

Interview with Therese Whitsett
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Tell about your early life: your family, where you grew up, your priorities, your interests, your values

I grew up on the immediate west side of Indianapolis, St. Anthony's Parish. I attended grade school there all 8 years. Our house was two blocks from school and the church, so we were very involved my whole early life with Church. My parents had nine children, and I was in the middle — middle child of nine. Our parents taught us very early on to participate in and be active with the church, giving service, volunteering all the time with church. At that time I had all sisters in school throughout my years, so we had maybe eight Sisters of Providence there in the convent and it just seemed like we were involved with something service with the sisters all the time. So I grew up knowing them very well. Two of my blood sisters were Sisters of Providence. They both chose a different path as time went on, but God's Providence kept me here with the Sisters of Providence, so for that I'm very blessed. The sisters there in the house that we knew always seemed very happy. I liked watching them, and I like the way they taught me in school. They were just kind of involved with families at that time, even though I know in those days they don't go out much and things like that, but we knew the sisters very well. And so I guess they were always good models to me, as well as my own blood sisters. I came to Saint Mary-of-the-Woods from the time I can remember, I was in fourth grade, probably younger than that because my sister came to Saint Mary-of-the-Woods to the community when I was in fourth grade, so that's my first recollection of that. (both sisters older)

When did you first consider becoming a woman religious?

In the early days in grade school we read the mission books about the Maryknolls, so I always had in my mind I would be a Maryknoll sister because I wanted to be a missionary. All that excitement and things like that, and knowing other people. Going to a far-away place to be of service. And so you know when you are a kid you want to do this and want to do that. Then it left my mind completely. But then after high school I gave it more serious thought. I wrote my letter, that's what you did in those days: write a letter. I was accepted and I came in 1962. But my basic reason was to be of service. I don't know that we thought so much of ministry in those days, but more of being of service to the church.

What were your feelings as you entered the Sisters of Providence?

I thought it was very exciting. Of course as time went on it was very different, but we accepted, because we wanted to be a sister, we accepted the life as it was. I believe we were 46 when we entered. We were Golden Jubilarians last year. At Golden Jubilee time we were four and now we're three. I say to myself, why me? To me it felt good; it felt natural to be a Sister of Providence. And as I get older I see it's even more natural because Providence has been a part of my whole life from school through my life and in how I was called to different ministries.

How old were you when you entered and what were you doing at that time in your life?

I was 18 when I entered our community, very young. I entered right after high school. During high school we worked after school, and I worked for the Catholic School office, so I had worked probably two or three years during high school.

Describe for me what "the call" to religious life was like for you?

I always thought it was my idea. At first I thought it was my idea. This is what I want to do, what I want to be, where I want to go, being a missionary and all this. As I have grown older, I have realized it was God's plan, God's idea all the while because some of the things that I wanted, yes, I have been able to be and do, but God has been the one to carry me through and call me at different times in different ways, mainly through people who were instrumental in my going to this ministry or that ministry. And even though I had in my mind that it was my idea to be a foreign missionary, I found out that you don't have to go far away to be of service or be in ministry with people. In fact St. Philip Neri School is two mile from where I live.

Why did you choose this Congregation?

Well I grew up knowing the Sisters of Providence and Saint Mary of the Woods was always a swell place to come visit and see and spend some time here. When I was little we would roll down the ravines and all of that. We loved it here. It was space, the beautiful space of nature.

Having lived all these years as one, what would you say is special about the Sisters of Providence?

I would say the strong desire to keep ministering, to be for people how you can be, to connect with others doing ministry — It's not just our show. The whole idea of growing in our understanding of Providence and Providence spirituality, being able to share that with people. All the sisters I have ever lived with or knew in the community have really helped me.

Was there a point where you were certain being a Sister of Providence was the right choice, or was it more like a leap of faith?

I've always been very blessed and appreciative of God calling me to be a Sister of Providence. I'll tell you it was very difficult when people were leaving in the 70s. I could see myself as a Sister of Providence, so I couldn't understand, and the leaving of friends was difficult, but for myself I felt it was my best way to serve. I would not have been able to have the experiences or be with people as I have had if I were not a Sister of Providence, and to be able to serve as I have.

Tell about your life as a Sister of Providence?

