

Sharing Our Marianist Stories, Episode 46 Audio Transcript
The Voice of Others with Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

00:00 – Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

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00:41 – Mike Bennett

That was Sr. Gretchen Trautman's experience when she joined the Marianist Sisters for her novitiate leading up to her first vows in 1970. Imagine the experience for Mother Pilar, Sister Emilia, and Sister Marina, who arrived in Somerset, Texas from Spain in October of 1949 to establish the first community of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate in the United States.

01:08 – Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

My hope would be that my little investment has encouraged or brought somebody to it. That I've been able to influence, and there's definitely a feeling I have that you pass on the gift to others, that others have continued the gift and that it exists and it's bigger, stronger, thriving. And in the Church, serving a mission that I think the Church really needs today.

01:36 – Mike Bennett

It's been 75 years since the Marianist Sisters' foundation in the United States, and there is no doubt that those three founding Sisters made an investment that continues to influence others. The Marianist Sisters in the United States now have communities in San Antonio, Texas and Dayton, Ohio. Their mission is to participate in faith communities; help build a church and society where all are included; respond to the poverties of our time, especially economic poverty; remain active with concerns of women; and maintain a global perspective while educating themselves and others regarding the interconnectedness of our global society. We are grateful for the continued commitment and contributions of the Marianist Sisters within the Marianist Family. I'm Mike Bennett, Media Administrator for NACMS. In honor of the 75th anniversary of their foundation, I am happy to share this interview from February 2024 with Sr. Gretchen Trautman [FMI] who has been the Provincial for the Marianist Sisters' U.S. Province since 2017. She resides in San Antonio, Texas, and is originally from Dayton, Ohio.

02:51 – Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

I was a Julianne girl. So, we went to the sock hops and the football games of Chaminade because the two schools had not yet merged. So, I knew Marianist men because of my brothers and cousins, male cousins, that went to the all-boys school. And so, I knew Marianist life. When the time came for me to pick a college, I looked at Kentucky, I looked at Indiana. But gee, right there in Dayton, Ohio was the University of Dayton. So, it was a good choice for me, and I could live at home and help my mom and dad and my brothers and stuff.

03:26 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

My faith had been important to me, even in high school. I was in Sodality. The Julienne and the Chaminade Sodality at times did do things together, so it just seemed natural. Go and join the Sodality out at the University of Dayton. I'd say key folks that I remember from that time would have been Hugh Bihl [SM], Larry Cada [SM], and certainly Sr. Mary Louise Foley [FMI]. So, we had little faith sharing clusters within the Sodality, and Mary Louise Foley was mine. So, I think she gets credit for my vocation, to tell you the truth, because she was the first Marianist Sister I had met, and that was a lifelong relationship from then on.

04:11 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

So, I also got to know the Sisters because at that time, the community residence was in the basement of Marycrest Hall. This was before our Sisters had homes off of campus. I also worked in the research center on the other side of the basement of Marycrest Hall for Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. So, I hung out a lot in the dorm, not because I lived in Marycrest, but just because it was a place to sit and study or grab a bite before I went to work or back to class. So, it was good to hang out.

04:43 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

And [I] met the Sisters. They invited me to meals. They invited me to pray with them and go see the movie "Sound of Music." And somehow, at that point, I was thinking religious life, but way in the back because I certainly had been dating and thinking of marriage and all that good stuff, too. In Sodality also instrumental was Father Phil Hoelle, SM. And if you were in Sodality, you didn't just come to the little sharing groups, the basic Christian community at that time, or attend Mass or something. It was expected that you have an apostolic mission or duty, that you were doing something. And so, each sodalist had to pick something.

05:27 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

I picked going to work at Dakota Street Center, and Phil Hoelle is key. He started that back in the '60s. So, by the time I came along in '65 / '66 as a college student looking for a ministry, I picked that one because it was a latchkey program at that time to work with after school kids, after school care. I remember a very old building, wood frame, two story. It burned down in 1974. And if you look up Dakota Street Center now, you will not find Dakota Street, but you will find Dakota Center. And I think it's on Barnett. It's huge. And what we did is latchkey and after school care. Now, you see the Golden Senior age program. It's an educational center for the West Side of Dayton. It's huge.

