

Interview with Sister Renee Dreiling and Sister Teresita Huse

Interviewer: Shirley Andrews

n.d.

RD = Renee, TH = Teresita

Q: We are here with Sr. Renee Dreiling and Sr. Teresita Huse, both of whom are Dominican sisters who have been in a community for a number of years. So, Renee, how long have you been?

RD: Since 1962, see, I don't finish my sentences either (laughs). Since 1962.

Q: And Teresita?

TH: I entered in 1933.

Q: 1933, that's fifty-three years?

TH: Sixty.

Q: Sixty-three years? Good, then both of you will be able to help with the idea of living in intentional community. You notice how stilted we become when we know that the tape recorder is on?

RD: Yes.

TH: Typical.

Q: Maybe we could ignore that. I'll try as well; I'm stilted as well. The project is interested in a couple of focuses that I think apply to those of you who have made a commitment in a communal, an intentional community that is ongoing for years, (to Huse) for you it's been decades, (to Dreiling) for you it's been decades as well, though. (to Huse) For you, though, it's been scores of years, maybe we could do that. One of the focuses is how you came to live in the community to begin with. My bias let me state it up front, my bias is that you probably both recognized and realized a call to God's service and to living in faithfulness in this way. But, talk to me a little bit about your call, in terms of the fact that accepting a call in this way meant that you would be living communally with other women. Was that a plus for you or did you look for alternatives to serving out your call as you heard it that may not have included living communally as a Dominican Sister. Will one of you, is the question muddy enough?

RD: No, it's clear. I think the part that has been always so important to me has been the community because there's a call to serve God, but when you try to serve God all by yourself it seems so difficult. It so much easier to serve God in a group where you have support and encouragement and someone to be with, it's like you can make more of a difference when you're with the group. Although, maybe sometimes over the years I questioned whether I wanted to be here, the thing that always came back is, "Well, I need the community". Even though it is at times a little difficult, most of the time it is a real blessing. The community and the love for the community and the fact that we can do so much together, where if you're trying to do something good all by yourself it's like you one person among this whole big group of different kinds of events going on. How can you make a difference when you're just one? Whereas, if you're a part of a group, it's so much more possible that you can make a difference. At least that's the way I've always felt. And I've, you know over the years always I loved the community, but over the years I love the community more and you become more close to the people that you've been living with. I can't really say that I've ever had an experience in the community that was so horrible that I would think that I would not want to be in the community. There have been a few difficult moments now and then, but nothing compared to the joy that is being together and being able to work on things together.

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Q: Do you find that you're, you talk about not being able to be very effective when you are one, do you find though, that when you are twenty, your effectiveness is as though you were forty? Do you find not only a collective amplification, but also one that goes beyond that, one that's intensified more?

TH: Yes, yes, I find that to be very true. I always admired the sisters having gone to a Catholic school all my life and I had relatives in the community, and I was just drawn to them, because as Renee said, I could just see becoming much more effective in a group. I have found that to be true. I entered at a very early age, but back in the thirties, that was not unusual. I have found that I have been able to do things in the community that I could never, never have done without being in a community and I'm just so grateful for the many opportunities given, educational wise and ministerially. I always thought, "Well if I were married, you know, I would have to be committed to a family and I'd have to stay home and I couldn't spread myself out so much." I just delight, delighted to be a teacher and to touch so many lives, not only of the children, but also the parents and the parish ministry and the many opportunities that I've had. I love being in the community because I find the support, the sisters are saying, "Yeah, go ahead and do it! We're here for you"

Q: So, having entered as a very young person, your education came after you made commitment?

TH: I had completed one year of high school. I finished high school here at the convent and I was sent away to college, but in those days, the only time that we had to go to college was during the summertime. I loved it. I think I had about fifteen summers and then they decided, "Well, you need a degree because we're going to open our college, right here at the mother house and we need qualified people". So, I was sent away to school. I have not only a bachelor's degree but two master's degrees.

Q: And what are your master's degrees in?

TH: In theology and in library science.

Q: Where did you get your masters, where did you study?

TH: Theology was in Chicago at, well first of all it was at St. Xavier college, but the degree actually came from Dubuque, Iowa, the Dominican fathers. Then my master's degree in library science was in Rosary college at Chicago back in 1956.

Q: (to Dreiling) How about yours, did you also experience educational opportunities here?

RD: Oh, yes. I entered after two years of high school. Even though it was thirty years later it was not a whole lot different. We didn't have a whole lot of change in those years. I entered after two years of high school and finished high school here. Sr. Teresita was one of my teachers. Then, we though, went to school. By that time, we had to have our degree before we started teaching. So, we went to school full time at Sacred Heart, it was at that time, it's Kansas Newman now in Wichita, and we got our bachelors there. Then I was able to get my masters, I have a master's in theology also and in counseling. I got those degrees at St. Thomas Seminary in Denver.

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Q: I think for women of at least your time, getting an advanced education was probably a novelty. There probably weren't many women who had the opportunity that you did to get an advanced education regardless of whether it came from this place or from another.

TH: That was one thing that our superior, Sr. Aloicia Rockbauer, insisted on because she had a doctorate from Catholic University in Washington D.C. in German, and she believed and that's part of our tradition as Dominicans to be well educated in the ministry in which we are functioning. She saw to it that nearly all of our sisters were able to get their master's degrees and we were either teachers or nurses at that time.

Q: All women were either teachers or nurses at that time, we had no other choices open to us it seems. Well, things have changed. One of the reasons why I'm so glad for both of you is because I'm interested in those changes that happened in the '60's. The project addresses that specifically, Dr. Miller is interested in documenting this time period because it represents the biggest excerpt in communal living as a culture, as a society in this country. So, I said to Dr. Miller, "How is it that these women in convent, in community can help us with that?" His response had to do somewhat with what happened to the Dominicans, did you see in your own community an excerpt of interest in becoming part of the sisters, the Dominican Sisters. Was there more interest in that time period, did the culture say that communal living has some answers and you have...

