

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ursuline Sisters Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 288

SISTER MARTINA CASEY

Interviewed

by

Donna DeBlasio

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: SISTER MARTINA CASEY

INTERVIEWER: Donna DeBlasio

SUBJECT: History of Sisters, education, convents

DATE: March 12, 1975

D: This is an interview with Sister Martina Casey for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Ursuline Sisters by Donna DeBlasio on March 12, 1975, at 11:20 a.m. at Ursuline High School.

Sister Martina, could you tell us about your family background and your educational background?

C: Well, I was born in Youngstown and I attended St. Brenden's School in the first grade. During World War II, my father was a supervisor for the Ravenna Arsenal. When we moved to the Arsenal, we lived with him in a compound there. I went to school there until sixth grade, and then in the sixth grade we came back to Youngstown. I attended St. Patrick's in Youngstown, and I went to Ursuline High School. I graduated from Ursuline High School. I graduated from Ursuline High School in 1955, and then I entered the Ursuline community. Since then I have received my B.S. degree from Youngstown University. I did graduate work in English at Notre Dame. I worked in Guidance at Boston College and John Carroll University, where I received my Masters Degree in guidance and counseling.

I have two sisters and a brother. My father is from Youngstown. My mother is from Pennsylvania. My brother and sisters are married and have families.

D: What influenced your decision to enter a religious life?

C: Well, I think that a lot of things do. I think family background has a lot to do with it. Coming from my family, it was a family of faith. My parents and my

brother and sisters were a very good influence in that area. Then I think when I was at St. Patrick's and here at Ursuline. One day the principal of the high school stopped and said to me, "Do you ever think about being a nun?" I said, "No." Then around April of my senior year something kept bothering me, there was just something there. There were many things about the Ursuline sisters that I liked. I liked what I saw and somehow wanted to identify with it. I think that is pretty much the reasons why I entered.

D: Could you describe a typical day when you first entered, and then how it has changed?

C: When we entered we lived out at the mansion on Logan Road. We got up very early in the morning, about 5:25 a.m. We had a half hour of prayer before mass. Then we went to mass. Then we ate breakfast. In those days, we ate in silence. Then we had various work to do, and we went to college most all of the time. There was some kind of arrangement through Youngstown University, and some of our sisters taught us. We would carry a regular eighteen hour college load. So much of our time was taken up in studying, doing college work. I had some classes on how to be a sister, regular periods of physical exercise, that kind of thing. Many of the programs of the day were really set up for us. Now, today, each individual sister sort of controls her own time, except for regular job hours, which you can't.

I am here at Ursuline from eight to eleven. That is pretty much controlled. We have regular periods of prayer and meals. Then outside of that, we are very active in things outside the community, in discussion groups and adult programs. In the early days when I went to the convent we didn't do that kind of thing, but we do now. You have control of your own time to some degree.

D: Where did you teach and when?

C: I taught at St. Charles in Boardman from 1958 until 1964. I taught the eighth grade. Those were very good years. That was the early days of my religious life, but they were exciting, challenging. I liked teaching eighth grade. I started out with just teaching all the same subjects all day long. Then I went into departmental. It was a full day. You got up in the morning, went to school, came home, got lessons ready for the next day, prayed, ate, and went to bed. It was that kind of thing. Then in 1964, I came to Ursuline and I have been here as Dean of Girls for eleven years.

D: Could you describe a typical day at Ursuline?

C: Yes. Let's see, as Dean of Girls, I am in charge of discipline. It is not that fun as being talked about. So a typical day might be in the morning talking to the people who have to leave early for their doctor appointments and all that kind of thing. We have a convent system that has detention and I talk to the girls who skip detention. I get that over with first thing in the morning. Then during the day, there is mostly interviewing and doing a lot of counselling for the girls who have misbehaved in class, or are getting failing grades in some of their subjects, or are finding going to class is a problem. Sometimes almost any kind of thing can be causing them to have some kind of erratic behavior in school. Then at lunch time I supervise in the cafeteria. That is a good way to get to know the kids. I arrange for tutors for people who are sick, or I call homes when it seems to be a truancy. I make parents aware of this truancy. These are typical problems for discipline.

