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Theresa, Loretta

Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: Sister Loretta Theresa

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: May 1, 2006

Transcriber: Will Beller

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Hello, this is 164th interview of the Bronx African American History Project. It's May 1, 2006, and we're here at Fordham University with Sister Loretta Theresa. Sister Loretta tell us a little bit about your family background, and how they came to New York City.

Sister Loretta Theresa (LT): My mother was born in St. Croix, Virgin Islands in 1907. My father was born in St. John's, Antigua in 1907. My mother came to New York when she was 13 years old. I'm not sure how old my father was when he came, but they met at St. Mark the Evangelist School. They both graduated from St. Mark's Elementary School, and they married when they were about 18-19 years old.

MN: Was St. Mark's the Evangelist in Harlem?

LT: St. Mark the Evangelist was in Harlem. That's correct.

MN: Was that a Catholic school?

LT: It was a Catholic school. My mother was Catholic for several generations, and my father – I'm not sure – he was a Protestant. I'm not sure exactly which denomination. Both of his parents were ministers. He was sent to St. Mark's for the education.

MN: Wow, what denomination ministers were they?

LT: I'm not sure of the exact title, but I do know that my great uncle started the African Orthodox Church, and later on in life my father became a minister and – we call him a priest, the African Orthodox use the term priest, and he later became a bishop in the African Orthodox Church.

MN: Was your father involved with the Garvey Movement?

LT: A little bit because his great uncle was one of the spiritual advisors for Marcus Garvey.

MN: What was this great uncle's name?

LT: Archbishop McGuire.

MN: That's an incredibly famous man.

LT: Yes.

MN: Have you met this man?

LT: No, I was a little tot when he died.

MN: Right.

LT: Yes, I did not meet him.

MN: Okay, now when you were born, where were your parents living?

LT: They were living in Harlem. Then my parents separated, I can't remember what – exactly what year, but it was early on.

MN: Yes, and so, where was your mother living when you were born?

LT: We were living on 8th Avenue in Harlem, and we didn't move to the Bronx until 19 – around 1942.

MN: Yes, and how old were you when the family moved to the Bronx?

LT: I was in the seventh or eighth grade when we moved to the Bronx.

MN: Yes, and what school were you attending in Harlem?

LT: St. Mark the Evangelist.

MN: Yes, right, and when you moved to the Bronx, what school did you enter?

LT: I continued to go to St. Mark the Evangelist, and then I went to Cathedral High School, but I went to the All Saint's Branch. You know, there were two branches here in the Bronx.

MN: Oh, okay.

LT: Yes.

MN: So there was a Cathedral High School Branch in the Bronx?

LT: There were two of them – St. Peter and Paul and Immaculate Conception.

MN: And where were they located?

LT: St. Peter and Paul is about a 161st Street St. Anne's Avenue, and Immaculate Conception about 151st Street around Melrose Avenue.

MN: Right, when you moved to the Bronx, what was the address that your mother moved to?

LT: Let's see, 1017 Trinity Avenue and then we moved for a small period – short period to Home Street. I don't remember that address, and then we lived on 1348 Clinton Avenue, and that's where the family was living when I entered the convent.

MN: Right.

LT: And I went to St. Augustine's during the week, and I made some very good friends at St. Augustine's Parish.

MN: Yes, right, did your family affiliate with St. Augustine's Parish as soon as you moved to the Bronx?

LT: Well, yes, my younger brother and sister went to St. Augustine's, but I continued going down to St. Mark's –

MN: Right, was there a reason why you chose St. Augustine's and not St. Anthony of Padua?

LT: Well, St. Augustine's was closer, but my aunts had come to the Bronx before we did, so they were the pillars of St. –

MN: Yes, so they were the –

LT: – Anthony's.

MN: – pillars of St. Augustine's?

LT: No St. Anthony's.

MN: St. Anthony's?

LT: St. Anthony's, right.

MN: So your, your family had its connections in both parishes?

LT: That's right. St. Anthony's was the, the first parish – I wouldn't say the first, but one of the early parishes that welcomed African Americans.

MN: Yes. When you were at St. Augustine's, was it a predominantly African American parish?

LT: No, it was just be – more or less beginning. There were Irish, Polish, German.

