

Interview Narrator: Sister Mary Joe Order Saint Joseph of Carondelet

Interviewed By: Elizabeth Theisen

Location of Interview: Fontbonne University

Date of Interview: March 21, 2015

00:07 **Interviewer**– Alright, Can you state your name or what you go by?

00:16 **Sister**- Sister Mary Joe Ritter.

00:17 **Interviewer**- And then, what is your baptismal name?

00:20 **Sister**- Mary Joe Ritter.

00:21 **Interviewer**- What is your religious name?

00:26 **Sister** – Right now it is Mary Joe Ritter. Um I was ah Vincent Helene.

00:32 **Interviewer** – When were you born?

00:35 **Sister**- November 15, 1941.

00:37 **Interviewer**- And where were you born?

00:38 **Sister**- I was born in Bonne Terre Missouri.

00:41 **Interviewer**- And is that where you grew up or did you move around from there?

00:44 **Sister**- Ah, we moved around a lot. Ah we moved from Bonne Terre, actually the hospital was in Bonne Terre we lived in Desoto when I was born, Missouri. And then, ah eventually we moved to Monroe City Missouri and then we moved to Louisiana, Missouri then to Clarksville, Missouri and then back to Louisiana, Missouri and then to Hannibal, Missouri. And ah my parents ah after I left moved to Mount Pleasant Iowa.

1:16 **Interviewer**– Wow you moved around a lot. [Laugh]

1:18 **Sister-** Yes.

1:19 **Interviewer-** And then, were you raised in a Catholic Family?

1:22 **Sister-** My father was Catholic. My mother was not, Um, actually she converted ah later.

1:30 **Interviewer-** Was that before they got married or after?

1:32 **Sister-** After they got married. They ah she didn't convert until I made my first communion.

1:38 **Interviewer-** Oh okay, and then where there any other Sisters Catholic Sisters in your family?

1:43 **Sister-** No, I am the only one.

1:47 **Interviewer-** And then ah, can you tell me who was in your family origin so if you had brothers or sisters?

1:52 **Sister-** I am the oldest of four. And, I have three brothers younger than I am.

1:59 **Interviewer-** Okay, what is the name of the community you belong to and where is your mother house located?

2:05 **Sister-** Um, the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Carondelet and its located in Saint Louis, Missouri.

2:05 **Interviewer-** And how long have you been a Sister?

2:12 **Sister-** As of yesterday 55 years.

2:15 **Interviewer-** Oh wow, what would you like to share ah anything about your community or Sister House anything special about it?

2:23 **Sister-** In the community I live with right now?

2:24 **Interviewer-** Umm hmm, yes.

2:27 **Sister-** Right now, um my community is unique in the sense of I live with one other Sister and two dogs. And I am a foster mother so I have children. Two children right now.

2:42 **Interviewer-** And ah then, can you describe the ministries that you have been involved in so far from when you started and had your first ministry till now?

2:52 **Sister-** My degree is elementary ed and I started in elementary ed. Um, my first mission was teaching first and second grade and um I was there for seven years. Then I went to another place where I taught 1st 2nd and then taught math to 3rd grade. Um and then it went downhill after, that and I went from um 1st and 2nd to 1st to kindergarten and eventually I taught ah actually opened the Montessori school Margaret of Scotland in South Saint Louis. So I became a certified Montessori teacher. Um, then of course my other ministry is a foster care which I still am involved in. Right now I am retired from teaching but I am a nanny.

3:51 **Interviewer-** Um what your favorite grade that you taught was there one?

3:55 **Sister-** Preschool.

3:57 **Interviewer-** Preschool. And then, when did you first consider a religious vocation?

4:02 **Sister-** When I was a senior in high school. Ah, one of the teachers approached me and felt I had a vocation and that. Ah, I left my options open and tried it.

4:17 **Interviewer-** And then when and how did you know that you would become a Sister? So what was your process?

4:23 **Sister-** The process was that I would try it out so I went to um Carondelet. Um, for what was at that time called a postulancy. Um, found that I liked it decided that I wanted to enter the novitiate. And in enter the novitiate I ah felt was this was what God wanted me to do.

4:53 **Interviewer-** And then during your process of your postulant was there anything that influenced to keep moving on or just to stay?