I have seen a change in the last eleven years in the kinds of problems that we have, and the attitudes towards the rules. You could get really down about a job like this because you are always on the negative side. But no matter, everytime that you talk to a kid that is involved in something, you always get to see either their sincerity or their honesty, or that they really want to do better on lots of things on their own but they can't. From that standpoint it is kind of rewarding.

D: Could you describe special occasions and how they were celebrated at Ursuline?

C: I can remember the Fourth of July when we lived out at the Mother house, out on Logan Road. Celebrating the Fourth of July, of course, was so much different than we had before we entered the convent. Out in the woods we had a grill. We had picnics and played games, baseball, and that kind of thing during the day. There were always favors at the table, decorations throughout the house, and there was entertainment. Then the big highlight of the evening was to sit out on the lawn and watch the fireworks at the Youngstown Country Club. I'm sure they never knew how much entertainment they were providing for us at that time. Some of the other holidays were always, of course, celebrated in a very religious manner. For instance, Christmas and Easter, were celebrated as a family of sisters, and then we always could visit with our own families afterwards.

D: What do you remember about Ursuline High School when you went there as a student?

C: Well, there was just the old building. I remember a lot about the grounds. There was a summerhouse out where the parking lot is now. At lunch time you could go sit in the summerhouse. It was beautiful. Down on Wick Avenue there was a small creek and a bridge going over it. We really had a campus at that time. It was just beautiful. The old convent was here, and they had a big porch that faced Wick Avenue. We used to have our class pictures taken on that porch. Or course, the arts building was here. The football field was here, but it wasn't as big as it is now. The shrine was erected when I was in high school, so it was in about 1954. One of the classes put that up. When we were seniors was the last year for the old building. There was something like nine hundred kids in that building then. Freshmen had coat racks in the balcony of the library to hang their coats on. They didn't even have lockers. We had four twenty-minute lunch periods. We had to keep silent because they had to move it so fast in order to get everybody out. The new building was being built at that time, and the auditorium had moveable seats. That is where our dances were. I can remember on Friday nights before a dance taking all of the moveable seats down. I remember a prom that was held there. I think it was either 1952 or 1954 that they made that into a ballroom. At that time, it looked like the most beautiful place. We just couldn't think of that ugly auditorium being that beautiful.

There were mostly sisters teaching at that time. I think the only lay teachers were Mr. Carrie, Mr. Shyron, and maybe two others. That has changed now. There are so many changes. I think we have 45 lay teachers, 20 some sisters, and 6 priests. There was a very different kind of community here at that time, because it was smaller. Although, nine hundred in that small building was rather difficult. You knew everybody, or rather everybody was from all over town. You know, it was only the one high school at that time.

D: What years of your religious life stand out and why?

C: I would say the last five or six, probably because with the changes in the church, the upheaval, people in the religious leaving. You had to reevaluate your own life to come to grips with your own dedication, your reasons for being a sister. Then three years ago I was appointed Director of Formation of our community, which means I am in charge of young women entering our community. It is kind of a call, a kind of growth for yourself. You feel that if you are working with young people who are interested in religious life, you certainly better have a good grip on it and you really want to have something to give. I have had a lot of opportunities to travel and

to learn about new procedure and formation of religious life. I have had an opportunity to work with gentlemen who are interested in religious life. It is a real call to growth, a real call to materializing a lot of things that you were taught a long time ago. I would say these last, maybe even ten years have been good.

D: How many things do you remember about any of the convents that you lived in?

