

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of the Youngstown Diocese Project

Personal Experience

O.H. 1562

SISTER ELIZABETH C. STAUDT

Interviewed

by

Stephanie Fisher

on

October 14, 1992

SISTER ELIZABETH STAUDT, H.M.

Sister Elizabeth Staudt was born March 6, 1915, in Canton, Ohio. She had three brothers and a sister, Sister Mary Dolores, who lives at Villa Maria. Her decision to become a nun was influenced by her early schooling at St. John and Mount Marie Academy and by her strong family faith. In 1934, Sister Elizabeth entered the Sisters of the Humility of Mary.

Before entering, she attended Ursuline College, Cleveland, for one year. In 1939, Sister Elizabeth received her B.S. in science and mathematics from Notre Dame College, Cleveland; her M.S. in Biology from Villanova University in 1948.

Her first assignment was teaching sciences, mathematics, and religion at Villa Maria boarding school in Pennsylvania. She found this a good "breaking in" because of the many preparations, the 24-hour duty, and the very little privacy; it would have been more difficult in later years.

Typical days for sisters before Vatican II were extremely structured: bells rang for rising, prayer times, meals, and retiring. Radios, and only later . . . televisions were turned on only during recreation hours. The dress was the traditional blue habit. In 1967, the Sisters experienced many changes.

After four years at Villa Maria High School, Sister Elizabeth's assignments were: Lourdes Academy, Cleveland; Central Catholic High School, Canton; St. John High School, Ashtabula; St. Edward High School, Youngstown; and Youngstown State University. Her favorite assignments were at Y.S.U. and St. John High School because they were the most challenging and rewarding. In

1985, she regretfully retired from Youngstown State, having reached forced retirement age.

Sister Elizabeth remains active in organizations such as: the Lake-to-River Science Council and Teacher Association, the Advisory Council of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, the Science Committee of the International Industrial Information Institute.

She co-authored a Quest for Happiness religion text and received various state and city awards for environmental activities at Youngstown State University.

In her spare time she likes to read, travel, listen to music, and attend Elderhostels. She is also involved in Eucharistic ministry at St. Columba Cathedral.

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INTERVIEWEE: SISTER ELIZABETH C. STAUDT

INTERVIEWER: Stephanie Fisher

SUBJECT: Mount Marie Academie, Villa Marie, the habit

DATE: October 14, 1992

F: This is an interview with Sister Elizabeth Staudt for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the History of the Youngstown Diocese project, by Stephanie Fisher, on October 14, 1992.

We just need to start out with a little bit of background material. For instance, where you were born and when. . . .

S: Canton, Ohio, 1915, March 6.

F: March 6. And you grew up in Canton?

S: Canton, yes. St. John the Baptist parish.

F: Okay. What do you feel is the major reason that you decided to join the convent?

S: There are several. I went to St. John grade school and then Mount Marie Academy, so the teachers I had were nuns through the elementary and high school years. Naturally, that influence was strong. I don't know whether it takes precedence over family life. We weren't a deeply religious family, saying the rosary every night, but we had strong faith. We were taught to have the greatest respect for sisters and priests; priests were frequent visitors in our home; sisters would have been if they had been "allowed" in those days. Our parents did many favors for the nuns, and

our brothers were their "chauffeurs" often before convents had cars. I presume it's my strong family background and then the influence of the sisters. I have an older sister who is a sister.

F: Older sister? What's her name?

S: Sister Mary Dolores. She's at the Villa right now.

F: How much older is she?

S: Two and a half years. She entered three years before I did.

F: Has she been involved in the Youngstown Diocese for numerous years?

S: She taught at Central Catholic--she was principal. She taught for many years at the Villa, and she taught in the Cleveland Diocese.

F: Okay, what year did you start your education?

S: I graduated from high school in 1932, then I went to Ursuline College in Cleveland for one year. I entered the convent in February of 1934.

F: Have you gone back to receive a master's, a Ph.D.?

