

Excellent
report !!
(see comments
on back of
last page.)

Life Review
Sr. Mary [REDACTED] of St. John Bosco

[REDACTED]

GRN 5000-01
Gerontology
Dr. Harold Salmon

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One of my privileges in Social Services is to write a brief social history of each of our residents as they come into our home. This is based on an interview with the resident and the family members who are present. Having this experience already in place, I thought it would be interesting to turn elsewhere for this project. I decided to interview one of our Sisters. As I was making this decision, it occurred to me that it would be very interesting, not only for me, but also for the class, since so few people are very familiar with the religious life. Also, a Sister's unique and radical way of life would influence her perspective and give different insights, which might be beneficial to the class.

Sr. Mary [REDACTED] is only in her seventies, but she is one of the oldest Sisters in our Province. In spite of a German ancestor who passed on the name of [REDACTED], Sister is thoroughly Irish. I know her as a very joyful Sister with a sense of humor, sincere and concerned, but frequently bubbling over in laughter and song. She loves baseball and music, and follows the news so we can know what to pray for. The houseplants flourish under her care. She also does some mending and other duties, and is eager to be of service, always on the lookout for little acts of charity. Although she suffers immensely from severe back pain, she accepts it cheerfully. I have never detected a trace of bitterness in her. Her memories are not all of happiness, but they are all remembered with joy. Her favorite reminiscences are of childhood, and that is reflected in this review by the amount of space I have allowed it.

A brief explanation of some aspects of religious life might also be helpful here. This is not a career. It is a vocation, a way of life. It is freely chosen by each Sister as she discerns an interior call to serve God and neighbor in a total, radical way. She goes through three stages of formation. As a Postulant, she becomes familiar with our way of life. The Novice receives the habit (what we wear) and enters more deeply into the spiritual aspects of our life. A Junior Sister makes temporary vows. She grows in the spirit and charism of our Congregation as she strives to live it out in the apostolate, which for us is caring for children and the elderly. Following this, a Sister will make her Final (Perpetual) Vows.

A Sister is a Bride of Christ, giving herself entirely and exclusively to Him. Our life is very simple, reflecting the poverty we have embraced in imitation of Jesus and allowing for very few distractions from our spiritual goal. One of the vows we take is obedience, by which we promise to live the way of life of this Congregation, including obedience to a Superior, in whom we see Christ. Our older Sisters are outstanding examples of this. They witness to the true freedom which is found in the loving surrender of one's own will. Unthinkable as it is in today's society, this freedom is undeniable. It can be seen in the joy that radiates from these Sisters and in the thoughts shared by Sr. Mary Patrick throughout the interviews, but especially on suffering and life satisfaction.

This review is structured according to one of the favorite quotes of our older Sisters. It comes from Maximilian Kolbe, a well-known Polish Catholic priest who offered his life in place of another in the concentration camp at Auschwitz. He said that life is made up of three stages: preparation for apostolate, apostolate, and suffering. Sr. Mary Patrick knows all three.

*Terrie's
Introduction*

Preparation

On a cold winter day, a Minnesota winter day, a baby girl was born to the [REDACTED] family in St. Paul. It was January 30, 1927, a Sunday. She was the sixth of ten children that would be born to Robert Patrick and his wife Mary Jane, better known as Myrtle. The new arrival, later to be known as Sr. Mary [REDACTED], was baptized Patricia on March 20. She attributes the delay to the weather, or possibly to difficulty finding godparents.

Patricia's childhood was truly idyllic. It was "nice being in a family with brothers and sisters." She was very close to the sisters nearest her in age, Betty just older and Kathleen about four years younger. Marian came between Patricia and Kathleen, but she died very young. Her brother Frank, number four in the family, was quite a tease, as older brothers will be. Rob, the oldest, was ornery, too, but he was not around as much. He was grown up and had a job as a policeman. Sometimes he would give his younger siblings a ride in the squad car. Then he would start the sirens, and they would lay down to hide in their embarrassment, afraid people would think they had been getting into trouble.

Their father ran a grocery store connected to their home. Growing up in such delightful circumstances certainly had its advantages. On school days, the children would run into the store in the morning to kiss their father good-bye. He would tell them to fill their pockets with candy before they left. Other children who came into the store benefited from his generosity in a similar manner. In the evenings, he would often bring ice cream in for dessert.

