

July 29th, 2016 – Sister Madonna Bishop speaking with Professor Mary Ellen Lennon at the Convent of the Sisters of St. Francis in Oldenburg, Indiana.

Abbreviations

SMB: Sister Madonna Bishop

MEL: Mary Ellen Lennon

MEL: Mary Ellen Lennon on July 29, 2016 in Oldenburg, Indiana at the Convent of the Sisters of Saint Francis. I'm very pleased to be with Sister Madonna Bishop. Sister Madonna, thank you.

SMB: My pleasure.

MEL: Would you like to begin?

SMB: My brother Harold and I were born in 1932. To Harold and Marie Sharfinberger Bishop. Shortly after our birth we were joined by dad's mother and father: Ella and William Bishop. In their first year of marriage, mother and dad were responsible for four dependents besides themselves and in 1932 that was the Great Depression. Dad had moved to Indianapolis four years earlier to accept a position in a family-owned Lumber Company and he remained there for 60 years. This was the beginning well of the Great Depression.

Our family grew by one in October of 1933. This happened also to be their second anniversary. When Mary Margaret, Sister Rosaire, was born, mother managed all of the housework, the laundry, the cooking and grocery shopping in addition to caring for an invalid mother-in-law, who was bedfast, by herself. She once commented that she loved to read, but when she picked up a book she couldn't get her work done until she finished the book, so she seldom read for pleasure.

Mother and dad decided earlier in their marriage that they would accept, raise, and love however many children God chose to send them and they would manage to give them good lives. God chose to send eleven children: nine girls and two boys and mother and dad managed to give each one of us a very good life. Mother once asked dad when the tenth child was promised that if he didn't want this baby to be a boy and he said, never, because if it's a boy it'll be twins. And we already have two sets. (laughs). But that was the only time I ever heard them discuss, you know, our family's too big or it's too much trouble.

I've often wondered as I've gotten older what raising a large family in the days of the Great Depression and the Great War really meant and the sacrifices they had to make in order to do so. I don't remember ever hearing them complain or even grumble about the shortages in the war. They did, however, exchange coupons, the coupons we had sometimes for shoes because the little kids wear out a lot of shoes or something that the next door neighbor needed instead of her shoes.

Granny, which is what we called dad's mother died in 1939 and pop decided to live by himself for the time being. He sort of lived with us and then moved and then came back and lived with us. Joelle was born in 1940. Followed by Thelma and Jerry. The second set of twins in [19]41. Actually they were thirteen months apart. I have vivid memories of dad

taking us to the park when he came home from work so mother could finish supper and of reading to us at bedtime. Dad read the classics. When he started Dickens's, The Christmas Carol, we knew it was time to be good. Mother often read to us on rainy days or after school, but she read stories like "The Timbertoes Family who Lived by the River" which I dearly loved even now. We always expected at least one good book as a Christmas present.

Sister Rosaire always said she knew when she was in the third grade she wanted to be a sister. I didn't know what I wanted to be, but I did know it wasn't a nun. I worked as a nurse's aide during the summer months of my eighth grade and after school and summer months of high school. I was intrigued with the idea of learning about the working of the human body and making patients feel better. I thought I wanted to be a doctor, but in reality, since I was second in line, by 25 minutes, I would have settled on being a nurse. Those were the days of no scholarships for medical school or funding for living expenses. So Trump doesn't have my support on that either, but in reality I would have settled on being a nurse. I loved being in just the hospital atmosphere.

In the spring of my senior in high school, however, I realized that I too should be a sister. It was a feeling I couldn't shake or forget and I really did try to. I wasn't really sure at what sisters did, although at Saint Mary Academy in Indianapolis they did everything. I didn't particularly want to teach and I didn't want to be a nurse-sister because they were always busy, too. I admired the sincere goodness I found in some of the sisters who taught at Saint Mary's. Their goodness seemed to fill a void and I knew I had to be a sister and so I applied. After I talked with Sister Estelle to see if they would even really want me to enter, I had no idea what training to be, I'm sorry, what training to be a sister meant other than that they wore all black clothes and a black veil and black stockings and shoes for that matter, but at the time that didn't seem to be too important. I spent the summer after graduating from high school collecting the things I thought I would need: black stockings, black petticoats, black shoes, and white cotton panties and T-shirts.