5:03 **Sister-** I um I think I never realized um what ah community life was I had never been ah. I think I am going to sneeze. (Laugh)

5:16 **Interviewer-** Your fine.

5:17 **Sister-** Um I had never ah realized what it was and um it was um an experience that um...that was it was just a wonderful community of people that helped you, and helped you to grow, and ah where there for you all the time. And ah during that time ah I prayed before I entered.

5:47 **Interviewer-** Um, hmm.

5:48 **Sister-** But I it was sort of mechanical I never learned to say to meditate.

5:55 **Interviewer-** Um, hmm.

5:56 **Sister-** Oh to pray in the listening way. And um, I just never occurred to me to listen and um they taught me to listen and so I think that God called me then (cough).

6:14 **Interviewer-** And what has surprised you the most about religious life?

6:18 **Sister-** What has surprised me the most? Dear ... I don't know what surprised me the most um.... I guess ah when I first entered I didn't want to be a teacher I wanted to work with

orphans um by the time I got there ah ready that I could do that there weren't orphans they were emotionally disturbed children and I did spend time in a summer with working with them. Um, but um then I suppose what surprised me the most ... was that you can find joy in what you think you didn't want to do at all. (Microphone falling on head)

7:49 **Interviewer-** Alright take two, keep going. Was there anyone while you were growing up was there religious life around you, women?

7:57 **Sister-** Um after we had moved to Hannibal I stayed for fifth grade through high school. I was taught by the Sisters of Saint Joseph and during high school I worked um at the hospital in Hannibal Missouri and ah they were run by the Sisters of Saint Francis. Ah so, yes I did.

8:22 **Interviewer-** And then how have um the your vocation changed over time how has your activities and interests changed?

8:31 **Sister-** Well I guess the way any activates change as you age.

8:35 **Interviewer-** Yeah.

8:36 **Sister-** You know um I no longer teach and as the years went by I did different things like um I remember my first year teaching ah I am not very athletic ah I was teaching first and second grade and these seventh and eighth grade boys came to me and said we would like to have a basketball team but we need a coach. And I said Oh I am sorry I know nothing about basketball. You don't have to know anything about basketball will you just say you are our coach we will do the rest we just need a coach to go with us to the games and um things like that. I had boundless energy so I said sure but I didn't know is that we had to I don't think they make them anymore a Chevelle car which is a very little car and I would

have to take 9 boys to the game in that little Chevelle car. Today I would probably be arrested for doing that (laugh), but I had boundless energy to do that sort of thing. Um and I didn't know anything about basketball so during the time when they called time out ah we would pray and I can remember many times going back in and a kid who never hit a basket would all of a sudden hit baskets or we would be tied at half time I would call somebody else to pray one of our community member they would do that they would pray we would win. At one point one of the coaches... ah gave me ah um gave me a foul card and it was because I was in a habit at that time and ah they said that I was disarming his players so but yah know... those were days that that kind of thing happened all the time and know you would probably.

10:48 **Interviewer-** Yeah.

10:49 **Sister-** You wouldn't be able to and so I have slowed down a lot since then.

10:54 **Interviewer-** Umm, what is the greatest blessing you have had in religious life?

11:00 **Sister-** The greatest blessing?

11:02 **Interviewer-** Yes.

11:05 **Sister-** Umm I guess what I am doing now is foster care. Umm... and I wasn't at all sure that I would get the okay to do that and I did and it has been.... Just life changing to me to be able to do that.

11:24 **Interviewer-** And then what were your greatest challenges of religious life?

11:27 **Sister-** Um I guess um some of the greatest challenges were umm ah... you know the vow of obedience. When I was here at Fontbonne in my Junior year my mother's sister died

suddenly and I was not allowed to go to the funeral. That um... and was told that if I it would be against obedience and that kind of thing doesn't happen anymore but at that time it was very very disappointing to me.

12:04 **Interviewer-** Yeah, definitely. And then, what had you been able to do as a professed sister that you wouldn't had been able to do if you did not become a Sister?

12:18 **Sister-** Um, I think I would not have had the freedom to move where I wanted to be. I think yah know if you start a family you have to have that in the back of your mind.

12:32 **Interviewer-** Yeah, definitely.

