for physically able to go and tour. And on the wall as you went down the corridor, one of the corridors. And they weren't little tiny pictures. But they were dramatic representation of the Stations of the Cross down that whole hallway and around. That was not a sister saying that. That was one of the planners, one of the nurses or one of the administrators had that idea. And if you went there today, I'm sure it's still there.

39:17 [Beth White]

The Catholic presence is right there.

[Rita Mary Wasserman]

It's there. And they like to come and share with us when they when they are able to advance certain things. They, they welcome us. Most of them know me. They don't know all the sisters. I get lots of hugs from the administrators and they remember what I did this time and that time and put my name on one of the board rooms and, you know, they - mercy is there. Yes. And probably there's people there that don't even know who she is. You know, that she's a Sister of Mercy that was here, you know. And, and it, and then I think on like Nurses Day or Nurses Week, they have blessing of the hands of all of the staff particularly the nurses, and the pastoral care sisters, were the ones that went and blessed each, each employee's hands for the work that they do for the patients. Now, many of them have forgotten that. But there's, there's those that still remember. And I don't know that they're still doing it, but –

[Beth White]

I think they are.

41:09 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

And I'm sure they do it at St. Vincent's

[Beth White]

Right.

41:14 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

I think when the Grey Nuns left St. Vincent's, it was very hard, very hard for them. As, as it has been for us. But they left the spirit of their foundress great. Marguerite d'Youville is with their employees. Just as Catherine McAuley, we hope this with the Mercy employees but those are little examples of what I think was done over the years. And it's, it's valued enough that is carried on. And I think you know we speak about one or two hospitals where well, I was at, I was at Mercy in St. Charles for many years. And I was a St. Rita's administrator and then I was in Willard for twenty-five years. So you see how many people and nurses as well as patients that we had personal contacts with. May I have a drink of water, Sarah?

[Beth White]

The foundation was, was well-laid. You're saying that you're confident that it's going on and -

[Rita Mary Wasserman]

I think, I think we have laid it. And, you know, we still have young sisters, not eighteen or twenty years old, but in their thirties, forties and fifties, who are ministering in parishes and schools. And I think the same spirit that we, that I have spoken of in our hospitals, that same spirit I think is being shared by - I think we have 11 sisters that aren't retired here, that are out in different ministries. And they're one sister in one place, one another. But they get together. They aren't just living alone, but they get together. They come here when we have celebrations. It's, it's a spirit of oneness. And as Sisters of Mercy we probably have four or five thousand sisters across the United States, which spreads us thin. But in this past couple of years, we've been seriously working to bring all of us, not into North Ohio or Tennessee or California. But we are bringing ourselves together as one. One community. And so it's not going to be little pockets of us around. It will - And those numbers will still diminish because we're all getting older. But there are younger sisters. We had a young sister from Toledo who was in the Coast Guard. That was her occupation for quite a while. And she entered our community. And I think she's final professed now, working in a social setting, social service setting that, you know, see that's and she came I'm sure that the sisters invited her, encouraged her, but she had she had a choice to make. As we all did. And we - it that is all different from when I entered. When I entered, there were ten of us that came on one day. And then September another ten came, you know, it just increased, increased, increased. But now it's one now. And one then you know, I do. And so it's a

different - it's different. And - thank you so much - It's, it's what Catherine did. She started out with, she started out with a large sum of money that she inherited from some people that she cared for. Not relatives, but people who she cared for until they passed away. And they passed away and they - she inherited everything they had. So she used that to build - the house still stands in Dublin. And it was the house for girls, girls off the street who had no place to go except, you know what. They were doing, anything that they had to do have a, have a meal. But she brought them in and she taught them how to sew and cook and how to do house things. And that was the beginning of Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy. It was small. It was, it was not too special people. It was special people on the street that she saw were not living a good life. And that - and then she took them with her when she went out to visit the sick. We have some pictures. I think we have a few pictures hanging here some place, of this Sister of Mercy, tending to a war veteran. I think during the Civil War. I'm not real sure about that time. But it was the soldier that was wounded and it showed her tending to him because there just weren't people to do those, to take care of him. So that's all changed from, you know, that's how you see the change that -

[Beth White]

Yes.

