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Mercy sister shines light on Jewish-Christian relationship, lives of women religious

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

Sr. Camille: When Mercy Sr. Carol Rittner responded to my query about what matters to her, I knew I was at the start of an adventure.

Rittner: What is important to me? Well, lots of things, but for sure: Vatican II and its spirit in our church today; genocide and genocide prevention; Jewish-Christian relations; studying about and learning from the Holocaust and other genocides (Rwanda, for example) and how the institutional Christian churches as well as individual Christians responded to "the hounded and hunted" (or failed to); education generally; the Gospel and how we Roman Catholic Christians try to live it out in our world today.

I'll bet there's more to come.

I'm interested in the Vatican and its investigation of American religious women these past several years. I long to communicate the really wonderful "news" about our commitment to God and to all God's people and our ministry in our church and in our hurting world.

The proof of those interests is in your "short" bio, which reads:

Dr. Carol Rittner, RSM, a member of the Sisters of Mercy Mid-Atlantic community, is distinguished professor of Holocaust and genocide studies and the Dr. Marsha Raticoff Grossman Professor of Holocaust Studies at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. She is the author or editor of 15 books and numerous essays in various scholarly and educational journals about the Holocaust and other genocides of the 20th and 21st centuries. Carol has lectured around the world -- Canada, England, Ireland, Australia, South Africa, Sweden, Cambodia and Israel, to name a few places, besides the USA. Her most

recent publications include *The Holocaust and the Christian World* (2000); *Will Genocide Ever End?* (2004); *No Going Back: Letters to Pope Benedict XVI* (2009); *Learn Teach Prevent: Holocaust Education in the 21st Century* (2011); and *Violence Against Women* (2011). Her new book, which was just published, is *Rape as a Weapon of War & Genocide* (2012). Sister Carol also is working on a 60-minute documentary film, "Sisters," which should be available for viewing by April 1.

This tells us much about your passionate pursuit of justice and truth. But I'd like to go back to the "other things" you mentioned in response to my opening question. Would you tell us how you spend a typical day? I ask that question, already pretty sure your "typical" would be "extraordinary" for most of us.

A typical day for me begins about 5:45 a.m. with about two hours for prayer, reflection and reading, usually something in theology to nurture my mind and heart. Some mornings, my reading includes London's *The Tablet*, *America* or *NCR*. I also like to check out *The New York Times* online, at least to troll the headlines in order to get an idea about what's happening in the world. Then it's time to get ready for the day with a walk before breakfast. I respond to emails, then I put a few hours into study and research, usually in preparation for classes I may be teaching that particular semester. I'm always working on some lecture or book project, so there are contacts to make or essays to read. I have multiple involvements on boards (two small Catholic university boards, the board of a nongovernmental organization affiliated with the United Nations in New York, and an advisory board for a local museum here in South New Jersey). If it is getting close to the deadline for the online publication I edit, *Mercywords*, I try to find time to work on that. I also find time to meet friends, share a meal and enjoy a nice glass of wine. And, lest I forget, if it is a teaching day, I drive to The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, keep my office hours so I can meet with students or other faculty, then teach my classes. When I finally get home, I try to unwind by watching a little television, chatting with my friend and community member Sr. Deirdre Mullan, a Sister of Mercy from Derry, Northern Ireland, before heading to bed by about 10 p.m. I am not saying that every day is filled with all of what I've enumerated, but these are the elements of most days.

Can you point to any life experience or influence that put you on this trajectory?

Well, probably Pope John XXIII and Vatican II have had the greatest influence on me. One month after I entered the Sisters of Mercy convent at what is now Misericordia University in Dallas, Pa., in September 1962, Pope John XXIII opened the first session of the Second Vatican Council in Rome's St. Peter's Basilica. Although he died before the council completed its work, the pastoral tone he set caused the Roman Catholic Church to undergo an enormous transformation, one that some of the regressive Tridentine types are today trying to reverse, I regret to say. Two of the changes initiated by the council had a great influence on me. First, the Roman Catholic Church came to a new appreciation of Judaism and has since tried to free its teaching from inherited anti-Jewish rhetoric. And second, the Roman Catholic Church discovered a new sense of solidarity with other religious communities and with the whole human family.

