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Kathleen Flanagan S.C.

Mary Ellen Gleason S.C.

Carole Garibaldi Rogers

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Handing on the Charism: Reporting on an Oral History Project

By

KATHLEEN FLANAGAN, S.C., MARY ELLEN GLEASON, S.C.,
AND CAROLE GARIBALDI ROGERS

In November 2001 the Vincentian Studies Institute awarded the Center for Catholic Women's History at the College of Saint Elizabeth in Morristown, New Jersey, a grant to conduct a series of oral history interviews in an effort to shed light on the various ways contemporary Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth have embodied and transmitted their Vincentian/Setonian charism — and how such efforts, if successful, might be distilled into future learnings.

These interviews, which took place during 2002 and 2003, are a part of the Center's larger ongoing oral history project entitled "Gifts from Our Past: Lives of Catholic Women in New Jersey," and were conducted under the protocols for respectable oral history research. This paper, reporting specifically on the Charism Project, has four objectives. First, we set the historical background for this particular community of sisters. We then describe the methodology we used to develop and execute "Handing on the Charism." We follow these nuts-and-bolts details with excerpts from several oral history transcripts so that readers can 'hear' for themselves how the narrators speak. Finally, we share some insight into what the oral histories can teach us about ways the charism of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth is — and sometimes isn't — being handed on.¹

Historical Background

In the diocese of Newark, New Jersey, the original impetus to establish a diocesan community of sisters came from a nephew of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley (1814-1877), who had been installed as first bishop of the diocese in 1853. Like his aunt, Bishop Bayley was committed to making education available to Catholics.

¹ The information in this paper was shared in preliminary form at a panel presentation by the three authors at the History of Women Religious Triennial Conference, 27-30 June 2004, in Atchison, Kansas.



Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley (1814-1877).
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On 20 August 1858, Bishop Bayley, who was assisted in the establishment of the diocesan community of sisters by Reverend Bernard McQuaid (1823-1909), later the bishop of Rochester, New York, sent a letter to the pastors in his diocese. He wrote:

We stand particularly in need of good instructors for the young, and experience has shown that no others can fill this most important office so effectually as religious women, who have been trained up for this purpose. Besides this, we need such women for various other objects of Christian charity – to visit the sick – instruct the ignorant – take charge of industrial schools, etc. But at present we cannot obtain them. Under these circumstances, we have no other recourse except to train them for ourselves. There are in our midst numbers of young women fitted for the purpose, and anxious to devote themselves to this work.²

² Archives of the Archdiocese of Newark.

Five women interested in becoming sisters were sent to the Cincinnati community of Sisters of Charity to receive instruction under the direction of Mother Margaret Cecilia George, a very capable Sister of Charity, who had served as Mother Seton's treasurer from 1813-1819.³ In selecting the Cincinnati community, Bishop Bayley said: "It seems to me proper, that I should have the aid of Mother Seton's children in establishing our holy Religion in this new diocese."⁴

The Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth thus developed from Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton's community, which had been founded fifty years earlier on 31 July 1809. The five New Jersey women who had been trained in Cincinnati – Margaret O'Neill, Margaret Lynah, Bridget Daly, Margaret Plunkett, and Catherine Duffy – returned to Newark as novices and joined Sister Mary Xavier Mehegan, who served as superior, and Sister Mary Catharine Nevin, as assistant, to form the new community, which was established on 29 September 1859.



Mary Xavier Mehegan, S.C.
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³ Judith Metz, S.C., and Virginia Wiltse, *Sister Margaret Cecilia George. A Biography* (Cincinnati: 1989), 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

The sisters lived in what was then the Colonel Ward Mansion on the corner of Washington and Bleecker Streets. Both Sister Mary Xavier and Sister Mary Catharine, who were members of the New York Sisters of Charity and had been given an option of remaining in New Jersey or returning to New York once the new group was firmly established, chose to stay.

The Regulations for the Society of the Sisters of Charity in the Diocese of Newark, 1859, read: "The Principal End for Which God Has Called and Assembled the Sisters of Charity Is to Honor Jesus Christ, Our Lord, the Source and Model of All Charity, by Rendering Him Every Temporal and Spiritual Service in Their Power, in the Persons of the Poor, Either Sick, Prisoners, Insane, or Those Who Through Shame Would Conceal Their Necessities."⁵

Within a year after the founding of the community in Newark, as the sisters outgrew their accommodations, they purchased a tract of land in Madison, New Jersey, for \$25,000. This property, owned by the diocese, had originally been the site of Seton Hall College, established by Bishop Bayley in 1856; later it became part of Convent Station.

Mother Xavier, along with nine sisters, moved to Madison on 2 July 1860. Not long after their arrival they established the Academy of Saint Elizabeth for girls and Saint Joseph Preparatory School for boys. One of the main reasons for opening these two schools was to provide some income for the community.

The early days in Madison were challenging, exciting, and difficult ones. Besides teaching, the daily schedule included a great deal of manual work. The sisters spent time working in the vegetable garden and the orchard, building roads, and tending to many other jobs that men would ordinarily have been hired to do.

