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Sr. Christine: Immigration Reform

Ella Iacoviello

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

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Ella Iacoviello

Sr. Christine: Immigration Reform

Abstract: I interviewed Sister Christine in December of 2018 about her lived experience as a woman religious. This paper includes segments of the interview in which she discusses her time helping new immigrants gain American citizenship.

“God is an equal opportunity employer,” Sister Christine repeated over and over again when talking about her experience as a woman religious. A talkative, spirited, and confident woman, Sr. Christine described her path to religiosity as slippery but gratifying. When she joined a newly built Catholic school in her town, she had her first encounter with sisters. “I liked them,” she said simply, “They were sort of a mystery to me, but somehow I liked them.” She went on to spend time as a teacher and then eventually moved on to her main vocation: the executive for an immigrant help center, taking stock in her mission’s charism of hospitality. For fifteen years she taught immigrants how to speak English and helped them study for their citizenship tests. With the gifts granted to her by God and teaching experience, her program successfully helped grant citizenship to more than 70 people. But she granted people more than that – one of the women she taught told her that, “to learn another language is to grow another soul.” Through her passion for hospitality and her ideals of representing only the best of what the Catholic Church has to offer, Sister Christine told a tale of a life that truly “cashed in on the blessings on the non-ordained.”

When asked why she was drawn to her line of work, Sister Christine enthusiastically described her love for hospitality, saying that she came from an Irish

family and knew that at one point, her ancestors were not welcomed into this country. This lack of hospitality in her own bloodline brightened the flame of her work, driving her to welcome those who may not be welcomed by others. When asked if her work was entwined with her theology, she paused and only said, “I was helping people survive.” Her language wasn’t intensely spiritual or didactic – though her work was inspired by her religion, she never used her religion as a way to go above people’s heads or as a driving force of perceived superiority. Still, religion was intrinsically there.

Charity, justice, and hospitality are all Catholic values that Sister Christine clung to throughout her career. She mentioned that the universality of who we are as the children of God inspired her passion: she knew that she had gifts and others had needs, and that is how they became connected. “I think hospitality ranks right up there with faith, hope, and love,” Sister Christine said in talking about her Catholic values, “I just think it’s a sin that millions of people are in the distress that they’re in right now.” Though welcoming the stranger was a distinctly Christian ideal, she never tried to impose her religion on others. Muslims, non-Catholic Christians, and atheists found solace and comfort in her program, and never once did she try to convert them. She knew places that tried teaching immigrants English from the Bible, and she found that impractical and ridiculous. “Can you imagine?” she scoffed, saying there was never an attempt to do anything but respect and welcome people. This, she thought, was more faithfully Catholic than the act of conversion.

She took pride in her work and solace in the sisters that surrounded her: “Sisters are on the forefront of peace and justice [...] we really help people come to a new image of God,” she said, mentioning that women religious have had the opportunity to bring a

new face to the Catholic Church. She praised her tradition and the women in it for being strong and pushing on in the face of constant change and adversity. The last sentence of her interview was spent rewording that: “So much has changed in the culture, in the Church, in the structures of religious life. Women religious navigating those changes is really quite remarkable.”

Works Cited

“Sr. Christine.” Telephone interview by author. December 22, 2017.