S: I was sent to Notre Dame, Cleveland for my baccalaureate degree in science and mathematics. Then my sister and I both started at Notre Dame in Indiana for our master's work. That was during the war. The second summer, the Navy moved in and took over the residence halls. We had to leave Notre Dame, so I finished at Villanova University with a master's in science.

F: Was this on a full scholarship?

S: No, the community paid for all of that education. A little bit of irony in connection with feminist movement. I had been majoring in chemistry at Notre Dame. Villanova wouldn't let women major in chemistry, so I transferred to biology. We weren't mentally capable, apparently.

F: So, what was your first assignment?

S: I taught at Villa Maria, Pennsylvania for my first four years. It was a full boarding school at that time. I taught the sciences, math, and religion. Then I went to Lourdes Academy in Cleveland. Although Lourdes closed twenty years ago--it became part of Erieview High School--a reunion last year brought together almost 1000 alumnae; it had a fantastic spirit.

When I started to teach in 1939, there was no Youngstown Diocese. It was the year that I was leaving the Villa that the Youngstown Diocese was formed.

F: In what year did you start with the Youngstown Diocese?

S: In 1946. I went to the boys' division of Central Catholic High School. The boys were at St. John's in Canton, and the girls were at Mount Marie. I taught for four years at the boys' division. When it was moved out to where Central Catholic is now, I moved out with it. When the Christian Brothers came, they taught the boys and we taught the girls. Eventually, the school became coed. I stayed there until 1953.

F: Did the sisters make . . . do you think they had a major impact on the formation of the diocese?

S: I really think the Catholic school, in general, had a tremendous impact. I've heard it said that the Catholic faith would not have spread as it did, any place, our diocese or anywhere, if it hadn't been for the Catholic schools. The families then were so intimately connected with the church through the schools. Practically every elementary grade was taught by a nun. Even at the Mount we had only a few lay-teachers.

F: As far as staffing, I was told that the education was free at one point in the school system and diocese. It progressed and . . . because of unions . . . unions to pay the lay teachers, it progressed. Do you have any comments about this?

S: We always received a salary, but the salaries, but the salaries were low for religious. Lay-teachers who taught at Catholic schools were usually teaching at the same salary. The unions came in as for the high schools. This was a period of great tension in the diocese. Although the Catholic Church had encouraged the formation of unions, back to Leo XIII, the diocese was reluctant to have them in education. A nun was actually put out of the diocese because she joined the high school union; a church official told the religious superior that regardless of testimony and a panel decision, the dismissal was FINAL. I'm not too sure that the union in strong even yet for the elementary teachers in the Youngstown Diocese. I do know now, that throughout Ohio, the various dioceses have had to increase salaries. That was partially forced, I suppose, by unions. But I think, also it was formed by justice and the need of the women and the men teachers to have decent salaries for their families.

F: Do you feel that the economy at the time, with the

strong steel mills, played a major part in the development of the diocese?

S: I suppose it did because, so many of the families in Youngstown were working and making decent salaries. There was great stability in the families of the "blue-collared"--for the most part--workers, and great commitment to their parishes, many of which were and are ethnic.

With regard to schools being "free" for elementary students, I think that the parishes considered their schools as a part of parish expenses . . . just taken for granted . . . and as long as the salaries were low and parishioners supported the church, this program worked. I am told that parishes started to charge non-parishioners tuition about 1955; after that, tuition became an individual matter for the respective churches. As you know now, many of the parishes can't afford schools at all.

F: That's right.

S: Even with tuition.

F: Were you ecstatic to feel that Youngstown was realized to form a diocese? That it was important to the community? Were you thrilled about this news?

S: We were in a rather peculiar situation, so our community was particularly happy about the new diocese. We came from France in 1864 as a diocesan community. We had been brought here by the bishop from Cleveland, and we really belonged to the Cleveland Diocese. But our mother house is in the Pittsburgh Diocese. So we belonged to Cleveland, but had to go through Youngstown to our mother house in Pennsylvania. When the Youngstown Diocese was formed, we became a Pontifical Community under the Pope.

