

Interview Narrator: Ida Berresheim
Interviewed By: Sarah Jimenez
Location of Interview: Fontbonne University, Interfaith Chapel
Date of interview: 4/6/16

- 00:26 **Interviewer-** Hello.
- 00:28 **Sister** – Hello, Sarah.
- 00:30 **Interviewer-** What name do you go by?
- 00:31 **Sister** – I go by Sister Ida.
- 00:34 **Interviewer-** What’s your baptismal na-name?
- 00:36 **Sister** –What is my baptismal name? Elizabeth Eugenia Berresheim.
- 00:42 **Interviewer-** and what is your religious name?
- 00:44 **Sister** – Ida Robertine Berresheim
- 00:49 **Interviewer-** When and where were you born?
- 00:50 **Sister** – I was born in St. Louis, Missouri on the 8th of January in 1928.
- 00:56 **Interviewer-** Is that where you grew up?
- 00:57 **Sister** – Yes, uh-huh.
- 00:59 **Interviewer-** Were you raised in a catholic Family?
- 01:01 **Sister** – I was raised in a catholic family, yes. Uh-huh.
- 01:04 **Interviewer-** um, were there any other sisters in your family?
- 01:07 **Sister** – I have three other sisters, yes.
- 01:09 **Interviewer-** Any clergy?
- 01:10 **Sister** – no clergy...no-
- 01:14 **Interviewer-** -would you please tell me um who was in your family of origin?

01:17 **Sister** – My sister, Ruth, who is fifteen months older than I am. My sister Delores who just turned 85. And my sister Shirley who just turned 80. [clears throat] And my mother and dad.

01:33 **Interviewer-** uh, what was your place in the birth order?

01:35 **Sister** – I was the second.

01:37 **Interviewer-** uh, what is the name of the community you belong to?

01:40 **Sister** – Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet

01:43 **Interviewer-** and your motherhouse is located where?

01:45 **Sister** – 6400 Minnesota in St. Louis, Missouri. same place where we came when we came to this country.

01:52 **Interviewer-** How long have you been a sister?

01:55 **Sister** – uh, sixty-nine years.

01:57 **Interviewer-** [chuckles] uh, briefly describe the types of ministries that you've been involved in.

02:04 **Sister** – Well, I was in uh, elementary education for many years and then I was asked to go be in high school [mumble] uh, high school teaching in different parts of country. And then I was called to be a uh registrar here at Fontbonne and then I was called into leadership at the provincial level uh, as a regional superior and after a year and a half, two years of that, I was called then to general leadership as-as a sister general of the co-congregation.

02:36 **Interviewer-** wow. [Chuckle] so, when did you first consider a re-religious vocation for yourself?

- 02:42 **Sister** – I started considering it when I was a junior in high school and it was a shock because I hadn't been around sisters for a long time.
- 02:54 **Interviewer**- How did you know that you would become a sister?
- 02:57 **Sister** – um, I-I guess I finally said yes to God I kept on saying no for a long time and then [clears throat] when I was about 18 years old, I said yes. Um but, uh, I kept on hedging for a long time. [Laughter]
- 03:14 **Interviewer**- um, who influenced your decision to pursue a religious vocation.
- 03:19 **Sister** – I think it was the sisters uh who taught me in grade school and uh the fact that I was distanced from them for a longer time because I went into public high school and uh then I just re-realized that I had a spiritual life and that-that those sisters led a good life and I wanted to be like them.
- 03:42 **Interviewer**-What are the greatest blus-blessings of religious life?
- 03:45 **Sister** – well, I think community life and being with so many good people at every turn even though the ministry might take us into other uh areas of life. The good people that are around all the time and the, and the life ar-are very, very supportive.
- 04:06 **Interviewer**- um, what would you- what would you have been able to do as a professed sister that you wouldn't have been able to do as a lay woman?
- 04:14 **Sister** –I think travel all over the world. I was mission coordinator for many, many years [clears throat] and then I was mission down in Peru and went to meetings in different countries and that was a great gift, that I would never have been able to do as a- as a lay person.
- 04:33 **Interviewer**- um, did you look at many communities before choosing?

