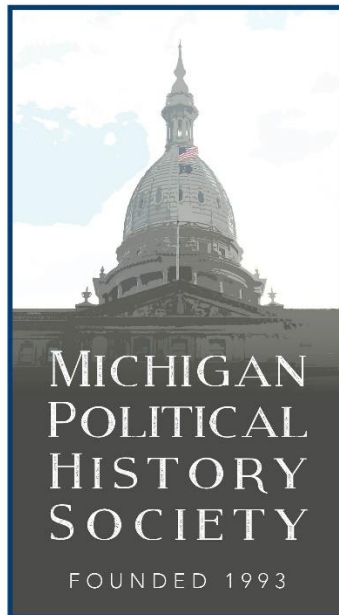


SISTER MONICA KOSTIELNEY

Interviewed by Larry Lee

October 14, 2021

**Sponsored by the
Michigan Catholic Conference
and
Michigan Political History Society
P.O. Box 4684
East Lansing, MI 48826-4684**



Paul Long:

Hello, I'm Paul Long, president and CEO of Michigan Catholic Conference. Since its founding in 1963, Michigan Catholic Conference has served as the official public policy voice of the Catholic Church in this state, advocating for justice and promoting the common good from June of 1972, until her retirement in November, 2010. Sister Monica Kostielney, a religious Sister of Mercy and gifted school teacher, devoted herself to the mission and works of the Catholic Conference.

At the outset of her tenure, she felt called to assist MCC on a critical ballot campaign and wound up serving as a materials and logistics manager for that successful effort. After a brief return to the classroom, she would rejoin MCC and serve as an advocate for education policy, as assistant executive director, as executive vice president, and as the first president and CEO. In those final two positions, she led the conference for 27 years.

Sister Monica was well known and highly respected by politicians, members of the judiciary, association executives, lobbyists, and others inside and outside the state capital community, and also, the statewide Catholic Community. She was appointed by four governors to serve on various boards or commissions. She played a consequential and substantial role on the issues of abortion, sales tax on food and prescription drugs, low income, energy assistance, welfare reform, assisted suicide, auxiliary services to non-public schools, the death penalty, education reform, and the list goes on.

I had the privilege of working for, and with Sister Monica for 22 years. I could not have selected a better mentor or colleague. It was always amazing to see the esteem in which she was held by liberals and conservatives, Republicans, Democrats, and independents, alike. For these reasons, MCC is pleased Sister Monica is now included in the Michigan Political History Societies, James J. Blanchard Living Library of Michigan Political History. This legacy interview by Larry Lee was recorded in her apartment at Mercy Circle in Chicago in October, 2021.

Larry Lee:

We're visiting with Sister Monica Kostielney, former president and CEO of the Michigan Catholic Conference, former teacher, and a highly respected voice on a number of issues; education, life, death, financial affairs, welfare reform, and a number of others. We're so grateful, Sister Monica, that you've joined us for this interview today.

Sister Monica:

Well, thank you. I'm very privileged to be here, actually humbled. The Conference is an important place both in history and in my life. And so, I'm glad that the Conference will be honored. Well, I am a Detroiter, I grew up on the West Side, and that's very important if you're from Detroit in a Polish Catholic neighborhood. At that time I thought that everybody lived that way, but when we got The Detroit News, I realized there was a society section, so I knew there was a great big part that great bands were brought in for coming out parties, and so it was a different society. But it was close.

I went to the Catholic school. My parents were from the same area and had a very happy childhood. I knew Detroit. I mean, I rode all over with my bike, so I knew where the Ford Rotunda was, Belle Isle, the zoo, Saunders, Hudsons, all those Detroit famous places, and the Tigers, of course, at the Tiger Stadium.

Larry Lee:

And you still root for the Tigers?

Sister Monica:

I do.

Larry Lee:

Good.

Sister Monica:

Despite everything else, yes.

Larry Lee:

Your family, your father and mother, how long had they lived in Detroit, by the time they raised you?

Sister Monica:

They were both born in Detroit. My whole family was born there. Actually, my grandparents were born in Detroit too, but from my maternal side, half the family went to the East Side and we had to convert.

Larry Lee:

Oh, they didn't mix, did they?

Sister Monica:

They didn't mix with the West, except when they visited. The East Siders always came on a taxi. The West Siders went to the East Side on the street car, and always came with white gloves and hats. We didn't wear white gloves and hats when we went to visit the East Siders, who were very active at the Polish Century Club, whereas on the West Side, it was Frankie's Bar.

Larry Lee:

Perfect. Your father did what?

Sister Monica:

My father worked for the New York Central at the time, Michigan Central. He was in the detective department.

Larry Lee:

In that famous Depot?