I entered on September 8, 1950 as was the Franciscan tradition. I wish I could admit that this period of training was everything I thought it would be. In those first months many things we did seem to be beside the point and so many things were so different from what I knew. I had left six sisters, three of whom were babies. The last one was five months old. I know. I didn't anything about when I left, but about a month it hit me and two brothers and I missed them. I missed the home in which we lived and of course I really missed mother and dad and I missed all the birthdays and Christmases I thought I would no longer be a part of. I should have realized that missing home was part of the sacrifice we were asked to make, but I certainly didn't. Gradually convent living became a reality and the beauty of the sisters living in Oldenburg became dear and at that time they were mostly either retired or infirm.

I especially cherished the night hours of Perpetual Adoration in chapel and the stillness the hour when we prayed in the adoration chapel. Personal prayer became very important to me an opportunity to really talk to God and to seek his company. Gradually too, the things that got in my way of being a sister took on newer meaning and I began to understand the many facets of this life.

One of my most cherished assignments as a novice was to clean in the infirmary. I soon found that I sometimes spent more time talking with the sisters and learning from their

stories and their vision of life. I learned much from their willing acceptance of pain and disability and their longing to be active and busy again. Religious life began to make sense for me. Our instructional periods which included the charism of our community, traditions, and the history of Franciscan living and described how Oldenburg Franciscans share many qualities of the Franciscan world-wide and how they cherished those qualities which make us unique. These periods also included periods of practicum in preparation for teaching and core classes leading to an academic degree. From 1953 to 1964 I taught in schools in Ohio and Indiana in the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades. In the fall of 1964, I was assigned to Rex Mundi High School in Evansville, IN. I taught in the high schools in Indiana from [19]64 to [19]88. My degrees were in English and Reading. I taught a variety of classes as need required. I always thought that was usually the last one in the door and so whatever was left landed on my—which wasn't true. But, made me feel better. And I taught, pardon me for saying so, world history. I think I kept about two chapters as a class in algebra and typing. Last one in the door. And a class for freshman about different kinds of jobs so to encourage them to take the right kinds of classes, which was almost disaster, I mean, well a nun telling you to be a mechanic, just didn't sit.

When it became apparent to me that I should no longer teach, I discussed with the Congregational Minister the possibility of training as a nurse, my preference being an LPN because I saw in hospitals that LPN did the bedside care and RNs, for the most part, couldn't. I was given permission to explore local schools before I could do this, however, it became apparent that mother needed someone to help her with her daily living needs. I worked as an aide in a private home for three years and lived with mother seeing that she got up and had breakfast and took her medicines and came home in the evening for supper and bedtime. Mother was able to stay by herself during the day. During this time, I also did aide work at Marquette Manor, which is, which was a three level assisted living in Indianapolis. It became evident that mother needed more attention and staying alone during the day was no longer possible. We had asked those members of the family who lived in or around Indianapolis to stay with her in the evening or after school and fix her evening meal. For a while this was an excellent arrangement it gave mother the opportunity to see and talk to other members of the family and to enjoy their cooking since she sometimes told me mine wasn't so great. Mother was, mother knew how to make wonderful things out of nothing because so many things during the war were either rationed or just not available and things like butter always went to, well, as they should have to the Armed Forces.

MEL: She was a creative cook, she's was a creative cook?

SMB: We always have for supper what dad liked, and what dad liked was well meat. Red meat and gravy, mashed potatoes, one other vegetable, warm, homemade rolls. We did not have like raw salads. And I don't ever think I remember desserts. We all drank milk or water. We all drank milk. Milk with meals was the 11th commandment. And we did not have things like Coke or other drinks. Mother was way ahead of her time because we, well, we all were very healthy.

Eventually, however, the variety of persons became confusing. And she didn't know where I was, even though I, you know, had said, I'm going, well, to work. For her and something of a burden she liked that they cooked different meals, but it was just confusing more. We decided I would stay with her full-time and this I did until her death in 1994. I would have to admit that I learned so many things, so many things that everybody should know: How to

change a light bulb, how to fix a toilet if it needed, how to varnish floors, how to wash windows on the outside.

It and just many things, it, mother always baked cookies at Christmas. Tons. I swore one time she'd must have made a thousand of most varieties and then of course sent them to the children who were not in Indianapolis and just friends, people she thought needed cookies and we used to do, when I was teaching, we did this cookies after school, or when I work then, whenever I had time she always told me what the size should be. And we made, we called them tea cookies. They actually were, it was a dough with nuts, supposed to be about like that. And hers grew to be about like that. And I kept thinking, Well you can't bake those together because half of them will be, no they didn't spread, but they would be half done. But if she rolled them that way then I rolled mine that way too. And she knew if I didn't. I had one sister who lived close to, fairly close to us who used to drop by and you know just to chat and sometimes helped with those cookies and she used to reduce them if mother's were really big and when she went home, mother put them back together.