F: Where was the first mother house?

S: We landed in Louisville which was a French settlement, but our first and only mother house is Villa Maria in Pennsylvania. The bishop of Cleveland wanted us to have our mother house in the Cleveland Diocese. Buildings were purchased in Wickliffe, Ohio, and a high school for girls was formed. We were going to be encouraged, or forced, to move our mother house to this land in the Cleveland Diocese. In the meantime, Youngstown became a diocese, our community became pontifical, the high school was closed, and the main building is now City Hall in Wickliffe. We were only ten years in France before we moved here.

F: What year, do you believe, you got the strongest commitment from women to devote their lives to God in the convent? I believe they had one house, and it was so overcrowded by the numerous women wanting to devote themselves, that they kept moving, and eventually. . . . They're on Shields Road now. But, that took a long time.

S: The Ursuline Sisters.

F: Right.

S: Well, you mean in quantity, in numbers?

F: Yes.

S: It has been cyclic. The year before I entered, twenty-five entered. In my class, there were twelve. Then a few years after that it dropped down. The sisters who celebrated their 50th just this past year entered as a class of two. Then after that, we began to get classes of thirty and forty. It has been a curve, depending upon so many things in society. There's an upsurge in other countries: Asia, Africa, South America, but I don't know whether it will come here.

F: Do you believe the reasons may be war, economy. . . ?

S: I think it's culture, society, sexual activity at an early age, crime, drugs. I think it's the lack of support of schools. We don't have the parents supporting the teachers and the school systems as they did. I don't think the teenagers have the role models that they had in earlier years. I suppose, in some instances, young people don't see that much difference between a good lay-life dedicated to some cause, like social work, nursing, or teaching from a religious life with those same ministries.

F: Do you believe increased education has hindered the diocese in its growth? And increased education of the population has hindered the diocese in any way?

S: Oh, I wouldn't think so. I don't think knowledge itself could. . . .

F: You don't believe knowledge could be a hindrance?

S: Not of itself. No. I think our minds were created by God to know. Of course, the sisters were fortunate in having what we used to call formation programs. We probably were being educated, because the communities could afford it.

F: What year, do you believe, the diocese pushed for in

creased education . . . that they realized that their teachers, the priests and the nuns, needed to go on towards a masters's degree and not just a bachelor's degree?

S: I'm not aware that the diocese did the pushing. I really have to give our community the credit for doing that. I don't know that there is any demand for a master's degree to enter the teaching areas. Of course, for certification we've always kept up with state requirements. In fact the Villa in very early years, back in the 1920's, was accredited by the Middle States Organization equivalent to North Central for Ohio.

F: Do you feel, over all that most of the members of the diocese, the priests and the nuns, and even the congregation had at least a bachelor's degree or [had gone] onto a master's, that you see?

S: As far as I know, the schools do not accept teachers today without a bachelor's degree . . . and I'm sure that many of the teachers to get their permanent certificates, continue with their education; some just for enrichment.

F: I'd like to talk a little more about your first assignment. I realize you specified your first assignment. If you could tell me your emotions and how it felt.

S: That was a difficult assignment because it was my first year of teaching and it was in a boarding school. The faculty was on duty twenty-four hours a day. We taught classes, presided over the study halls, were with the girls for sports and recreation of whatever kind. One of us was appointed to be present for the meals. There were big dormitories. We slept in one corner of the dormitory with a curtain around our area. So, our privacy was next to nothing. The adjustment was difficult. But, I enjoyed it.

We had a beautiful spirit among the girls. I was moderator of the sodality, so I got to know some of them in a different manner. In those days, the girls accepted religion. Most of them went to daily mass. We had frequent beautiful religious ceremonies. It was a part of their lives . . . again, in contrast to what I see today. I don't think teenagers now, would accept that. We had to close our school, as you probably know, about three or four years ago. The enrollment was going down.

F: This was at the Villa, you say?

S: The Villa.