- 04:37 **Sister** – No, I really didn't 'cause I knew the-these sisters [clears throat] and they were in our parish and uh it was uh vo-vocation that I thought I was called to- I looked at one other community that I thought this community wouldn't take me. [laughter]
- 4:53 **Interviewer-** [laughter] Why did you think that they wouldn't take you?
- 04:55 **Sister** – because I went to public school and my eighth grade teacher [laughs] didn't like that idea and she- she was kind of cut me off and um but anyway, I saw in the uh in the Catholic newspaper that uh this community had taken another person from a public school and uh oh they'd take us, so go ahead, try. [cough]
- 05:16 **Interviewer-** So what drew you to um the sisters of St. Joseph?
- 05:19 **Sister** – I think it was their prayer life, their community life, the kindness, and the joy uh there were many really joyful sisters in my uh upbringing, the sisters of st. Joseph. And compassion, there was a great guild of compassion to- for those who were different, those who were uh, maybe couldn't come up to other standards of learning and so on.
- 05:45 **Interviewer-** would you say that it was their charism? That initially-
- 05:47 **Sister** -- -I think that their charism was operative now that I know more about charism. uh and le-learned that after Vatican two. [coughs] excuse me.
- 05:59 **Interviewer-** um, so at wha-what age did you become a novice?
- 06:03 **Sister** – um, I worked for a while after high school and at 18 um I guess at 19 I got the habit uh I was a novice at 18-19 mm..
- 06:14 **Interviewer-** um what would you like to share anything about that process of discernment that you had?
- 06:18 **Sister** – well I- as a novice we lived uh in a very strict time and I figured well if that's what you had to go through to be a sister of St. Joseph, I can go through that. And uh I

think- I-I saw my parents go through tough time during the depression so I figured, I can- I can go through these times if that's what you have to do, that's what you have to do and besides, I was with a group of young people that had a lot of fun in between, so that helped eh and there was a nice balance [clears throat] even though the strictness was...a little bit to uh be questioned now.

06:58 **Interviewer-** um, did you have many reactions from your friends and relatives when you told them that you were going to become a sis-

07:03 **Sister** – yes I did. I remember in my work place, people thought I was crazy. My relatives uh they were all pretty much in awe as like how coul- how could one of us go into religious life? You know, we're just plain ordinary people. And uh, little by little, they came along and uh nobody that I recall of my relatives that were thought I should not do this. My dad gave me a few warnings that nuns weren't perfect, but uh uh they were mostly encouraging.

07:37 **Interviewer-** [quietly] That's good. Um, when did you take your final vows?

07:40 **Sister** – I made final vows, I think it was in 1952. Was it 1952? Yeah, uh, mm.

07:50 **Interviewer-** How old were you?

07:53 **Sister** – I must have been 21 [laughs]

07:57 **Interviewer-** [laughs] and so what vows did you take?

08:08 **Sister** – Poverty, chastity, obedience.

08:02 **Interviewer-** um, have those vows shaped your experience as a sister?

08:06 **Sister** – yes they have because in those days, your obedience meant, among many things, they-it meant that you went wherever you were sent and you didn't have anything to say about it [coughs] and then after Vatican two, you had a lot of conversation and a lot of

discernment about where you went. But uh in general as I look back, I'm really happy about the places I was sent because they were opportunities as I look at them now. But I have to say also that I tend to have a positive uh personality so I-I interpret things rather favorably.

08:43 **Interviewer-** how-how has discernment influenced your life in an ongoing way?

08:47 **Sister** -- oh.. it in-influences very, very much uh not only because I have a spiritual director who helps me be objective that I don't have to figure out everything my own head, I can figure it out with other people and in prayer and among our sisters, with a spiritual director with people that mean a lot to me and are mo-more or less on the same wave length but are brave enough to ask hard questions sometimes.

09:20 **Interviewer-** How was sister life different from then, when you were discerning to now?

09:25 **Sister** – um, it's different in that our own discernment now has more influence of our lives than the discernment to-uh before uh Vatican II [clears throat] and-and that has to do also with the way uh obedience was structured in that time the persons at the top, namely the people in authority like superiors had a lot to say, principles of the school and the superior were usually the same person, they had a lot to say about where you did when, what you did. Now, you do that together with the people in power or people in influence or people in authority that can look at the whole picture maybe in the way that a-a person making decision can't look at it. so we make the decisions together.

10:19 **Interviewer-** [clears throat] so tell me about that community, how is it organized and structured?

10:23 **Sister** – um, we have a general government which is over all of the sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. In the United States, in Peru, Japan, Hawaii. And then we have our own St.

Louis province which is over those of us who are part of that province and uh we relate mainly with the people in our provincial government and then if a very big question comes up about serving in a place where its congregational, like Peru, then we refer to those persons- or the persons in the provincial- they refer to them and you- you get into a larger conversation.