C: Well, the convent here at Ursuline was an old one. It was a very beautiful place. Now this is the one that a lot of the woodwork and the fireplace are in the Livingston store, one in the Eastwood Mall and somewhere else. It had stained glass windows that were very big and beautiful. I remember the ones on this side of the house, toward the school, had scenes of birds and bird's nests and very delicate colors. Every room had a huge fireplace with marble inlay floor around it, a high ceiling with a big chandelier, and a great, big, huge mirror that would take up half the wall. There was a skylight that was also done in stained glass artistic design. There were three floors. I was, of course, one of the very young nuns there. By the time I got to the third floor to go to bed, I never wanted to come down again because it was so high up. I think it was five flights of steps. It was a haven for bats. We used to spend a night a week killing bats. So it was a high house with steeples and it was a great place for them to be. If you looked at the house from the outside, it always reminded you of a haunted house. It was very dark and bleak on the outside. It was very beautiful on the inside, actually. It reminded you of the kind of haunted house that you see in storybooks. But it is gone now. Both of the old mansion type homes that we had as convents are no longer, they tore them down. There were three of them, the one on Rayen Avenue too.

D: What sisters stand out in your memory?

C: There was a sister here at Ursuline that I am sure many people in the Youngstown area would remember, Sister Regina. She taught chemistry and physics here for years and years, and years. Here at school I remember they used to call her "The Bug" because of her association with finance. She was a genius in the area of science. She had studied and helped work under the discovery of, I think, penicillin at Catholic University. She had some hard times here in school, but I will never forget when I came to live here as a sister. Whenever there was a dance she would always be the first one over to see the kids decorations. She was the kind of person who had a real zest for life. The football players would come

home at night after a game, and her window was by the sidewalk, and they would always yell the score up to her on their way down. She was just always interested in everything the kids would do. I can remember too, she was in her sixties, I think, her middle sixties, when I came here. She carried this great big briefcase home every night. You would want to help her carry her briefcase up the steps and she wouldn't let you. She just kept on going. She was always involved. Every year she took kids to Cleveland for science fairs. She always had projects entered in it. I always thought that that was the kind of person that I would like to be. To be someone who just kept on going and was always interested in what the kids were doing, what was new. She was a great inspiration. You know that they often say that if you are a very active person that when you retire sometimes you just go really downhill fast. Well, she did. I think that she was in her early seventies when she retired. She went downhill very quickly. I imagine that it was hard for her, but I don't know, maybe that is the way that it should be. She stands out as a person who influenced me. That, of course, was after I entered the convent. I had her in class when I was in high school. But I wasn't thinking of being a nun at that time. I had individuals in grade school who seemed to have a zest for life and a kind of happiness. These are things that I look back on and see why I may have at one time wanted to be like those people.

D: What was memorable about the mother superiors under whom you served?

C: Well, Mother Blanche was the Mother Superior when I entered the convent. She was one who was very interested in seeing that we got an education. I remember that about her. I also remember I learned how to drive when I entered the convent. I was learning how to drive from a state highway patrolman and I think it was a brother of one of our sisters. I had an accident on my second driving lesson. It was with a parish car, and I had only been in the parish a month so it was a very traumatic experience, and I was vowing never to get back in a car. That summer Mother Blanche made me take driving lessons from the AAA. I always think that if she hadn't done that I probably would never have driven. But she must have known that that fear was there. She made me take those driving lessons. She was the kind of person, too, that helped us a lot. She taught us how to make our clothes. That was when we wore the long habits and all the white starch things. She spent a lot of time with us as young nuns. She was interested in what we wanted to do and what we wanted to be. She is another one that reminds me of Sister Regina. She retired several years ago, and she is still very active. She has her days filled with doing

things for others, driving people to the doctor, that kind of thing.

Mother Marie was my eighth grade principal when I was in grade school. She was the one who appointed me to Ursuline High School at a time when young nuns really weren't sent to high school. I was very young, and I didn't know whether I was ready for this, but she had confidence in me. She sent me away to school, to Notre Dame. Then she sent me to Ursuline, and I have been here ever since. Then Sister Conroy, who is our present Superior, appointed me Director of Formation. Although that is a somewhat frightening and responsible job, and it is, it has been a very growing experience for me in my life. I have had to learn so much, and to do so much, and to be really convinced of my own vocation. I have to be able to really believe in what I am doing. I am grateful to her for that opportunity.

D: What changes have you noted from when you first entered until now in the Ursuline Order?

