

August 18th, 2014 – Sister Kathryn Holohan speaking with Professor Mary Ellen Lennon at the Marian University, Indianapolis.

Abbreviations

SKH: Sister Kathryn (Kate) Holohan

MEL: Mary Ellen Lennon

MEL: This is Mary Ellen Lennon in Oldenburg, Indiana, at the convent of the Sisters of St. Francis. It is August 18th, 2014, and I am very happy to be sharing this time with Sister Kathryn Holohan. Would you like to introduce yourself?

SKH: Yes. I'm Sister Kathryn Holohan, and I'm beginning my story with Mary Ellen, and I would just like to clarify that when I entered the community I had the name Sister Annata Holohan and Saint Anne was my patron. But after Vatican II we were allowed to go back to our baptism name, and folks said I was more a Sister Kate than Annata so I went back to my baptism name, after I was out of leadership.

So, to start from here is a wonderful well I think I'll start with my story of how I got to Papua, New Guinea. When I was in the third grade a missionary came from Africa, he was an Irish priest and he spoke to us about his work in Papua—I mean in Africa. And I went home that day and I said, "Mom, when I get big I'm going to be a priest and go to Africa." And she said, "well, you won't be able to be a priest," and I said, "well, why not?" And she said, "well, you have to be a boy," and she said, and I know that's not fair. And she said, "well, that's the way it is, honey, but you can always be a Sister." Well, the only Sisters I knew were the Sisters of Saint Francis whom I had in school, and that didn't seem very exciting. Anyway, I just always say I got my call to foreign missionary life in the third grade. And so then, when I entered community I knew that the Sisters did not have foreign missions but I had fallen in love with St. Francis, and followed a Franciscan call. So that led me to Oldenburg and the Sisters of Saint Francis, and I was still in formation when the missionaries, the Capuchin missionaries came to Oldenburg and asked for Sisters. And so, because we were not foreign mission community, they asked for volunteers. So I volunteered. The night that we heard about it I volunteered to go. So I understand there was something like three hundred volunteers at the time, but I was selected to go, and so I was working here at the convent in our infirmary as a practical nurse but I was also working on my teaching degree. So, I actually wasn't finished with either one yet so I had to hurry up and get my degree in teaching. I went from April to September, when we left. And so I got my degree, I mean I got the studies I didn't get my diploma until the following year.

But anyway then I got to go to Papua New Guinea, and my dream. So people said, wasn't it scary? Well you know, it wasn't real scary for me because I was following my dream and it was so exciting. So, I was one of the first four, Sister Noreen and Sister Martine and Sister Claver were my Sisters going with me. And actually I think it was the first time all four of us were in airplane, and certainly I it was my first time and so you know, we had a what did they call it—missioning, foreign missioning and so we were in

our chapel for that. Some of them our family got to come to be a part of that and to see us, and the Archbishop was here from Indianapolis. And we got our mission cross, and at the end of that instead of going and being with our families to say goodbye we went directly from our chapel out into a car to Cincinnati where we stayed at one of our missions for a while, until our plane left at eight o'clock at night or something around that time.

And then, lo and behold, the plane had bishops on it as well they had just finished a meeting, so I can remember our leaders being somewhat consoled that we were in a good place you know that we would be protected by the bishops. So anyway, we went from there to San Francisco, and in San Francisco we were to take off at midnight I believe for Hawaii, but something happened and so we were had to lay-over there for a few extra hours. And so we ended up going into an area where you know, the other members of the plane were waiting in and we were in our long habits and so a little out of place in the middle of the night and they were serving drinks and things. But anyway we finally got on the plane and flying over the ocean was kind of a scary, and I always had a laugh at Martine because she fell asleep and then she woke up when she said she saw the lights on the wings you know and she said, "oh, we landed?" We said, no we're flying over the ocean. So that's one of the memories we remember you know that.

So then from there we flew to Australia from Hawaii to Australia. Oh I should say in Hawaii though because we had a layover for a few days there, we got a little taste of Hawaii you know, and visited some of the—we stayed with some Franciscan Sisters from Orange, California. And then there was a Marianist brother who took us around and showed us the around for a couple of days and then we took off from there.