Sister's happiest memories of childhood – at least, the ones she speaks of with the most delight and the brightest sparkle in her eye – are from the summer days out on the farm. They rode horses, took care of calves, threw hay, swam in the lake across the road, and had a wonderful time. Patricia learned how to swim when Frank pushed her out of the boat. Naturally, she learned pretty quickly, but she was not afraid anymore. She was very grateful to him and never told on him. She did not want to get him into trouble, because if Mother got scared she might not let them swim anymore. Betty, who was older, helped out in the grocery store, so she would come out later with their father. Their arrival was a double delight, since Father brought them candy. On Sundays, they would stop for ice cream on the way home from Mass. This was anticipated with great eagerness, since it was the only time they got ice cream during the summer and they were used to having it nearly everyday in town. Sister cannot remember just how far they were from St. Paul. One day, though, Frank had to ride the horse into town for coffee, and they waited all day for his return. They kept watching for him, and when he finally appeared, they all ran out to greet him, so happy to see him. Frank used to help out a lot with the farm work. "Uncle Benny," their mother's uncle, took care of the farm. He was like a grandfather to Patricia, since she never knew her own. The other kids never seemed to pester him so much, but she loved to be around him and hear him tell stories. She recalls that he would smoke a pipe, or chew Copenhagen. And, oh, how she loved to tease him, even from her earliest years!

During the winter months, when they stayed in town, Frank would take his younger sisters on the toboggan. There was a big hill only about a block away. The girls piled on, and Frank steered. He called out when it was time to lean, intentionally telling them the wrong direction, and over they would go, spilling out into the snow, laughing.

Sister recalls being a bit timid about attending school. Betty brought her to the classroom on the first day and told her she would be back. After waiting anxiously for quite some time, little Patricia ran out into the dark hallway, frantically crying out "Betty! Betty!" Her voice

echoed in the large space, but she did not care. She was desperate. Finally Betty came hurrying toward her, telling her to be quiet. "But you said you would come right back!" Betty explained that she must wait until the end of class, and then Patricia was okay.

Then there was the time that Betty and Kathleen needed to stay after school. They told poor Patricia that she must walk home alone. She was so afraid! Mother had often warned the girls not to talk to strangers and not to dawdle. Sister thinks now that she must have run most of the two miles home. At one point near home, an old woman with a "babushka" came out onto her porch and began speaking to her. The frightened little girl panicked and ran straight home and right up to her room. She shut the door and stayed put until she calmed down, not wanting anyone to see how frightened she had been. She never told anyone what had happened. Now she observes, with wisdom born of growth in humility, "Pride comes early."

It was in about the second grade that Patricia [REDACTED] first felt the desire to become a Sister. Even then, however, she knew that she did *not* want to be a teacher. She saw the Sisters who taught her, and they were very good, but she never liked school. Sometime near the end of grade school, she told her mother what she was thinking. "My mother knew me," she says now with a smile. "She told me, 'You better pray and go to Mass every morning.'" The advice was taken seriously, and from that time Patricia attended Mass with her father, who went almost daily.

The Catholic high school was only two years, so when she finished there, Patricia went on to boarding school. This was her choice. Her parents supported their children in making their own decisions. None of the others ever went to boarding school, though. Looking back at it, Sister connects this decision with her desire for religious life. She adds with a smile that her mother must have been thinking of this, too. "She knew me," she says again. "Let her go and try it out." This would give her a mild taste of what it would be like to leave home for the convent. Patricia stuck it out.

In seventh grade, she had read the autobiography of St. Therese and decided that she wanted to be like her. Her confessor allowed her to write to the Carmelites, but told her he thought she should enter an active order. Sister remembers this with a little chuckle. "I guess he knew I liked to talk." The nuns wrote back and sent her a holy card, but it was a used one. She prayed more. She wanted to be a Carmelite. Then finally she saw it in the Sunday Visitor – the Carmelite Sisters of the Divine Heart of Jesus. Devotion to the Sacred Heart had been important in her family. This congregation combined Carmelite spirituality with the Sacred Heart devotion, and they were not cloistered. She wrote to them, and they sent her information.

After high school, she spent some time working in the family store. Her mother had told her she must wait until she was twenty-one to enter the convent. Finally, Mother let her go a little early. She got a train ticket for January 3, less than a month before her twenty-first birthday.

It is "hard to leave home," but you "feel you have to go." It is so "strong" – "God is calling" you.

The day Patricia left for the convent, the whole family came for breakfast. She went into the store to say good-bye to her father. He let her know that it would be okay to come back. Her brother Frank drove her to the station. Margaret gave her a box of chocolates, probably thinking that she would never get them in the convent. When Patricia saw everyone beginning to tear up, she "took off" and found her seat in the train. She traveled all the way to Wisconsin "in a daze." Near the end of the trip, she gave the box of chocolates to a lady on the train. Mother Margaret Mary met her at the station. "What happened?" she asked as they drove to the convent. "You wrote to us, and then we didn't hear from you for a whole year." Patricia explained to her about her age. "In those days, you did what your parents told you," you followed their advice.