Sister Monica:

Yes, the famous Depot. We traveled there. We did have a family pass, so we did vacations on the train. I remember going to New York for one, and my mother was a homemaker, and my sister's 10 years younger. I had wanted a baby's sister for a long time, so when it finally came, I was happy, and I have been very close and loved her ever since.

Larry Lee:

The school you went to, was that a single gender?

Sister Monica:

No. I went to the Catholic school that was St. Francis. It was the parish school. There were 12 sisters teaching there. There were 12 classrooms. Early years, the first three years, we had a teacher who taught us Polish. I had a little bit of the language, which I didn't carry on afterwards.

Larry Lee:

You couldn't tell us anything in Polish today?

Sister Monica:

No, I couldn't, except one instant. When I was in high school, I worked in the bakery for a little while and what people would walk in and inhale, go like this, and I would say, "ładnie pachnie" which translated to: it stinks nicely, doesn't it? There is a better word for fragrance, "Zapach", but I didn't know that.

Larry Lee:

Your teachers, do you had some you admire? Is that when you first thought about becoming a teacher? Where did that come? Did you not know at that point?

Sister Monica:

No. Thinking of plans, I think I probably thought like everybody else did. Women's options were nurse, teacher, and certainly to get married and have children, but it was after I was transferred, when I graduated from the eighth grade, I went to Mercy High School in the Northwest Side, and that was a new experience.

At the time, Mercy High School, it was all-girls school, and it still is, but it was part of a quadrant. And that quadrant had the University of Detroit Boys School in Catholic Central and Immaculata. And we did share events of social events, sports, academic. And so, it was a new world for me.

Larry Lee:

And then in 1955, you did pledge to the Sisters of Mercy?

Sister Monica:

I did. When I was graduated from high school, I joined the Sisters of Mercy, whom I have had for four years in high school, right?

Larry Lee:

Mm-hmm.

Sister Monica:

And they were teachers. I thought I'd end up being a teacher.

Larry Lee:

And you're encouraged to do that? That's a decision you just came on by yourself? How did that work?

Sister Monica:

Well, that's a big decision in life.

Larry Lee:

It is a big a big decision. Yes.

Sister Monica:

A big decision, and it was not an easy one. In fact, it was very, very difficult. It's choices between family, religious life. And actually, it was a Jesuit, during a retreat, that knew I was struggling, and said, "When it's all over, at the end, what do you wish you had done?" And I guess now that's an old Jesuitical question, and it helped me decide, because I jumped right to the end and made a decision and have been very blessed ever since.

Larry Lee:

Did that lead to a convent life for a while,? Or what happened then?

Sister Monica:

Well, yes. I was in formation for six years. We were in an early formation as a postulant, and then a canonical novice, the requirement to stay within the convent at that time. And for religious instruction, our religious life, then we were a senior novice that began some education in college, and then first vows taken temporarily, and then taken two years, one of those years teaching, and then final vows in '61.

Larry Lee:

Okay. And then Mercy College. It wasn't Detroit Mercy at that time.

Sister Monica:

Right. By the time we finished, we had our bachelor's degree from Mercy College.

Larry Lee:

Right. And was that in teaching, or was that in another discipline?

Sister Monica:

No, It was in English with a minor in French and theology. It's a pretty standard schedule for the religious.

Larry Lee:

Was it at that point you started focusing on becoming a teacher?

Sister Monica:

Yes. Right. And we even took teaching classes. And I remember many from those classes. Those classes were really very good, and the techniques of teaching. But my favorite class also was this Mr. Lloyd Riddell. He was a practicing artist, sculpturer. The philosophy and the metaphysics classes were the two that really excited me. I still have notes from those classes.

Larry Lee:

Really?

Sister Monica:

Right. And then we also took one home ec class. And it was a very broad schedule of classes.

Larry Lee:

And then you did go to the University of Detroit for another degree.

Sister Monica:

I did. I was assigned to go there.

Larry Lee:

Assigned by?

Sister Monica:

By the superiors to, assigned not only to go there, but what subjects to take. I took English. And one of the classes that we had, it was studying medieval literature. This is prepared for a test. We prepared together and we prepared, knew everything we thought about, and we got into the class and there was a word, the tabard, and oh, I was so glad I knew all about what that tabard was. The historical beginning, wrote three pages, and meanwhile, this very bright girl in class walked right out. Oh, I feel bad she didn't know. Well, the test was, "Define tabard." And it's a cloak. The answer was one word.

Larry Lee:

Oh, and yours went on for a while.

Sister Monica:

Yes.

Larry Lee:

Was it in the incorrect, or was it?

Sister Monica:

Oh, it was correct.

Larry Lee:

Okay. Just way more than.

Sister Monica:

It was way wrong for me. I never used, I maybe blended it in someplace halfway, but all we needed to do was put a cloak.