11:08 **Interviewer-** Um, did you- do you live with other sisters and where do you live?

11:12 **Sister** – yes. I live at Carondelet and we have six small communities at Carondelet and I live with a community of four other sisters, soon to be five because another sister is coming into our community and um I like that. We pray together, we uh do things together, have birthday parties, and...and discussions and uh um watch televisions. Do things together, but also you do things in the larger community, there are twenty two living at Carondelet now and uh that's good too.

11:45 **Interviewer-** That's good. Uh so what's your role in this community?

11:50 **Sister** – um, my role in the community as a- as a retired person is to do what I can do uh given the talents that I have, given the conversations that I've had with leadership and others uh for instance, I can speak Spanish so sometimes I can help with translations, I can drive so sometimes I can take care of going to meetings. I have an experience of leadership so I can do some of the things that others are not able to do. So I do what I can do with good health and uh ability [both laugh] and it's fun. [laughs]

12:33 **Interviewer-** yeah [laughs] um, how does your community share this responsibility? Do you follow like a common schedule?

11:40 **Sister** – Uh, somewhat. we happen to live in a- in a motherhouse which is an institution so there are meals at a certain time. One meeting a month of the whole group. Uh we

have sharing of the heart which one of the groups of the house, a couple of the sisters have decided that would be helpful for everybody who wants to come, so we do that. Um, there's some structure and not some structure so in- we work that out together in conversation and uh we decided we like the climate in the house a whole lot.

13:23 **Interviewer-** so what does being a member of this community mean to you?

13:26 **Sister** – uh I guess it means everything. It's uh- I guess I can-I can reflect a little bit about what one of my blood sisters says- say to me. She says, ' you have a family, but you've grown in the family of your community who are so caring and so loving and take such good care of you.' And I said that's true that's true. I can still be apart of my family and they appreciate it but I- my family doesn't need to take care of me uh if I should have some debility that they- that others would have to take care of. That's all part of our sharing everything together. Our income, our resources and uh it's positive in my life.

14:16 **Interviewer-** uh, through this discernment process and placement, did you have a lot of flexibility in choosing where you wanted to live, what work you wanted to have?

14:25 **Sister** – Yes I did. For instance, for many man- well seventeen years, I lived at the US Mexican border and uh I was living in a community that sometimes was changing because sisters moved in and out, small group, small house. There were room for four of us, mostly three of us. And so when the last sister moved out 'cause she was elected provincial down in Mexico, uh I decided [clears throat] that it was the time for me, I wasn't going to stay there by myself so I talked to all the people that are concerned back here in St. Louis and said I thought it was time to come back and uh I did that and they were very open about saying yes it seems that that's a good decision.

- 15:17 **Interviewer-** Um, what are the challenges that you find living in community? And are there some joys as well?
- 15:25 **Sister** – uh, some of the challenges are uh seeing people go downhill including myself and asking the question of when is it time to cut back. And helping others ask that questions of themselves. That's not an easy question for some that is an easier question for others. And um, the same with let's say people want to talk to me and they want to talk about their deci-decision and their discernment and uh not giving them uh the answer that I think would fit, but helping people to come to the answer that would probably be part of their discernment so those are the kind of struggles that you might talk about, it's like when you made the decision to come to college you know uh some of the same elements are present in the decision.
- 16:31 **Interviewer-** um, can you tell me a little bit about your educational journey?
- 16:35 **Sister** – um, my educational journey. Well, when I entered the community, it was a time when a religious community throughout this country were trying to fill all of the elementary schools that were cropping up, the catholic schools, which was a whole historical thing and uh so we were given a minimal education as novices. Sisters from Fontbonne who taught here went out- came out to the motherhouse and taught us. And then right after the two years of novitiate we went and started teaching but we kept on furthering our education. The really good education that I received though outside the classroom was the sisters I lived with because they so much us wanted you to succeed that they just helped so much in the classrooms and so I happened to have taught lower grades and that was just a tremendous help.