On the first day, Patricia was so excited. She received the black dress and little veil that Postulants wore at that time. There was so much to do and learn. The second day was much different. She became very homesick. Mother Margaret Mary saw her and asked how she was, and she just "bust out crying." She "felt so silly," crying like that when she was twenty years old. Mother Margaret Mary brought her to Sr. M. Imelda, the postulant mistress, who sat her down and talked with her. She "quietly explained religious life," how everything is very simple, no curtains, and so on. Her calm voice settled Patricia down, and she was so kind. "I was fine after that."

Only two days after her arrival, Patricia received the official Postulant collar and her new name. She had to begin Postulancy right away in order to enter the Novitiate in July. Mother Mary Francis (one of our old German Sisters, who was very excited to discover that this newcomer was a distant cousin) asked her what name she would like. "Out of the blue," Patricia suggested "Mary Patrick," for her mother and father. Mother Mary Francis said that was okay. Sr. Mary [REDACTED] later found out they had been thinking of the name Gertrude for her. She is happy she got Mary Patrick. Her title "of St. John Bosco" was added later, when she professed her first vows.

After a couple weeks, Sr. Mary [REDACTED]'s parents came for a visit. Her mother had been a little concerned about her, but was content after seeing that she "was so happy." They were impressed with the Sisters, and happy for their daughter. "Your parents want you to be happy." After that visit, Sister "felt so good and so at home."

Sister spent her Postulancy, Novitiate and Juniorate in Wauwatosa, near Milwaukee, where we have a boys' home. She made her Final Profession on July 2, 1949, in West Allis, also near Milwaukee.

Apostolate

Sister Mary [REDACTED] made her Final Vows on July 2, 1954. Soon afterwards, in August of 1954, she was sent to Nicaragua, where she cared for the children, from age two to twelve. At that time, our Sisters were not allowed to return to their homes to visit their families, but an exception was made when they were sent to the missions. Sister had a feeling when she said

good-bye then to her mother, that she would never see her again. Two years later, Mother Margaret Mary, who had become the Superior in Nicaragua, asked the Sisters to pray. She had to tell a Sister the news that her mother had died. Sr. Mary [REDACTED] prayed very fervently for this poor Sister, never thinking that it was herself. When Mother Margaret Mary called her in to tell her, it came as a surprise. She cried, but "God heals it." After one year, her father came to visit in Nicaragua. He told her all about her mother's death and the funeral. It was a good visit. The children loved him, and vice versa. He had a way with children.

Nicaragua was a very different experience from Wisconsin and Michigan. It was so poor and so hot. At that time, our Sisters never ate meat, but, again, an exception was made in Nicaragua, where they had to eat whatever they could. Mostly, it was rice and beans and a little fruit, often bananas. Occasionally there was a little meat, but very poor. Once a year, on Easter, "we each got one egg. It was so good!"

In the beginning, Sister did not know the language. The children taught her by pointing to objects and saying the name. She also read to them in Spanish, and heard them as they learned their numbers.

Sister thought she would be in Nicaragua for the rest of her life, but after seven years she was sent back to the States. One of the Nicaraguan girls she had cared for in the beginning came with her and worked for the Sisters here. It was a real blessing for those who were able to do this. They had no means of livelihood in Nicaragua, and often the girls were forced by necessity to turn to prostitution.

Sister was almost sent right back to Nicaragua, and she would have gone willingly. Another Sister volunteered, however, and she was able to stay. She was stationed in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where she spent two years studying nursing. In 1963, she was transferred to St. Charles, Missouri, where she was very happy to be of use after all her time in school. This was a difficult time for her. St. Charles was "a dump." She cried every night. Still, she knew it would not last forever. Sure enough, a new Superior was appointed, Mother M. Alberta, who fixed things up. She painted, changed the cabinets, and planted trees. It was such a change – a real "heaven."