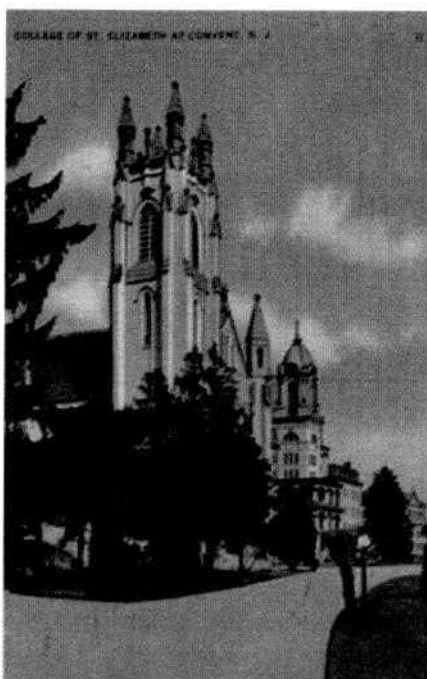
A year after the sisters arrived in Madison, the Civil War broke out. In the spirit of Saint Vincent de Paul, the Sisters of Charity immediately responded to the needs of the wounded soldiers in New Jersey. Temporary shelters were used as hospitals in Newark and Trenton. In an article in "Caritas," a newsletter published by the Sisters of Charity, Sister Alice Regina wrote: "As a result of the nursing services of the Sisterhoods during the war, their work became better known to physicians all over the country so that after the war the services of the sisters were eagerly sought by these physicians and others who appreciated the ability of the sisters in hospital

⁵ *Regulations for the Society of the Sisters of Charity in the Diocese of Newark, 1859.*

administration and nursing care... Truly, the record of the nursing sisters is a brilliant page in the history of the nursing services of our country."⁶

The "missions" of the new community increased rapidly – along with the number of sisters – in the remaining decades of the nineteenth century. From the beginning, the ministries of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth included elementary and secondary schools as well as commercial schools, hospitals, and various forms of child care.

Along with the more organized institutional ministries was a less formal but always present tradition of charity that included providing clothing for those in need, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, washing and dressing the dead for burial, and cheerfully doing whatever else needed to be done.



Period postcard. College of St. Elizabeth, Morristown, N.J.
Public Domain

⁶ The Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, *Caritas* (September-October, 1941): 10.

By the close of the nineteenth century, the sisters had opened the College of Saint Elizabeth, one of the first Roman Catholic colleges for women in the United States, and were serving in sixty-one schools, four hospitals, three orphanages, a day nursery, an infirmary for seminarians and students, a home for incurables, and a residence for working women. With the exception of seven schools in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut, all of the "missions" were in the Newark and Trenton dioceses of New Jersey. The number of sisters totaled more than 1000.

For the next one hundred years, missions opened and closed. An additional focus during the twentieth century centered on serving in missions such as China, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Bolivia. Not long after the close of the Second Vatican Council, three provinces were created and were then dissolved by the end of the 1990s.

"*Toward Boundless Charity*," the Constitution of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, states: "By our vowed lives we are called to give public witness to Gospel values which continue to challenge us and our society. We strive to love as God loves us, to hear and respond to the cries of the poor, and to live as a community always seeking to discern where the Spirit leads us."⁷ Currently there are more than 500 women in the congregation. More than half are actively involved in full-time ministries in elementary education, secondary education, higher education, healthcare, and social services. Josephine's Place, in Elizabeth, New Jersey, is one of the most recent ministries sponsored by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth. Named in honor of Sister Josephine Marie O'Brien, an extraordinary Sister of Charity who served as a general superior, Josephine's Place provides a variety of services to economically poor women.

Sisters of Charity do not retire in the same sense as other women do and, therefore, many older sisters volunteer in a variety of ministries – congregational services, education, healthcare, social services, and pastoral services. Currently sisters are serving in many states and outside the continental United States in El Salvador and the United States Virgin Islands. As in previous times, and now, as they celebrate the 145th anniversary of the congregation, the sisters continue to study the possibility of new initiatives in response to the Spirit.

⁷ *Toward Boundless Charity: Constitution of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth*, 1989. C47.

In the seventeenth century, Saint Vincent de Paul described The Company of Charity as one that “dedicates itself to serve the poor, who are God’s chosen ones. Because of this love for the poor, we have reason to hope that God will love us. Therefore, let us go forth and work with renewed love in service of the poor. Let us seek out the most poor and abandoned. Let us realize that the poor are our lords and masters and that we are unworthy to render them our small service.”⁸ In the nineteenth century Elizabeth Ann Seton adapted this charism to the specific needs of the American church of her day.

Today the characteristics of the Vincentian-Setonian charism include: a preferential option for the poor; addressing the social problems that currently exist in the world, i.e., spiritual and material poverty and subsequently working towards systemic change; and sharing the Gospel values, which is intrinsic to working with the poor and addressing systemic change.

The Charism Project

By the generally accepted definition of the Oral History Association, oral history is “a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. Oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using twenty-first-century digital technologies.”⁹

In recent decades, oral history has enlightened the study of immigrants; of African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans; of farm women, mine workers, and veterans; of survivors of war, tragedy and natural disasters. Tracy K’Meyer, examining the role of “Oral History and the Meaning of Faith in American Religious History,” argues that oral history “holds particular promise for studies of the private nature and meaning of religious belief, the interconnections between belief and public action, and the place of religion in broader historical narratives.” Extended interviews, she found, “provided the nuance and complexity the subject demanded.”¹⁰

⁸ Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., *Flames of Love: The Vincentian Family on Fire for Mission* (Chicago: 1998), 11.

⁹ Oral History Association website, <http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/about.html> (accessed February 2005).

¹⁰ Tracy E. K’Meyer, “‘I Just Felt Called...’: Oral History and the Meaning of Faith in American Religious History,” *Journal of American History* 86:2 (September 1999): 726, 728.



Official seal, College of St. Elizabeth.

For the past seven years, the College of Saint Elizabeth has been engaged in an oral history project entitled, "Gifts From Our Past: Oral Histories of Catholic Women in New Jersey," and our research tracks with K'Meyer. Using the techniques of oral history to gather women's faith stories offers a rarely opened window through which we can study various aspects of contemporary American Catholicism.

