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Sr. Irene: Teacher and Friend

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Sr. Irene: Teacher and Friend

Abstract: This paper includes a short piece from interview conducted in December 2018 with Sr. Irene, who has worked in education for 40 years. She recalls her experiences as a sister in her congregation since entry.

As a young girl, Sister Irene never planned to join the religious life. While she attended a Catholic school run by sisters that she respected and loved, her first plan was to become a nurse and eventually marry and start a family. Looking back, Sister Irene noted how God had a sense of humor, as she became a sister and a teacher, the two things she never wanted in her youth. Still, she has embraced her calling and enjoyed her work as an educator and sister for over 40 years.

I asked Sister Irene what surprised her most after her entrance to the convent all those years ago. She had only recently graduated high school, so it was a big change. She recalled the biggest surprise being so much silence. At 17, she was surrounded by more quietude that she had ever experienced in her life. There was more quiet than talking in a regular day. Plus, she was limited in the letters and phone calls she could make to family and friends. Perhaps most shocking of all was the fact that the new sisters could not speak to the professed sisters. These professed sisters were the very same sisters who had taught Irene as a student and made her want to become a woman religious, yet she was only allowed to speak with them during holidays. It was a difficult reality, but looking back she says it was necessary. “We couldn’t just run to our favorite sister.” She recalled, comparing this time to the military or a college sorority.

Additionally, Sister Irene recalled the best parts of being a sister after years of living in the community. Despite the shock of her 17-year-old self at the level of silence in the convent, she has grown to love its daily peace. Moreover, despite the many challenges of living in community, she loves the other sisters like family. Sister Irene cited community living as simultaneously the best, worst, easiest, and hardest part of being a sister. To a women religious, the community is everything. Even during missions where a few sisters are apart from the main community to perform a specific service or job, Sister Irene explained that these women would continue to pray, eat, and live together, synchronizing their schedule (when possible) with the motherhouse every day.

One story that was particularly relevant to a book from class – *When The Sisters Said Farewell* (Caruso) – was Sister Irene’s recollection of the many women who left the order around the 1970’s with the arrival of Vatican II, which prompted radical changes in theology and religious life. Many habited orders chose to dress as laypeople, new social ministries emerged besides nursing and teaching, and Catholics became disengaged with their communities. Consequently, overall encouragement towards the religious life decreased sharply due to less noticeable clothing, fewer sisters teaching and influencing children to consider the religious life, and a less-participatory Catholic population (Caruso 51-53). Furthermore, the new equal value of marriage and religious life, poor initial reasoning for joining the religious life, or desire for a career prompted many women to leave their orders.

Caruso also notes that the unusually high entrance of women in the 40’s, 50’s, and 60’s plummeted during the 70’s, and this change was immediately felt. Perhaps the women Sister Irene mentioned who were originally seeking community realized they

would not be surrounded by the same size of community as decades passed. Watching the convent shrink was a difficult time for Sister Irene, and prompted much internal evaluation. Why had *she* become a sister? Why had she stayed when others left? Sister Irene noted solemnly, “Maybe they shouldn’t have ever entered the convent. Maybe they were women who were looking for security.” However, she never seriously considered leaving her order, even when the other sisters were going in droves. “I’ve always felt called,” she says. Admittedly, while she watched her family members having children, families, and spouses, Sister Irene admitted to experiencing some jealousy – maybe even regret. Their families were beautiful; she was giving so much up by never having a family of her own. But as soon as she was back in the convent, she felt at home and at peace once again. She has always been content with her decisions; this was not as difficult to overcome as watching her fellow sisters leave.

Works Cited

Caruso, Michael P. *When the Sisters Said Farewell; The Transition of Leadership in Catholic Elementary Schools*. 2012. Roman & Littlefield Education. Plymouth, UK

“Sr. Irene.” Personal interview by author. December 27, 2018.