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Jocelyn Plowman

Sr. Darlene: Education and Retirement

Abstract: This paper highlights part of an interview with Sr. Darlene, who is a member of one of the most hardworking orders in the United States. Sr. Darlene has personally experienced the reforms of the Vatican II Council, increased professional opportunities for women religious, changes in the Catholic education system, and new opportunities in retirement.

Sr. Darlene shared a story that explained the impact of retiring the habits: It was homecoming week at her school and there was specific dress up days for each day of the week to celebrate. One of the days was 1950s day, so Sr. Darlene dressed up as a nun from pre-Vatican II with the floor length habit and a black shirt. Sr. Darlene described how students acted differently around her and seemed very uncomfortable by her traditional outfit. At the end of the school day, she had several students come up to her and asked her to take the habit off because they felt a clear divide between Sr. Darlene and them. The traditional habit made the students feel inferior to her even though she did not carry herself in a different way.

There were only a few career options for careers when Sr. Darlene became a woman religious. The standard options in at the time were to either become a teacher or a nurse. “I definitely didn’t want to be a nurse. I do not like blood!” So, education was the only option left. Sr. Darlene originally wanted to go into elementary music education since she studied music in college but was placed at the high school level. She has really enjoyed high schoolers, even if they have a bad reputation, since she gets to see their transformation at their graduation and see how much they have grown. Sr. Darlene is now retired from education, even though she would love to still be teaching, and is volunteering a lot at the local spirituality center to keep herself

busy instead. She is a part of a team that trains hotel staff how to look out for human trafficking as well as trying to help kids' safety in other ways.

Every congregation of sisters has a charism they believe and live out each day and adjust their ministries to. Sr. Darlene's congregation's charism (or mission) has a triple focus: walk with the poor, end the violence, and take care of the Earth. Their charism is one of the main reasons why she knew she wanted to join that congregation compared to others. She said how their charism is lived out and each of them since they are all very down to earth people and stick to their roots, while also doing something about important matters and not just waiting for someone else or another order to take charge. Her congregation seems to be more of the activist type than some of the other orders.

I found it very fitting that Sr. Darlene is a part of a congregation that is very down to earth and has the charism that they do. She is very passionate about the work she has done in the past and the work that she will do in the future. She really emphasized the need to keep kids safe with all of the recent gun violence in schools and human trafficking. As previously stated, her congregation is currently working with hotels to look for the signs of human trafficking, which is one of the three parts of their charism. Another point Sr. Darlene stressed was how teachers deal with so much more that she did when she went into the field of education. Her main complaint was about parents complaining about kids' test scores, but in today's world of education, it seems like teaching kids is almost secondary to all of the bureaucracy and regulations teachers have to deal with on a daily basis.

Sr. Darlene has since retired from education, but that has not stopped her from continuing to work. The National Catholic Reporter told a story about a nun who did not truly retire, Sr. Mary Gallagher, which is quite similar to Sr. Darlene. Sr. Mary was a Spanish teacher in

Chicago and its suburbs for a very long time. Once she retired from teaching, she took on the roles of being a pastoral administrator and helping with ESL programs in smaller towns outside of the suburbs of Chicago as well as Aurora. One day she then left everything she had built up in the Chicagoland area, including her own family to go to South Carolina, since she heard a new calling for her retired life. Sr. Mary was asked to act upon some of the local Hispanic ministries' education and social programs since she had a very strong Spanish speaking background. She did not like to address retirement as retirement, but instead thought of it as recycling since she felt called to keep taking on new challenges despite her being retired.¹

This mindset seems to be very popular among sisters in the United States. Sisters never stop thinking or giving back to their ministries or creating new ministries to help even more people. Sr. Darlene is a great example of this mindset. She moved around teaching at various, small Catholic schools the majority of her adult life and decided to retire. You would not know that she is retired based upon how busy she is helping others at the local Catholic center and helping other ministries. She took on a whole new project with her involvement with the human trafficking program with hotels. Sr. Darlene has not ever stopped her vocation or calling(s), and neither has the majority of sisters. They know how big of a role they play in helping their communities and feel like as long as they are physically and mentally able to contribute to what they vowed to originally, they will perform and exceed expectations. I am convinced that sisters will always uphold the duties and mindset of a sister for the entirety of their lives despite being “retired”.

¹ (Jones)

Lastly, it is very important to connect with and ask questions of women religious, so that we can understand and get to know the faces behind the ministries that help in our communities. Our society needs to make an effort to appreciate and respect the work these women do as well as assist them along the way if needed or asked upon.

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