I again asked to take a nursing program, which I started in 1995 at Ivy Tech. It was an LPN program and for me it was wonderful, that was. It was a rewarding program for me, I learned a great deal more than just text books. Namely, the persons who were in the class, it was such a mixture. Age, well of course, I was 64 when I started that class. And, so I was the oldest in the class. Everybody knew that.

MEL: Sister, do you remember that decision to go back, to go to Ivy Tech. I'm interested in how you were feeling. As you said you were sixty-two, you had all these experiences, but you're going back to the classroom with all these other people?

SMB: Who weren't sixty-two. I never thought of it. I did not appreciate the fact that I probably shouldn't be in that classroom. I loved it. And it, uh, of course I studied a whole lot more than almost anybody I'm sure, but I knew that the care I was able to get mother was the kind of care I wanted every mother to have. And I also knew from being in some nursing homes, that didn't happen. So my purpose in asking to go to Ivy Tech, a second, my second request was so that I could work in a nursing home and give the kind of care I, I, thought persons should have. And so age, I never thought of it. When I, and then I applied here because the community had released me from, well like a salary or whatever. Or perhaps a wage, while I was staying with mother and I thought, and nurses were sometimes in short supply here. I thought if I were a nurse I could pay back, well a little. Yes. That was my, so I guess age didn't, I started in here in May and in July one of the, well, Margaret, Sister Margaret Horney, who is the treasurer, handed me a Medicare card and I thought, well I really thought, What's this for? But then it dawned on me. You had to be sixty-five.

But my health was good. I did, you know, I could do anything that mother needed, including lifting her in and out of bed and chasing the dogs. And it was just never a factor. I'm now a few years older than sixty-five and I'd have to admit, I'm well, when I turned eighty, that was a surprise too. I taught math, but I must not have been too good at the arithmetic.

This class consisted of students ranging from a mother who I my add was black who worked all night in a nursing home, got off work in time to see that her children got ready for school, and packed their lunches and then attended class or did the hospital or nursing home work all day. Every time I thought I had problems I just thought about her. That class

also considered at least one male student who was an admitted gay person and he was the most wonderful nurse. At one time it was getting close to Christmas and he spent part of his off time singing Christmas carols to one of the patients because that patient was sad, he was in the hospital instead of where he wanted to be. Wonderful. There were also some ding-a-lings, but the ones who were really interested, you know, nursing meant something more than a paycheck, we're just wonderful people that had to have been a highlight. They also had some who thought nursing might be a good job because it's in quotes "easy" in case he got bored with his present job. I don't know what kind of nurse he turned out to be, but, but. Some students never opened a book outside of class time, even, if they even brought the book to class, while others struggle with reading problems, so reading problems on top of human anatomy was quite a problem.

I did part of my clinicals at Wishard Hospital. The name has changed and, which at one time was called The City Hospital and actually was a dumping ground. This was a great learning experience for me. The patients there usually didn't come in until they absolutely had to and so whatever their original symptoms were, were multiplied. We learned a lot of things. By and large they were very—the patients were pleasant, they were cooperative, if you said take this pill, they did. And were interested in what you either were doing or were like when you weren't there. Yeah that, I would have applied at Wishard, I really wanted to work there. I thought those people were my people, but I think in the age problem would have at least there it seemed that 65 was a cut-off point because and because there you really ran the eight hours, you would straight sometimes.

And the nurses there seemed to be genuinely interested in giving good care so it was you know that somehow they made time to listen. I'm a firm advocate that listening is a major part of a nursing program. And they really listen to what patients had to say about their condition. The other students in the class were eager or at least willing to help students who needed any kind of help like making a bed or taking care of soiled linens just so, actually so everybody could go to lunch at the same time.

When I finished the course and took the state boards, I asked to work in the infirmary here in Oldenburg and I supervised and cared for the sisters on the first floor, which at that time was set aside for sisters who could basically take care of themselves, but either needed help with remembering to take medicines or sometimes needed shoes tied; it's hard to stoop when you have arthritis and that kind of thing. But they, they have showers in the middle of two bathrooms and so many of them preferred showers at night, so they took care of that kind of thing. They made out their own menus and just generally took care of everyday things most of the time I ran behind them and said, what should I do next? That was, I'd have to say a good nursing experience too. They were very pleasant and well grateful for whatever extra you could do and I spent a lot of time listening and sometimes that's what they needed. They weren't sure and as I'm older I can better appreciate that, wondering what all those pills and treatments and whatever else mean and what the outcome might be. That's um, yes. And I, I think I did that maybe for 13 years.

