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Interviewee: Susan Mountin

Interviewer: Michelle Sweetser

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Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

Michelle Sweetser: Alright, so we are recording. And for the record I want to state that today is

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

Susan Mountin: Well, and at that time and I mean I don't know if I could say it was more meaningful in the sense that because I did those things I never walked into Gesu with my classmates. However, I think my faith development through the Theology Department was extremely significant. I had extraordinary professors and great classes and I think it was at a time, when we were in a transition between the theology faculty teaching, but also being concerned about the faith development of the students. Certainly that starts to change in the seventies, after there is the development of Campus Ministry as a separate entity with a focus on the faith development of the students, and then the poor theologians having to meet all the demands of tenure and have the—I mean there were good things about wanting theology to be recognized as an academic department as a peer among other academic departments with the same kind of quality and expectations, for those faculty. But at the same time it feels—felt to me like we were beginning to lose something in that connection.

Michelle Sweetser: Sure, sure. So can you talk about some maybe some of these professors of these classes that were instrumental?

Susan Mountin: Many. Many. And I remember them well. Probably my favorite was Fr. Tom Caldwell, who is still here and up at San Camillo. He taught Old Testament courses so I actually took every course he taught in my four years. I think he was on sabbatical one year so I missed him. But Psalms and Wisdom Literature and it was just wonderful because he has a fabulous sense of humor—very dry sense of humor, a lot of puns he uses. And I would get so frustrated with my classmates, because they would just kind of like be asleep at their desks and if you really listened to him you were laughing all the time and he had this tremendous lexicon of the Old Testament terminology and history. And you just listened to him, he just made it engaging. Fr. Tad Guzie I had for several courses. He's no longer a Jesuit, he left and married, as many of my professors did actually. It was the time that that was happening, but I took courses on sacraments and sacramentology. Very, very, important I think in kind of an understanding the basic framework of the Catholic faith, particularly with its focus on symbol and sign. You know, really connecting with what I was also doing in my philosophy classes at the same time. You know, doing Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, where we spent time looking at sign and symbol. Or my metaphysics class in which we used Bernard Lonergan who is both a theologian and a philosopher who talked about metaphysical reality. And that enters into our understanding of sacraments. I mean, there was just so much rich coalescing. And I'm talking about this like it was yesterday and it was forty five years ago. But clearly it had a powerful influence on me and then—I can keep going?

Michelle Sweetser: Keep going! Yeah, I mean if there are more of like, let's, yeah.

Susan Mountin: Well, let's see, sophomore year, actually it was the cusp of the Vatican Council. And all sophomores took Vatican II theology with Father Bernie Cooke on closed circuit TV.

Michelle Sweetser: Oh, wow.

Susan Mountin: So you sat in a lecture hall of 150 students. Mine was in the biology building and looked at a little teeny tiny TV [laughter] at the front of the room, in which Fr. Cooke was giving us the lecture and then we met in discussion groups once a week to talk about this common lecture experience.

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

Which, was you know—was it a good methodology? Probably not. But I know, you know, at the time it was I think a way of having all the students as I look at it now as a professional and say we had a common experience. And there are few of those now in comparison. And there students and

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

so visionary in a sense. I don't know how many of us ended up—well actually quite a few of us ended up as theologians or working lay ministry, when I think about the people sitting around that table. So there was a vision of the

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

Michelle Sweetser: [laughter] Well, later we can talk a little bit about what's changed. I'll try to stay in that period I think now.

Susan Mountin: Yeah, the other thing I should have reflected on is that Father Naus's Schroeder Hall Masses down in the basement of Schroeder Hall before they partitioned the space, at midnight on Saturday nights. That was also my era. And there would be 350 to 400 students crammed in the place sitting in the window ledges and everybody'd come after their dates: you'd go out for the night or you'd go to the mov—whether it was a date or you were out with friends, you'd go out, you know, for the evening and end it with Mass at midnight. And it was, I think, when some of the leaders already of alums in the Milwaukee community, people like John and Mary Cary, and John with the MACC fund. They were regulars at that Mass, you know. And really powerful connections were made among people who prayed together. And I think that was part of Marquette's identity in those days.

Michelle Sweetser: Sure. What made that Mass so popular? Was it Father Naus? Was it the timing? Both?