We began with the primary objective of collecting oral histories from the wonderful diversity of Catholic women in New Jersey – women who are second or third generation Irish or Italian Americans but also more recent immigrant women from Latin America, Asia and Africa; women who were college educated, perhaps by the Sisters of Charity, and women who are still struggling to find entry-level jobs.

As we developed a template of questions and a list of narrators, and started the interviews, we began to see that we were not only preserving the histories of Catholic women who had lived through important events of the twentieth century, but we were also learning about the ways they were passing on the faith to subsequent generations. And while we were interviewing Catholic women about their faith lives, these same narrators were also wives, mothers, neighbors, and citizens of town, state and country. Therefore we began to recognize these oral histories might converse with a variety of audiences.

A key element in our methodology has been to reach out to women who were connected in some way to the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, a congregation that has deep roots in New Jersey. In the first phase of the project, we interviewed women who are graduates or friends of the College of Saint Elizabeth. In the second phase, we interviewed recent immigrant women from three inner city locations where our local liaison was a Sister of Charity ministering at

a school, hospital, or social service organization. In the third phase, we interviewed African-American women whose roots go deep in the New Jersey communities of Montclair and Newark.

An analysis of some early transcripts showed us that many of the women spoke of the positive influence the Sisters of Charity had in their lives. They spoke of a strong sense of serving others, especially the poor. Many among the college graduates chose careers in the helping professions and, as wives and mothers, also devoted time to volunteer work in both church and civic communities. While those observations might be partially explained by demographics and the social milieu of the times, we were motivated to look deeper. Our analysis led to the most recent phase of our work – a collection of interviews devoted to the topic: “Handing on the Charism of the Sisters of Charity.”

The entire project has followed the highest standards of oral history methodology. We have honored the integrity of our narrators. We have aimed to produce quality archival material, which will be available to both students and scholars. And we have intended to make the results of this research available in curriculum materials and through articles, symposia, lectures, and exhibits, open to the general public. We have used the oral histories in several panel presentations, sponsored an oral history Study Day for junior and high school teachers in New Jersey, created an exhibit for the College library, and published excerpts from the transcripts in an article in *America* magazine (“Remembering First Communion,” 10 May 2004).

In 2001, the College established a Center for Catholic Women’s History. The oral history interviews are a key component of the Center, but it will also explore many different paths to preserving, studying, and sharing the stories of Catholic women’s lives. We have begun to collect photos and devotional artifacts from some of the narrators.

With that background in place, we turn now to the most recent phase of our oral history work – an exploration of Vincentian spirituality and praxis, as it is demonstrated in the lives of the women we interviewed. The goals of this research were twofold: first, to collect a set of oral history interviews that remained rooted in the methodology of “Gifts from our Past,” but also added a cluster of questions that specifically related to the Vincentian–Setonian charism. And, second, to analyze the transcripts of those interviews, finding what the narrators might reveal about ways the charism has been

communicated, directly or indirectly, by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth.

As explained earlier in this paper, the Sisters of Charity minister in many different fields. It was essential that the interviews reach into all those areas – education, health care, social services, parish work – in a variety of locations in New Jersey.

That presented a large pool of potential narrators and we set out to establish some parameters before the interviews could take place. Together with the coordinator of ministry services, Sister Maureen Sullivan, we compiled a list of fourteen Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth who could in turn recommend to us laywomen who had come in contact with the sisters at various junctions and in various roles. We then interviewed each of these sisters, requesting a list of women who might become narrators. Through this process we came up with sixty-four possible narrators. And so we began the long process of screening, winnowing, scheduling, and interviewing.

Our oral history interviewing relies on open-ended questions that are clustered around topics. This method has allowed us to maintain some control over the content of the interviews. It gives us a base line of subject matter, enabling comparisons across transcripts, for example, but it also allows for flexibility so that we can honor each narrator's individual story and not try to create models before we listen. The introductory cluster of questions concerns early memories of Catholicism – family, education, sacraments. The context of these memories is clearly different when we interview adult converts and so we need to change our questions to allow for those differences. Another cluster concerns troubling times in a woman's life. Still another allows the narrator time to sum up and reflect, for example, on how her life as a Catholic woman might be different from that of her mother or her daughters.

For the charism phase, we inserted a cluster of questions about encounters with the Sisters of Charity, seeking specific anecdotes, quotes, and memories. We also asked about Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton: when – or if – the narrator had learned of them. We asked specifically if the women were aware of what the Sisters of Charity stood for. We wanted to know how – or if – they understood the word "charism" and how it had – or had not – been conveyed to them. And finally we asked questions about the future, about the dwindling numbers in religious life, and about suggestions the narrators might have for the sisters.

We have completed interviews with twenty-five women in this phase of our work, bringing the total oral history collection to just fewer than one hundred narrators. The interviews have been transcribed and are preserved in the archives in tape, disk, and hard copy formats.

The poet and essayist Adrienne Rich has written, "We cannot help making history because we are made of it, and history is made of people like us, carriers of the behavior and assumptions of a given time and place."¹¹ And in her book, *Friends of God and Prophets*, theologian Elizabeth Johnson, elaborating on Rich's observations, says, "women take their bearings toward worthwhile life from a living tradition, one moreover that is ripe with promise: 'seeds stored for generations can still germinate.'"¹²

Oral history has a rich tradition of preserving the voices of ordinary participants in history – the soldier instead of the general, the laborer instead of the executive. Our ongoing oral history project, the charism phase, in particular, follows that tradition and also illustrates what both Rich and Johnson describe. We have operated from the stance that preserving the narrators' voices, analyzing the interviews, and sharing their stories allow non-iconic Catholic women to become part of history, to provide "a living tradition ripe with promise."

As we move on to the "Voices" segment of this paper, it is important to clarify a few points.