TH: Statistics. In the '50's, these were the people who entered, and these are the ones who remained. You will see in the '60's, it was just the opposite because after the changes of Vatican II, many of them opted to leave.

Q: Woah, (looking at statistics) Sr. Teresita, you're amazing. Here's the peak in the early '60's but then it declines, and it continues to remain at low numbers. I think that's the trend that has been documented often, not only for your profession but for the priesthood and for other denominations in your professional capacities. Well, thank you, may I take this along?

TH: Surely. You can see in '66, see, we noticed that it was such an unstable time in the church and n society and in communities. During these years, we refused to accept any young women because we saw it isn't fair to them and it wasn't fair to us. There were too many changes in the church and in communities.

Q: So Vatican II was in...

TH: 1965

Q: 1965. What did Vatican II, I have a pretty basic and sketchy idea of what Vatican II said in terms of the position of the Catholic Church to the rest of the world. I have some specific ideas of the way that played out, for one thing, the discarding of the habits and whatever had to be worn. What other kinds of changes that may not have been obvious to the world, but were obvious to you as sisters already, happened with that? Did you find differences in the people that are in your church community? Obviously, Sr. Teresita's statistics here note that there was a dramatic change in the numbers of those of you who were already in community.

TH: There were many liturgical changes which affected us, we were praying in Latin and then started with the English. We also had disciplinary changes, many of our customs really came from the communities in Germany because we are an off shoot from there, those we dropped. It was just in general, there was just such a hubbub of things, and I feel like the women who entered, weren't sure because it was such an unsure time that they did not feel like they did not want to make a commitment to something which was so wobbly.

Q: In a state of flux, yes

RD: Yes, and I think when most people came there was a real sense of security because religious life had been around for centuries and centuries and things didn't change. The way of living stayed the same and at this time, everything, you know the habit was just a minor change, that was just what people saw and to them that was a big thing, but that wasn't one of the biggest things that changed. It was the whole way that we lived our daily life and the focus on becoming more aware of what's going on in the world so that we can better minister to what was happening. Whereas before, we were completely cut off: we didn't hear news, we didn't read newspapers, we didn't know what was happening. We did our prayers and we taught and nursed and were completely unaware of what was going on around us. At this time, it's become like, we need to know what is happening so that we can become better ministers to the people that we serve. Just even that was a big change. But people coming into the convent, before they could come into church and that was basically it. Then they began to be able to join us at meals, just to go down different hallways was a big thing for some of them. Even within the community there were different segments, like the perpetually professed and those of us who were temporary professed, we couldn't go into the part of the building where the perpetually professed lived. So, you know there were lots and lots of changes. For some of us coming in in the '60's, some of those old traditional things that the people before us had taken for granted, we couldn't figure out. We'd ask so many questions and the director, of course, oftentimes didn't know what to say to us because it's been that this is how religious life is, well, we wanted to know why. Nobody had ever questioned before us. She said, "You know, there is no answer to all these questions." But we wanted an answer. We had already come from the education of the scientific that there's an answer to everything and everything can be figured out. We had already been educated in that even though we were educated by the sisters, that part had filtered through. But we wanted everything to make sense, it should make logical sense. Well, religious life didn't make logical sense. There was a big change in the whole way we looked at things.

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Q: Let me push that, religious life didn't make a whole lot of sense, does it now? Have you been able, in the 35 years or so that has followed, been able to identify, I want to say justify, but that almost sounds judgmental and I don't want to imply that? Were you able to find the answers to those questions in your searching because it's now okay for you to look?

RD: I don't know that, we could ask questions and are encouraged to ask questions now, whereas at that time, and I don't know that it, I don't mean that it didn't make sense religiously, but it didn't make sense scientifically. There is a big difference and it still doesn't make sense if you want to talk about mystery. Religious life is still a mystery, so if we're going to look at it scientifically, it still doesn't make a lot of sense. But if you look at it in the spiritual aspect and mystically, then yes, it makes sense. But it depends on which way you're looking. I think as young people coming in, we didn't have that experience of the spiritual at that stage, even though religion was pretty well regulated. We didn't, we were too young to understand the spiritual significance, so we followed the line of the questioning of the scientific. That's what we grew up with, what we were exposed to through television and culture. There was a little bit of ...

TH: Well, back in those days, you know society, family and church were all authoritarian and that's the way everything was. So, you just took for granted, the superior is the one in charge and she knows what we are to do. In the '60's and after that, then we had what were called discernment, they looked at our talents, well like you said, women just had nursing and teaching prior to that. Now we have social work or anything. Let's look at your talents and see what you would like to have, what would you be happy doing and then we'll discuss that. We discern that, there's a great deal of freedom now. In its day it was okay, but it doesn't fit now, so these changes have been made.

Q: Teresita, I like the way you said that. One of the things that I'm reluctant to ask, in a way, because I don't want to put either of you on the spot, but you both have seen wide variety of changes after Vatican II, but you also are seeing at least from my perspective as an outsider looking on, some changes happening again. There's new information, certainly not about your professional calling, the big question is always women being ordained. That's not something yet, but do you see that in the future? If you don't want to answer that because you feel that it may be something that you don't want to...I guess, I don't want to pin you down to an answer that might be uncomfortable, but I think of that, because women in my own denomination are struggling so much with what it means to feel the call to ordination, being able to consecrate elements and preach the gospel from the pulpit. For you that isn't a possibility. Do you see that, though, as coming down the line? Or would you...

TH: Sure. Yes, you don't have to hesitate to ask me because we see that in the future probably not in my lifetime, but definitely. Women are well qualified and many of them are even better preachers than we have at the present time. It can't come too soon for me.