12:32 **Sister-** Community gives you the freedom to expand and do anything that a women can do.

12:40 **Interviewer-** Definitely, Um did you look at any or many communities before choosing one or did you just go right into your first community and say this is what I want to do?
(Laugh)

12:49 **Sister-** I um well in our small town we had the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

12:54 **Interviewer-** Um Hmm.

12:54 **Sister-** And then, the neighboring parish had the school sisters of Notre dame. And then, I um... worked for the Sisters of Saint Francis. And I liked all of them but I guess because I went to high school ah I had a relationship I had a relationship with the Sisters of Saint Joseph. So basically, umm I didn't consider entering any and maybe it's because... they are the ones who brought it to my mind to come it was not something that I thought of doing ah.

13:29 **Interviewer-** Before they mentioned it.

13:30 **Sister-** Before they mentioned it.

13:33 **Interviewer-** What drew you to your congregation and like did the mission influence you at all during to the congregation?

13:40 **Sister-** The mission?

13:41 **Interviewer-** Yes.

13:42 **Sister-** Ah umm... I don't think the mission did, all though I had in my mind um... you know working with orphans and I was told they did.

13:54 **Interviewer-** Yeah.

13:54 **Sister-** Ah and so yes that was much more appealing to me. I umm... at when I was younger I ah... probably before well during high school anyway and I had thought about becoming a nurse. I was working at the hospital umm, but the first I saw umm a little boy who was dying of cancer I thought I was not strong enough to do that kind of thing.

14:24 **Interviewer-** Yeah okay oh yeah definitely. At what age did you become a novice?

14:32 **Sister-** Umm... 18.

14:36 **Interviewer-** What would you like to share of discernment?

14:40 **Sister-** My process of discernment ah after I finally made um a decision ah my process of discernment wasn't too much it was then it was something that I knew that I wanted to do. God had as in many things in real life had called me to do this, so the community had more discerning to do about me than I had to do about the community.

15:10 **Interviewer-** And then what were the reactions of your friends and family after you decided discernment?

15:14 **Sister-** Shocked. Um my friends couldn't believe it um... In those days they sort of accepted that you get married right away. Have children so it was very shocked my mother was very much against it... Um, they had an umm they had an idea of what religious life was in those days you didn't see them out in public yah know all they did was that you knew of was pray and teach school. Um, so they had no relationship with any umm sisters so umm my mother was pretty much against it but in the end she was very happy it almost... You know I was always free then after my final vows to be able to go home and be present to her where as my married brothers were pulled to in-laws and I wasn't so she came around.

16:22 **Interviewer-** And then at what age did you take your final vows?

16:26 **Sister-** Umm I don't actually remember, but it was umm ah 7 years after I entered so let's see so I guess it was 67.

16:38 **Interviewer-** And then which vows did you take for instance poverty?

16:42 **Sister-** Poverty.

16:42 **Interviewer-** You did poverty just?

16:43 **Sister-** Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience.

16:47 **Interviewer-** And then how have the vows shaped your experiences as a Sister?

16:51 **Sister-** Well very much so ah you know ah... for instance I don't make a decision to go buy a car.

16:59 **Interviewer-** Umm Hmm.

17:00 **Sister-** I don't own a car. I have a car for my use. Ah um obedience yah know you sort of do what you are supposed to do yah know.

17:13 **Interviewer-** Yeah.

17:13 **Sister-** Follow the leadership um and chastity was never that difficult for me but umm poverty came kind of poverty and obedience...

17:26 **Interviewer-** Were the harder ones.

17:27 **Sister-** Yeah.

17:29 **Interviewer-** And then, how would describe religious life to a young person in discernment?

17:35 **Sister-** I would say that... give it a chance like I did there is fulfillment. I think there is great joy in having a community um to support you. Ah, we have an email that comes out asking for prays all the time ah or we can yah know somethings up that we need prayers to feel the community if your mother dies you feel the whole community coming to be present with you ah for that. I think that it's very unique umm... If you were out in the world yah know it would be yah you would have your close friends and relatives but this is like millions of women and that are praying.

18:28 **Interviewer-** How does your discernment influence your life in an ongoing way?

18:33 **Sister-** Could you repeat that?

18:34 **Interviewer-** How does your discernment influence your life in an ongoing way?