MEL: This was your first plane ride, and the first time leaving the continental United States?

SKH: That's right. So and things were moving quite right well you know, we left on September 27th, and I don't know you know I'm Martine would be the one to ask those specific things but we ended up in Australia and we were met by some wonderful Aussie people. They were so friendly and so I mean they really you know I learned to love the Australians very quickly. And of course their accent in their English, but sometimes you wondered what language they were speaking because they say it's so different things so differently than we do. But anyway they met us, and the one was the mother of a Australian Capuchin priest and that's how you know she got involved, and the other one was the wife of a ship delivery stuff you know so, we always had to have everything shipped from because there were no stores where we were going. And so these two people were just wonderful, the one the mom that was head of the meatpacking. And she provided lamb, lamb a very kind of way you could eat lamb for the convent where we stayed. And the convent was Sisters from originally from Ireland and so they were a wonderful, every place we went you know it just seemed to be people were just waiting for us to arrive it seemed. But they're you know, the big news at the time was Kennedy, all the Australians and the Irish were aware of Kennedy and

they thought he was so great and wanted to know everything we knew about Kennedy and sometimes they knew more than we did. And so anyway we stayed there we had to go shopping because they told us you know, there wasn't anything that we could get there so. And there was no electricity where we were going except with a generator by day. So we had to get they told us to get a washboard for washing our clothes you know, and we had to get just everything that we needed you know day by day. Although we packed a lot you know, from Oldenburg and sent that on ahead by trunk-loads, but they told us that would take three to six months to get there. And so we had to have things you know, what we could use right away. So anyway that was a fun thing too just shopping.

And our words and their words were different like for sanitary napkins, they called them well, what did they call them now? Anyway, it was something we didn't know what they were talking about you know, so I mean we used our terms and they couldn't figure out what we wanted you know. Oh diapers, something about diapers, that they sent us to a diaper counter you know, so they weren't understanding and we weren't understanding them. And then the washboard too, they didn't know what that was. So there I saw one of those of our Sisters demonstrating what you do with the washboard you know. So that whole day and then we were told to bring some spices, meaning you know, the things that you cook with cinnamon and salt and pepper and and whatever else you might use. Well then they asked us if we had any spice in our [caise] any spice in our [caise], and we said no. And they said, well you know they're asking you to bring some things with you and you know, the things weren't connecting. And then we finally got it through that they were asking if we had any space in our suitcases, any spice in your [caise] and then it was you - putting on our suitcases in the boot, in the boot—the the trunk of the car.

So just things like that and of course the Sisters were you know quite different too, it was at a time when we couldn't eat with the Sisters, we had a separate room. And it was just their rule I think we had it here too, you know. It's just our own Sisters could we. We would serve other people other Sisters too, but this was the place where we stood served visiting Sisters and priests and things. And so that was funny to us that you know, we were off in this room and just like I said this woman provided the meat and everything was [unintelligible]. And at first you know, at first it was good, taste eating lamb for the first time. We had it for breakfast we had it for dinner we had it for supper, we had it for breakfast we had it for dinner, we had it for supper. We were there about ten days I think and so it got it got to be funny for us, we'd go to the table and we prayed and say "baaa". So anyway but it's like I said they were such lovely people and and we're always there in that for our Sisters coming and going for the next many years, many years.

MEL: There were four of you, four of you staying there.

SKH: That's right.

MEL: Did you, how did you all feel thinking about the next stage? Here you were in Australia, thinking about Papua New Guinea, and probably thinking about home too. Or in between.