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Q: I like your answer. Two things come to my mind though, if I can push that: one is that there seems to be such a decline and certainly your statistics bring that out here, but I suspect that the priesthood would also be able to make similar documentation. With the decline in members of the priesthood, there are parishes then who have no spiritual leaders and women could fill those positions. Would you see that though, if that were the case, let's just be real theoretical, if that were the case and the church decided as a denomination to say that under certain circumstances, women could be assigned to be the spiritual head of the parish.

TH: Shirley, that isn't theoretical, it's already happening in the Catholic church.

Q: Oh, thank you! Tell me about that, I didn't know that.

TH: Some sisters and some lay women are even in charge and the priest just comes and has the sacraments. They are the leaders in their own town.

RD: They preach in prayer services. They can't say mass, and that's the part that is difficult. Because the people there are not allowed to have mass, but they are still allowed to have prayer services and very meaningful prayer services. The women do preach, and the women do lead the people and they are the administrators of the small parishes. That will eventually be spread, although, at this point the church doesn't want to acknowledge that at this time the change in the church of the spirit works on all levels, and we can't...but it will continue to spread.

Q: My favorite professor has a favorite phrase, he says, "The spirit blows where it will". There is nothing any of us can do about directing that. The spirit will blow where it will.

RD: And the grounds swell with people will have that spirit and the spirit will continue to grow. Women will preach, and they do.

TH: It depends upon the bishop in each diocese. Some know that, Bishop Gumbleton and a few, Wheland, you know, a few of those bishops are so outgoing and visionary that things are permitted in their diocese which other, I don't like to use the word conservative, bishops

Q: How about more traditional?

TH: That's better than conservative. For instance, here at our mother house, we did not have a chaplain for years. So, we had a service. The sisters would take turns and they would do, have the Eucharist, not the mass as such, but we'd call it the communion service and they always preached. That's been going on for years.

RD: We still do that, when the priest has a day off then we have our own service.

Q: Would either of you choose that path if it were open to you today? Would you choose, if the priesthood, the office of the priesthood, the ability to say mass, the ability to-in our church we call it "consecrate the elements"-in your church perhaps you have a different word, would that be open to either of you?

RD: I have my master's in divinity, so I'm ready. I think seeing what, as I was working in my counseling degree, I did pastoral counseling at the hospital. To see what it means to people who are sick to have the Eucharist brought to them, I always thought I wouldn't want to be a priest, but to see what it means

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to people I think I would feel obligated to do whatever I could to bring the sacraments to people. They would just cry when you would come in. How meaningful and how sacred and how great the need to have God brought to them on their death bed. I think I would feel that I need to do this. I think it's more of a call of what's necessary. I think it would be very difficult for me right now to work in the structure of the church. But if it would mean bringing God to people, I would do it.

Q: Would you agree, for yourself?

TH: Well, at this stage I would have to see what are the requirements. My theology was back in the '50's or the '60's, I'm sure that updating, although I try to stay updated. But what would be the requirements, but at 78, I go out and give retreats anyway and days of recollection and work in the parishes where there is an opportunity.

RD: She is a wonderful preacher.

Q: I suspect she is.

TH: So, you know it would just depend. I would be ready, but I don't know what the requirements are.

Q: But if you were a much younger woman, perhaps half your age...

TH: Oh definitely, definitely.

Q: Well, see that encourages this middle-aged woman who wonders what on earth I'm doing in Religious Studies at my age, starting over again. You're encouraging me by realizing that there is...

TH: People are so hungry. They haven't had the opportunity that has been given to us. I'm just so eager, I talk about it all the time.

Q: Well, just go right ahead.

TH: Not on this tape.

RD: But I think that even as middle aged women that we have a gift to bring. I was older when I went to, I just finished my degree in '93, my master's in divinity. There was so much that I could bring with my life experience that the young men who were studying just didn't have a clue. Sometimes we would be, we were having discussions and I would say, "You know, this doesn't have anything to do with reality, it's all philosophical and that's not where people's need is". When people come in, they want to know something that's going to touch their heart, not their head. You can have your head touched any place. But people have a hunger in their heart today that's good. I think we have a, and as women, we have a more integrated knowledge of life, just by who we are as women that sometimes has been left out not just by our church, but by all churches. That integration is a really important part. I think we have a lot to offer as women in any church today at our age because we have more life experience.

Q: Well, thank you for that, I may have needed to hear that myself today.

TH: We are so involved in ecumenical things too, you know, working with other ministers and it's just a joy to share.

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Q: Now that is something too, that has happened within the last few decades.

TH: After Vatican II, you see there was a special document on ecumenism. We were told to get out and to work with other denominations, they too have truth.

Q: Oh, yes, thank you. That's been so important to me because as I've done my additional undergraduate biblical studies that's one of the things I've found that we each have a perspective that is truth and reflective of who God is. So, isolating ourselves and saying "We are the only truth" is not only myopic, but it was just the point of Christ as far as I'm concerned.

RD: It is. It puts God in a box when we say, "we know what God wants". God is much greater than any one of our beliefs.

TH: And in our days of recollection, or these little retreat days or even our bible studies, we have people from other denominations join us. It's just wonderful.

RD: Because then you get another whole idea, a different way of looking at things.

Q: Well, I don't know how well we're doing on the list of questions and frankly, I'm not sure I care. This discussion is exciting, at least to me, it's very important. How did you, when you felt your call, you both said that you finished your high school here, was it you Teresita who spoke about having a family or was that Charlotte earlier? Having a lot of family ties to being a professional religious before? I guess my question is, (see how I babble before I ask questions) were you pointed by family experience to this profession, did it come in an isolated way, though, outside of that, have you always known that this was a possibility, did you feel your nudges very early? You're shaking your head yes. You were listening politely.