First, many of the women, even the Sisters of Charity themselves, spoke of the influence of other congregations of women religious. A woman's journey may have put her in contact with several different communities. Our focus was on one particular community and its charism, but across the pages of the transcripts march Benedictines, Dominicans, Little Sisters of the Poor, Sisters of Saint Joseph, and many others.

Secondly, our transcripts are filled with fond memories and gratitude to many individual sisters. We are aware that we worked in a universe where narrators by and large thought the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth were wonderful women and that other congregations doing similar investigations will surface similar emotions.

¹¹ Adrienne Rich, "Resisting Amnesia," *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (New York: 1986), 145.

¹² Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets* (New York: 1998), 33-34.

Finally, we are also aware that if our pool were statistically larger, we would certainly encounter some negative responses. This has been qualitative, not quantitative, research and what we consider important is to look beyond: look beyond the words to what happened in a woman's life; look beyond what the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth have done as compared to what women religious in general have done – and must do – to preserve their charisms.

There are at least two ways to use oral history interviews in printed or spoken work. One, which has been followed by many oral historians from Studs Terkel to Tony Parker to Sherna Berger Gluck, employs lengthy excerpts from transcripts, allowing full focus on the voice, with only brief introductory contextual material and perhaps concluding observations. Another way of using oral history, which Rosalie Riegler uses well in her book, *Dorothy Day: Portraits by Those Who Knew Her*,¹³ is to take very brief excerpts – sometimes only a sentence or two – from the transcripts and surround them with contextual material, history, and supporting data.

In the “Voices” interlude, which now follows, we have chosen the first path. We wish to allow the reader to hear, with a sense of the questions asked but without interspersed commentary, the wisdom – and humor – of some of the women we interviewed in the charism project. We give our response, setting the excerpts in context and drawing some conclusions, in the concluding “Reflections.”

The Voices

Sister Carol Heller, S.C.

A Sister of Charity of Saint Elizabeth for nearly forty-five years, she was teacher, spiritual director, and youth minister before her last ministry as Director of Xavier Center, a retreat and conference center in Convent Station, New Jersey. There she welcomed everyone – ecumenical groups, both women and men in twelve-step programs, people with AIDS. Her interview took place six weeks before her death at the age of sixty-two.

The interviewer asked when she first learned about Saint Vincent de Paul. Sister Carol said: “My father belonged to the St. Vincent de Paul Society. And I can remember as a child every Tuesday night my father going to that meeting. I never knew what the meeting

¹³ Rosalie Riegler, *Dorothy Day: Portraits by Those Who Knew Her* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003).

was. As I got older, I began to realize that it was for the poor in the parish. But I never fully realized until my father's death – which was in 1975, and I was about thirty-five at that time – the good that my father had done through the St. Vincent de Paul Society, because there were people who came to the wake who would say how my father would arrive with clothes and with food and with money."

Later in the interview, when she reflected on changes, she added: "When I think of the St. Vincent de Paul Society and the things that my father did in his life, they were the things that people could accept today that was the spirit of [charity].... It's still needed now, but that's not all that I can do without looking at systemic change."

Sister Carol described her giftedness as "welcoming" and traced that through her early ministries in working with young adults in spiritual direction. The interviewer asked Sister Carol about her understanding of her current ministry at the Retreat Center.

"...the mission that we have is that every individual who comes here, feels loved, knows that they're loved by God.... I read a book many years ago about the many faces of God. We'll see someone here, and we'll say, 'Wasn't that a different face of God?' It might be the suffering, it might be the rejoicing.... But every person, you know, is a face of God."¹⁴

Cathy McCann

Raised in a large Irish Catholic family with an aunt who was a Dominican, she had Dominican Sisters as her teachers in grammar school and she is now an associate with the Blauvelt Dominicans. But in between there was Sister Carol Heller, a Sister of Charity of Saint Elizabeth. Cathy works for a large community food bank in New Jersey.

As she talked about her life as a young Catholic woman, the interviewer asked her about Berakah, a young Christian singles ministry, and the role Sister Carol played there.

"[She] was one of the first people I met when I went to Berakah. And right away there was some kind of connection there. She was warm and loving, and she had a smile – a face that could light up. She was just so human. Somehow she had this uncanny ability to really call forth [other peoples' gifts]. You didn't even know

¹⁴ Oral history interview with Carole Garibaldi Rogers, 22 May 2002. Transcript: Archives, College of Saint Elizabeth, Morristown, New Jersey.

she was doing it. She gave wonderful hugs. She made everyone feel welcome. Everything that happened – everything, God was in her life. She could find God in your life.”¹⁵

Carol Bamesberger

The mother of two adult daughters, she is a certified hospital chaplain with the National Association of Catholic Chaplains and directs Angel Connection, a ministry to those with AIDS.

The interviewer asked what connection she had with the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth. Carol answered: “For many, many years I have been a friend there. Early in the AIDS epidemic when we first held an AIDS event called “Princess for a Day for Mothers and Children” we could not find a location. And I went over and spoke to Sister Carol [Heller] at Xavier Center, and she immediately opened their doors. Other religious communities of women turned me down and said, ‘No. We don’t want that here. We can’t have that here.’ The Sisters of Charity were right there and their doors were opened. What I’ve seen in the Sisters of Charity – their model of following Elizabeth Seton’s lead in what they do for people in the community is what we’ve done at Angel Connection.”

The interviewer asked her to expand on her answer.

“When Elizabeth Seton was alive she watched what was the need of people, and that’s what she went to work on. And what I see in the Sisters of Charity is... these women of God go and meet the need where it is for the time of the day it is. And in doing that they’ve had to go out into the community to hear the needs of the women and people of the world and to meet those needs. I am in such awe of that – that they are women in the world but not of the world. Their life is what I live out here. And so years ago I was offered an opportunity to become an associate of the Sisters of Charity, and I didn’t follow it up. And I was offered it again and I didn’t follow it up. And I was offered it a third time and I didn’t follow it up. And finally a year ago I said, ‘This is silly, because I’m doing this work similar to what they’re doing. Why not have the benefit of being part of that community.’ And that was quite a gift to me.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2 December 2002.