Susan Mountin: That's a good question, I think it's a both and. I mean definitely because he could relax with students and have fun with students and you know do his silly things that he did at ten p.m. Mass in more recent years at St. Joan of Arc. It was important. But also the time. And you know, I think it became a really significant, common experience for students who wanted to have faith life as part of their lives. And we didn't have four p.m. Mass in those days. There was no Sunday afternoon Mass. This was like *the* campus Mass. So, it was really important I think in that sense. They were *fun!* [laughter]

Michelle Sweetser: [laughter]

Susan Mountin: The music was great. It was lively and

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susar Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

Michelle Sweetser: Ok, because you came back to Marquette in 1977?

Susar Mountin: No, I went from there to U.S. Catholic in Chicago and I was an associate editor at

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

Michelle Sweetser: Sure. "

Susan Mountin: One of those stories I was sent to cover was on the seminary here in Milwaukee opening to lay students. And I covered the story, and then went down to interview several of the administrators, the priests that were running the seminary. And at one point, one of them, an older man, probably in his late seventies—I don't know, you know at the time he felt really old,

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

Michelle Sweetser: I know you said it was

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

birthday, and we have fifty people here, somebody else here has a birthday today." And sure enough, there was another person with a birthday on the same day! I didn't *know* that!

Michelle Sweetser: [laughter] Wow, Statistically, really...

Susan Mountin: Statistically, if you have fifty people you should have two people with the same birthday. I have no idea. But it worked. But again, you know, what are the values of businessmen? And when you think about the work of Gene and Ed, you know over the years, how they brought those deeper questions into business education at Marquette. And why that was important. Journalism, Journalism ethics, you know, and the rise of the media. We could do things that would really, I think, augment what was happening in the classroom. So that was a big part of my job the first ten years."

Michelle Sweetser: And so it was not uncommon and then it seems to have forty or fifty students on these retreats?"

Susan Mountin: No, no, I mean some were smaller, some were

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette

Simmons Grant Oral History

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

kind of come back and talk a little bit more about your ongoing work in Campus Ministry and your work in Manresa and other programs. So—how long was it that you were affiliated with the Campus Ministry area?

Susan Mountin: I worked in Campus Ministry for twenty five years. And actually one of the things I had been thinking: "Oh I never talked about doing marriage preparation." Because in all my years in Campus Ministry, many parts of my job changed over time, but one of the constants was always doing marriage prep. And at one point, Fr. George Winzenburg and I—and this was early on—maybe after ten years, we actually did a survey of all the couples we had prepared for marriage either individually, couple to couple, or person to couple, pastor to couple, and then the young people that came on our

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

that little paperwork and working with the priests and the diocesan people in other places was part of that too.”

Michelle Sweetser: So in the 25 years that would have taken

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

Vigil is the fullness of the sacraments of initiation. And I don't want to say unfortunately, but the reality is that we separate those out for somebody who is baptized as a Catholic, generally.

Michelle Sweetser: Well I think that calendar would be hard, given an academic calendar too, because often students aren't here at Easter.

Susan Mountin: Although, if they were being received into the Church, then you know we—they would know, that they still have to be here at that time. And we only have

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

Susan Mountin: Well, it wasn't a group, that's more individual than anything, but definitely I saw quite a few young men who had fathered babies who had been aborted and went through or knew that their, you know, young women were aborting babies and went through an awful lot that they needed to process."

Michelle Sweetser: And did you ever get push back from anyone on on these conversations? Or the support that you provided to students who had chosen the abortion route?

Susan Mountin: That's a really good question. Push back from—I I think because of the strong role that the Milwaukee Archdiocese had—I don't know if you know, but Project Rachel, the post abortion ministry that is now international, was actually begun in Milwaukee by Vicky Thorn, Bill Thorn's wife, and she was working in the pro life office of the archdiocese and was getting phone calls from women who had had abortions or were thinking about it and she began to say, "What do we do for these women?" And at the time Archbishop Weakland was the bishop and he did those listening sessions with women on women's issues, you know, so there was a a strong support system saying we have to find a way to do this as a Church. And, you know, if Pope Francis were around then, the whole idea of mercy and forgiveness and love, you know, and and creating space for people, I think it's what—Rembert Weakland did as well. So I actually didn't get pushback from most people. Would I occasionally get hate mail? Yeah. Occasionally from an alum. Like, "What are you doing? Are you out of your mind?" You know, that kind of thing. And sometimes—sometimes words that were not quite so nice. But, I still believed that it was a really important ministry and to walk with a woman who has gone through such a horrible situation for her and who wants to come back into a sense of a knowing that there is a loving God that holds her, is a really powerful place to be."