RD: I'm trying to think. I don't remember really much of a time when I didn't want to be one of the sisters. I think it was kind of just always there. I did have some family members here, too, an aunt and an older sister. But I always wanted to be one of the sisters, I wanted to be one of them teaching. Their life just always appealed to me. My family did not discourage it, I don't know that they encouraged it a whole lot either, they just kind of, "Well, it's whatever you want to do." At one point when I was, finally made the decision to come, a friend of mine was going to come with me, and when she chickened out, I said, "Well, maybe I can't do this." My dad said, "If this is something you want, you can do it without your friend, you can do it on your own." So, in that sense there was encouragement. You don't have to have somebody else to do this with you, if it's what you want, go for it. Then on the other hand, when he saw how homesick I was when I came, he said, "You know, you don't have to stay, you can come home if you want to."

Q: That sounds like a loving father, a loving father.

TH: My call was quite unique. It was only after I was in the convent a number of years, my mother told me the day I was born, she and my grandmother, although they didn't know this, prayed that I would be a religious woman.

Q: Really?

TH: And then also when I, at eight years old, when I made my first communion, a sister who is still living, by the way, she's in her nineties, she said, "Whatever you ask Jesus on your first communion day, you will receive." That was my request. I always repeated this whenever I went to church, to mass. It just was always, I think I was born with it, and it's a gift of God and very unique. I just admired the sisters then; we Dominicans wore the black and white. I loved the habit, the black and white. Later on, I went to the St. Joseph sisters who have a black habit, I thought, I told them immediately that I was going to be a Dominican. That's the way it is, and I just never changed. Just a gift, that's all it is. Whereas some of our sisters were engaged. I think of one, you know, who was going to New York with her boyfriend to meet his parents, she knew that that was not what she was called to be. John said, "Well, okay. I'll give you to God, but not to another man."

RD: Little did he know.

Q: That's a good story. One of my classmates is doing a master's thesis that involves what families feel when their children decide to become a communal, either in an establishment like yours or there are other groups. With Charlotte I used the word cult and I immediately regretted it. There are a number of communes, communal living situations that are very valid. They also have their faithfulness. So, in thinking about that, Charlotte was telling me a story. Actually, her mother did. She showed me a picture of Charlotte when she was in first grade wearing a habit for trick or treating. I said to Charlotte this morning, I said, "Did you know from that time?" She told me her story, different in so much as her understanding of what it meant to be a sister as a first grader kind of got discarded because it wasn't valid. It was again later, in college that it became a call that had meaning and purpose for her. I think sometimes that happens too; her family certainly would have been receptive to her joining.

TH: I gave a vocation talk just last Saturday night at St. Rose Parish, and I was saying "I can't recall the last time a parent told me that he or she would be happy to have a daughter enter religious life."

Q: So, it's an attitudinal change that you feel?

TH: Definitely, definitely.

Q: Do you have a...have you theorized about why that might be?

TH: There are so many opportunities for women you know, things that we do, they can also do. They just don't see the value of religious life. I said, "I feel that we sisters do not talk about it sufficiently, because if we did, our convents would be overflowing because of the joy and the ministerial opportunities that we have." I'm convinced of that. The parents nowadays, I feel are so concerned about their posterity, "I need children, and grandchildren and great-grandchildren." I do not think that they pray sufficiently in the family, I challenge the parents to do that. To pray for a religious vocation, it is such a beautiful vocation. If I were to ask some of the parents, "On a totem pole, where would you put religious life?" I would think that married life is first, and single life is second, then religious life is third. Those are the three vocations that we have to choose from.

RD: I think the families aren't as large as they used to be. When there were more children in a family, when one or two went to religious life, it didn't mean there would be no grandchildren. But if there's

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only one or two children in the family, then that makes a difference. I think there was also a lot of negative publicity after Vatican II, there was a lot of negative stuff that came out about community life. Parents didn't want their children involved in it. Before that, I think a lot of practices within religious life, stayed within religious life and nobody else knew about them. But when things opened up and people started talking about it, of course the negative always gets the major attention. Just like it does in the news today. It's always the negative, the person who maybe wasn't a good religious or priest who got the attention and then the parents don't want their kids involved in that. So, I think that the negative has really overtaken the positive. One of our national vocation directors said, "Religious life today is the best kept secret there is." Because the publicity does not come on those of us who are happy. It would take a great deal for us to call a news conference. But if somebody is unhappy or has messed things up, they can get one very easily, so it's really hard to get the positive out about religious life.

TH: The spiritual is inexplicable.

RD: It is.

TH: It cannot be portrayed on TV.

RD: It's a mystery.

TH: It's a mystery.

Q: A witness, though, can be portrayed on 60 minutes or 20/20 or whatever. I was thinking of that as you were speaking because that's what happens. It gets national exposure really quickly. You know, Teresita, I've been thinking about your coming in in 1933, right in the middle of the Dust Bowl, right out here in Western Kansas, the Depression, it must have been a safe haven for you in more ways than one, in those times. That was a tough time. With World War II then, looming directly thereafter. It must have been a...I want to say safe, maybe secure is better.

TH: At fifteen, I never thought of that, all I wanted was to be a sister. I wanted to teach as a sister, nothing else mattered.

RD: The security wasn't here either in my understanding of the history, you know, because the sisters were very poor and begged for food and were very...so there was not security here either from my understanding of the history. They were very poor and often hungry. So, it was not any more secure in here, I don't think.

Q: Well, that's good to know, I thought perhaps it might have been provided for, but actually not.

RD: Some of the sisters will talk about you know, going out to beg and people closing the doors, not allowing them to come. In those days, our ministry was not paid, like it is now. You ministered and what you got in return was your food and housing, but if people didn't have it themselves, then we didn't have it either. Because we didn't have money, we weren't paid in those days.

TH: I don't know whether you know, Shirley, our salaries always come to the mother house. The sisters who are getting salaries in their paid jobs, all the money comes to the mother house and then they ask for what they need. That was, that always was that way for us.