In answer to another question about Elizabeth Seton, she said:

“Through my life I’ve done a lot of reading about women and Dorothy Day and Elizabeth Seton seemed to me to be two powerful women, New York women, girls – New York girls who just went out there amidst odds and made a difference. And I liked that about both of them. I think that when I came to know the Sisters of Charity one of the biggest gifts they gave to me is that I saw that there were many, many people doing exactly what I did. Elizabeth Seton is a guide to me. And these women – these are all women of God that I clearly see as role model[s]. They’re out there. If they had been there [for] my mother as an alcoholic woman [when] we couldn’t get any help for her – had they been there, there would have been help for her.”¹⁶

Margaret Roman

Married with two adopted children, she is a professor of English. She is a former member of the Sisters of Charity and became a Seton associate several years ago.

In answer to the question: “Did you have an early awareness of the poor in the sense of serving the poor or as a need to pay attention to those who had less, who were less fortunate?” Margaret answered: “I don’t remember sensing that a lot in elementary school, but very much in high school at St. Vincent Academy. [That] was not accidental because the school was named in honor of Saint Vincent de Paul. Of course, this was the sixties and several of the sisters were very vocal about the problems in society and certainly about racial discrimination.... And everybody had to have an apostolate. So that’s where the fervor started to build.... To me that meant that my world was larger than myself and my family. You know, my mother did not always agree with these apostolates, I want to tell you. I went to St. Mary’s orphanage every Saturday morning for about a year, and I cleaned floors. I worked a little bit with the children, but mostly I was doing housework. So she was not happy.... And she’d say, ‘Well, don’t you think that this charity begins at home?’ But that was not the message I got from the sisters. It was like, well, yes, I can also do what’s at home, but I need to move outward. I need to reach out to places that are hurting in society and do something about it.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29 January 2003.

Later in the interview, to the question, "How would you describe the charism or the identity of the Sisters of Charity?" Margaret answered: "I would say that the Sisters of Charity reach out for the poor and for the disenfranchised. And just as Vincent went into the streets and helped those people, that's what they do. Every time you turn around, that's what they're talking about, and that's what they're attempting to do."¹⁷

Jacinta Vilas

She emigrated from Spain twenty years ago, following her husband who had arrived the previous year. A Sister of Charity, who was working with inner city immigrants at an adult school in Paterson, New Jersey, helped her husband find a job. When Jacinta came, she helped her, too – first, to get an education and then to become a teacher at that same inner city adult school. Jacinta recently completed a master's degree in literature.

The interviewer asked Jacinta what appealed to her about the sisters she met.

"So all the sisters that I came in contact with helped in some way in my life, to make it easier, to make it better, and not to be so difficult for me. I think that the effect is that it makes me stronger. I feel that if I ever need them, they are there for me. So it gives me comfort, that you always have a friend no matter what, in good times or bad times."

Later, the interviewer asked Jacinta what the word "charity" means to her.

"Charity means to help other people less fortunate. But also to help them with friendship, not just with money.... So to me charity is getting to know the other person and understanding [them]."

And when she was asked how the sisters could continue their influence, she said:

"Their philosophy should be passed on... What makes the big difference is their way of thinking, their way of putting God in everything they do.... You help one person unconditionally, and that person is your friend."¹⁸

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18 September 2002.

¹⁸ Oral history interview with Mary Aktay, 3 December 2002. Transcript. Archives, College of Saint Elizabeth, Morristown, New Jersey.

Mary Aktay

A writer and public relations consultant, she first met the Sisters of Charity when she applied for a job as their communications director. She is Catholic and has raised her two daughters as Catholic although she fasts for Ramadan with her Muslim husband.

Toward the end of her interview, Mary was asked what she thought the Sisters of Charity and all Vincentian communities who are faced with dwindling numbers should do to continue their influence.

"There are three ways, basically, that I think the Charities, and all communities really, need to go. The first thing is presence. I was very disappointed to learn of the closing of Seton Center in Jersey City. I think the Charity presence and community in especially communities of immigrants or disenfranchised communities... is exceedingly important. I mean that's what Vincent was all about, and that needs to continue....

"The [second] thing that I think is very important in continuing or increasing numbers is meeting the needs of today, of this generation.... one of the ways the sisters could go is temporary commitments, one-year, two-years, whatever. I have two daughters. And what I would say is that young people today are afraid of commitment. They're afraid of failure. They know that when they go into jobs, they're not going to be there for a lifetime the way their parents were or their grandparents. This is not the way the world is anymore. So [with temporary vows] they know it's going to be for three years, and then they'll go someplace else. But they haven't failed.... If they decide to leave, there's no stigma attached.

"The third one, which has always been part of the Vincentian charism, is that one-to-one relationship, that connectivity.... When I was working [with the sisters], I would have these wonderfully long, long talks, mystical talks, with one sister. It was great. Another sister would come in very gently every morning, 'Hi, how are you, Mary?' [She had] a sincere interest in my life, in my family. It's that type of thing that people respond to. In any vocation, whether it's a vocation to married life or whether it's a vocation to service within a community, you have to see Christ in the other. And also very, very important, I think, and this is what the Charities do so well, is you have to be able to see Christ in you reflected in their eyes. To look in

their eyes and know that they see Christ in you. I think that's where [the Charities] excel."¹⁹

Claudia Cavanagh

She attended Seton Hall University where she worked in the campus ministry office with two women who had what she described as "presence, a dynamic-type of energy" but whom she did not know then as Sisters of Charity. As a result of their invitations, she spent first two weeks and then, after graduation, two years working with the poor in the Appalachian mountains. She remained friends with the sisters after she returned and later joined the Seton associates. Claudia works as a social worker in the neonatal intensive care unit at a New Jersey hospital.