MEL: I'm thinking of you taking care, being a Sister of Saint Francis taking care of other Sisters of Saint Francis.

SMB: Oh yes, it was different. For one thing it meant to the other sisters that I wanted to be there, I wanted to be a Franciscan taking care of other Franciscans and I let that be known

a lot of times, between, to the sisters themselves, that I was there because I wanted to be there and as a matter of fact I did not receive a salary. I received a stipend to cover expenses, but that was important too, yeah. Took me a long time to understand how important and the things I do here now I collect at dinner trays after each meal and it says to the sisters, well for one thing, I can do that, but that I care. I also have time to either tease them, you have to know who you can tease and who you can't, or just chit chat, ask them about the weather and sometimes I get the whole roster and sometimes they just look at you and so. And I have several friends on this floor who were also on the first floor and just the difference in their deterioration. It's, yes—

That's hard to deal, it's hard for me sometimes to deal with, but they are alert enough to know that they're not as good. As one was a teacher at Marian and she knows she doesn't know and she's not as alert as she used to be and can't do things for herself and sometimes that's, personally, is hard. But she's always, she's always, mostly cheerful. She laughs at my jokes, she's, you know, then too, the fact that she can't do things is kind of beside the point, she's still a great Franciscan, yeah. Yes and actually that's about as far as I got.

MEL: You've thought, you've seen the aging process and how the sisters think about it and how you think about aging.

SMB: Well, my mother was the supreme example of aging. She two, um, and well, she had two fairly serious surgeries when she was in her 70's and she had a mastectomy in her 70's, which she didn't tell anybody, not the mastectomy, the cancer. I think because she thought it probably would go away and she had her gallbladder removed in her 80's. I almost had a heart attack because I thought, don't they know she's eighty-six? Which diminished her, I think, certainly at least to some point. I never heard her complain about anything. She fussed, well she fussed about my cooking sometimes, but that was you know, not, I'm going to take you to court. It was just a comment she wanted, thought I would like to know, which, as a matter of fact, I did, but, I never really, I remember me lifting her from her bed into a wheelchair and she must have made a face or moaned a little and I said, you know, "I know, I hurt you when I get you up and I'm sorry" and she replied, "Yes, you do, but I know you can't help it and it has to be done." And that was the extent. So, when I went, met some people who weren't quite like that, it was, that was a little experience too.

I would have to say most of the time the sisters are patient and understand that it's a big floor and sometimes it's, you have a lot of "have to's" and you can't do the "want you to's." But we're human like everybody else and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

MEL: I've always thought that after a life of such service that Sisters of Saint Francis have done in their lives to then find themselves ill, that that transition must be difficult as well. A life of doing and then—

SMB: Well, yes, and personally I have to agree with that. It's difficult I think, well as a classroom teacher, to be, in quote, "in charge" or to think you're in charge. Sometimes it's, you think you're in charge and certainly with mother, I made myself in charge, but why'd you have 10 siblings and 35 opinions and I was always there and even in nursing your sort of in charge, at least to some extent and then to find out you're not in charge of anything, yes, I would have to admit, I have found that difficult, but the plus side is there are plenty of sisters, well, here who understand because they have been sick themselves or

incapacitated. I've never had, I've never had a serious surgery. I've never had an illness that lasted a long time and so this is another one of those learning experiences. There are lots of sisters here who understand that and are willing to listen to you rant and rave if or just to listen and try to understand. And every time I walk into one of these rooms, I think of what some of the rooms are like, other places. I think the meals that we serve here and what the meals are like in some of the other places. It shoots me down every time.

Yes and here, well, although I try to do some things like collecting dirty dishes, there's still plenty of time that is just time and that's a great opportunity to walk the campus or just sit and listen to the birds and listen. Last week or so I was on campus and it was really overcast, I should have known better, it was really over cast and I was just about ready to get up so I wouldn't get soaked and I heard the most beautiful sound and thought what on earth could that be? And it was big raindrops hitting the leaves on the trees. It sounded like a symphony. It was just—and I, I've been around a while, that's the first time I had ever noticed that. That's a great time to say thank you God.

MEL: It's a gift.