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Q: So, there isn't a stipend or an allowance that's assigned, that's established that you have for yourself without answering for that. For example, if you were to say that you needed money for new clothes, or something like that, would you ask for a specific sum and then go shopping or would you go shopping and then say, "Penney's has a sale and..."

TH: That was one of the changes in the '60's, we were given a budget and we make out, we do our own budgeting, what will be your needs during the year, because the food and the shelter and all that is taken care of. Medicine, medical things, the community takes care of that, so we don't have to budget for that.

RD: So, we have full budgets in our local houses,

TH: In the local houses, yes...

RD: But we can budget for what we need for food and rent and those types of things, then that money is given to us. Each month whatever we spend, like if we budget for five hundred dollars and we spend four hundred then four hundred is given back to us for the next month, so that we always have five hundred to go off of.

Q: Oh, I see.

RD: Personally, we have to budget ahead of time, so if there's a sale at Penney's if we have money within our budget to go get something we do, and if we don't, we don't.

Q: Pass it up and wait for the next sale.

RD: Right.

Q: So, health care is taken care of for you.

TH: Yes,

Q: And the order takes care of you, even if a sister required catastrophic financial intervention, such as a transplant? Well that may be another issue, though, is that another issue?

RD: We have never done that, I don't know.

TH: We've never had a transplant.

RD: I suppose it would depend. What we do is we put our financial managers, who are very, very good, and instead of paying into a health insurance, she said, we will put that much money for each sister each month into our own fund and pay our own. So, we have a fund that is put into every month for each sister and then all of our health needs are taken care of through that fund, so I suppose if there was not money in that fund to take care of everyone, then there would have to be some discrimination about what kind of services. So far, we've been very blessed.

Q: And are you able to receive health care services at Catholic hospitals in a pro-rated rate or in some other way?

RD: No, we pay the same as everyone else does.

TH: Even for our own hospital. You know, we own the one across the street and we do the same thing, we pay.

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Q: Well, it is a business. It has to be fiscally responsible as well. So, you take your meals together in the dining room, where we were, and you have services daily that you participate in as a group or by choice?

RD: By choice.

Q: But most of you choose to do that?

RD: Most of us choose to come.

TH: See, this is the mother house and it's a place for the retired and the semi-retired and the infirm sisters, those who are ill, they also are in this. So, when she was talking about the budget for the local houses, see I live in the mother house, so I don't have to worry about that. The three meals are here, we get everything, my room is there, and I have everything provided.

RD: But those who are still active in ministry live in whichever city they're ministering in and those of us who are active here in town are living outside of this house, since it's mostly a retirement place.

Q: Like Charlotte and Charlene?

RD: Yes.

Q: Charlotte was explaining to me that I needed to, these are my words, not hers, she was much kinder, that I needed to rethink my definition of what community is. In her understanding, she and Charlene, because of their ministry are a community within a community, a mission.

RD: So, in those small communities, we form community also. There's community here at the mother house but there's also the formed community of the small places, where we pray together and eat our meals together. The sister I live with, we eat breakfast and supper together and pray morning and evening prays together. We eat at lunch here, because we work here. But we have community also in the small household. Then we join the larger community here for, like for the Eucharist and for the noon meal because that's, because this is where we are.

TH: In our own community here in the mother house, we have six small groups and we form a community, it isn't that we eat together, we do in the common dining room, but we periodically get together. The group I belong to, we get together every day to pray and then to discuss various things, so these six little groups do the same thing. That's very common in religious life. Many of the community even though they all live in the same building, they still form a small community within that group.

RD: Because you can't be intimate with 65 people.

Q: No, you can't. So are those small groups that form here at the mother house, surely, they're not by invitation, do you tend to gravitate based on...

TH: Choice.

Q: On choice, and might that choice be directed to or toward a focus? For example, I'm thinking, I would like to find a group, for example myself, who would talk about Biblical studies with me, and it's possible that, in fact, I know that the world is full of people who really don't care to know any more about Biblical studies, thank you very much, and is that the sort of focal interest that draws these small groups to become a small group? Or do you see yourself as soul sisters and heart sisters in a woman to woman way as well? I don't know if I phrased that very well. I guess for myself, I know that in my own life, I need other women around me. That's not a secular thing to say, it's a spiritual one. Because women hear me in ways that men I have met, most surely my husband does not. I need both in my life. Is that, would that be descriptive, maybe, of how your small groups are formed?

TH: I think it's both, because you go with your friends if you're of the same mind and you want to discuss, you know, if you want Biblical studies or if you want to choose another book, it's just it's a free choice and every year we can change if we like. So, there's a choice too, if you don't want to be in that one group, you may choose another one. Then you find out whether they want you, so it's a two-way street.

Q: I want...I don't want to talk about negative things, but I want to talk philosophically about the difficulties with religious life, not in an exploitive way, I'm just interested in some of the things that might be in common with all intentional communities, such as difficulty with, maybe with another sister. Certainly, that happens everywhere, people are people. They're going to have a difficulty with that. When that happens is there a resolution process in place? Is it something that you as an individual deal with yourself in prayer and meditation and counseling perhaps? That's an example, maybe there are others. Does it become, maybe you don't like Thursday afternoons lunch that is served routinely ... I just finished interviewing a couple from a Bruder Hope as I mentioned to you, well, I'm interested in their theology and their philosophy as well, they too find themselves in the public eye right now with some very vocal dissenters and are very sensitive to that, but it makes me wonder sometimes, because we're all human beings and we're all going to have, things are never going to be as idealistic as we hope they are when we join, so what are the down sides? Did you have some theologic questioning as you went along, did you have sometimes of spiritual desert, heaven knows I do from time to time.