06:17 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

And so, I look at that as a taste of what Marianist life meant to me. It was the support of my personal prayer. It was also just fun, because to join Sodality was fun. And the other part of it I remember is even between classes when I wasn't in class, or up in the basement of Marycrest Hall. Peers for me would have been like Jim Vogt, Margie West-Cavanaugh, Tim Phillips [SM]. There's an era there of many people who have gone on to be in State Community or in other ways been in [institutions] like MSJC [Marianist Social Justice Collaborative], became great torchbearers. And so, that Marianist Spirit caught a number of people in my era, and some of us joined religious life, and some of them moved on to their own path in life. But the Marianist Charism was deep.

07:13 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

So, I joined Marianist Sisters from that experience, feeling good about the community. A little leap of faith here because I lived in Dayton, Ohio. I had never been on a plane. I had never visited San Antonio, Texas, [which] was 1500 miles away. So, when the time came for me to join religious life, I wrote and asked, “May I come?” So, I wrote in January. I got the letter in August, about two weeks before I was expected. I didn't know the Sisters in San Antonio, but I got on that plane and came all the way to San Antonio. People had bets on me. Maybe she'll last three weeks, maybe three months. Well, it's 50-plus years later and still going strong.

08:13 – Mike Bennett

You mentioned that there was a point that the thought of being a religious sister was in the back of your mind. I think you may have said the way back. But I'm wondering what brought that to the forefront? And then, what did that process of becoming a Sister look like?

08:30 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

Okay, ten years old Christmas gift. I wanted a nun doll, and they actually had them. And so, we've got a [picture where] I'm sitting on the couch looking like “Merry Christmas” and holding my nun doll. And that's when I was ten years old and enamored with the Sisters of Saint Francis of Indiana [who] were teaching me then, and I just thought that was the greatest thing. So, by the time I was in eighth grade, you could sign up to be in a little club that you wanted to be a Sister. Then I went on to Julianne, and then I wanted to be a Notre Dame Sister. All right, that didn't work out. My mother was very ill for a number of years, and so that was just an impossibility.

09:08 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

So, I went on to college. And I have to tell you, out there somewhere, I hope Gary Welshenbach is very happy. We were dating pretty seriously, and he asked me if I would come up to Sandusky, Ohio and meet his family. And I could just feel it coming, and I thought, “He's going to ask me to get married.” [That] kicked me into gear, and I thought, “Well, you can't get married and then decide it's not your thing, but you can go to religious life, find out. And if it's not, then you go back and find Gary.” So, that was the catalyst when he asked me for Thanksgiving to come and meet his family. That's when I wrote the letter in January. And [the Daughters of Mary Immaculate] didn't answer, and they didn't answer. Well, then I thought, “Well, God, look, you had your chance. And I tried. And if they don't want me, that's just fine.” Don't ask me why Sr. Maria Blanca [FMI] didn't write back for all those months. But eventually, I think God gets you where He wants you. That's one of my life mantras... We see things, and there's invitations, and there's relationships, and those form us. Those choices truly make us find our path. And it's God's way. And so, another one of my mantras would be the voice of others is very often the voice of God calling you. And that one stuck. And I don't know why, but I was pretty young when that one hit me.

10:41 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

But I would say those kinds of things: God calls you [through] other people, inviting you to do something, other people seeing something in you, and saying “You know what...?” And you would never, ever, ever have asked it of yourself. That would be me. More has been made out of me than I would have ever made out of myself. So, the thought of “Was I going to be a teacher,

or what? Are you going to be a nurse? Because both those jobs, you could raise kids.” I think I would have made a good wife and mother, but it was not my path. But those were the things I was seriously considering. Why would I want to do this? I think it's a rare, rare, .000 percentage of the human race that would choose to say, “God is so important to me that every day I'm going to have time with God, that I'm going to not just have time with God” - because you can do that married, you can do that single - but I'm going to set aside my life and say, “Whatever is God's design, what is it that I should do? What is my role? And I'll be a little part of something, just a little bit.” I wasn't planning much. It was just like, whatever they tell me to do, I'll do it. And it was.