18:40 **Sister-** My discernment for religious life?

18:42 **Interviewer-**Yes.

18:43 **Sister-** Umm... I am not sure how to answer that I am I think yah know I am still I still discern everything... about not the religious life, um because I feel complete in that but in everyday life I think and religious life how to discern and basically how to ask God for the answers.

19:19 **Interviewer-** Then will you tell me about your community and how it is organized and structured?

19:23 **Sister-** My community at large?

19:25 **Interviewer-**Yes.

19:26 **Sister-** Okay well, we have a general councilor a council who is umm over like five provinces. Um then we have a Proventil council or it's called the Proventil team that is over our province. Umm... and ah we have regular meetings in our province and then we will have we are belonged to a federation. Umm so, that we also have connection with the other provinces and we have you know news notes that join us together with those provinces.

20:10 **Interviewer-** Have you ever thought about being one of the higher up people?

20:14 **Sister-** No.

20:15 **Interviewer-** No.

20:15 **Sister-** It's not a job that I would want or I care for. I have no desire to be a principal of a school or any kind of a leadership role I am just not that kind of personality.

20:30 **Interviewer-** Do you live with other Sisters and what is your place like?

20:35 **Sister-** I do live with one other Sister. Um, I live with when I first went to this place we lived with eighth and um little by little they either died or went to Nazareth. And now I live with Sister John Mandeville who is 83. Um we live in the city um and we live in a two family flat, but we live in the whole house um we have two dogs two children who are living with us.

21:10 **Interviewer-** And how old are the children right now that are living with you?

21:12 **Sister-** Right now um one is 15 and one is 3 weeks and then this summer Austin will come back from college he will live with us he is 21.

21:27 **Interviewer-** And then what is your current role in your community right now?

21:31 **Sister-** In my local community?

21:33 **Interviewer-** Yes.

21:35 **Sister-** I am just a sister.

21:38 **Interviewer-** (Laugh) Just another. Ah and then what does that mean to you to be a member of the community?

21:44 **Sister-** It means that... everyone has got my back yah know I was talking to um a boy the other day who is no longer in gang but he was in a gang and a I said, "you know what made you leave the gang" and he said, "there are days when he is sorry he left the gang because they always have your back." And I think I feel that way to the community I feel very supported.

22:18 **Interviewer-** Make sense. Umm have you had any challenges while living in the community?

22:26 **Sister-** I am sure there are.

22:28 **Interviewer-** Yeah.

22:28 **Sister-** But I am a person who doesn't remember so much the challenges as of the...

22:33 **Interviewer-** Positives

22:34 **Sister-** The positives um yeah as far as community goes great there's been lots of challenges with scary kinds with foster time that its things like that and but... yah know the biggest challenge is a Heroine addicted baby that's not so bad when you have a backing.

23:00 **Interviewer-** Yeah. Umm, can you tell me about your educational journey did you go to Catholic Schools, your college life?

23:09 **Sister-** I went to umm first grade to a Catholic School in Monroe City Missouri and then I went to public schools ah until I got to fifth grade and ah the last half of fifth grade through high school. I was in a Catholic School in Hannibal Missouri and then when I entered um... We had some classes at Carondelet and then we had at that time which we don't have any more the junior age. I went to Fontbonne and lived in St. Joseph fall and at Fontbonne and got my degree there.

23:48 **Interviewer-** And now we are going to talk about your ministries and especially you as a foster mom. What is the biggest joy you get from being a foster mom?

24:00 **Sister-** Well, I guess sometimes my biggest joy is the same as my biggest sorrow... when I have had a baby brought it back to yah know its health and it goes to a wonderful family who have been waiting forever for it.

24:20 **Interviewer-** Yeah. How many babies have you had or children?

24:25 **Sister-** Um, about... 5 years ago I quit counting when I hit 100 so I would imagine 106 7 by now.

27:37 **Interviewer-** Wow. Why did you decide to be a foster mom like what struck you?