I started out teaching first grade in Fort Wayne, Ind. Sister Adele Beacham was my first principal. She taught be a lot about the mechanics of school, but more than that. She's a wonderful person. I volunteered many times to go to Peru, South America. Then Mother Mary Pius very simply said in a little note, we want you to go to Cochabamba Bolivia in August to study Spanish. So off I went. I was so excited. So I went off to Bolivia with Betty Smigla and we studied very diligently for a year at the Maryknoll Center House. So I was reconnected with the Maryknoll, because we stayed with the sisters. Then I went to teach at the Jesuit school in San Jose in Bolivia and Betty was sent, in those days, up to Juliaca in the mountains. So after I returned, I was there two years maybe and then I came back *home*, and kind of floundered around a little bit. Then eventually I was back in the classroom, but shortly after that one of the sisters invited me to go to a migrant camp to do work because I knew Spanish. Well, I didn't know it as well as I thought I did, but I went. That was a great, bringing me back, kept bringing me back to the Hispanic community. After that I was invited to go to Holy Cross School in Indianapolis. And I was there for eight years, with Sister Adele Beacham again. She was the principal, and that was a great opportunity, teaching. And then after that I went to the Catholic Indian Mission in North Dakota. That was like a two year retreat, to see another culture, the Native American community which is really a forgotten people. So that was a real eye opener experience, great. So after that I was invited to go to Maternity BVM in Chicago, so I'm back with the Hispanic community again. After that I was privileged to

have a year's sabbatical at Notre Dame, and it was after that year that I was invited by Marikay Duffy to help her work at the Hispanic Education Center in Indianapolis. So I was there for 15 years, working with adults and children and programming and writing grants and all of that. That center merged, became incorporated with four or five other Hispanic organizations and was renamed La Plaza. That new plan that they had, they did not want to give direct service, and that is what I do, direct service of teaching. So I left there in 2006, and again Providence led me to an invitation to St. Philip Neri School, where I am now, teaching English as a second language. It's now called English as a new language because some children know more than two languages. Our school is about 99 percent Hispanic students, very close, about two miles from the city. I'm able to help children, help the parents in other ways, many ways. But the idea is that God keeps me with the Hispanic community, for some reason. But I feel very blessed and privileged to be a part of their life and to know them because they give us a whole new appreciation of their faith and closeness to God. Faith, family and flowers are their keystone of their life and their culture. So I do feel very privileged to be a part of their life. Anyway, at the end of all of it I keep saying, God is at the heart of everything. So that's my understanding of Providence, that it wasn't just my idea. So after all these years I can say that, that God is at the heart of everything and Providence brought me along.

Has your life as a Sister of Providence turned out the way you imagined it would when you entered?

No. It's ever changing, evolving, yes, I'd say. And that's part of Providence, too, to stay the course and see what excitement evolves. I should explain that Providence is the mainstay, the focus, but there are many aspects that come along. Sister Bernice always taught us, I had her in the novitiate, and she was always telling us that the one thing you are going to know is that change is inevitable in life. So that is true even of the Sisters of Providence.

What would you say is unique or special about the lifestyle of a woman religious?

For me I can say, as I said before, I never would have experienced so *many* people, varieties of people, ministries, been involved in people's lives and been touched myself so many different ways, different places. And the freedom to go and be where my sisters could not be. So I think that was a big thing for me when I decided to be a sister, and that was my whole idea of mission, being a missionary, to go where others maybe could not go. And the Sisters of Providence certainly have supported me, like our time all those years at the Hispanic Education Center, supporting our life there through the SP ministry fund.

What is your favorite part about being a Sister of Providence?

The excitement of these times, like the week each summer when we all get together and you see old friends and share, you just reconnect immediately with people and hear what other people are doing and think about what still needs to be done. I think also the very beautiful prayer services and liturgies at special days that we come together. It's like a reenergizing.

Do you have a particular philosophy about life that you would like to share?

Here it is. It's very simple. Everything is easy when you know how. That's what I tell the kids all the time. Especially the older children, sixth graders, who are trying to learn a new language. It's going to take you five years to learn your language. Be patient. Here I've been at it how many years, 30 years, and I'm still struggling with the language, learning new words. So I just tell them simply everything is easy when you know how.

What advice would you offer to women who are considering religious life today?

Consider it! Yes, it's going to be different, we don't know, and if it's not being a vowed member of a community, which was my choice, you're still going to pray first, be of service, pay attention where God's Providence wants you to be. Be open. That's what we still have to be even though we're vowed religious. You don't know what's around the next corner. Consider it because it's wonderful to share the same values as other people, you feel like wow, there's still people who value what I value, who challenge, who keep the blood movin'.

What do you think joining the Sisters of Providence offers to a woman today?

Well I'm just going to say the same thing. A life of prayer, a life of community, a life of service, the value of Providence spirituality. In any community you join you're with people who share the same ideals and values and who want to do God's work.

If you could do your life all over again is there anything you would do differently?