F: What year did they . . . just recently did they start accepting the opposite sex?

S: We tried it one or two years, but it didn't bring enough in. But the Lord always opens another door, and that place is just buzzing. They have retreats, and conferences, and workshops, and camps. There are a couple of nuns who offered to stay on.

F: Funding's much stronger now at the Villa Maria?

S: Yes. Through the retreat and conference programs.

F: You did specify your first assignment . . . what do you believe would be the typical day of your daily activities through the years? Has it changed completely? First you talk about your hardships, but you accepted this lack of privacy. Say a typical day of just being a nun.

S: I can contrast what was a typical day then and what is a typical day now. We made our changes, drastic changes in 1967. At Vatican II, a change in religious life was mandated. The council communities advised to modernize, to study their relationship with modern society and to decide whether or not the past rules were what we should be continuing to do, or whether we should make some adjustments for modern life. Before that, we were very structured, bells rang, we all got up at the same time, we went to morning prayer, meditation, Mass. We went about our duties, had a period of adoration every day, and of course, we said the office morning prayer, vespers, matins, and lauds. In those days, we chanted the office. There was no television permitted in the earlier days of my religious life, but the radio was permitted only during recreation hours. All of us were in some kind of a habit which was simply the dress of that day when our community was founded. The blue habit that we wore was like the dress the French women wore when they started our community. In 1967, we decided to go into what we called the contemporary habit, a blue suit. We had been called the "blue nuns." Eventually--and that was only in the last maybe three or four years--we went in various other colors.

Now, everything is more independent, and many of us are living in smaller units. I lived at St. Elizabeth's hospital for nine years--part of the time that I was teaching at the university. There were forty of us living there but, they have taken over they have taken over that whole convent for offices. We are living in smaller houses. Many of the parish convents had to close for financial reasons or because enrollment was

going down. Our prayer program is still there, but it's our responsibility. No bells call us in the morning. I'm Eucharistic Minister at the cathedral for the 12:10 Mass each weekday.

F: What about transportation? As far as getting to shopping centers, movie theaters. . . ?

S: In a house of several people, a couple cars are available. If you're living alone, you have a community car. We have a budget and we send in a financial report at the end of each month. We send a car report also: mileage and any major repairs.

F: Is the budget reevaluated as far as your living expenses and your needs?

S: In the spring, each house makes out a budget and has it approved. Each sister gets a personal budget for clothes, and anything of a cultural nature, for example, the symphony.

F: So, if you wanted to purchase a house or a condominium, that would be out of the question.

S: Out of the question. The community owns the cars. The community owns the house or pays the rent.

F: Is this the same way for any retired monsignor or a father?

S: The diocesan priests do not have the vow of poverty. They have a salary.

F: So, that's one thing Vatican II did not change. It will never change. Is that what you're saying? The vow of poverty and the difference of the standard of living for. . . .

S: Well, the vow of poverty simply means that, as a religious, we do not have possessions that are "ours." We could have inherited money or received gifts, but we make wills naming the beneficiaries.

F: So, if you had inherited something from your relatives, that is not yours to keep?

S: It's there, and it depends on the beneficiary of my will.

F: Okay, could you tell me the year again that you started in the Youngstown Diocese. Did you say 1950?

S: 1946. I was at the boys' division. Then I went out with the Boys' School to Central Catholic until 1953

when I was sent to St. John's, Ashtabula, which was a brand new school. I was sent as the first principal of St. John's High School. In recent years, the enrollment began to go down because Ashtabula was in dire straits. For several years, it was, "St. John's is going to close unless. . . ." So, parents were reluctant to even send their children there. They could see that it was not going to stay open. The diocese decided that it was going to close in June of 1992. But, a group of people simply demanded that there be a private school. They are running an independent Catholic school. The students raised the money to buy the school for a hundred dollars. They have a woman principal. I went up for the dedication of this new independent school, and I was privileged last June to give the last commencement for St. John's Diocesan High School. They are going to try to keep it a Catholic Independent school. Father Ken Miller represents the bishop on the board which operates the school. After Ashtabula, I was at Central Catholic for two years, then Lourdes, principal of St. Edward's junior high school for three years, and finally at the university from 1967 to 1985.