11:55 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

I had no design in my head when I became a Sister. And if they say, “Do this. Get a degree. Could you do this?” You fill the need, and that would be how I was brought into the Marianist world. So, I've done a whole bunch of things. I've had a lot of careers, but in time you look back on it and you think all those were stepping stones. You can see the hand that initiated the path. So, I look back, and that's where it came from. And I hope Gary's happy somewhere out there.

12:40 – Mike Bennett

Was there a particular person that was making that invitation to become a Sister that sticks out to you?

12:47 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

To be a Sister, certainly Mary Louise Foley. And I don't think it was ever, “Would you become a Sister?” But it was just her personal friendship with me. I thought I was going to be an English teacher in high school. Never happened. So, it would be Sr. Maria Blanca who would say, “Okay, so you're going to become a teacher at St. James grade school. The day after you've finished vows, we're going to put you over there, and you're going to teach.” And so, things like that. It would be Sr. Maria Blanca who also said, “We think you should get a master's degree.” I would never have asked. Maybe I would have in time. But those kinds of leads, somebody saying, “This is what we would like you to do,” that's an obedience in religious life. But it's like you go where the need or the call is and whatever the group needed. So, things like that.

13:37 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

I would say the largest and “hugest” change in my life would be when we were at the General Chapter in 2012, and we were getting ready to vote for officers for the General Council. I was stunned because I got votes. And I have a good mouth, as you can tell. I can talk. So, I must have said something that somebody thought, “Oh, she should be on the General Council.” So, to get votes like that, it was... The impact is not so much on me, but our Province in the United States is small. Small! Small, but mighty. We're doing the right things. So, I would say that's the hardship. When you listen to the voice of others, and you realize the impact is not just on you. But what does this mean? And I said, “I just can't say right now.” Well, okay, overnight you pray about it, you think about it, you discern. The next vote is round two. And then, you get the votes, and they say, “Okay, now you have to say yes or no.” And so, again, it's just [the question of] do you hear the voice of the Spirit? And you say, “This is something God wishes, God wants. This is God's design. Or do you hear the other Sister saying, ‘don't you dare?’”

14:56 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

I said yes, but the impact was hard. It is a discernment when those moments come, because you can say, "I don't think so. I think I have to go back to the United States." But that really, in a way, changed my life. But I would say it was an explosion of understanding the international congregation or the global Marianist Family. It's like the little girl from Dayton, Ohio, coming to San Antonio: that was an explosion of experience. This [was] for me, too, but I felt like, "Well, I enrich the Province by what I have experienced." 2017, that term ended, and I did not accept to run for a second term because of the need here. And that time, I did say, "Don't keep my name on the ballot. It's just not possible." So, I think we all have to look at what does God put in our path? Who might be the person or the vote or job offer? Restlessness within, there's all kinds of things that could move us into new territory. I'm certain that you, too, can say, "If it hadn't been for that, I wouldn't have done this." Those are things I can look back on better and say, "Yeah, I think God was working."

16:18 - Mike Bennett

The vote you're mentioning there at the General Chapter, that was for the General Administration for the Daughters of Mary Immaculate.

16:25 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

That was for five years. So then, I became what we call Head of Temporalities, General Treasurer, and I was one of four on that Council. So, it's the Office System. You have a General Superior, Head of Religious Life, Head of Education, and Head of Temporalities.

16:42 - Mike Bennett

I know you're currently the Provincial for the U.S. Province. How have you seen the Marianist Charism impact your approach to leadership in those different roles?

16:55 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

Collaboration means more to me than it ever did before. So, if I were maybe in my 40s or 50s, it was nice to be in Family of Mary groups here in San Antonio. And I was in Dayton, Ohio, and here too. But I think once you've touched the World Council of the Marianist Family, and you see how it is thriving. What's going on? We're in 19 countries now. It was 16 countries when I was on Council, but we've expanded. I know the Marianist men are in 30, almost 40 countries, the Marianist Lay people are in even more, and [there's] thousands of Marianist Lay people across the globe. We're hundreds as FMI's.