The interviewer asked Claudia to describe a trip to Emmitsburg, Maryland, which she had mentioned.

"In July of 2000, I spent the weekend in Emmitsburg [with other Seton associates]. And it was just an incredibly profound experience of Elizabeth Ann Seton. It was the summertime, and I had been planning to take a couple of days off from there, so I had brought my bicycle down with me. I'm not a morning person at all, [but] as the sun came up, there was something that just pulled me up, that said, 'Get on your bike this morning before the conference begins.' I couldn't go back to sleep. So I took my bike out, and I started to ride along these country hills. In Emmitsburg there are a lot of rolling, beautiful hills. It was the most incredible morning I think I have experienced in my entire life. The sun was coming up, and so the whole hillside had like a pink hue to it. The moon was still full, a huge full moon....

"I was so moved by the beauty that surrounded me, and I remembered reading in some of the literature that Elizabeth Ann Seton loved the moon. I was listening on my headset to Bocelli. We had just read about a time that Elizabeth had spent with the Filicchi family in Italy, and the Italian connection [for her]. I thought to myself, 'God, Elizabeth would love this.' And I heard back inside of me – the words didn't even come from myself – 'I do love it.' Then I [was] startled and caught myself, and I said, 'Is that you?' I felt this warmth that just rushed over me and I could see Elizabeth Seton threaded through my

¹⁹ Oral history interview with Carole Garibaldi Rogers, 28 May 2003. Transcript. Archives, College of Saint Elizabeth, Morristown, New Jersey.

whole life. I said, 'It's been you all along.' The response was almost like a nod. I kind of choked out a 'thank you.' It was a very deep and profound experience where you actually felt the presence of her right there within me."

Later, to the question, "What do you think the Sisters of Charity should do to continue their influence?" Claudia answered: "A friend of mine works at [a Sister of Charity high school] and he's invited at least a dozen people to become associates. And all those people now attend the conferences and are getting to know Elizabeth Ann Seton and Vincent de Paul. I think there are so many people out there already connected to the Charities. The schools and the institutions and the colleges and the high schools have to say, like my friend does, 'You're already living the charism here. You could be working in [a public high school] and getting twice the pay. So you're doing this for a reason.' And when the people begin to see that, it opens a lot of doors to their own awareness of who was this Elizabeth Ann Seton, who was this Vincent."

The interviewer asked: "So it's the outreach, the invitation, that you're saying is important?" Claudia responded: "I think sometimes so much energy is spent in saying, 'Where's our community going? How come the numbers are dwindling? How can we get people to come in?' instead of saying, 'Maybe the movement of the Spirit is in a different direction right now.' Before, if you joined the community, if you entered, then you get this treasure chest. Well, hey, break open the treasure chest and pass the treasures out to the people, and you'll be amazed at what can happen."²⁰

Sister Barbara Nesbihal, S.C.

A native of New Jersey, she joined the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth in 1955 and has spent most of her life in Jersey City. Since 1969, she has been principal of Saint Bridget's elementary school, now part of Resurrection parish, which joins several parishes into one and operates three schools under the parish umbrella.

"My first mission was St. Mary's in downtown Jersey City. Just at that time the population in the city was changing. A lot of the people from Puerto Rico were coming into the city. Oh, I loved my first groups of children, very, very poor children. I remember a lot of them had lice, and I used to take them to the basement of the convent

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2 April 2003.

and delouse them in the afternoon so they could go to school the next day because the nurse would give them a note, you can't come back until... And the parents were trying to get jobs. It was very hard times for our people then....

"I was in charge of First Communion, and I remember they were so poor the pastor gave me money to take them all to get their clothing and everything. I brought them all to this store and I got them their clothing.... Then they made their First Communion. That was my first year. Father said to me before mass, 'Now, Sister, you have to get the clothes back.' I said, 'Clothes back?' He said, 'Yes, we have to save them for next year.' I said to myself, 'Oh, no way.' Father was a little demanding. So I said, 'Oh, okay, Father.' I remember I went back after mass, and I had this little communion breakfast for them, and I was hurrying them. And I said, 'Okay, have a nice day. Go home now.' Father came back. He said, 'Where are the clothes?' I said, 'Oh, the clothes, Father! The children wore them home. I'll get them, Father.' He said, 'Oh, okay.' And then that June, Father was changed, so I never had to worry."

In 1969, the community asked Sister Barbara to become principal of St. Bridget's school, and she accepted.

"95% of our children were below poverty-level income. That was the time of the riots, and the only thing standing here was the church, the rectory, the convent, and the school. Everything else was slum landlords, and the place was all burned down. There were real riots here. I remember... being on the street at night, and the police were yelling at us, 'You should be in your convent saying your prayers! What are you doing out here?' I said to them, 'We're trying to help our people.' They were hysterical, the poor people. [The police said,] 'Yeah, help the people.' So I said, 'Well, if you'll give me a minute, officer.' So [another sister] took one side of the street, I took the other, and we talked to them. We said, 'Just be calm. Don't worry. Go back inside.' Because we were really worried for the children. Of course [the people] listened to us because we had a relationship [with them]. Then the cops were like, 'oh, wow!' So I said, 'Officers, we won't even ask for any of your pay. Have a nice evening.'