49:14 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

From Catherine to where I entered and to the present time that we, we move with the time. And I wish I could quote Catherine, but I'm not good at quoting and which she she's told us, you know, that we needed to consider the time. How did she say it? We have to consider the needs of the times. Not, not what needed a hundred years ago. But the needs of the times which has changed all of us. Even in retirement, it has changed us.

[50:07] [Beth White]

That is such valuable information to remember. Sister Rita, I could talk with you all day long. Thank you for it. We have taken an hour of your time and I can't thank you enough for your example.

[Rita Mary Wasserman]

I don't know if I've answered all of these questions.

50:26 [Beth White]

You answered them so beautifully. I don't have another question for you. Do you have any questions of us?

50:33 [Patricia Beach]

I do have - I'd like to just circle back to one thing earlier, Sister, I'm intrigued. During the interviews that we did, when you had made your professed, your final vows, what was your, what was your given name then? And then how did that change?

50:52 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Well, at that time, when we when we took our temporary vows, we were given of course, when I entered for six months, I was Sister Rita. And I persevered those first six months. Then - I've lost my train of thought.

[Patricia Beach]

The names.

51:25 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Then we - six months, then we were given temporary vows 2.5 years later. And at the time we got our temporary vow, and we, we could ask for a name, but never assured that we'd get it. Just what they would decide to give us. And I had I think, we gave three choices or something like that. And I gave my choices. And one of them was Lucretia. And I had a girlfriend, Lucretia, that I worked with during World War Two. And I always thought of Lucretia. So my mother said, Where did you come up with that name? She couldn't believe that. I said, Well, we were good friends. Well, she accepted it. But my first name was Sister Mary Lucretia. Then in the mid, in the mid sixties, I can't tell you what at the time, the Church was making a lot of changes. And the community then gave us the option of changing our name to whatever we would prefer. And so I chose my baptismal name, which was Rita Mary. And so that is how I went from Lucretia to Rita Mary.

53:29 [Beth White]

Is Wasserman your family name?

[Rita Mary Wasserman]

Yes. Okay. Wasserman, is my - and of course on our legal documents, should you need to use your family name, as well.

[Patricia Beach]

Thank you. That's always an interesting story.

53:48 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

I don't know how the Grey Nuns - they probably has some changes similar to that. I'm not sure.

53:56 [Beth White]

Sisters of Notre Dame had similar changes too, with Vatican II, was as you said, all the changes that happened in the Church.

[Rita Mary Wasserman]

Community had that was one of the changes that, and at that time also is when we, probably in the late fifties, early sixties, we changed from the traditional habit that we are in early pictures, to a navy blue dress. And we all wore a veil. Our hair showed which everyone wondered whether we had hair or not but we changed from the enclosure to a navy blue dress. And we all wore the same navy blue dress and veil. And then I would say over the next ten years after that happened, then there was a relinquish of the strict habit and that the sisters could choose street clothes. I'm not sure what a better name is for it.

55:21 [Beth White]

That's right.

[Rita Mary Wasserman]

We could choose street clothing. So that's how you see us today. Yeah. Although there are a few sisters my age and older, who still wear the habit.

55:37 [Beth White]

They still like the habit? Yeah.

55:39 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

Yeah. And so they're permitted to do they don't they don't need to change. That, that's what they want. So there's just not so there's a minimal number. But that we were given choice.

56:05 [Patricia Beach]

You were given choice earlier on then a lot of orders, didn't you?

[Rita Mary Wasserman]

Yeah. I think we might have, yeah. What it sounds like. But then they soon followed us, some more or less and some of their sisters still wear the original habits, which is fine.

56:30 [Patricia Beach]

I would just follow up with what Beth said. Thank you. And there are not enough words to say. Thank you for your graciousness and for your time this afternoon, sister.

56:40 [Rita Mary Wasserman]

I don't know if I really answered many of the questions.