MN: Yes, and the same thing with the school?

LT: The school – yes.

MN: Yes, did you feel any tension surrounding race or culture?

LT: No, I did not.

MN: Yes, it was – you felt welcomed?

LT: I felt welcomed there, yes, yes. Monsignor Drew I think had come to St. Augustine's before I – just before I entered, yes.

MN: How many people came to mass at St. Augustine's on the weekends? Was it an active, dynamic parish?

LT: Now, I went during the week time.

MN: Oh.

LT: I didn't go to the Sunday liturgies often, and occasionally I went to midnight mass, and it was a full church. It was a very large church, and so there were people – it's a beautiful location. When the bell rang, it took me – the first bell – by the time the second bell rang for mass to begin, if I left my house on the first bell, I would be there, but it was in church on time. It was beautiful to see the people coming from different directions in church.

MN: That's, yes – it's on a hill.

LT: It's on a hill.

MN: Right.

LT: Yes.

MN: What was the neighborhood like on – your first apartment was on Trinity Place?

LT: Right, Trinity Avenue.

MN: Trinity Avenue, and how did this compare to Harlem?

LT: Well, it was less crowded, and it was very, how would you say it? Family oriented.

MN: Yes, so –

LT: And across the street from us was a family that moved up from Harlem, so we –

MN: So you knew people in the neighborhood?

LT: Yes.

MN: Were most of your family's friends from the Caribbean?

LT: Yes, but we didn't make that much distinction, you know?

MN: Yes, right.

LT: Yes.

MN: Was it fair to say that the Bronx was kind of a step up in terms of quality of housing, and just shopping, street life and the –?

LT: Definitely because I remember coming up on the trolley car and getting off on Caldwell Avenue to go to the real estate, and I thought I was going to heaven. It was just so bright and, and just so beautiful.

MN: This is going with your mother?

LT: Yes.

MN: To the real estate office?

LT: Right, to look for the apartment, yes.

MN: And it was on Caldwell Avenue?

LT: Yes, the real estate place was, and then we walked over to Trinity Avenue.

MN: Right, now do you remember the name of the real estate place?

LT: Oh, no [Laughs].

MN: You were welcomed at the real estate place?

LT: I must have felt welcomed it was like [Laughter] –

MN: It was like light, airy?

LT: Yes, yes, and many more trees.

MN: More trees.

LT: Because we lived a long time on 8th Avenue in Harlem, and the railroad was up there – the L.

MN: The L?

LT: Yes, yes.

MN: So, it was noisier, more crowded –?

LT: Right, right.

MN: Air quality was different?

LT: A lot of vendors were on the streets, which you didn't see up here.

MN: How was the shopping in the Bronx?

LT: Oh my, you could go to the Jewish section on Union Avenue – get good buys, and of course you could walk down 3rd Avenue to 149th Street, yes.

MN: At the Hub?

LT: Yes.

MN: So that was a plus a too?

LT: It wasn't called the Hub then because you had [Crosstalk], yes.

MN: Now, when you were in your early teens, did you have a sense that you would have a vocation?

LT: In – yes – well, I used to go on Saturdays to one of the convents at St. Mark's, and answer the door and help to do some of the cleaning around because the sisters – many of them went to school on Saturdays.

MN: Now, was there an African American religious order that you became affiliated with?

LT: The community that I joined – the Franciscan Handmaids of Mary, and I recall some sisters from the Oblate Sisters of Providence from Maryland visited the Blessed Sacrament Sisters, and – on a Saturday when I was there, and I remember one of the sisters giving me a little booklet about their community.

MN: Now, tell us a little bit about the history of this community.

LT: The Franciscan Handmaids of Mary?

MN: Yes.