Larry Lee:

A cloak. Did teaching follow right after graduation from Detroit?

Sister Monica:

Right. Yes. Right after. Yes, I taught.

Larry Lee:

And you wound up in Grand Rapids.

Sister Monica:

I did. Only two of us started at St. Francis Xavier, and there were three of us who were assigned to that school. We were all first year teachers. And I had the seventh grade. And I wasn't real familiar with the math that they were teaching. It was the new math.

Larry Lee:

Oh, yeah.

Sister Monica:

And so we spent a lot of time on poetry. I still get cards from some of those students, and on this Christmas card, he always writes, "Whose woods these are? I think I know." And they made poetry books that some of them still have, and really like all the poetry that they liked and wrote down.

Larry Lee:

That's got to make you feel pretty darn good.

Sister Monica:

Yeah, really, really. And I went away for a while and taught in Muskegon and then came back to teach at Mount Mercy. It was an all-girls school. And it was a fine experience. Moderated the yearbook and taught English religion.

Larry Lee:

And in that time, most of the teachers were religious women, or?

Sister Monica:

Except for two, all of them were.

Larry Lee:

And as I understand it, not quite the case today.

Sister Monica:

I looked up a little fact and I saw that in the state of Michigan, there are eight women religious teaching in the state, teaching elementary school. I think there may be some more teaching high school, and they may be working in other avenues, but they're eight. And six of them are in Detroit.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. And so, how long were you teaching at those schools?

Sister Monica:

Well, I taught at Mount for three year, and we had a little theater which was really good. But I had run a TV show. Well, I didn't run it actually. Students ran it, but I moderated it. It was Quidnunc.

Larry Lee:

TV experience does go back.

Sister Monica:

It was called Quidnunc. And Quidnunc, it means, now what? And we named it after our principal because we had a hard time getting approval for it. And so we named it after her, Now What? Because every time I walked in her office, that's what she said, "Now what?" And I always said, "We temporarily interrupt your child's education to send them to school. We're going to do this Quidnunc program." And so we did have a lovely, little theater in the school.

Larry Lee:

And then in 1972, the focus of your life changed significantly because of this conference.

Sister Monica:

Well, the principal received a notice from the superintendent of schools and superintendent asked if the Mount would hold a meeting that they would supply the panel for, if we would bring together the principals and teachers in Grand Rapids, because there was an upcoming campaign ballot issue, and we were to be informed about it. And so she asked if I would handle it. I did, and get the coffee ready.

Larry Lee:

And the ballot proposal was to legalize abortion.

Sister Monica:

Well, for 20 weeks.

Larry Lee:

For 20 weeks.

Sister Monica:

Yes. And the panel came, it was a theologian, Father Charles Dautremont, the superintendent came, Monsignor Zerfas, and then there was an attorney that was from Traverse City, Stuart Hubbell, and there was this lobbyist, Mr. Farhat.

Larry Lee:

From the Catholic Conference.

Sister Monica:

Yes, from the Michigan Catholic. He was the only one from the conference, but the other three had participated in activities from the conference. Mr. Farhat explained in great detail what the proposal was, what the polling had indicated at that point, and we were way behind. It was like 70/30. It was very bad.

Larry Lee:

It was apparently popular and had the support of the governor William Milliken, who was fairly popular governor.

Sister Monica:

That's right. And we were way at the bottom. And so it was trying to charge us up. Now, I had been told by the community that I had no more free summers, that I would have to either go pursue another master's or work for an advanced degree. I was prepared to study *La Cinema*. I was enrolled.

Larry Lee:

Say that again, that word?

Sister Monica:

La Cinema. In the '60s, that's what we called Fellini, and this was all big time foreign movies. And so I listened to the panel, and they explained it well. And then there was a question answer period. The last question was, "You really think you can win. How many babies are you going to save?" Father Charles Dautremont answered the question and said, "If I save one life, all our work is worth it." In a moment of clarity that I have never had before or since, it was a call. I knew I had to do something.

I didn't know who these people were, where they came from. I had worked when we got papers to distribute it on political issues. I cooperated, but I had never been to. I didn't know what the Catholic Conference was. We were walking and Mr. Farhat was the last one out, and I said, "I'd like to help you out." And he says, "Well, get your superior's permission and stop in and see me."

I went home that night and we had just happened to have our major superior as a guest. And she said, "You look excited." And I said, "Well, I just heard this wonderful panel, and I'd like to help them." And very quickly she said, "Go with our blessing." And the school was in a battle with parents because they were closing. That was going to be the last year of Mount Mercy.

Larry Lee:

The last year of Mercy.