"We had a large convent and a lot of rooms that we weren't using. The people were so in need that we would have a turnover of people every couple of months who would be living with us.... The slum landlords would turn off their water so they would come to the convent for their showers and such. It was terrible. Then, as

the rioting thing subsided a little, the people were moved away, [but] we were able to track them because it was the same year that they passed a law that they would have transportation reimbursement for Catholic schoolchildren. So the children, although they left the area and lived with relatives, were able to take the bus and come back to school. So that when finally the developers came around and were going to develop this area, we used the convent as a rental office, as it were, and we had a wonderful lawyer: Steve is a saint. He came to us, and he said, 'Sisters, are you willing to help the poor with housing?' We said, 'Of course. That's why we're here.' So he met with us and the developers. As the developers would say, 'We don't know where these poor people are,' we would say 'Excuse me, sir, we do.' We had all the records and everything. Because we wanted the displaced people to be returned to their homes. That's who deserved this, you know."

Sister Barbara recalled other events during this time period. "The prenatal clinic found out about us, and we used to have a lot of mothers who were expecting children come in residence with us. As a matter of fact, at one point we had four babies and four mothers. One of the mothers was a displaced alien, and she had no place to sleep, so we took her in. Her baby was born at the convent. She lived there with her child for four years, and then she moved right next door with her daughter. Then when the little one was seven, Mom had an aneurysm hit the lung after minor surgery and she passed away at the hospital. We were watching the little one. The only legal guardian she had was an uncle who was legally blind and had a brain tumor. He said to her when we woke her up, 'Adele, what are we going to do?' And she said, 'I don't know about you, Uncle Mike, but I'm packing my clothes and I'm going back to the convent.' She moved in with us the night her mom died and she didn't move out until the day she was married. Her little girl was born last year. And her little baby boy just came home from the hospital yesterday."

At some point in the 1980s, additional changes were made to help St. Bridget's become more financially viable.

"Every year the former pastor and I would sit down in June and say, 'We can make it for one more year.' And we'd been doing that. Now we have a new pastor who's here thirteen years now. About six years [ago] he said to me, 'Barbara, we're never going to make it if we don't do something drastic.' So what we did was we turned the first floor of the convent into a preschool, and we marketed that like

Elizabeth Seton did: Go to the rich to help the poor. So we marketed that to the new people down at Exchange Place, the business section of the city. Then we moved here to the rectory. Father Greg, our pastor, moved to the basement. So the pastor lived in the basement, we lived in the rectory, and the convent's first floor became our new state-of-the-art preschool. It's really beautiful, thank God. Now this past year we've gotten in the ABBOT Program that helps the very poor; they don't have to pay.... So we're still catering to the poor, thank God."²¹

Ana Vazquez

A native of Puerto Rico, Ana is a parishioner at St. Bridget's and frequently helps Sister Barbara in the school. Her upbringing in Puerto Rico was marked by abusive family relationships, separation among segments of the family, and other domestic troubles. She moved to the United States in 1956 or 1957, and met Sister Barbara a few years later.

The interviewer asked Ana what words she would use to describe Sister Barbara. Ana said she had no words, but that the sisters were wonderful.

"They are wonderful because they are – It's not because whatever they give you, it's because of the way they talk to you, you know? They have something – God gave [these women] something that when they talk, you listen, and you feel that thing in your body, it's something good. Like when Sister Barbara – when I have my door[bell] ring, and I come, and Sister Barbara says, 'Sit down,' and she starts talking to me, it's like medication. For me, it's like medication! I feel so calm. And you know that's the people that you need. That's the people, because sometimes you go to the person, and that person has problems, too. So you're going nowhere. But with Sister Barbara... and another sister... they are the kind of person that they have a shoulder for you! You know what I'm saying?"

Ana also explained that she takes a statue of St. Martin de Porres from Sister Barbara's desk and carries it around the school when she comes in the morning to open the gates and doors. Sister Barbara has given her a key to the school and the convent. "Whatever I've got, I can come here, there, to the convent, and I've got a key. I've been here for twenty-seven years! It's a lot of time. I remember

²¹ *Ibid.*, 20 March 2003.

I started working on February fifth, 1975. So, see? I feel so good! I feel good!"²²

Lucille Sproules

Another longtime parishioner at St. Bridget's, she was born across the street from the church and raised her children in the parish. They attended the parish school where Lucille worked as a secretary for thirty-two years. She knew the Sisters of Charity her whole life, and was impressed by many of them. She had never heard of Vincent de Paul or Elizabeth Seton as a young person, but learned the importance of giving and sharing from many in the parish.

For Lucille, Sister Barbara modeled what love means.

"She's just – I've never met anybody like her in my entire life.... She takes money out of her own crumby allowance to give to people who come to the door.... I was working for her for – oh, gosh, let me see – about four years when my husband got very, very sick with cancer. And her and this other sister would come to my house on a Saturday, clean my whole house while I was at the hospital, stay overnight and drive me to the hospital on Sunday, and then go home...."

At another point in the interview, Lucille talked of her husband's death. Sister Barbara and Sister Mary Ann Van Note had taken her to the hospital and were driving her home. She did not realize how close to death her husband was.

"And when I left the hospital that night... they kept saying to me, 'Oh, don't go home,' because my youngest son was staying at his sister's. And I was by myself that night. 'Come and stay with us.' I had my own room at the convent.... And they said, 'Come and stay with us tonight. Don't go home.' And luckily I left [the convent] phone number, because at four o'clock that morning they called and said, 'Come to the hospital. He's taken a turn for the worse.' So they took me, but he was already dead. I didn't realize that because his eyes were open. But Sister Barbara did, and she went over and she closed his eyes...."

Lucille said that the goodness of the sisters affected her. "I think to be a little kinder. But I would get involved with the kids. This little girl I used to bring home... You know, she'd stay with me and my kids...." Lucille is still close to the little girl who now is an adult.