RD: Definitely. Definitely. There are different personalities and there are different theologies too, within our community. There are those who say we should never have changed anything. The problem is that we made all the changes, we should go back to the way we were. We have those who say we haven't changed fast enough, we need to keep up and keep going, so there are both ideological differences and personality differences. We work with them just like everybody else does, with trying to talk to each other on a one to one and come to a consensus or be able to at least friendly agree that we disagree and be able to continue to live with each other. But counseling is also available if we need it. We do have a process, due process, we call it, which is an organized structure of how to deal with disagreements in case they can't be dealt with. So, there is a process set up with mediators or who would be the mediators, who would work through a problem. We have that process in place in case we need it.

TH: And we've never used it.

RD: We've never used it.

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TH: It's just always worked out.

RD: But it is set up.

TH: Yes, it is, just in case. We have a, you know the Heartland Center for Spirituality, we have the advantage there of sisters here and also a priest who have spiritual direction. Many of the sisters take advantage of that. We have continual seminars and workshops to go deeper in our spiritual life, you know, as well as to get along with people.

RD: I think just constant striving to accept people where they are and to say, "We don't have to agree in order to get along. It's not like we'll have to think the same thing in order to be living peacefully in the house together."

Q: (To Huse) Is that a change? Is Renee's concept a change from when you entered, do you think?

TH: Well, you know we were assigned to a certain place and you were there. Usually, you just accepted it, you know, just think God, I'm here. So, there wasn't any discussion or very little discussion at that time. But see, when I entered that's just the way it was. Did you ever discuss things with your parents in those days?

Q: No, but my children certainly, yes, and my grandchildren.

TH: Yes, even in the classroom, you know, the things that children say to teachers nowadays...so that's, it was just typical.

Q: It's shocking, actually.

TH: Yes, it is.

Q: I have a...my daughter is a Head Start teacher in a small town out here and the things that she notices or knows about the families of her children that create the children that they are make your heart break and cry out. I don't know if the violence, the family violence, the family abuse, the lack of parenting, the lack of direction in terms of commitment to your children has changed or if we just didn't know about it before. But somehow, my personal feeling is that it has changed.

TH: It has changed. Within the ten years of my teaching, if I had the child in my classroom, I also had the parents. They were with me. Ten years later, that's not true. I had to work with the parents otherwise, I didn't even have the child to go along with what I wanted or needed. That was way back in the forties when I saw that change, in the fifties. Now, you don't touch the child, you know, the child is right many, many times.

Q: Or at least there's a reason for why the child behaves the way they do in today's society there's all of these...Some of them are valid, I'm glad we know about dyslexia and I'm glad we know about attention deficit disorders and all of those things now. I'm sorry though that somewhere along the way we've discarded the idea that there are people whose authority is to be respected, even if it isn't totally agreed with. There are times when it's appropriate behavior. Well, I'd like to look at the list. I don't know that it fits so much, we've covered I think most things. I tend to want to know other things than what's on this list, I'm afraid. I think that's just a note, yes.

TH: See, what was daily life like in my day and in the beginning when you (Dreiling) entered, it was highly structured, now it's more optional. That happened after Vatican II.

Q: When you go about discerning your gifts, here's another Shirley question, when you go about discerning your gifts is that done over a period of time of introspection? Is it done with input and dialogue with others and how they see you and how they might identify your strengths as observers?

RD: Many times, the community calls us to be of service in areas that we think we wouldn't have the gift to be, I'll say, "I can't do that, I don't have that gift in the community," they'll say, "Yes, yes you do. We see this and this and this and we would like you to do this." So, there is a challenge also, to do more than we would maybe at times be willing to do ourselves. To say that, "It is a gift and I have an obligation to use this gift and I'm being called by the community to use it right now."

Q: It makes you stretch and grow.

RD: It makes you stretch and grow.

Q: If you were to say, "I shall not do this." would that be heard? You probably would not say it in that way, but if you were to say, "Listen, I just..."

RD: That would be heard today, now I think way early, it would not have been. You did what you were told to do. Whereas now that would be heard and we would be able to say, "I just don't feel comfortable with it right now. Maybe I have the gift but at this point I'm not comfortable with it" that would be heard today. That's a big change from the beginning.

TH: I'm thinking of the leadership team. This is all a process of discernment. Back in '78, '77, I was asked to be the vice-president. I didn't think I was able to do that, so I listed all the weaknesses and all the strengths, and I said, "Superior, do you know this is what I have, and this is what I haven't". Then the community voted, so I just accepted that as the call. Not only from God, but from the entire community, so I served it.

Q: So, you've always been an organizer, haven't you?

TH: Yes.

RD: Always.

TH: Still am.

RD: And she served very well.

Q: Tell me a story, tell me a story about a sister in your life. It says here, "Who were the unforgettable characters?" I'll bet you have them. I'll bet you have those that you think back on that spoke to you in a way that most don't. Tell me a story.

TH: I think of Sister Aloicia, she was one of the holiest people I have ever met in my life. She had so much vision and she always wanted the best. She was the superior for eighteen years and we had to get special permission from Rome for the last six years, because at that time, you could only serve twelve. So, she had a rule, "Don't bother me the first hour of the day because I'm praying." So, we never bothered her during that time. She always believed in having everything very nice so she would always take a walk, she would make a whole list of things that needed to be done and she was just a self-sacrificing woman. Her holiness is what always impressed me. She loved people, especially children. Even when she was, was she ninety? No, she was in her eighties when she died, she said, "Oh, I just love our community days!" We get together at least four times a year. All the sisters come home. She'd say, "Those young sisters just laugh and have so much fun and I just enjoy that so much!" She appreciated the younger people and believed in the future of the community. It was during her term that we accepted the mission in Nigeria. She was just a great woman. Another one is Sr. Theodocia, she's ninety-three at this point and she was still teaching, I was a co-teacher with her over at our prep school, that was our high school. She demanded so much and the girls worked so hard, but they loved her to death. She taught in Hutchinson, this is co-ed, and the boys just loved her. She still, you know, she was still teaching in '80. Just a model teacher and having so much fun. She's upstairs now on the third floor and she is still a model. We would laugh. She was in drama, and I would always help her. We would have so much fun together. Just an all-around person, still is.