LT: Well, our community was founded in Savannah, Georgia in 1916, but prior to the founding, our founder, Father Ignatius Lissner, was a missionary in Africa, and when he came to New York, he was – not to New York, I'm sorry – to the United States, he was assigned as a missionary in Georgia, and he established a number of schools and churches, and around the 1914-1915, there was a proposed bill that was going to outlaw white sisters or white people from teaching black children. And he had already on staff Franciscan Sisters from Ireland, and he was worried – how was his school going to continue if this bill became law, and so he was always interested in native vocations because he had been a missionary in Africa before coming to Georgia. And so he got the idea, "I can start my own community," because he had tried to get sisters from the Holy Family and sisters from the Oblates, but they didn't have any extra sisters to spare, and at that time, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, even though they were founded for African Americans and Indians, they were not accepting African Americans, particularly because Mother Drexel thought she would be taking away from the two black congregations, and

plus, you know, the mentality of the time, all right. So Father Lissner presented a constitution to the bishop, and he said, "Black sisters for black children." He used colored at that particular time. So Father Lissner looked for someone to cofound with him, and it was a young woman – Mother Theodore, who had been a religious in Louisiana in a small community that had been disbanded, and she already had vows. She was already trained, and so she consented to collaborate with him, and there were some young women in Georgia who were interested in religious life, so that's how we started in Savannah, Georgia. Thank God that bill did not become a law, and so our sisters were trained in basic pedagogy by the Franciscan Sisters who were staffing the congregation – not the congregation, but the schools at that particular time. However, there was a lot of poverty at that time, and there were very – actually no place for the sisters to continue their education, and – and since those sisters were already there, they could continue the, the work in Savannah. Mother Theodore prayed, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" because she realized they couldn't continue there. The sisters were doing laundry at night and begging along the waterfront, and some of the sisters were actually teaching in the school, but weren't bringing in enough funds. So the Lord answered her prayer through a request from Cardinal Hayes here in New York for the sisters to come to New York to start a day nursery. The pastor at St. Aloysius noticed a lot of young children unattended playing on the streets because their parents were working, so he requested Father Lissner, and Father Lissner and Mother Theodore got their heads together and said yes to come to New York to start the day nursery. So a few sisters were sent to New York in 1923, and the next year, the rest of us – as if I was a part of it – came to New York in 1924 – the whole congregation. We were released from – because we had allegiance of course to the bishop in Savannah, and since the bishop here in New York invited us, we had the permission to come to New York.

MN: And – so this was the entire congregation – came from Savannah to New York City and ran a day nursery at St. Aloysius Parish?

LT: The day nursery was St. Benedict's Day Nursery, right.

MN: And what, what street was that located on?

LT: It was on 132nd Street between 5th and Lenox, and that nursery moved later to the Kennedy Center.

MN: Right, I know where that is [Crosstalk]. Is it, is it still there?

LT: No, it's – it moved again in 1999. It is adjacent to our mother house on 124th Street opposite Marcus Garvey Park.

MN: Okay, yes. What attracted you to this community?

LT: Actually, the simplicity of the sisters, and I remember the sisters were able – at least the ones that I met – were able to, to find something spiritual even in the plains, and that attracted me – that they were just so, so warm.

MN: How, how old were you when you first had contact with them?

LT: I can't remember. It seemed like I always knew them [Laughs]. One of our – one of my classmates had a sister who went to the nursery, and I went with her a number times to get her sister, and I remember one time I decided I needed a job, and I went to the employment agency on 125th Street, and I saw these two sisters walking down the street. Of course I didn't get the job because the job was domestic work, and I guess they thought I couldn't do it [Laughs] so I didn't get the job, and I saw them. They were carrying packages, and I said, "Sister may I help you?" And I just knew where to go.

MN: [Laughs]

LT: It wasn't to the nursery, it was to the mother house, which was on 8th and 131st Street, and I just knew where – I don't know when and how I knew where they lived, and I, I just went ahead of them and took the packages, and one of the sisters was washing the windows, and then I also got to know them, some – I really got to know some of the sisters because when I went to Cathedral High School sometimes the Sisters of Charity would send books up to the sisters and ask me to take it to the convent. I went to the opening – what do they call it – the blessing of the mother house that was in 1946, and I remember in high school we had to write "What Did You Want to Be" or something like that. I wrote on becoming a nun. I did a little research on it. I wasn't really thinking about it that strongly then, but I guess it was in my subconscious that I would do that [Incomprehensible].

MN: Right, was your family supportive of you pursuing a vocation?

LT: Yes, but I wasn't too sure, so when I first told my mother about it, I wrote her a note, and I said I would wait a year after graduation, and it was taken so nicely, so I said, "Oh, I can enter now." She said, "Oh no, you said a year."