Nope.

Complete this sentence: I am passionate about ...

Living one day at a time and being the best I can be. Trying to focus. To do and be the best I can.
To live one day at a time and try to learn as much as you can from your mistakes and go forward.

Tell about your current ministry and why you choose to minister there?

It's my dream ministry. It's great, because I have contact with every grade level. I love being able to help the children and also speak with their parents. I feel very blessed and privileged to be part of their life and culture. Once there was a little boy in third grade from Honduras who had never been to school before. He cried for the first six weeks. Not a word of English did he know. He was never in a school with a desk, let alone 25 kids, so without a word of English, he was very scared. Over time and with lots of patience, the expression on his face began to change. But it took three years to see that progression. Now he's in high school and doing very well. I work with levels one and two, I pull them out and work with them one on one or maybe with the small group. Other times I go into the classroom and help the teacher or sit next to the child or work with another group. Most of our children are English language learners. In the whole school we probably have a handful of children who are considered level five, after you do a formal test with them. So the majority are still language learners. Sometimes I talk with the teacher and help them with resources, or just talk about children, their best way of learning, also. I *really can* enjoy being with the kids. And also getting to know their parents. And a lot of them have many, many struggles, and they will tell you what they are sometimes. We have a mother who walks probably 10 blocks or 12. She has three children she's dragging along. Two of them stay at school, one of them she's pushing in a carriage. She walks them to school in the morning and picks them up in the afternoon. So she makes four trips, walking, to bring her kids to school. They want the best for their kids, it's wonderful. St. Philip Neri is part of the Mother Theodore Catholic Academies, there are four schools and we are one of them. In many cases schools share resources; faculties join together for in-service days and support. And we try to gather part of the student body on Mother Theodore's special day, have a Mass celebration in honor of her. And our sisters started St. Philip Neri School in 1910. So that's another reason I feel really great about being at St. Phillip Neri. Sister Marikay Duffy, the sister I live with and worked with all those years, attended St. Phillip Neri grade school. A few years ago they did a really great renovation of this old, old building. They put in new windows, new lights, new floors, painted. It's

real bright. It's beautiful. I remember the transformation when it was dark and green, you know that institutional green. And the next September when they came back the kids' eyes were just all over the place. And it still is beautiful.

How has Mother Theodore been an influence on your life?

Her quotes just come all the time. I think that for me knowing that she came from France and had to learn English, struck me as something. It did not deter her from what she was able to do. And when you think about what a short time she really lived here, what was it like 14, 15 years and in ill health, she had many counts against her. So I sometimes say this to the kids, look, yes it's a struggle. We have this saying in Spanish Aunque sea difícil, no es imposible. It may be difficult, but it's not impossible. I think about Mother Theodore. She speaks French, learned English, and was able to work with people, start schools and accomplish many other things.

Tell about a struggle in your life.

Probably that I've grown in confidence, and I don't know about that middle child thing, but to speak up. I'm a real introvert, so to be more outspoken. Not so shy; I was always told you're shy little Therese, timid. That's what people would say about me if they were to describe me. She's quiet. But I've learned kind of overcome that, somewhat, but not totally.

Favorites

Favorite quote "Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God," Corrie ten Boom

Favorite flower: I like the daffodil; it's a simple flower

Favorite movie: October Sky. It's about people who were coal miners in West Virginia and the struggle they went through. And this little boy did not want to go in the coal mines, like his father, so he had this little riff with his dad. He wanted to go to school and learn to be a scientist and his hero was Van Braun the scientist. It's kind of quirky, but it shows how a kid can reach his goal, but not without struggle, with his father, oh my.

Favorite sport: I love baseball and the poor Cubs

My all-time favorite dessert is cherry pie

Favorite time of day: morning

Favorite saints: my mom and Mother Theodore

Favorite Holiday: Christmas, I guess because that's when a lot of people get together, families and so on.

Favorite childhood activity: playing with kids in the neighborhood. In those days you could run around barefoot up and down the streets. Now you can't go, some of our poor little kids they never leave the house, because they're afraid. But anyway we would run over to the park and run back, play ball.

When I am not at work or involved in ministry you are most likely to find me: probably reading or watching sports on TV or cleaning around the house or visiting family.

One thing most people don't know about me is: I rode a camel and I've branded a calf. I had no idea that the little calves cry. It was a sad thing.

My biggest pet peeve is when drivers, persons, pass you on the right side and cut in. I'm not going to talk about road rage, but that's how it feels.

Least favorite subject in school: Math

Favorite hobby: it used to be cross stitch, needle work, but now my eyes won't let me do that. I guess reading.