SKH: That's right. Well we know, it was almost like you couldn't you didn't have them time to think about what we were going to because all of this was so all new to us too. And so it was part of the journey to the missions but when we finally landed we were still far from home from what we were going you know. But in that so that was the capital of Papua New Guinea, Port Moresby. And there we stayed with a native group of Sisters, The Handmaid's of Our Lord, and they they were about already about maybe fifty years in the in the country. But we were five hundred miles from the Highlands where we were heading. So there too it was like we had to visit the educational places and get our degrees and things, get everything straightened out you know. Because we were going for teaching and so and there was Capuchins, the Capuchins were the ones who recruited us in the first place, for their diocese, it wasn't the diocese yet it was just a mission field you know. And there were no roads in, you had to fly in and fly to you know wherever we went we had to fly, no road. So anyway we spent some time there too then, finding out what's available for health and for the schools that we were going to and that.

But so after about ten days there then we, one Capuchin Father Otmar who when they recruited us, he flew to the coast to meet us and we got on this plane to fly them into the Highlands. And it was a plane with it was kind of like a commercial plane it just had like canvas seats across on both sides of the plane you know. And so and in our flight up there then this Father Otmar would jump to the windows and say, you know, this and that the other thing. But there we were and then the milk cans on the top started leaking on us and things, and so it was quite an experience just the airplane flight into the Highlands. And we couldn't go all the way on the first day so we had to stop in one of the our work was going to be in South, in the Southern Highlands. We had to stop in Eastern Islands for overnight. And there, we stayed with Mercy Sisters who had a boarding school for the children of missionaries and the lay workers in the country. And so we stayed with them and we were there on the 14th of October and that night we were invited to go to a movie about Columbus discovers America.

So that was quite an experience there you know, and so then there was all these little children, some from Australia, some from England, some from you know. And they got the boarding school. So the next day then, we went from the jet to the smaller to the smaller plane and I think it was it held twelve people I think. So yeah, so we flew then into we arrived in Mendi the 15th of October on the feast of St. Teresa of Avila. And of course, the mission was in walking distance to the airstrip you know, and when we got off the plane and so the the road all the way from the plane down down to the mission station was lined with the native peoples, and welcoming us and all. And so they were all a very primitive in their grass skirts the women in their grass skirts and the men had bark belts with a net down the front and leaves up the back, and people would say just I can remember the Bishop saying to me, don't let the initial shock frustrate you. And I thought, you know, thinking back on that it was it wasn't a shock at all, because I guess

I didn't even see it was like their their faces and their eyes you know we're just so welcoming and so open. And it was it just left a permanent impression on me, you know. And so anyway then we we started out by having a mass there, the Bishop having a Mass for us.

So then just the next day the next day we went into the school, they already had a school there and they had three native men sort of teaching it. And I think the the one, the most educated had gone to third grade. So he was teaching and they were well all three of them were just kind of taking the syllabus of studies which came from Australia and they would copy it because they didn't have a clue what it meant, they were copying it to the blackboard and then the children were—they would have the children to copy it. Not teaching—So it was a revelation.

So anyway, there was three classrooms, Noreen got one and Martine got one and Claver got one, and I was going to start with new children. And they wouldn't have a classroom yet so I just sat on the hillside with them you know. And ages were from five to twenty-five I always said, we didn't know for sure but they anybody who wanted to come to school could come, you know. And to start out with they came and they went, they came and they went until you know it settled down somewhat but. It was interesting and sometimes with the first ones the five year-olds the moms would come in and give them the [unintelligible], you know, the recesses instead of. So it was quite a unique situation as far as school school but it that went. We had nothing, we had nothing, no books we just had that syllabus of studies and so somehow we had to get paper and we had to get pencils or we had to get you know. And then we got blackboards and we got the the Brother to paint the plywood so we could use them as blackboards and chalk and things like that. We were able to get a few supplies from the Education Department but so that's how we got started in our teaching.

MEL: And you were teaching on the side of a hill?

SKH: Yes.

MEL: What did you teach?

SKH: Well, that was, they did like a syllabus of studies they had like—and they were just getting this too, it was how to teach English as a foreign language you know. And so then the teachers' copies would give you patterns that you would teach and then the children would you know learn them. And then then like I said whatever the syllabus said to teach this, we had to find our own way to teach you know. And so having had that, all the others had had a lot of years already teaching, but this was my first this was my very first because I worked here. I was I was set in formation so I worked here in the infirmary doing practical nursing as I got my degree. And I got my teaching two weeks with my sister in Batesville at her classroom, that was for my teaching.