MN: Right, what sort of work did your mother do?

LT: My mother was a domestic, and when the war came, she worked in the war factory, and then she worked for Jack Frost, and then they moved out of the city.

MN: Jack Frost is what?

LT: It's sugar.

MN: Oh, so she –

LT: Sugar refining, yes.

MN: It was a – she worked for a sugar –?

LT: Factor – it was a factory – packaging sugar.

MN: Where was the factory located?

LT: In Long Island.

MN: In Long Island.

LT: Right.

MN: So she went from domestic work to factory work?

LT: And then when they moved to Long Island, then she worked for Catholic charities as a home attendant.

MN: Yes and is that –

LT: [Incomprehensible]

MN: What?

LT: That was her last job.

MN: Her last job?

LT: Yes.

MN: Yes – what are your recollections of the domestic work? Did she work for one or two families or did – day work?

LT: It was day work. It was day work.

MN: Now was she one of those people who lined up on street corners, or did she go through an employment agency?

LT: No, word of mouth.

MN: Word of mouth?

LT: Yes. I just learned about the – what you just mentioned about lining up on –

MN: They call it the Bronx Slave Market.

LT: Right on the Concourse I think?

MN: There was one on the Concourse. There was one out on Prospect Avenue and 161st Street.

LT: Oh.

MN: Several centers of people who lined – it was like the way Latino workers line up today [Crosstalk]. It was very common. Did you feel you got a good education at Cathedral?

LT: I got an excellent education at Cathedral. Yes, and also at St. Mark's because when I went to St. Mark's – when I went to Cathedral from St. Mark's the teachers would say, "Where did you go to school?" And I know that, looking back now, that most of the people in class were all immigrant children – first generation, and some of the English that I've heard, you know like news guys and things like that, I had never before.

MN: Right [Laughs]. Do you think your education was a cut above the public school education at the time?

LT: I know it was [Laughter]. It all – a lot depended really on what public school. I don't want to put down the public school just in general. I know even, I believe it is Wadleigh High School?

MN: Yes, Wadleigh High School.

LT: Right, and they had a lot of teachers that were really interested in their, in their students. You know, I was just fortunate to –

MN: Right, now when you became a nun, was it presumed that you would be a teacher of some sort? Was, was that a pretty close correlation or not necessarily?

LT: Not necessarily, and to tell you the truth, I just wanted to be a nun. I didn't even stop to think what would I be doing because the sister that I entered under, who I called my sponsor – she was not a teacher. She just helped around the house. She also helped in the infirmary if there were any sicknesses and so forth, so it really didn't matter, and in fact I was kind of shocked when I was sent to school full time, you know.

MN: You were sent to college?

LT: Right.

MN: And what college was that?

LT: Well, as – when we were novices we went to Manhattan Extension, and then when we, when I was professed, I was sent to the College of Mount St. Vincent.

MN: And then did you do graduate work?

LT: Right – Catholic University, and then after that I was assigned to Pastoral Associate at St. Aloysius, so I went to Dunwoody to take courses in masters of religious studies.

MN: Now, what does it entail being a Pastoral Associate?

LT: Well, I could say briefly doing everything that the priest does except say mass and you confessions. You know, I, I really was in charge initially of the religious education program, and sometimes organizing prayer services, visiting the sick.

MN: Have you lived in other cities than New York?

LT: I spent one year in Wilmington, North Carolina. I taught seventh and eighth grade combined, and it was my first taste of walking into a building and seeing black, white – this was back in 1954-55.

MN: So this was a Catholic high school?

LT: This was a Catholic elementary school.

MN: That was segregated?

LT: Right, the black school was about three blocks from the white school.

MN: Yes, and you were there for one year?

LT: One year.

MN: And then moved back to –?

LT: I was called back to St. Aloysius School.

MN: And has that been your – what are some of the occupational niches that you've worked in since that time?

LT: Well after I taught at St. Aloysius School I taught at Cathedral High School All Saints Branch. That was the same branch that –

MN: And that's on 160 –?

LT: That, no, All Saints Branch was at Saint – at All Saints School – 129th Street. But when the new school – Cathedral High School was built, all of the branches were closed, so it was just that one school. I was assigned to the main building, but I was very happy that the principal at All Saints asked me to stay at All Saints, so I stayed.