27:42 **Sister-** Um Well the first inclination that I had I was teaching St. Genevieve, Missouri. We had a PTA meeting Um and I went as a teacher and they were talking about the need ah for foster homes that in St. Genevieve County. They really in St. Genevieve, Missouri the city they really need they had no foster homes. And that if a child or taken from um a family they had to put them in a holding cell. So afterwards, I went up ah said well you know I would be willing to do that. I talked to different teachers and nuns who were at the meeting they were okay with it. And so they said um I'm really sorry but you're a nun and we would have no idea how to license you so um we are really sorry and I said that's okay.

25:46 **Interviewer-** Yeah

25:46 **Sister-** Um and the next day um about 8 o'clock at night I got a phone call they said that we decided your place is better than a holding cell would you like to keep these. So we had a family come in it was this is St Genevieve, Missouri. We had gobs of nuns I don't remember I think about 18 and they were dirty the children were just dirty and we put them in bath tubs and gave them a bath and they were absolutely hysterical and had a

wonderful time. Um and all of the sisters came and they started going through giving there presents and giving their stuff all that kind of stuff it was it really was just an emergency thing. They um came the next morning and took them into St. Louis I guess into a foster home. So that was my first experience and then I let it drop after that. Then I moved to St. Louis and um with all teaching I made friends with parents who were foster mothers. They worked for a private agency in pre adoptive. And this one mother lady new that I was very interested and asked me to babysit and I did and then something happened on a Labor Day weekend and she was called out of town and she asked me to keep them again. And then she said, "And well yah know I just found out that I was pregnant how would you feel about doing this." And um I said, "Well I don't know I am teaching but maybe I could do it in the summer." She said, "That would be great my kids come home for the summer I would like to spend time and you could take over for me." and I said, "Okay, but I had that this experience that um and they probably won't be able to license me." And she said, "Well oh the agency I work for the guy is Catholic. I bet he will work on something." And he did. But before that happened um I made a retreat at Avila and it was a directed retreat and ah I told the director that I was thinking about that and I didn't know how the community would feel about it and she said basically told me to pray and I said I don't think anybody's ever done that and she said no probably not. You know as a Sister of Saint Joseph you can do anything that a women can do. So that really struck a chord with me in that afternoon I went out into Avila's neighborhood and was walking around. And I came upon a garage sale and I said, "You know I am just looking I'm at Avila on a retreat" and she had gobs of baby things and I said, "I see these baby things um I am thinking of becoming a foster mom I just like to look at these things

to see what I would need.” And she said, “You are was thinking that if you were thinking about being a foster that is wonderful” and she said, “I really want to be out of here and if you really want to be a foster mom I will save this for you and you can come back and pick it up.” I was walking so and she said, “You can have it all” and to me that was a great sign.

29:32 **Interviewer-** Definitely.

29:33 **Sister-** So I came back with a car full of baby clothes and basinets and bouncers and bottles and things like that. And then, I told Peggy the one I was told I would help her out and she said that I think your right that I think God is calling for you to do that and ah so then I asked the community they said yes and um that’s the story.

30:05 **Interviewer-** So what was the hardest part about being a foster mom? What’s the hardest thing?

30:10 **Sister-** The hardest part is they have a goal it’s called reunification of the family and there are times when they go back to somebody that you know is not gonna be good to them. That’s the hardest part. Just last year I had a little boy umm I kept for two years and he ah his mother was not mentally capable and so they put him with his father who had who didn’t even have a full time job and umm and they put him back. And he was very bonded to me so it was difficult on him and on me and I knew it was not a good situation. Ah supposedly he moved in with his sister so I was sort of encouraged by that. Um and then a few weeks later I see on the news that he’s missing so that was just totally scary to me. In the end he was found um it turns out that his dad went to jail and they put him with the mother who was incapable um and some of the family members came back and

kidnapped him but and took him back. But hopefully he is okay now but that's the hardest parts its hard always to let go but to go when you know it's not going to be good.

31:44 **Interviewer-** Oh yeah definitely. But the highs always out weight those lows.

31:47 **Sister-** Yes.

31:48 **Interviewer-** Is the process of the children leaving usually the hardest part?

31:52 **Sister-**Definitely.

31:54 **Interviewer-** Yeah. Just think of all the good you are doing for all the children that is definitely is very good. And what is your biggest like joy did you have?