Michelle Sweetser: Sure. Wonderful.

Susan Mountin: And we would average, oh I'm guessing, when we were really advertising on campus that we were offering a post abortion ministry, probably at least a dozen a semester. And sometimes it was their roommates and friends, you know sometimes it wasn't the woman."

Michelle Sweetser: Oh interesting.

Susan Mountin: Because I think for many women the effects of the abortion psychologically and spiritually, we know from research don't occur until many years after. And it may be some little trigger that clicks them into something. But the people around them that do know about it are more likely to struggle with it early on, and then the woman, later. Also, staff and faculty, interestingly enough, because they were in that later stage. You know. And something as simple one of things we found out, that something as simple as going to a party and being served a screwdriver because all of a sudden they remember having orange juice after the abortion. Or a certain kind of cookie, that they served after the abortion. Or hearing a vacuum cleaner. Just a very strange and it's often sensate kinds of things would trigger a response and all of a sudden somebody would find themselves crying or depressed or whatever, and come to see someone, basically."

Michelle Sweetser: So you had faculty and staff seeking out these individuals as well?

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

another hope they had was that more young people would think about church ministry as their life work. Based on the fact that if you looked at the statistics over time, there were fewer and fewer young people in seminaries of all religious denominations. And many of the people that were in the seminaries were in their fifties and even older and were in their second career. So the number of under thirty five year olds in the seminaries was very, very small. And so they hoped that with programs across the country focused on vocation and asking questions about purpose and meaning of life,

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

meeting.

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

and want to talk about that. And some aren't. And so, you know, it's like what kind of windows and situations can we create in which people can have those kinds of conversations? Not to indoctrinate them, but to give them space and freedom. Ignatius' St. Ignatius is very big on freedom. But it's a freedom that grows out of a sense of your gifts and talents given to you by God and a sense of gratitude so that you're free to act in light of that, as opposed to license. It's not license; it's freedom. Which are two theologically very different things. Does that make sense theologically?

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

Susan Mountin: Oh my God. And all I remember is, we – there was like Benediction or something going on and I'm up in the choir because my mom's singing in the choir and I look down and here are all these priests in there, and the acolytes, all male at that point, and I mean because I was nine, in their little lace dresses, you know. And all the incense and the

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Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

Michelle Sweetser: Oops! [laughter]

Susan Mountin: Which is pretty funny! Yeah, I mean yeah, they self select for Dorothy. So they knew something about her. And they were involved in hunger and homelessness things or justice issues, so they're very open. I think what was different is when they no longer because they changed the theology requirements then we no longer have the third level specialty classes. That then I started teaching Christian discipleship and morphed that course to include probably a third of the course on Dorothy Day at which point people hadn't chosen that, but all of a sudden were exposed to learning this model of being Christian. And for a number of students from very privileged backgrounds it was quite a challenge. You know, to look at the issues she looked at in through the lens and part of what I always said to them was that this isn't about trying to convert you. However it is about understanding the lens through which she looked at these issues and and claiming that you understand it. You don't have to believe it, but you have to understand it. So how can we help you with the learning process to understand why this woman believed what she did and did what she did because

Simmons Grant Oral History Project: Susan Mountin Interview
Marquette University Libraries

Michelle Sweetser: [Laughter]

Susan Mountin: In the sense that, you know, I don't want to flip us from a patriarchal structure to a matriarchal structure. And I know that there's a sense in the church right now, that that's what's happened. That you know, and I don't think it is the case. But there is a fear that—and and I suppose that anybody that's in power, fears relinquishing that power because, you know, the people that are moving in will have power over them. But it seems to me in good ministry it's not about power over or power under, it's about companionship and leadership with. And that's a very different model.