So but of course I grew up in a family of, they were you know fourteen kids who grew up and so. Ah you know knew pretty much how to teach little things—and but as it

happened we I don't know how soon our classrooms just looked like real like real classrooms—but then the children, the children came from they were mostly boarders I think, you know. And so we just had a bush house for the girls and a bush house for the boys, and then for cooking they had outdoor cooking places. I mean they had a roof over them but then you know they just had drums in the middle. And very very primitive, and so that's where they ate and then they slept in these little houses and then they would, they did their own cooking we didn't have we didn't cook for them they did sweet potatoes and and their greens. And they would go, we'd send them out after school to gather firewood, and so they would you know start their own fires. So maybe have a little pause here?

MEL: Of course.

Part II

MEL: This is Mary Ellen Lennon in Oldenburg Indiana on August 18th, 2014, and I am continuing my conversation with Sister Katherine Holohan. So Sister Kate, would you like to continue?

SKH: Yes, I would like to share some of the details that I feel that perhaps the other Sisters were not aware, they're aware of them but they because of my role as leaders and one of them I was not the leader at that time but something I think that needs to be remembered when Papua New Guinea began its study of setting up a university, they had they asked we as they gave us to understand that our Sisters and their degrees were some of the most educated missionaries and expatriates in the country. And so they had asked for us to be a part of planning the University of Papua New Guinea. So Sister Mary Claver, Erin and myself Sister Katherine Holohan were asked to go to a meeting on the coast, Port Moresby, and sit with others in the country, people that they had gathered to plan the University of Papua New Guinea. So whether or not that's recorded there at all I don't know but they do have a University now and we were there long enough to see some of our students go through the University of Papua New Guinea. And maybe even teaching there, so it was it was a good thing to remember.

Also, I was early in the piece after the first five years I was designated as a coordinator of our Sisters. By that time we had three different schools in three different areas and I was asked to be the leader of those three communities and we began what we called here in the States "shared responsibility". And so I would go around to these three schools and and then when other Sisters started to arrive, we had the next group and we started in 1960, the next group came on '69 and they were Swiss Sisters, Sisters of Saint Francis of Divine Providence I believe their their title was. And they from them you know from the time that I became leader we were—our houses were used for orientation for the other Sisters who came. So over the years we had this that the Sisters from Switzerland and then the next group was from Australia, and so they came and they spent time with us because all of us from religious communities had to let go a

lot of the ways that we lived religious life here in the States, or in their home countries. And then another group that we got some national Sisters from the coast and they too lived differently than the Highlands people did, and so then another group came from Belgium and they spent some time with us over the you know. These didn't happen right right away but as they came they ended up having orientation with us.

And then the Swiss when they came they had also the medical field plus the teaching field and so they got that started in the Highlands, and the Capuchins continued to get new men and they too, you know would start new stations and then the Bishop actually he was not a Bishop when he came then he was you know, made a Bishop and it became an official diocese.

So then in eventually then when we decided that when we took up our mission in Papua New Guinea, Mother Mary Cephas who was in charge here at the time, she said that she wanted us to be prominent in helping to establish native vocations. And so it was about '70, 1970 when some women started asking if they could be a Sister, and so it was what would we do, would we have a native community or would we have a community that was attached to us? And so there was a time of study and what you know, I went then to the coast and talked with some national communities and some communities who had taken the native women into their community and so was just we then had a Sisters conference in our diocese and decided that we sort of had to give our [unintelligible] discussions to the Bishop and say you know, women are asking and we feel like this is the kind of community that we should have them be, their own community and but that we would be willing to train them for ministry here in their own country. Because, we felt like you know where our standard of living was so different than theirs, and that they would be asked to move into a standard of living that took them away from the needs of their people and so, by you know having them become religious for their own people they would be available to live more simply than we lived you know. Just because we have grown up with what we needed.