MN: Now, now when African American women embraced vocations, what – in your generation, were most of them directed to the Handmaids of Mary, or were some recruited by other religious orders?

LT: All right, when, when I entered, and I didn't even realize that, there were three predominantly black, traditionally black congregations. And when I entered, very few of the white congregations were accepting African American sisters, and I was blessed that I chose the Franciscan Handmaids of Mary so I didn't have the pain as some did who went to schools with the white sisters, fell in love with their charisma and their way of doing things and applied and were rejected.

MN: Now was Francesci your contemporary?

LT: About, I would think so.

MN: So she went in to a traditionally white –

LT: Congregation.

MN: – congregation?

LT: Right, right.

MN: And when did you meet her for the first time?

LT: I met her for the first time at a Franciscan conference. I believe the conference was on education – was a part of the Franciscan Federation, and it was on – an education conference, and I just remember her bright, beaming smile, and oh yes –

MN: Was this in the 60's or earlier? [Crosstalk] Or later?

LT: I believe it was in the 60's, yes – early 60's.

MN: Were there African American cultural influences in the Handmaids of Mary before the 60's?

LT: Well if there were, we, you just didn't pinpoint it, and it was just part of our life in a sense. We had, we had Caribbean sisters and sisters from the, from the south. We did not sing the spirituals much or the gospel singing because back then it was kind of considered Protestant.

MN: Right, okay.

LT: We sang the spirituals, but not at church. Okay, so I don't think that what specific –

MN: Now did that change at some point?

Interviewee: Sister Loretta Theresa

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: May 1, 2006

LT: Right I had the joy and privilege of attending the first meeting of the National Black Sisters' Conference, and how would I – I'll say it. I learned so much because we were taught mostly by white sisters, and so I didn't know too much about my own history I'd say and didn't even realize – even that part of my family was making history in terms of Archbishop McGuire. I had heard about him, and at one point I said, "Sounds like they're just making that up," but one of the big celebrations in honor of Marcus Garvey – I went to the Schomburg, and I saw a picture of my, my uncle, and I saw the booklet that he had, had written. And I said, "Oh, must be true."

MN: No because all – I've read a lot about Marcus Garvey, and his name comes up all the time.

LT: Right, right. Then I have another – his brother was a missionary in South Africa, and I met his wife, but she didn't want to talk about any of the, the problems in South Africa at the, you know, time.

MN: Now, to go back to the Bronx, when you embraced your vocation, you were living on Clinton Avenue between where and where?

LT: Between 169th Street and Jefferson Place.

MN: Oh, so you were right off McKinley Square?

LT: That's right.

MN: And what was that neighborhood like in those years? This was the middle 50's or early 50's?

LT: This was in the late 40's [Laughs].

MN: In the late 40's? Oh, okay.

LT: Well, my, my path in the sea that year I didn't go to the convent after I graduated from Cathedral, I worked at Metropolitan, but my path was from home, to St. Augustine's, to mass, and then down to school, or when I started working, it was to work, and then I took a few courses at Hunter College. So coming home 9:00 and I had no fear of walking up the hill because of the L home.

MN: So you used to take the 3rd Avenue L and walk up 169th Street?

LT: That's right and occasionally we went to the, the movies – the Towers [Crosstalk] –

MN: Sure I've heard of that.

LT: – on Boston Road, and I really didn't participate – I came – went down to Harlem. I belonged to the sodality, and we gave plays and things like that, and so that was my, my route. I

really even did – my brothers and sisters knew a lot of the people -- knew the people in the building, you know, “Good morning, good afternoon,” but I really did not after mass or after novena on, when I went to St. Augustine’s – there was one lady. We used to wait – a Mary Beck – she also joined the convent. She joined the Sisters of Christian Doctrine. After mass or after novena, we would come outside and just talk waiting for her mother, and we would always say, “She should be the nun,” because she was always, always praying. So I used to meet Mary Beck [Incomprehensible] and a few other of the girls, and we would just talk and then go home.

MN: Now, when you’re embracing this religious life, are you listening to secular music and listening to jazz and R&B?