SMB: Yes, it's a—and so time for prayer is important here, if you make it important. If you're too busy that's another thing, but you can be too busy, I mean that's your choice. I think my prayer has gotten more personal and less, the hours that we pray, and I always, I thought when I was with mother that my doing was my prayer and I'm sure I'd have to say I'm sure, but God agreed. Yes, I surely got more from that whole experience, then I put into it. It was, that was wonderful.

MEL: Taking care of your mother? Your time with your mother.

SMB Yes, oh yes. It, well in taking care of the house afterwards and knowing what she wanted done with, she wanted each of us to have one thing that was personal to her and we spent a few afternoons, she did, making sure I knew what they were, which actually made pieces of furniture or ceramics or whatever, you know, more important to the people who got them. Yeah. It's—so all in all it's been, I'd have to admit it's been a very good life. I don't know even to this day what made me think I had to be a sister. There were lots of times when I thought, you must be wild or mad, but it was the right choice. Yeah.

MEL: I'm thinking of you as I guess, eighteen year old, young woman, entering the convent and you mentioned learning the Franciscan Charism for the first time. And now after a life of service, thinking back to that younger self learning about the Franciscans.

SMB: Yes, that, those were well of course important, but those were special times. Our charism hasn't changed, but the emphasis on some parts have, you know, I left home thinking that I would never see another Christmas at home or would never be able to celebrate birthdays and you know at home and that's well, obviously that's changed.

MEL: Sister, I'm sorry, for someone listening fifty years from now, I was just, could you explain the Franciscan Charism in your own words.

SMB: We believe that God is present to us. My belief is God is present to us to the extent that we allow it. We believe that he wants good for each of us again to the extent that we

will allow it. I've often thought of all the types of creation that, of all the animals and birds and fish and whatever that we're surrounded with. We're the only ones with free will. A dog is a dog his whole life. A bird has to sing has to look for food has to take care of her young for however long that life is. We alone have free will, which also means we have free responsibility and so it's up to us, I think, to model our life in whatever situation we can so that it accomplishes the values God has in store for us. But that too is free will. It's a great gift, but it's also a great responsibility.

And that charism I think includes care for the poor in whatever ways you can do that, even here, there are lots of people a lot poorer than we are. And so in praying for them this has been such a year for that, all of the deaths, all of the absolutely unnecessary deaths, and all the families that are left. So care for the poor, care for the disadvantaged, care for those kids who can't read.

It, uh, I have a, well, in fact I have two nieces who have autistic children and who have done everything that they could possibly do to make those children's environments more productive and they're still autistic. I mean, those kids get plenty of love and attention, but that's different, they're in, they're both in families where their sisters or brothers are very talented and have done well in school and in, in whatever they work, you know, and they're at the bottom of the pile and I would think even though they're oblivious to some things, they certainly know that things aren't even. Just because they can't be. Yeah, that's uh.

MEL: How do you think about those children? How do you think about those children? It's, as you said, it's uneven.

SMB: Oh, hug them as much as you can. Actually one family lives in, in or around South Bend, so and we don't see them very often. The other, in the other family, there are, I guess two girls and two boys, the other three have all graduated with honors from college or from colleges and now his mother, who is a nurse at Wishard, in fact she's the supervisor of the neonatal, yes, and Wishard's I think, is not as, I don't mean advanced, but it's not as large as, because Riley is right next door. But she's there with him trying to help him with schoolwork. It really is hard and he's just in his own world. Yeah, that's ah, yeah that's—we had a family reunion around the Fourth of July and he was there, he sat, well it was in a park so he sat on one of the benches by himself. He had something, his computer, like a computer whatever that he played the whole time. He, he got up I think finally and got a couple of cookies that was lunch. Sat down and whatever he was, it was some kind of game he played. He didn't want to talk to anyone. I tried to start a conver—of course he probably didn't know who I was, but a conversation, and he kind of muttered something, "I, I don't want to talk." And so and he didn't. It's uh, yeah and he is the youngest in the family, but you often think that's, that's really hard.

MEL: There's so much love in taking care of people. That's your life.

SMB: Yes, oh. Well, Jesus took care of people that way too. Even in his days, the lepers who were really untouchables. Yeah, well I guess I think these days there are, there's so much hatred being spewed and a little love is necessary. Yes.

MEL: Thank you. Thank you, sister, so much. Is there anything we haven't talked about today that you'd like to talk about? I appreciate so much, you talking.

SMB: Right now, I guess, I, I could.

MEL: Oh good, well maybe, maybe another time.

SMB: Sure.

MEL: Thank you sister so much.