Shortly thereafter, Sister Mary [REDACTED] was transferred again, this time to nearby Kirkwood. She began studies at St. John's Mercy to become a registered nurse. Then she returned to St. Charles. From late 1979 to early 1981, she was stationed at our home in Pensacola, Florida. Sister served as administrator for our St. Agnes Home in Kirkwood throughout much of the 1980's. In 1988, she was sent to West Allis to see if she could save the home there, but it was too late. One year later, after the home in West Allis was sold, the Provincial Superior told her she thought she would send her to Grand Rapids. Sister responded that if it was just the same, she would not mind going back to the Central Province since she had been sent for West Allis and that was done. (The Sisters in the U.S. had been divided into three provinces in about 1968.) Sister surprised herself in saying this. Never had she questioned or made any contrary suggestion to a transfer. "They spring things on you kind of fast in the convent," but she had always accepted without hesitation. Even on this occasion, she was perfectly content to go to Grand Rapids if that was what the Superior told her to do. The Superior agreed to let her return, however, and she "was happy all the way back." She had become "so used to the Central Province." When the home in St. Charles was sold in 2003, Sr. Mary [REDACTED] moved with the other Sisters to our Provincial Motherhouse in Kirkwood where she currently resides.

Suffering

In 1986, Sr. Mary [REDACTED] began to have severe problems with her back. It required surgery at one point, and she is in constant pain. Recently, it became more intense. I have seen her face pale from it. She comes close to tears. Still she is cheerful, neither denying the pain nor taking refuge in self-pity. In view of her experience with it, I asked if she would mind sharing her thoughts on suffering. They are well worth pondering, and a great example to anyone else who suffers.

"In a way, it's like a privilege. It is a privilege." As Christians, and even more so as a Spouse of Christ, we suffer in union with the sufferings of Jesus. This is especially true in our Congregation, since our main theme is reparation for sin and indifference. We can offer all our suffering up in reparation and in union with our Lord.

"It's a privilege." We need to accept it. "It's easier when you don't fight it. Just sit back, accept it, unite it with our Lord. He carries it. Just look at a crucifix," and think of how Jesus suffered. "What more do we need. We can just bury our little sufferings in His." Look at the martyrs, all those who have suffered and shed their blood. "This is nothing."

"And the Holy Father!" She suddenly remembers the Pope and what an inspiration he is in his own suffering. "He has been the greatest example to me!" He suffers so much, yet continues to pour himself out for all people. He shows us how to suffer. "I hope people take advantage of that."

"It's really simple. God does it all."

"I don't suffer anything compared to some people." "I think people who suffer should look at somebody who . . . has more [suffering]. What we have is nothing, absolutely nothing."

"It is a privilege."

And what is the life satisfaction of one who has given her whole life in service to others, who has denied herself so many comforts, who has sacrificed her own will so often, who knows what it means to bear pain? I asked her, "Are you happy with your life?"

"Oh, and how! Oh, my goodness! I can't contain myself sometimes! God has given us so many things!" She looks out and sees the colors, the leaves, so many beautiful things. "He created all these things for me, because He loves me! All the beauty that's out there! What a beautiful world we have! Why should we not be happy? We should be overflowed with happiness! There shouldn't be any sorrow in this world. People don't know what they're missing."

*Excellent
focused topic*

I am so grateful for the opportunity this assignment has given me. There is so much for me to learn from our older Sisters. It is a real blessing to live among them and share in their lifetime of experience. In these interviews, I have learned things about Sr. Mary [REDACTED] that I would otherwise not have known. It has helped me to piece together some of our history. The good example she has given me in telling me about herself has already benefited me greatly in my life and in my vocation.

I hope that this is also a learning experience for the class. Sr. Mary [REDACTED] is obviously an example of a healthy, happy person growing out of a healthy, happy environment. She grew up during hard times, with the Depression and World War II, and yet she has such a wonderful positive attitude. Her family life was so wholesome, especially compared with so many broken homes and tragic situations in today's society. She powerfully demonstrates the benefits of giving rather than focusing on ourselves. From what I can see, she does not merely score high on life satisfaction – she is off the scales.

This makes for an interesting comparison with our class studies. By the world's standards, she is not wealthy, prestigious, or healthy. To some extent, she might even be considered "useless" or "unproductive," since her back problems do limit her activity. However, she does live in a very caring environment and she has ways of helping out and remaining active. Most of all, she is able to recognize a supernatural value in her existence, including her suffering. She maintains a positive attitude, because she is humble enough to admit that she is dependent on God and selfless enough to continue giving even in the midst of her own suffering. Quite honestly, I can find no satisfactory natural explanation for the kind of joy that she expresses. But that is a subject for another class, and I leave it for your own contemplation.

You seem very philosophical. I urge you to read Man's Search for Meaning by Victor Frankl. So many of Frankl's views appear to overlap with yours.

** I hope that you will permit me to put your paper on reserve so that other students can read it. (See comments on back of page.)*

See comments below!