LT: Yes, yes, and going to parties and dances. I have to tell you, the first time it really clicked in my mind that I really wanted to be a nun, I had a friend from Harlem that went to Hunter. At that time Hunter was considered kind of pink in terms of the communist scare, but anyhow, we were at a party, and evidently I must have been the only one from a Catholic school, and the gentleman I was dancing with said, “What school do you go to?” I said, “Cathedral High School.” He said, “Are you going to be a nun?” I said, “Of course not,” and the moment it came out of my mouth, I felt like I had lied.

MN: Wow.

LT: [Laughs] So later on I said, “I better look into this,” so that was my really first [Laughter] –

MN: Oh, that’s pretty cool. What was some of the music you were listening to in your teenage years?

LT: I’m trying to think of – Nat King Cole, “A Train” –

MN: Duke Ellington.

LT: I was too busy, busy dancing, and my friends – I mentioned that a group of friends moved up with us – the Wallace’s – we used to put on the make believe ballroom and we danced in the house, and I remember going with them to the, the Savoy. And one of my sisters had a friend that sang at the Apollo. I remember going to the – down to Amateur Night, Wednesday in the evening. So the – and also our church, St. Mark’s used to have a dance fundraiser, and I belonged to the band. My sister and I belonged to the band, so we started going to the –

MN: What instrument did you play?

LT: I didn’t play it that well [Laughter]. I started with the drum, but I couldn’t drum and walk at the same time – so the cymbals, and then I could carry the flag if the wind wasn’t too strong.

MN: Right, now when you were living in the Bronx, were you exposed at all to Latin music? Was that part of –?

LT: No, there were not, not too many people from the –

MN: There weren't that many Puerto Rican people living in that neighborhood?

LT: That particular neighborhood. I believe St. Anthony might have had some.

MN: Yes, a little a bit further south [Crosstalk].

LT: Right, not the St. Augustine's area.

MN: Did your family eventually leave Morrisania, and what were the circumstances that led to it?

LT: Now after I, my – who was the first to leave? My sister Alice, she moved from Clinton Avenue to the Patterson Projects.

MN: Right, oh, okay.

LT: And then from the Patterson Projects, she moved to kings. My sister Barbara remained on Clinton Avenue. She moved from 1348 because that was torn down, and she moved diagonally across closer to the corner, and we always said she was going to be there until the building fell, and it was almost close to that [Laughs].

MN: Yes, did she stay there through the period when things started to deteriorate?

LT: She was there, right, yes.

MN: And you visited her?

LT: Right.

MN: What was your, your, your sense about – this is I guess we're talking about the late 60's and the 70's – what happened? How did you explain it to yourself?

LT: I couldn't [Laughs]. It just seemed unbelievable. It really seemed unbelievable.

MN: What – was there a major drug issue that preceded the deterioration?

LT: Well, I did not visit that often, so I let's see – it would have been more towards the 80's. You know, I didn't visit there because when mother moved – wherever mother was [Laughs] –

MN: Right, and where did your, your mother –?

LT: She lived – her last place she lived was 163rd Street in those – what was it called, it was new projects at the time, but she was – was it for seniors? 163rd – let's see I had to pass Trinity – I don't remember exactly where – 630 East 163rd Street.

MN: Right, okay.

LT: But that was disaster too because the elevators were not always working and –

MN: So this is in the 70's and 80's your mother was on 163rd Street?

LT: Yes.

MN: I guess it's the Forest Houses, McKinley Houses, and then the one with the terrace – Woodstock Terrace – she wasn't in the terrace?

LT: No, no.

MN: So you were visiting her when she was living in public housing, and the elevators weren't working?

LT: That's right, so sometimes it was walking up eight flights of stairs, which wasn't too bad for me, but for her as an older person –

MN: Did she ever feel unsafe or in danger in her community?

LT: No, no. It was just the inconvenience.

MN: The inconvenience of a poorly operated, right. So, were you living at the Mother House in the 60's and 70's?

LT: Most of the time there. Part of the time I lived in Staten Island. We had a house in Staten Island. That's where we had the training for our sisters.

MN: Right, did your mother remain active at St. Augustine's the whole time?

LT: No she didn't.

MN: Where did she affiliate with?

LT: She did not officially affiliate with any of the churches.

MN: So she just drifted away.

LT: Right.