32:03 **Sister-** I guess um like my last baby. I can't remember if I was doing this with my last baby. I don't think so. Um they ah.... They ah said that you know he would be needing therapy so it was life and he probably will but he went from having a very total stiff body ah to relaxed and happy um by the time he left he was 18 months and they thought he wouldn't he would always be delayed. He was right on target so that's one of my biggest joys. And then the 21 year old um when we said that we would take him they said okay and we took him because I had his sister who was abused he was shaken baby. Um and they said yah know if you take him he may be just a vegetable. And ah at the time yah know I was much younger and I thought yah know okay I will do what I can do and since I had his sister I couldn't see letting her go back into the system they were bi racial they were taken away and um... too Tennessee it was a long drawn out process. Ah people said this will never happen you will never get her back because of inner state you are not in her and blood all kinds of things happened should never of happened um for me to get them back. Um and I did and now he is 21 and he's on the dean's list of college and they

thought he would be a vegetable it's not my accomplishment but it's not my accomplishment.

33:52 **Interviewer-** But you helped along the way.

33:53 **Sister-** Buts all God doing it makes me feel joy.

33:55 **Interviewer-** Oh definitely yes yes so now what can you tell me about your communities prayer life and spirituality?

33:05 **Sister-** Um, as our prayer life has um changed a lot in the sense that we no longer have yah know prayers at 12 or 6:30 in the morning, but we certainly are very united ah in prayers we just had the feast of Saint Joseph celebration and it's so beautiful to see our liturgy's and... ah our celebrations of life. Ah now our prayer life Sister John and I often pray together um, but it's a lot more on our own except when we come together um and then it's such a priority that it's very enlightening.

34:56 **Interviewer-** Do the foster kids you have do they usually share the same prayer life with you while you have them or?

35:03 **Sister-** Um they it depends on the age. I mean we had the Eucharist in our host undenounced to me one of them found the tabernacle key and made their first communion at four but.

35:20 **Interviewer-** Oh no.

35:21 **Sister-** But umm they do they attend church with us um if they are infants like the one I have now they go to community meetings with me.

35:35 **Interviewer-** I bet the sisters love that.

35:36 **Sister-** Ah yeah, I think of the kids who have gotten old enough they have learned very much the value of prayer. Ah and when something is happening in their life and they say will you pray with me.

35:51 **Interviewer-** Ah that's awesome.

35:52 **Sister-** Um, one of them has nightmares um and has had for a long time um she he will ask to be blessed with holy water. And ah so I think I think they go away go away with the sense of prayer and knowing God loves them. Now that doesn't mean that they are always go to church. I say as long as they live in my house I say you have to go to church and I think they pray they complain about having to go to church sometimes (Laugh), but um I do think that they realize that God is there for them.

36:34 **Interviewer-** That's a great thing for children to realize. And then in your view how has Vatican two changed things for women religious in the US?

36:43 **Sister-** Well I think a lot more has to be done.

36:46 **Interviewer-** Yeah.

36:46 **Sister-** But I think it has been ah... It has been wonderful ah that we have been able to take on roles of like uh not me but other sisters have led parishes done baptism and do the homilies. Um and I think yah know making the roads to becoming priests.

37:14 **Interviewer-** That's awesome. What do see as the role of Women Religious in the 21st century?

37:21 **Sister-** I think umm it should be a very prominent role um not in educating right now like racism umm definitely leadership roles as well as any man can be and umm...

37:45 **Interviewer-** And then does your religious institution have a communal symbol to recognize your profession?

37:52 **Sister-** We did have a profession ah cross the wore for some time we don't know most of them most have a pendent that has CSJ on it which means congregation sisters of saint Joseph.

38:09 **Interviewer-** And then is it important to you to have a community symbol do you think times have changed in that aspect?

38:15 **Sister-** Um... I don't think it's important I think almost always they find out anyway yah know.

38:24 **Interviewer-** Yeah.

38:25 **Sister-** By the that that we don't need to show say by habit that we are sisters.

38:34 **Interviewer-** And then what are your hopes for the women religious in the future?

38:39 **Sister-** That they will be just as happy and fulfilled as I am.

38:44 **Interviewer-** And then for final thoughts is there anything else that you would like to share for anyone that is going to become a Sister or anything about your story?

38:53 **Sister-** Not really except to listen and um... follow your heart.

39:00 **Interviewer-** Okay, that's it. We are done.