C: Well, of course, there are the exterior ones, you know, the habit change. That might be important, and it might not be. There are various changes in the administration and the kind of work that we do in the community, Mahoning Valley. The meeting of people in different areas has changed. We have a sister that works at the Speech and Hearing Center. We have sisters involved in poverty programs, Upward Bound and Head Start. We have a sister that works for the Mahoning County School of the Retarded. So in the area of service to the people of God in the Youngstown area, that has definitely changed. When I entered the convent, every sister taught grade school or high school, period. That was the primary work. We have sisters running adult education programs, that kind of thing. A lot of these things are aspects of education, but they are different. A religious life in all communities at the time when I was a young nun had many of the decisions made for us. Our lives were very much regulated by rules and regulations. Now, the whole emphasis is on the mature religious woman who is dedicated to Christ and to the gospel message and can make her own decisions. She chooses what she wants to major in, for instance, in college. Most of the time we get at least a preference in what kind of work we would like to do, where we would like to live. We are really assuming leadership roles as religious women in the valley. I think that that is quite a big change because I think that although the sisters of the past certainly made great sacrifices and did a very fine job, their role was the role that was particular to that time. Ours is one that is particular to this time. It is one that shows some kind



of leadership for women, especially for religious women.

D: Why do you think that it is difficult to get more women to join the religious life?

C: I am not so sure that it is as difficult as it is made to be. I think that there are a lot of reasons. I think, first of all, part of the history of this whole notion of talking to girls about vocations is that period of time maybe ten years ago when religious life changed, when renewal came. All kinds of problems arose and sisters left communities. So there was a kind of feeling within sisters that they wouldn't ask somebody about vocation at that time because there was a lack of confidence. It was very shaky. Just as the changes in the church were very shaky to the laymen, they affected religious women too. So it got to the point where nobody would touch that topic at all, and nobody would say anything. I think that that is changing. I think that if we have religious women who are convinced that there is value to this life, that it is a good life, that it is a fulfilling life as a woman, then it is becoming a little bit easier to talk to other young women who feel their call. There are always going to be people called whether they respond or not. Who is to say whether they are going to respond or not? But I think that it is becoming a little bit easier to talk about it again. I think it is that kind of thing where you've got to really be convinced that there is something to this life. I think, too, that one of the other reasons that it is difficult to encourage young women is that there are so many opportunities for service that there were not before. You have the Peace Corps, you have various volunteering regularly in the community at large here, and these are fulfilling. They are certainly opportunities for serving people. There is also the problem today of anything that is permanent against anything that is temporary. I think we see this in Youngstown in people not wanting to take over family businesses. We see the same thing in the armed services, all areas. So in that idea of life dedicated to God, they think that is certainly something that is hard to talk about. It is very much part of our culture, and probably another reason why it is hard to encourage women to join the religious life.

D: What do you think is the future direction of the Ursuline Order?

C: Well, I could get all excited about the future direction of the Ursuline Order because right now we have four young college women who live with us who are going to be Ursuline sisters. Their vision is a great deal wider and greater than ours. They are open to meeting the needs of the

people of Youngstown, whatever they might be. When we entered the convent, the needs were teaching elementary school and teaching high school. They see all kinds of opportunities or ways of serving the people in different kinds of ministries. It might be a ministry that a young girl who is a nurse would like to go into the homes of the aged and combine bringing the gospel message and her nursing ability to these people. I think that the future of the Ursuline sisters is very hopeful. I think that if God wants us to continue our work here we will, and he will send us people to help us do that. I think that as the years go on there will be a different kind of work done by the sisters. I think we will just continue what we have been doing, witnessing the gospel, and serving the people, hopefully. I really do believe that though.

D: Do you have any other comments that you would like to make?

C: I could say that perhaps in the last ten years I have been very much aware of the role that the Ursuline sisters have played in Youngstown and in this area, and the way that they have played in the lives of my family, people with whom I grew up. I think that this will continue and I hope I am around to see it continue.

END OF INTERVIEW