²² *Ibid.*, 26 September 2002.

The interviewer asked Lucille what she thought the Sisters of Charity were all about: "Loving and caring and helping." The interviewer asked whether the message has changed through the years. "No... I don't agree with all of them. Like Sister Barbara would say, 'Sharing makes you happy.' And I would say to her, 'Don't start that crap again!'"

Finally, Lucille told the story of the tragic death of a woman who was involved in a car crash on an overpass near St. Bridget's complex. She was thrown from her car and landed on the street near the convent. Sister Mary Ann saw this and knelt by her side until police and an ambulance arrived. Later she came to Lucille's home, and the narrative continues:

"She got to my house; she was white as a sheet. She and Sister Barbara went to the wake, and they spoke with the [woman's] mother. In the windup, the mother had wanted to be a nun her whole life, but got married and had three children. And her marriage had been annulled, and she came to St. Bridget's because she wanted to see where her daughter died. It was two blocks away. And then she came to church. And I met her that day. I was there the day she came. She's now taken first vows as a Sister of Charity."²³

Reflections

We reiterate here that our interviews about handing on the charism of the Sisters of Charity are not so unique that other congregations could not ask the same kind of questions and hear comparable responses. The names may change, the missions may vary, and the particular virtues described may be somewhat different, but the spiritual connections will be similar no matter what congregation is named.

First, for context, we offer a few comments on the narrators themselves. Every woman we interviewed was honored to be invited to share her story. Seldom are people asked to share not only the facts of their biography but also some elements of their deepest core values. Reading the transcripts and noting how vulnerable these women were willing to be in order to communicate what was obviously important to them can be a deeply moving experience. The full transcripts also reveal the many ways and the number of times each interviewer

²³ Oral history interview with Rosemary Carroll, 9 August 2002. Transcript. Archives, College of Saint Elizabeth, Morristown, New Jersey.

affirmed the woman telling the story. This, in itself, was a kind of modeling the "spirit of charity."

The selection process we have used for the entire oral history project has welcomed Catholic narrators who had no academic degrees and for whom English was a second or recent language, as well as those who were educated and articulate. Thus we found that in some transcripts the narrator found it difficult to name her experience or stay focused in the storytelling. For a researcher, this can make excerpting difficult, but it does not negate the value of the content of the transcript. The voices of the inarticulate as well as those of the articulate need to be heard; such a combination of voices reflects the make-up of the American Catholic Church.

When we turned our attention to the content of the interviews, we found that the women spoke about their early recollections of the faith with great fondness. These recollections, including their First Holy Communion, crownings of Mary during May, Holy Week rituals and family rosaries, appeared in transcripts from all demographic groups. It is also interesting to note the role that grandmothers, both past and present, play in introducing children to the faith and in encouraging them in their religious practices. Further research of the transcripts could provide comparative views of the contributions of families and of early teachers of religious education. Such deep-seated memories of early faith experiences could be of real use to planners of catechetical programs.

More specific to this project was a clear impression that the charism of charity was often cultivated at home. Children learned of the importance of sharing with others, of caring for the poor, and even of living simply in their homes. When we designed the questions for the interviews, we anticipated that the narrators' answers might demonstrate a connection between knowing the life and virtues of Vincent de Paul and Elizabeth Seton and living those virtues. While many women had heard of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, few knew of Vincent himself. That seems to be true even of those who attended Sister of Charity schools. That conclusion may apply more to older women than to those educated by the Sisters of Charity within the last twenty or thirty years, when more attention has been given to the life and virtues of the founders, but it seems that more needs to be done to consciously tell the stories of Vincent and Louise and Elizabeth. We note the wisdom shared by Claudia Cavanagh in her interview when she suggested that direct invitations to share in Seton

associate membership or attend special programs focused on the life and charisms of the founders are important for all teachers in Sister of Charity schools.

Handing on the charism seems to work best when someone identifies with a Sister of Charity who embodies the charism for the other. Our oral histories are filled with examples of people responding to the generosity of a sister toward them or others. It is clearly not only the biography of the saint, but the life of the sister that makes the charism come alive. However, as noted above, it also seems that those sharing in the ministry of the Sisters of Charity would benefit from more age-appropriate information about the lives and spirit of the founders, which could enrich the lives of new generations of followers.

Many of those interviewed seemed to indicate that they wished that sisters had invited them into the community or into sharing the charism more directly. Invitation matters. This, too, appears to be an area that needs more attention within congregations. Enthusiasm for the Seton associate program is real for many narrators. But, again, some said they wish they had been asked to join the Seton associates sooner because they would like to share in the spiritual riches of those who are Sisters of Charity. The kind of membership in Vincentian congregations might be changing, but the appeal of the charism has not changed.

Our narrators confirm that there is no one way of expressing the charism of charity. For these contemporary women, some features include reverence for the person; direct service with and for the poor; involvement in systemic change, which is clearly a result of church social teaching and the vision of Vatican II; and the empowerment of women. Perhaps it was a bias of the types of people we interviewed, but it does appear that institutions sponsored by the Sisters of Charity are still an important vehicle for handing on the charism, and that those who share in the ministry of the Sisters of Charity are an important source of hope for the future.

From our observation we offer the following recommendation: that there be a mission and values committee at every sponsored institution and that it serve as a vehicle for providing opportunities to learn more about the founders and the Vincentian charism, and the multiple ways the charism might be made concrete in the institution.

This project was far more than an academic or intellectual exercise. It was a multi-layered project that touched deep chords

of faith and spiritual values among all who participated. There are nuggets of wisdom to be mined about "handing on the faith" as well as "handing on the charism." In the end there is the awesome recognition that if the charism of charity is to be handed on, this great treasure must be shared with as many people and in as many ways as possible.