For me, both as a Roman Catholic Christian and as a member of the Sisters of Mercy, Pope John XXIII and Vatican II continue to be influential and, may I say, formative in my personal life and in my professional vocation in service to all people as a teacher and scholar.

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What influenced your interest in Jewish-Christian relationships?

More than 40 years ago, I was shattered by Victor Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. How, I asked myself, could a place like Auschwitz have existed within the very heart of so-called "Christian Europe"? How could human beings separate Jews from others in the human family, force them into concentration camps, demean and starve them, then funnel them into gas chambers and burn them in ovens? Where were the Christian churches? Why didn't Christians help the Jews in their time of need? What, I asked myself, happened to the great teachings Jesus taught to Christians: "Do unto others as you would have them do to you"; "What you do to the least of your brothers and sisters, you do unto me"?

I remember being quite shaken by the realization that none of this seemed to matter very much when it came to helping Jews during the Holocaust. Why? I wondered. Why did the teaching of good and evil in organized societal and religious institutions fail to prevent the Holocaust?

Today these seem like naïve questions, but 40 years ago, I didn't yet know that Hitler and the Nazis had built their deadly ideology on the twin foundations of racist anti-Semitism and theological anti-Judaism in Christian theology. It was only later, after much agonizing study in scripture and other branches of theology, renewed and re-energized by the fathers of Vatican II, that I came to understand what unleashed such evil upon the innocent.

For almost two millennia, Christians clung to the "belief" that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. This so-called "deicide" charge kept alive anti-Jewish prejudice and hatred. It was used to justify everything from the persecution and expulsion of Jews from Spain, England and elsewhere in Europe between 1050 and 1650 to the vicious pogrom against the Jews known as *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, a pogrom engineered by the Nazis and their collaborators in Germany and Austria. It was my study of the Holocaust and of the failure of the Christian churches to prevent it that encouraged me to do my small part to promote better relationships between Christians and Jews.

Please describe your childhood.

I was born 70 years ago into a pretty standard American middle-class upbringing. My mother was a stay-at-home mom and my dad was a hard-working, successful businessman. I attended a Catholic high school in Harrisburg, Pa. -- Bishop McDevitt Catholic High School -- then went to Immaculate College outside of Philadelphia for a year before entering the Sisters of Mercy in Dallas, Pa. I was involved in many high school activities and worked for my father in one of his restaurants during summers and on weekends. I had two younger sisters and an older brother. My mother was Catholic and my dad was Protestant. We were all raised as Catholics, attended Mass every Sunday. We had family friends who were Catholic, Protestant and Jewish. We were, in short, a typical suburban family. We even had a dog named Cindy.

Did you have role models?

My parents were surely role models for me: faithful, honest, loving and welcoming to family and friends. Growing up, I remember being inspired by Dr. Tom Dooley and his commitment to people in need in Southeast Asia. I also loved the energy and commitment to public service of John F. Kennedy. He became president when I was in my senior year in high school.

What attracted you to religious life?

My high school teachers, almost all of whom were nuns, at Bishop McDevitt High School in Harrisburg, among them Sisters of Mercy from Dallas and Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters (IHMs) from Philadelphia. I was drawn to young, energetic women with attractive, loving personalities. They laughed with us, helped us decorate our gym for dances, and, of course, gave us advice about our worries and

woes, among which were our boyfriends, or lack thereof. They seemed perfectly normal, completely dedicated and very interested in us. There were some really great teachers among them. I also had two classmates who helped encourage an attraction to religious life -- Michele Lanshe and Cecilia Wambach. We were going to be nuns together. We ended up entering two different communities, they to the School Sisters of Notre Dame and I to the Sisters of Mercy. They stayed a few years, then left to follow new vocations. Still, without them and their encouragement, I seriously doubt if I would have "entered the convent."