RD: She was wonderful at teaching diction and public speaking and plays and debate. Her children always took top honors. I went while she was in her eighties, teaching in Hutchinson, I went to one of the last plays that she gave with her students. They did a wonderful job, you understood every student and heard all of their voices very clearly. When the play was over, the students gave her a humongous bouquet of red roses. They called her out on the stage and gave her this big bouquet and just carried on. They really loved her. She taught me. I was in some of her plays in prep school she was one of my teachers. I was always very shy, "Oh, I can't do this..." "YES you can, yes you can. Just speak up you can do this." And you did it. You did it because she believed in you.

Q: Oh, she believed in you.

RD: Yes, she believed in you, she expected the best and she believed you could do it. She would do whatever it took in order to help you get that way. So that if you were having troubles, she would say, "Why don't you stay for a few minutes and let's work on how this is to be said?" She'd work with you, but so encouragingly, and with such belief that you did it because you didn't want to disappoint her because you knew that she really believed in you.

Q: That's the gift of teaching isn't it?

TH: Oh, yes, she was a born teacher.

RD: Remarkable. I think of Betty Jean, too, who was also one of my teachers at that time. She also became one of the major superiors. She taught the things like chemistry and math, which were not my

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thing. I can do the language and the writing, but the chemistry and math...I remember one day in chemistry we had made such a humongous error in one of our lab experiments that we had a hundred and eight percent degree of error. She said, "Well, now, this is very interesting. I think you have created a new substance!" But she too, would work with us until we could. She was a real visionary in our community. She came in at the time that all the changes, right after all the changes had been made. It was through her vision that we started the farm. It was through her vision that we started Heartland Center here for spirituality. She said, "You know, we have this big building, and we have people with needs, let's use this building to bring in people and to teach them and to have a place for spirituality." She was a very gifted woman and very, very dynamic in her stand for the poor and for justice. I met one of her friends from another community who tells the story of how she had met Betty Jean and they were supposed to be having this vacation time together. She said, "We ended up at a rally." She said, "I didn't think this is what..." But Sister Betty Jean said, "Yes, we have a duty to justice to be here to stand up for what is right." So, she said, "It's not my idea of what I needed to do," but she said, "Yes, we have to do this."

Q: What kind of a rally was it?

RD: It was a peace rally; I don't remember exactly. Some sort of a peace rally. She was in, like what, in the seventies?

TH: Yes. 70-78. Then she worked with the Indians after she got out of office. She took the EMT and she was an ambulance driver. Then she taught in a high school where there was so much prejudice between the Indians and the whites and she would do things for those Indians, just because they were just downtrodden. She was a remarkable woman. She died a few years ago, five years ago. She was a great woman.

Q: Is your order open to people of all races, and cultures?

TH: Yes.

Q: Do you have sisters here in Great Bend, I realize that one of the difficulties is that Kansas is not populated heavily with other races and cultures, we're pretty linear yet.

RD: We're mostly German, but not completely, we do have some Mexican Americans and we had a number of Irish for a while, but mostly Caucasian. But we are open to whoever, but like you said, in this area of Kansas, there's not a whole lot of variety.

Q: I was a professional Girl Scout for a long time and one of the directives of the national organization was to have a certain percentage of other ethnic groups and it just was not possible for Kansas Councils to meet. Are there Dominican centers other than this one in Great Bend in this country?

RD: Oh, yes, there are thirty.

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Q: Thirty? So that there may be some in areas like Southern California, Florida or Texas or other places where there would be a different proportion of Caucasians.

RD: Yes, there are thirty communities and twenty-three of those thirty communities have a collaborative novitiate, which is a training experience for the women. Since so few are coming these days, we have that in St. Louis, and there's a wide variety of ethnic groups. There were fourteen there this year and there was a wide variety of ethnic groups in that group. Which is because it takes in...it covers from around the country.

Q: Charlotte, I think, went to St. Louis. Would that be right?

RD: She wasn't in the collaborative novitiate, but she went there for her theological studies at Aquinas Institute.

Q: Well, you know I think, I think I'd just like to say, is there anything else you'd like for me to know, is there anything else you'd like to tell me. I know we could sit and talk for hours about what I don't know, but are there other things that you would like to say for posterity, for those, this is going into an archive to be available for historians over the years so that when someone in 2096 looks back, they'll hear your voices and read your words, is there anything else? Do you want to say something about your vision for the church as it looks in the 20th century or your vision for women, your own vision for this community? We've talked about religious vocation being at an all-time low, it's the best kept secret I think you said Renee, do you see a vision of making that more open and known so that you'll increase your numbers? Do you see your ranks as diminishing? I never give you a chance to answer, I just come up with about fifteen questions. That's so you can pick, I'm a multiple-choice kind of interviewer.

TH: Let's talk about the social program.

RD: We do have, there has been a great movement in the church of lay people who do not want to take the vows that we take to be religious, but who want to be connected with religious communities, with our mission and our charisma and our prayer life. They are called associates. That has just blossomed throughout the country. Many, many communities, not every community, but almost all communities now have associate members of both men and women who are connected with us. We have approximately 60 right now in our community who want to be a part of our prayer life, our mission, and our ministry, but who are either married or are single and do not wish to take vows. I think the time will come when we will live together with these people and there will be more intentional communities and we won't have the "religious" and "lay people". I don't think there will be all that separation, I think there will be a whole lot more integration of people who are working for the same cause living together in the same place, so they can more effectively work. Which is what's already happening at the farm. I think that could be a very trend of how community life will move. It's already moving that way. People who choose to be together so that they can accomplish more and more effectively and have the support and the prayer life together, even without sharing the same faith, as such. But it's still the same God and the same...I mean, we're working for the same God. There is one God and all of us are working together. So, whichever way you choose to worship doesn't make a whole lot of difference when you're working to achieve the kingdom of God or the reign of God on earth.