MN: And what about your sister on Clinton Avenue?

LT: Her grandchildren – some of them attended St. Augustine and part of the religious ed. Program because most of them went to public school.

MN: Did you remain connected to St. Augustine's informally at all?

LT: No, no. I used to come up – no just very seldom – I used to come up, yes, for First Communion or something like that for my nieces.

MN: Did you find what happened to the Bronx sad?

LT: Oh, yes, yes, I certainly did. I was happy, in reference to St. Augustine, they were one of the first churches that had gospel choir, and that was very – I remember bringing my confirmation children up from St. Aloysius to participate.

MN: When did they start the gospel choir? What years?

LT: Oh, I wish I knew. It was when Father Jeffers was there.

MN: Would this have been in the 70's? The 80's?

LT: It would have to have been in the late 70's.

MN: Late 70's?

LT: Yes.

MN: So Father Jeffers was the one who brought this into the parish?

LT: I would think so. There was a family – let me get it straight – Mrs. Lafory just died not too long ago, and she was one of the first ones that came to St. Augustine's back in the 20's when they were accepted in the church but not in the school, and she had memories. And this is a testimony to the depth of people's faith – faith. She had memories of going to, to mass and sitting next to little girls, and how they kind of take their dresses so it wouldn't touch the other person's dress, so in other words it was not that welcoming –

MN: And what was this person's name?

LT: Gladys Lafory, and I believe she mentioned to me that her son – someone in her family helped to start the gospel choir.

MN: Right, so basically she was not allowed to attend the school, but she was allowed to –

LT: Attend the church.

MN: – attend the church, but when girls sit next to her, they made sure –

LT: That's right – their dresses didn't touch hers [Laughs].

MN: Touch hers.

LT: Yes.

MN: Yes, I've heard similar stories from other neighborhoods in that period, and this the 1920's?

LT: Right.

MN: Right, so there's a whole history in this parish of coming to terms with African Americans both as people and as repositories of cultural traditions.

LT: Right, right.

MN: Did your congregation eventually embrace African and African American culture as an integral part of the religious experience?

LT: Yes, I would say that. In fact, realize that, let's see after the – even after the – I'm trying to get it, get my mind together – we've been using even the Nguzo Saba, the principles for Kwanzaa, particularly since you realize that you're dealing with people sometimes that come from public school. They know the principles, so to kind of relate them to the Catholic – not simples but the faith – to begin with that and to show them the relationship.

MN: Are you able to bring young people into your order and where are the recruits coming from?

LT: The recruits are scarce and far between, and to find the exact reading, reason – well I know that, you probably know that, St. Charles and St. Aloysius, those Harlem churches, just during the 40's and the 50's, they were coming in by the hundreds. When the 60's came with the Civil Rights Movement and so forth, and the ideas that went around among some people that this was the white man's church, so things started going down, downhill in that respect. And so, therefore, in some, some churches the younger people are few and far between, and in order to be attracted to religious life, first you have to be attracted to a strong relationship with the Lord, and also now there's so many ways of serving the Lord and serving your fellow man and so forth that there is a dearth of religious vocations all over, and since in the, in the African American tradition it has not been, accept maybe in Louisiana, hasn't been that strong, that young religious – it's, it's difficult. So we really have not too many. Now the, the last person who entered, that was like three years ago, was a person who was not that young. But living a life and saying, "Oh, I think God wants something different of me," you know, and I think this is a phenomenon that's being noticed in many of the congregations. Older women are entering –

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Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: May 1, 2006

MN: That's fascinating, and it, it makes some sense. In looking back at all of this, you know, what are some of the things that are – you would most want to communicate with young people today who would be listening to this interview?

LT: I would love to let them know, for me – I've been religious for 57 years, and I find it most rewarding – but I know that it's not for everybody. All right, but just realizing that I have dedicated myself to God, and that means it doesn't matter whether I'm teaching, nursing, helping somebody fill out immigration papers – no matter what I'm doing, it's for God, and it doesn't matter what I'm doing. It's representing him. You know, so it's – to me it's a marvelous way to say, "Lord I'm available to you to do what you want to do in me and through me for my brothers and sisters."

MN: Okay, well thank you very much for this very enjoyable and instructive interview [END OF INTERVIEW]