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Sr. Barbara Joanne: Prison Ministry

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Amayrani Lopez

Sr. Barbara Joanne: Prison Ministry

Abstract: This paper includes an interview with Barbara Joanne, a woman part of a Roman Catholic religious congregation and a teacher for about 20 years, and her experiences with prison ministry.

To receive a better understanding of the lives of women religious, it is known that firsthand accounts are the best in receiving the most accurate information. Keeping this in mind, I interviewed a women religious about her work with the Catholic Church. As seen through this interview, the life of a woman religious was very different and not comparable to the life of a “regular person”. I discovered interesting things about not only her life but the evolution her congregation had gone through since she began when I interviewed a women religious named Sister Barbara Joanne.

It is best to provide a brief preview of the life of Sister Barbara Joanne before unfolding her interesting story. Sister Barbara Joanne entered her congregation in 1954 and graduated from college in 1958. Afterwards, she continued her graduate studies in sociology. She taught social science courses in high school and junior college for a few years but never liked either side of the teacher’s desk- not as a student and definitely not as a teacher. To further emphasize this, she did not pass her comprehensive examination, a mandatory exam taken by graduate students in a particular field or study, because she hated studying. In 1974, Sister Barbara Joanne began working as an executive associate at an institute, where she worked for 30 years. The purpose of the institute was for scholars from all over the world to come and study. Most of these scholars were on sabbatical. The institute had a seminar every week, where these scholars gave lectures. Sister Barbara Joanne retired on May 30, 2004 because her boss was retiring, and she didn’t want to get involved with another one. She

moved to a center for sisters, where she lives now. While at this center, she helped another women religious by working at a retreat affiliated with her congregation. According to Sister Barbara Joanne, her life as a woman religious can be divided into four sections: religious formation for 6 years, teaching for 20 years, 30 years at an institute, and 15 years at a center for sisters.

During the interview, a story that really caught my attention was Sister Barbara Joanne's work in prison ministry. She has been and is still corresponding with many inmates on death row. She was introduced to this ministry in January 2012 when she received an oblate newsletter. On the back of the newsletter, there was a short article stating that people on death row are some of the most forgotten people in the world. After reading this, Sister Barbara Joanne decided to go through the names of potential death row pen pals that were given in the article. She picked a name she could remember and spell. Because Sister Barbara Joanne told me anyone could look up the cases of any prisoner on death row, I decided to look up her pen pal's case. Like most of the other inmates, he was on death row for murder. Currently, he's in a penitentiary and resides in the same pod as Sister Barbara Joanne's other pen pals. Sister Barbara Joanne has formed such a close connection with her pen pals that she has pictures of them on her shelves. Her pen pals seemed to have formed a close connection with her as well. They send her drawings of cars that she has hung up all over her office and even a portrait of her that she has hung up on her bedroom wall. Sister Barbara Joanne has formed such a strong with her first pen pal that she looks at him like the son she's never had. Sister Barbara Joanne receives a letter from him every Friday or Saturday. Additionally, Sister Barbara Joanne sends him money, so they can talk on the phone. They have gotten so close that Sister Barbara Joanne even sends him a spring and fall food package.

When asked about the most common misconception people have about offenders on death row, she addressed the amount of time before their execution. Most people believe

inmates on death row are executed shortly after they are sentenced, but it actually takes much longer. For instance, there hasn't been a death row execution in the penitentiary where her pen pals reside since 2006. Her first pen pal has been on death row for 20 years. Many of the offenders on death row are dying natural deaths. Thus, prisoners don't focus on being executed. Instead, they focus on living day to day in a confined area. When her pen pals begin feeling trapped and upset, Sister Barbara Joanne reminds them to stay grateful because there are others living in worse conditions. The biggest difference between living on death row and living in the general prison population is that prisoners on death row can't have jobs. The boredom kills them. Sister Barbara Joanne believes her pen pals could at least get a job and feel some worth if they were in the general prison population. Sister Barbara Joanne became a friend of her first pen pal's sister. His sister told her she didn't want him in the general prison population because he wouldn't last a week. In his sister's opinion, prisoners in the general population would be furious to have people on death row living among them and would take it upon themselves to get rid of them. Lastly, it's important to get Sister Barbara Joanne's take on the death penalty because she's so closely linked to prison ministry. She is opposed to the death penalty and dislikes how 60% of Catholics still believe in the death penalty. Sister Barbara Joanne thinks the life sentence is much more effective because it gives inmates a purpose and a future to look forward to. Also, it bothers her that we hear so much about abortion, but we don't hear the other end of it. She believes the death penalty is an issue that's equally important to address.

Her perspective and interactions with inmates on death row humanizes them and demonstrates that everyone deserves a second chance. All in all, Sister Barbara Joanne describes her experience in prison ministry as the most rewarding and fulfilling thing she's ever done. She gets as much pleasure from receiving a letter from any one of her death row pen pals, but looks forward to her first pen pal's letter each week.

Works Cited

“Sr. Barbara Joanne.” Interview by author. January 15, 2019.