- 17:33 **Interviewer-** um, As you were growing up did you go to any Catholic schools? I know you said that you went to public school...
- 17:40 **Sister** – yes, uhuh
- 17:41 **Interviewer-** Were any of them Catholic affiliated, or...?
- 17:46 **Sister** – You mean the schools themselves?
- 17:47 **Interviewer-** yeah mhm.
- 17:47 **Sister** –No I went to Maplewood, Richmond Heights Senior High.
- 17:50 **Interviewer-** oh okay.
- 17:50 **Sister** – Which is not too far from here. And I, I guess uh, in that day in age people were more church related than they are today and for instance, at the last day of WWII when the announcement came, our school was- we were free. That was such a great day in History. And one of my girlfriends said well let's go say a prayer of thanksgiving, which shocked me to death because that just wasn't part of our vocabulary, but we did. We went to a church down in Maplewood and prayed in thanksgiving for the end of the war because we thought it wasn't going to end, it was a bad time. It was very bad time.
- 18:31 **Interviewer-** uh, what's your highest level of education?
- 18:33 **Sister** – I got my masters from St. Louis U in English in 1966.
- 18:42 **Interviewer-** um, is your education tied to your religious vocation?
- 18:47 **Sister** – I don't know what the question means exactly, but I think that in that the education has helped me think about my life yes. I- I do think that the level of education sometimes, especially eh, the critical thinking and skills that you get in an education helps you think a lot about your own personal life. So yes, in that yeah it does help my life in so far as a voc- in life a vocation yes it does help

19:19 **Interviewer-** and you said a little bit about your ministries but could you talk a little bit more about the positions that you've had?

19:25 **Sister** – uh [clears throat] when I was in general government- when I was in provincial government, I could see a lot of what was going on in different dioceses here. I had uh rural Missouri, Kansas City, and Denver. all different. Rural Missouri is very different from St. Louis, from Denver. When I got into general government uh, it was uh a way of seeing a bigger world, even bigger. So I gradually got into that world of Peru, which is totally different culture, Japan totally different culture, Hawaii totally different culture and so vocation and culture began to mesh in a whole different way and that was a-a great revolution and-and-and a tremendously expanding experience which I treasure.

20:22 **Interviewer-** um through those experiences, did you find any key turning points in your ministry at all?

20:28 **Sister** – I think that one of the key turning points in uh in Peru uh was allowing the Peruvian people to be apart of my life and so far as when I came back to this country, I wanted to continue to work with people uh [mumble] uh Hispanic people. To make them-to help keep on learning from them and to keep on being apart of that culture.

21:04 **Interviewer-** uh, so what's been the most gratifying work that you've done?

21:07 **Sister** – The most gratifying thing... um I think general government and being mission coordinator in that general government and then beyond that, keeping on living and being able to experience the-the communities of Latin America and my own community, other communities, and uh traveling in different parts of the world.

21:39 **Interviewer-** um, could you share an example of a ministerial experience that brought you a lot of joy?

21:45 **Sister** – um, just recently, I was able to help with that great influx of central American uh refugees and immigrants who came into our country and specially beginning in 2014 and just to be apart of that, to be apart of the volunteers that came down, to be apart of the stories of some of the people, apart of the children, apart of the young people when they realize they were in a safe place, they were no longer being pushed around or into uh, um boarder uh federal offices. It was just such a well it was both an emotional and uh practical experience because we had to provide for the people and provide for the uh volunteers to see all the generosity of the outpouring of people from churches of every denomination who wanted these people to be safe. That was just uh a recent experience that I-I can't say enough about it. I-I can't duplicate it. It was such an extraordinary that was just a recent experience there has been many others.

23:09 **Interviewer-** um, has there been any disappointment parts of your ministerial works?

23:13 **Sister** – yes, I think so. I thought I might be able to go back to Peru after I'd finished. Uh In uh leadership when I- in 1990-1994. Took me awhile to realize that it wouldn't be wise. It was a disappointment for a while and when I realized it wouldn't be wise to go back that I kind of settled in. Thought more about future instead of trying to redo the past.

23:48 **Interviewer-** um going back to the sisters of St. Joseph, could you talk a little bit about your community's prayer life and spirituality?

23:55 **Sister** – uh yes, um, when I first entered, It seemed to me as I looked back on it. That was, we all did the same thing at the same time. As we began to get into new ministries and people did more what they were inclined and they uh sometimes they could not be together in the community to pray at the same time as they used to like we all prayed at 5 o'clock, we all prayed at nine o'clock. No they prayed when they could get together after

they came home from their ministry. Or they prayed early in the evening or they prayed early in the morning. And then the prayer changed it-it was not the litanies and the prayers that we said in the past. It was prayers that were more in tune with our life. We also discovered that uh in our history, that the early sisters had a what they called a sharing of the heart and a sharing of the house and we began to be able to do that together and that deepened our relationship with God and with one another and that-that's been a great gift.