F: Did you like administrative work?

S: Yes, I did. It's not easy. I wouldn't like it now. I think that the Lord provided the changes in my life at the right time. That's another big difference, too, in community life. We have the privilege of saying what we want to do and finding the niche where we want to work. But, I never had that experience. I'm grateful that I did not have the choice, because the things that I have done that I have enjoyed the most or that have been most fulfilling I would never have experienced. I could never have sent myself to the university. I was hired for the natural science department and was teaching natural sciences for elementary teachers and for non-science majors at Youngstown State. Natural Sciences were absorbed in Biology, and in 1970, with the first Earth Day, we introduced an environmental class, and Biology and the Modern World.

F: What, do you believe was the central figure in the formation of the diocese? If you could say one or two people . . . what do you think? There's numerous, but could you. . . ?

S: I suppose the bishop that came from Cleveland was the . . . one of the key people--Bishop McFadden. He had been bishop in Cleveland. I suppose some religious orders and priests also.

F: Do you believe that the Youngstown Diocese ran smoothly from its formation, and continues to?

- S: As far as I can judge. We've lost an awful lot of beautiful priests. You know the difficulty right now with this "walking through" program about fewer priests. So many of the city parishes are going down, down. We have a lot of parishioners at St. Charles', St. Luke's, St. Christine's, in the suburbs. But the parishes in the inner city have gone down, so many of them are going to have to combine with other churches. Detroit and other cities have gone about it very drastically, with just closing the churches. The poor people in those areas have been completely uprooted. It's been a very traumatic experience. So, getting back to your original question--do you think the diocese is running smoothly? I do think that they are trying to be smart in anticipating this with a ten year program. But, I think there are other ways. There are vocations in other countries. I think we're going to become a mission country again, to bring in not only the religious, but the priests from foreign countries.
- F: Well, there are a lack of priests, and that's a problem, but you mentioned you losing your priests to what diocese?
- S: Leaving the active priesthood. So many have left and married. But, you know, they're beautiful priests. The irony of it is that the Anglican ministers that have come into the Catholic Church can become priests even though they're married. Our priests, now, cannot marry. The whole issue is so complex, but I think until some accommodation is made, we're going to have a deficiency of priests, at least in the United States.
- F: Does this apply to nuns? Are you having a lack of nuns? People leaving the convent?
- S: We had a lot of sisters who left. Again . . . it was really ironic. Many sisters left after Vatican II when the life was less structured. When a nun left the community some years ago, it was a news story. There were books written about it. There were movies about it because it was unusual. It would take too much courage to leave. But, then, when rules lifted somewhat, there was much more freedom, even the freedom to leave apparently.
- F: But there isn't a lack?
- S: There are very few vocations. That's why so many of our schools have closed, because there aren't the sisters. To pay the lay-teachers a full salary is expensive, so a lot of the parishes cannot afford to keep their schools open. Many of our sisters left education in schools to go to other areas like pastoral

ministry . . . assisting the parish either as a Director of Religious Education or as a pastoral minister, to assist the priest visiting the sick, taking the Eucharist, running the schools of education. The D.R.E.'s are very prominent in parishes where the schools closed, because the religious classes are so much larger. Many have gone into social work.

F: What did you feel has helped to develop the diocese besides education developed in the school system? Anything else you feel that has really helped develop. . . ?

S: The social programs, our Catholic charities, and Catholic social work, the family life department, the religious education department. The religious education now, in the diocese, is probably as programmed as the actual school programs were originally.

F: What do you find is a hindrance to the growth of the diocese?

S: We say we have an option for the poor, but I'm not sure if we do an adequate job with our poor parishes. St. Patrick's and Immaculate Conception are examples of schools that have been on the fence. They have big fund-raising programs every year to try to keep those two schools in existence. I think these are the only two inner-city Catholic schools anymore. It's money.