Where do you find support for your many passions?

My support comes from other Sisters of Mercy, especially from my good friend of many years, Sr. Deirdre Mullan, but also from other friends, religious as well as lay.

How do you pray?

I hope you won't think me facetious when I say, "with some difficulty." Nearly every day during the 50 years of my life as a Sister of Mercy, I have tried to take some time to pray, usually in the morning, but also a few moments before going to bed. What does it mean to pray? Does it mean to recite the psalms? (I do try to do that.) Does it mean to quietly read the Hebrew and Christian scriptures? (I do try to do that, too.) Does it mean to "speak" to someone, some "person" beyond myself? (I do my best to do that.) Does it mean to just quietly sit and "listen"? (I even try to do that.) But, is any of this prayer? Honestly, I don't know. I guess it's why I am attracted to Jesus, who revealed the human face of God. I always just hope that I shall recognize him in others. (Something I confess that I do not always do.) Perhaps this is prayer. Honestly, I'm not sure.

Favorite scripture passage?

Jeremiah 29: 11-13: "I know the plans I have in mind for you -- it is Yahweh who speaks -- plans for peace, not disaster, reserving a future full of hope for you. Then when you call to me, and come to plead with me, I will listen to you. When you seek me you shall find me, when you seek me with all your heart." [Jerusalem Bible translation]

What led you to make "Sisters," the documentary you're working on?

The so-called Vatican "visitation" of American religious women.

What is it about and why does it matter?

Many Americans -- Catholics, Protestants and Jews -- have been surprised -- even bewildered -- by the Vatican's negative attention directed at Roman Catholic sisters in the United States. These women, who have dedicated their lives to God, to the church they love, and to all God's people in the United States and beyond, have influenced the lives of millions of people, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, through their work in schools, hospitals, orphanages and other social service institutions. They've been in the forefront of social justice issues, serving the poor and marginalized in the church and in society at large, advocating for the rights of women and children, educating immigrants and refugees, bringing health care to rural communities, and ministering to the elderly and lonely.

The presence and ministry of "women religious" (the canonical term generally preferred to the colloquial "nuns" or "sisters") have had a critical impact on the development of American Catholic culture and, in fact, on the building of American society as a whole.

While some people might prefer that the "good sisters" function as passive handmaidens to the clergy and hierarchy, American religious women think differently. Who are these women? What is it they stand for? And what is it they do?

Answering these questions in an attempt to make clear the value of these women's lives in contemporary America -- a value often obscured by myth, distorted by stereotypes or deeply misunderstood by a male-dominated religious hierarchy -- is the goal of "Sisters."

How does it achieve this?

"Sisters" is an interlocking series of profiles of five sisters working in America today: a pediatric emergency room physician, a counselor of college students, a sister working as the head of a nongovernmental organization at the UN, a woman organizing the rebuilding of homes in the poorest section of New Orleans, a senior vice president at a Catholic hospital serving the poor of Denver, and a campus minister and teacher at a Catholic college in Philadelphia.

But something makes each of these women more than just a committed professional, working to make the lives of others better. In "Sisters," we learn that each has a quiet and powerful center to her life. We see them in their work -- healing children, bringing comfort to the poor, and presenting an important moral example to young people -- and we come to understand that no matter what it is they do, they bring a kind of holiness to it. In their own voices, they tell us what their spiritual foundation is, what prayer is to them, what the face of God is to them, and how these things invest every effort of their working lives. They have dedicated their lives in a way few can truly understand, but many can appreciate.

"Sisters" not only tells the story of these remarkable women, it provides a kind of paradigm for all of us, a reminder of what it is to be a Christian today, to be genuinely human in a difficult world. In addition, "Sisters" will reveal their extraordinary commitment to the church they love and cherish.

Thank you for all you do, and please make sure to let us know when we can see "Sisters."

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available from Now You Know Media.]

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