25:11 **Interviewer-** uh, does the Sisters of St. Joseph have a theology on religious life?

25:17 **Sister** – I think that the theology of religious life is one things and I think that different communities address different aspects of the life of Jesus and um Franciscans look at poverty, the Dominicans look at evangelizations especially through preaching uh our founder took-uh focused more on the love of God, and love of neighbor without distinction had a lot to do with the history because we were founded when women could not serve the way they would like to have served so uh we conserve in any way that women any place in the world and that is a very freeing kind of uh openness to ministries. So yeah [chuckle] to answer your question, yes.

26:13 **Interviewer-** [laughs] um in your view, did the Vatican II change things for women religious in the U.S.?

26:20 **Sister** – Changed things drastically and we had a- a superior at that time as a matter of fact we had superiors throughout the congregation who were open to all of the good things and the mistakes of changing and some would have changed more rapidly, some would have changed more slowly, but yes. Uh I mentioned changed in ministry, some sisters were in teaching who just did not like teaching that was not where God wanted

them to be so they could go easily into another form of-of ministry. So, yes, Vatican II changed us drastically, changed our clothing, told us to get with contemporary times and uh we changed too fast for much of the larger church but I think that's catching up now after fifty years [laugh]

27:19 **Interviewer-** uh how did the sisters of St. Joseph specifically respond to these changes?

27:25 **Sister** – One of the-oh er- many ways in which we responded, I think it was a very uh er, a way that made a big impact was to take-to have people trained in renewal we also had a-a number of sisters throughout the congregation sisters of St. Joseph and throughout other sisters of St. Joseph congregations. We looked at our primitive documents and said oh, here's what they-they say and look what we've done, we've been doing what eh, eh happens in each country or what country wants or what the bishop wants or what the pastors wants, let's look at those primitive documents the way Vatican II said to look at them and see if we can pursue those paths and so with training in renewal, different teams could study those, go to the different centers of the congregations and make a difference. Give us something to think about, to pray about, to talk about. That was in a more future instead of past.

28:35 **Interviewer-** um, so you've been talking a little bit about the foundations of the sisters, um so what do you think the role of women religious in the 21st century is?

28:44 **Sister** – The role of the re-religious in the 21st century there is I think that what I mentioned before, do whatever women is capable of doing. I think that's our role. As long as we can, as best we can and let the chips fall where they may, you know. Um, that's what I think is happening and will continue to happen as the world changes, we

change and we try to respond in the way God wants us to respond. Through search, discernment and so on.

29:23 **Interviewer-** What are your hopes for the future for women religious?

29:27 **Sister** – um, I think it will change in that the laity is so, is moving so quickly into a deeper uh spiritual life and a longing for spirituality and they, they are coming to us in great numbers, longing to live out this charism of the way they see us living it out and the way that any of them living it out, it's not something we own. And I think that that movement is giving us an indication of- of the true way of religious life. It's going to be shared in a much broader context and we share our lives or then we have shared them in the past, we were rather exclusive. Now, I think that we are getting to be more general, we're moving to be with-with others in our- in our miss-in our ministry and our mission.

30:32 **Interviewer-** um, what is at the center of religious life that you hope to pass along to the next generation?

30:42 **Sister** – The gospel. Uh that's.. I-I there's nothing greater than that and we constantly find uh great gems in the gospel that we discover anew and share. I think that's-that's all that God's asking of us and pulling us to live more-evermore faithfully.

31:09 **Interviewer-** um, were your outfits changing in the Vatican II, does your-does the sisters of St. Joseph have a symbol to recognize your profession?

31:22 **Sister** – Not one single symbol for all the communities. Whether that will come, I don't know. Some communities have it, some don't. Many of us wear the same kind of cross, many don't wear that but uh, it just depends on-on the person right now that-

31:43 **Interviewer-** Is it important to you to have this?

31:45 **Sister** – Yes it's-it's important to me and I have found that both Christians and people uh and non-Christians recognize the cross and some recognize the little print of CSJ on the- on the bottom, say they went to school with the sisters of St. Joseph or they want to know what it stands for. It's a conversation piece [laugh] and so I-I-I'm happy to wear it and I do want people to know that I'm a sister of St. Joseph.

32:19 **Interviewer**- That's it.

32:20 **Sister** – That's it! Oh that was so pleasant!

32:23 **Interviewer**- Do you want to share anything else?

32:26 **Sister** – not really [laughs]

32:27 **Interviewer**-[laughs]