17:43 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

When I think back in the day in the 1800s, you have Adèle, who's like me, walking around thinking about being a religious, got a proposal of marriage, took a couple weeks to decide, and said no and became our Foundress. You have Chaminade building in his mind, also, "I think I want to start a religious order." He was a priest. Their little dreams didn't come together for a long time. In 1819, I think, Adèle started correspondence [with Chaminade] because she heard her Association of young women [was] like a Sodality, and his Sodality going on in Bordeaux. Somebody introduced her to the thought that, "Oh, did you hear about him? He's doing it." She wrote the first correspondence to get the two of them communicating, and that happened for about ten years before they met face to face. And they merged in more than one way, not just

Adèle's Association and his Sodality, but they merged that vision of starting a family, a charismatic family with lay and religious, and it happened.

18:50 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

We're here 200-plus years later, and their dream, their vision that started just by accident continues. And I'm a little dust piece in that beautiful stream. To be part of something like that lifts me. And so, leadership, if I look back and I think, where are we going? What is this Marianist Family? It's how do we do it together. How do we support, build on, initiate, motivate? It's together, because alone, we can't do much: a little group of women here. But with others, and we stand shoulder to shoulder. I think that's something about equality that you see in the Marianists. You see it in the brothers and priests, but you also see it with equal voice. So, you get to the World Council and those voices at the table. There's four branches there because they also have the Alliance Mariale. But the voices of the lay people and the religious are equal. Now, there's a national [council]. I'm on a national council. I'm on the regional [council]. You see all those levels, and you think the gift is there. That charismatic family that started centuries, a couple centuries ago, that to me is what, if anything, has made me expand in my concept of leadership. And whether I'm leading, I'm not so sure. But to be *a part of* is maybe the word. Leadership for me means to be collaborating and be a part of something and lead by doing and showing and working with. So, that, maybe, is what's changed. The concept, the very definition of leadership is an experience of working together.

20:45 - Mike Bennett

Before we hear Sr. Gretchen's to our concluding question, I'd like to mention that you can watch a full video version of this podcast that includes photos from Sr. Gretchen's journey and pieces of the interview not included in this audio-only version on our YouTube channel at ThisIsNACMS. Thanks for listening to this episode of *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*, a production of the North American Center for Marianist Studies in Dayton, Ohio. Make sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts, follow us on social media at ThisIsNACMS, and utilize the resources on our website at www.nacms.org. And now, let's return to Sr. Gretchen for her response to our concluding question. We know that the Marianist Founders corresponded through letter writing. So, if you were going to write anyone, dead or alive, a letter and be guaranteed a response, who would you write to and what would be the topic?

21:52 - Sr. Gretchen Trautman, FMI

I would write [to] my father. In my journey in life, he certainly was a great influence. As I mentioned, my mother was sick, so my dad had a lot to do with my three younger brothers, and he was so strong in his faith. And I could remember conversations with him as a young girl. He wasn't Catholic in the beginning. He was Lutheran. He converted to Catholicism. His faith was very important to him in bringing us up as Catholic. And so, he definitely had challenges. But he would say, "Oh, Gretchen, I've certainly been pushed to the brink. I feel like God has put me right on the edge of the cliff. But he's never pushed me over yet." So, my dad's faith was very strong, but he felt God was challenging him, us, all of us. And so, I think of moments where he taught me things. Like, I'm a teenager, and I see him out in the garage, and he's got the old Western Flyer sled, and we had outgrown it. But my older cousin, Ed, had kids now, and my dad had gotten it down and he was steel-wooling the runners and painting it red, doing all this. "Dad, what are you doing that for? Just give that thing to Ed and tell him to do it." "Gretchen, it's the

right thing to do.” And so, his moves through life, no matter what it was, just as simple as without any fanfare. But those are times where I think, what would he say to me now? I've outlived his years. I'm older than he was, so his wisdom lives on in me. But I'd love to hear what he'd have to say about me now, and say, “Well, this is what you need to know for this time of your life,” because it's a very different time. And he lived through those years. I'd love to hear his insights. He was a beautiful soul, very much the core of my faith, too. I think of my grandmother and others, but he was pretty significant in my personality, but also my faith.