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Q: thank you.

TH: And don't we have Margaret already who's an initiate?

RD: Yes, we have a non-Catholic as an initiate for the associate program. She has not made her full commitment yet, but she's in the formation process or the study time before she makes her formation. We have openers initiate program to non-Catholics.

TH: To Christians, and she's a minister.

RD: She's a First Christian Church minister.

Q: What a radical, radical thing.

TH: Well, another great change in some of the communities, we haven't had anyone, older women are entering now. Some are grandmas, we're open to that. But no one has applied, as yet.

RD: They're women who are ready for a definite, for a second or a third vocation.

Q: That's also something that's pretty radical for the times.

RD: Yes, you're right. And that is happening. The sisters, the Adorers in Wichita, have two grandmothers who are in their beginning stages of religious life.

TH: And I think the St. Joseph's sisters have one.

RD: Yes, they do.

TH: And the Franciscans at Lacrosse, I know. I met the lady; I think she had about nine grandchildren.

RD: When you do that then, Charlotte talked about in-laws. She says now when she goes home for a visit, then she comes home, you know, to Great Bend. As if there are two families, and I can see where that would be important if you were a grandmother to be able to...as a grandmother, you have an obligation, I think, to your grandchildren too, to help their parents until...

Q: That's a fascinating concept.

TH: Well, that happens in the priesthood, too, you know, married men.

RD: Yes, one of the men that I was in the seminary with, one day we were having a big celebration and he said, "Sister! Come, I want you to meet my son." I said, "Oh, okay!" So, it is happening in the church and it will bring about change.

Q: Those that enter having been married, having been parents perhaps, the vow of chastity and celibacy is still in place I assume?

RD: Yes, for after that.

Q: Actually, chastity ought to be in place before, it isn't always, but, certainly, celibacy is a call of a different sort.

RD: For those who wish at this point, those who wish to be vowed members of the community, that's still a requirement. Then like for associates, who want to be part of the community, celibacy is not a requirement for associates. I think that there will always be those who really feel a call to the celibate lifestyle, but I believe that we have room and space, and that we can work with those who are not choosing to be celibate either, I don't think that makes a difference, we're all called to holiness and

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we're all called to bring the reign of God. It doesn't matter how we do that, as long as we're all working for that together. I think we're more aware of that in today's church.

Q: So, is your personal theology that the reign of God the Bosoleia, is in the future? Or do you feel that the reign of God is now, this is another Shirley question.

RD: It's now, it's now and it is already, but it needs to keep being brought more fully, I think we need to continue to make it more full and more complete and more whole and more holy, continue to unfold, would you agree?

TH: Wholeheartedly, wholeheartedly yes. I was just thinking about our missions, we haven't said too much about our Nigerian missions, that's one of my loves. I had volunteered to be a missionary, but I wasn't accepted. They said, "Go to school and learn theology." But my heart, I did visit in 1982, so I love to go out, we have mission appeals and so I keep up with our missionaries every time they come home and get updated with what's going on. I'm working in the development office too, so I don't find it difficult at all to go out and beg for donations. In fact, I received a grant from a foundation I needed two motorcycles for the sisters, because the cars, the roads are just impassible. I have one and a half motor cycles, in case anybody's listening (laughs).

Q: So, are you looking at mopeds? The little ones?

TH: The smaller ones, yes that are sister sized bikes. So right now, we have 54 Nigerians. One of the reasons why we went over, we wanted to strengthen the local church. One of the best ways was to establish a native community, so right now we have 54 sisters there.

RD: Who are native.

TH: Yes, native sisters. Soon we hope that they'll be able to take over their own leadership, in fact some of them are in leadership already. Financially, it will be many, many years before they will be able to take care of themselves, because they all have to be educated. So, we have made a commitment and we've helped them ever since 1956 and we don't know how much longer, but it will be a long time.

Q: Are they educated in Nigeria?

TH: That's what we want, yes, because if they come to the states, they probably will not go back, or they would want to teach only in universities and it's the poor, it's the local people, you know, that we want them to work with. So, they have health clinics and they work in parishes and they teach, it's a whole gamut. There are three primary schools and each one has between six hundred and eight hundred youngsters' grades 3-11. In Dusow, they have twenty-six teachers and the head teacher, they call them head teachers, it's equivalent to the principal, one of our native sisters is in charge of that, ages 3-11, they are spreading the word.

Q: And moving ahead to be participants in the world.

TH: Right. But we do not bring them to the United States to educate them. It's very, very expensive for the Nigerians to educate them, because, being a Christian way down there, sometimes you're not allowed to go to school because you're a Christian and not able to get a job because you're a Christian.

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Q: Really?

TH: Yes, and their salaries are about ten to twenty dollars a month.

Q: Well, I suspect that's commensurate with what they need to live, but your point still is that's pretty...

TH: It isn't commensurate. In no way.

RD: It isn't commensurate. That's why we must support them because there is no way they can.

TH: It's very expensive to live, anyway.

Q: Any last comments? Well, I thank you both. I've learned a lot and I think I'm most excited about the barriers coming down between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, I do agree that we have a lot to learn from each other and it doesn't stop with Catholicism and Protestantism either...

TH: That's right.

Q: I think it expands to a lot of things.

TH: We have two women ministers in other denominations, you know, and some of them find it a little difficult too.

Q: To believe that it's happening?

TH: Well, to even minister in the parish because, well, you're a woman.

Q: Oh, yes, oh, I see, absolutely. I have friends in seminary now who deal with that same thing. It is hard.

TH: Yes, anyway, it's a breakthrough.