So and so what that was decided that that would be, so then the Bishop asked each community of us there to suggest somebody who might be the leader of this community for him, you know, to help these people be formed in their faith. And so, like I said which was unusual I think for all the Sisters from these different countries in different communities that we worked together like that. We had a Sisters conference and they everybody presented somebody and they had different charisms. the Bishop was a Franciscan and we were Franciscan and the Swiss Sisters were Franciscan communities and so the Bishop asks for it to be a Franciscan in their spirituality, but so he asked me if I would start the the community. And I said well, I would only if I had the opportunity to get a go for renewal and you know some training and formation so. He agreed for that and so in '74 I went. It was after Vatican II, see. In '74 then I went to the Philippines for seven months training and so that when I got back then it was kind of like, we wanted to have some time to just to see if there's any other women ready or wanting to religious life so we set up a tour of the Highlands where we gave our story, you know of religious life and it's more than just about you know Franciscans but that's how that's in '76 then, started the Franciscan Sisters of Mary. Well we just gathered

some women you know, but then we came up they came up with the name and so on and so forth and so. Actually the first alums to come, there were three who came for formation, but then two were teachers, the one was a domestic worker and—but when they were ready to enter the novitiate I had to come home on leave first, and when I went back I was going to start the novitiate. Well, the two teachers decided now while I was home and so we just had the domestic worker. So I had to leave her, go back to her village and I told her when, you know when we started if we started again we would call on them. So we did we started with her but then we knew there were other women but we needed to get them further in their education, and so we started first to teach them to get their high school diplomas you know. So there are really really what we call bush you know, they hadn't had the opportunity for schools. But they were they had been parts of the church growing in their areas, and had come in too you know, so it was and when they saw the Sisters and what we did that's what drew them you know.

And so in the beginning I had to set up a course and pidgin English because some of them had not been to formal education. We were taking them through at least through high school you know, but to begin with I had to give the lessons in pidgin English.

MEL: Did they come and live with you? Or did they live at the convent or where were they?

SKH: We set up a living you know I I went to live with them. So we had a we had a building on the mission that had been used for you know, by this year was '70s, what '76 we no longer had the boarding students, they were day students. And so this dormitory that we had for when the girls were boarding we renovated that into kind of a formation house for the native Sisters. And our convent was right across the road and so again avoiding them needing to live you know, like us I went to live with them, and so they were much more at home and at ease you know what with living their way. And so you know we had this lovely we just had little rooms little cubicles where where we had bedrooms you know and then they had—we had outhouse, and then we had you know a shower that the Brother put in there. And would have on the room a new chapel, where we just sat on the floor and then we had a kitchen and a little wood stove. And they did we did our own cooking and they you know sweet potatoes and crackers and peanut butter. And then so it was it was much much simpler but still quite different from what you know from what they would be used to in their own homes.

MEL: Did they know each other or did they they first met each other when they became Sisters? Like how did you find these, how many women were in the first class?

SKH: The first class were five, and no yeah no the first were three and then in the next class when I started up again which was a year later then there were five. And of those five two remained. And then what there's what around forty now you know. So it's just you know like I say this gets even when I start talking about it this all the stuff that happened in in those years and it's like at the same time I was teaching them I was an educator secretary which meant that I helped establish teachers with with the government for our schools. By this time our community had been asked to help in the

teacher's college too, it was a regional teachers college, so our Sisters were by that time were teaching in the regional teachers college and then we were teaching in high school, we had a high school. And so there was just a whole lot going on you know, and more of our Sisters for coming more of our Sisters were coming. We ended up I think with maybe nineteen all together, at once you know at—I mean they weren't all there at one time but I think about nineteen of our Sisters or maybe even a few more than that went there for some terms you know. But then the original ones we were there for a long time. And I was the first one no no, Claver had to leave because of illness, and then I was elected [unintelligible] leadership and so I had to—so I think maybe—

MEL: Okay, that's good. Thanks, Sister.