F: What were the biggest changes you've seen while you've been with the Youngstown Diocese?

S: I think probably the closing of the Catholic schools and therefore the tremendous increase in the schools of religious education. Then, centralizing of diocesan operations, and loss of religious teachers.

F: What do you feel was your best assignment?

S: Best from what angle?

F: The one that made you the happiest.

S: I think St. John's was the most challenging and the most rewarding. People-wise, it was beautiful. So, that stands out as one of the high points of my life. But, I can be very honest with you that I loved teaching at Y.S.U. I just loved the college. I always loved my teenagers. I enjoyed teaching boys. But, then I really lived the collegians. I felt that they had been maligned through the years. I found them to be quite receptive, even though they were taking a class only to fulfill a requirement, not their first love. We got into activities of the environmental

nature, and I really enjoyed that. But, probably St. John's, Ashtabula was the most rewarding because it was so different and such a challenge.

F: Were you ever on an assignment where you felt that you could do so much more, and you were limited in what you could do?

S: No, not really. Sometimes we were given direct orders, but as a rule, within our own classes, we were given independence. But, I will tell you this one thing--I went back to Central Catholic in the 1960's, and the brothers were there. I was moderator of the student council, and the only ones allowed to be officers in the student council were the boys. The sister principal and the former advisor of the student council told me about the situation and they said that they had been trying to make inroads because the school was now combined, and that I should go all out to get the girls elected or at least nominated. We succeeded, but it was not accepted. I left there after two years because I was being too forceful with trying to get the girls nominated for officers' positions. The superior said, "The bishop said that he does not want to cause friction with the brothers." That problem would never exist today, but in 1961 or 1962, they did not want the girls to hold office in the student council of a coed school.

F: Things have changed for the better. What do you believe your major contribution has been to the Youngstown Diocese?

S: As an educator. I love education. That's been my life. I can truthfully say, that wherever I was, I really did enjoy teaching. I can't stand it when someone says, "I'm just a teacher." One of our sisters is an artist and she has painted a shirt for me that says, "To teach, is to touch a life forever." In fact, I asked a prominent nun of another community, "Is your community getting out of schools as much as ours?" She said, "Yes, and that's the worst thing we ever did." Sisters thought that with the emphasis on the social programs, that they had to leave the schools to take care of these social programs. By leaving the schools, we created social problems. She said, "That's the worst thing that ever happened. That so many of the nuns felt the urge to leave education to get into some other kinds of work." Not that other kinds of work aren't also edifying and needed, but we do need good teachers. We need dedicated teachers.

F: That's right. For our country, we need dedicated teachers. To wrap it up . . . are there any changes that you wish you had seen that you did not for the

Youngstown Diocese? That you felt that they had made mistakes . . . everybody makes mistakes.

S: Everybody makes mistakes.

F: That's right.

S: It would probably be difficult to say, because anything that I would say would be from only one vantage point. Overall, I don't see any big, big problems. I don't know whether the priests got all of the support that they needed. Something is awry when religious leave the convent, when priests leave the active practice of the priesthood. Once a priest, always a priest. But, I'm not sure if they have been given all of the support that they needed, or could have used. But, I'm not in the position to judge.

Other problems have been mentioned previously: injustice of "firing" a Sister unjustly from a diocese, reluctance to let teachers form unions, negative publicity about schools in jeopardy which only aggravated the situation, questionable treatment of priests requesting leaves, and male chauvinism even on a high school level.

F: Were there any changes that you did not like or angered you?

S: I wouldn't know any. I went along with the liturgical changes. I feel bad about some of the changes in education.

F: That's what you feel is the worst changes--what has happened in the education?

S: I think so. Because, I think that the family life is so dependent on the child's schooling and vice versa.

F: Is there anything else that you think I should have covered or asked you?

S: I think you did a very fine job.

F: I think I've tried to do one. Can you think of anything?

S: No, I can't. Thank you.

F: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW