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Sr. Cynthia: Powerful Interactions

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Sr. Cynthia: Powerful Interactions

Abstract: The following paper includes portions of an interview with Sr. Cynthia Gray, a Salesian Sister who has worked in the education field for over 30 years. The paper focuses on the recurring theme of the important interactions and connections of women religious, specifically Salesians, with the rest of the world.

As a Salesian Sister, Sr. Cynthia's primary focus or charism is the education of youth. She describes the charism as "the evangelization of young people through education" in accordance with the "Preventive System" which relies on reason, religion, and kindness. Specifically, Sr. Cynthia explains the value of reason when as a teacher she would help young people understand the motivation behind learning and behaving properly. Likewise, Sr. Cynthia explains the importance of religion by stating that faith permeates throughout one's life and is necessary to everything one does. Lastly, kindness is a crucial aspect of her congregation's goal; therefore, in the interview Sr. Cynthia frequently commented on the "family spirit" and welcoming atmosphere of the schools and homes of the Salesians. She describes attempts to genuinely engage with people whether through education or simply playing a game of basketball.

This Salesian "education" takes different forms depending on the needs of the community at the time. For instance, she mentions Salesians in different countries whose mission involves caring for refugees or even children who have been enslaved. These children have often been sold by the parents because they are extremely poor so "they sell one of their children to feed the rest of the family." These Sisters have to rescue and rehabilitate these children who have

undergone a traumatic experience. Additionally, the Sisters help to reunite and rebuild the families and communities to make sure the families do not need to survive on the sale of their children again

Although Sr. Cynthia has dedicated over a decade to teaching children, she insists that education is not just a matter of schools, but refers to the goal of fully educating the person. She talks of education as a process of "walking with them to who they're called to be." Essentially, Salesians help to form people into who God has called them to be whether it be through academic schooling or other "formative encounters" such as youth groups, summer camps, or simply a chance encounter on the street.

Overall, Sr. Cynthia emphasizes direct connection of women religious with others. Today, this is not easily accomplished because of the decline of women religious resulting in fewer sisters and less opportunities to interact with people. This is a common issue for Catholics as can be seen by the following statistics; "the number of women religious alone decreased by 48.8 percent between 1964 and 1989. . .during those same years 3,929 Catholic elementary schools and 1,379 high schools closed."¹ Sr. Cynthia witnessed a similar decline in sisters joining her congregation resulting in less teaching positions and interactions with young people and future women religious.

Before the general decline, sisters often joined congregations they were exposed to during their academic career or within their own communities. For instance, Sr. Cynthia joined the group that taught at her high school. She saw the genuine interest of the Salesians in caring for and teaching young people and was attracted to their group and charism. Sr. Cynthia believes

¹ McGuinness, Margaret M. *Called to Serve*. New York University Press, 2013, 84-85.

interactions, like those between a teacher and student, will allow people to better understand women religious. She realizes that “people don’t look to be something that they do not know.” In addition to physical interaction, she mentioned congregations creating a matchmaking website to pair possible congregations with future sisters according to their beliefs and vocational desires. Congregations, including the Salesian Sisters, are attempting to bridge the gap and connect with the youth today.

Sr. Cynthia spoke of strong connections within her congregation as well. She feels that her sisters are her family and treats them with kindness and respect. She has disagreements with her sisters, teases them, lives with them, prays with them, and genuinely loves them. She says her community and prayer life are the most important aspects of her life as a woman religious. To sum up her experience as a sister she stated "It's a good life, if you are called to it, it's a great life."

Work Cited

“Sr. Cynthia Gray.” Skype interview by author. January 6, 2018.