Sister Monica:

I could leave easily without feeling I was abandoning students. And so I went to Lansing and we only had one car, and the principal drove me, and we went around the block once. I had wondered what that big building was. I had no idea.

Larry Lee:

Really?

Sister Monica:

Went in and there was Mr. Farhat. And he gave me a job description. I said, "No, you don't understand. I'm not looking for a job." And he says, "No, you don't understand." He had already done all his vetting. I really found that out later, because I didn't know about how people got hired. And so, I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, when you work here, you get paid and you'll have a car, and he said, "Because you're new, you really ought to meet with a lobbyist that has dealt internationally with this issue." He said, "Check

with the secretary and she'll arrange for your flight to St. Louis to meet him." All right. This all happened fast. And so I stepped out and got to St. Louis to meet, and of course, I had nothing to say because I didn't know anything about what I was getting into. And he was fine. And then we left, he gave me, we had a good conversation. He talked, he explained the issue, he gave me his business card. He had four offices, one in Rome, London, New York, and California. All right. I think he probably thought I didn't say much because I understood what he was saying, but that wasn't the real case and he never found out.

I came back and Mr. Farhat certainly was the mentor. And I began to work. The job description was materials manager, and so we were apart. And they got the first meeting. I thought this was going to be very easy. The first meeting was very conflictual because it was a group of the right to life people.

Larry Lee:

Who are not Catholic Conference there.

Sister Monica:

They were not Catholic Conference. And other people that were very strongly live. And it didn't. What was wanted did not break out from these groups, but there were the new photos of the unborn child from, I think Switzerland, and they were beautiful photos. And then there were what they call the garbage baby photo, to show the reality. And we were split in half.

Larry Lee:

About how to use that material?

Sister Monica:

... about how to use material like that. And the conference was adamant from its very beginning. There was no showing of violence, or brutality, or criminal. We were able to win and then we began our work at the Conference,

Larry Lee:

And you poured your life into that, to that campaign.

Sister Monica:

... to put my life in 12, 14 hours a day.

Larry Lee:

Wow.

Sister Monica:

And there was a lot of travel. And in those days, there still were the purple Monster papers. We didn't have computers, the machines, yeah.

Larry Lee:

The mimeograph. Yeah.

Sister Monica:

The lists were gold. And if you could get lists from every source, it was tough. And we couldn't use postage for.....

Larry Lee:

For direct mailing.

Sister Monica:

Yes. For direct mailing and stamps were gold. And I remember traveling in the summertime. I put way over 2,000 miles on the car very quickly during that time, and I was traveling to Flint. It was a beautiful summer evening, and we just went fast all the way and saw the police, passed them, thought, "Whew, that's over." But there was one waiting for me at the next few miles, and I'd never gotten a ticket before. And so I said, "Is a citation a ticket?" That was my question.

He says, "Yes, a citation is your ticket, but you can write on the back of it if you don't think you are guilty." And I said, "Thank you." And I left. I got home and I wrote on the ticket, "Dear judge, I am very sorry for my misbehavior on the highway. I certainly will not do it again, but the weather was clear, but I misused gasoline, but I'm really very embarrassed to ask my community for money to pay for whatever I was going to be ticketed." I got a letter back next week, "Dear Sister, case dismissed as per your note. Go and sin no more."

Larry Lee:

That's perfect.

Sister Monica:

I wouldn't speed on 27 for the rest of my life. I still have the letter.

Larry Lee:

Yeah, you shouldn't. Your last ticket, I hope. Did you do any speaking on that campaign, or the material?

Sister Monica:

Oh, yes. That was all part of it.

Larry Lee:

Okay. That was what you did.

Sister Monica:

We even, from all levels, going to convents to get prayers for the issue of speaking to the issue. And for many, it was a new experience.

Larry Lee:

New political involvement.

Sister Monica:

... political involvement. Yes. It was very, an exciting time, and it was a good time. And so there was a cold question of church involvement and a political issue. There was that, and later on in the education issue of crosses in the classroom. But what I quickly learned is, the public square, that was my office.

The language of political action and public policy really hinges on four words, if you think of it. And there're four very important words and a quadrant of words in the political square, and they are church, state, and religion, and politics. And Francois Mauriac only had one answer for why are those words important? And his answer always was that the works of statesmen and the political realm often become moral questions. And that was true when Francois Mauriac defined the four terms, it's church, state, religion, and politics, that continues today.

Larry Lee:

Well, simpler enough words, but it becomes extremely complicated when put into practice.

Sister Monica:

And there's much, much confusion of, we can't do this because the church states separation. We can't be doing it though, so I can't participate or whatever. And to explain that the church-state issue really, really belongs to the not having a church-state country, which is very different from religion and politics, which must be thought together.

Larry Lee:

And then the abortion issue was defeated by a landslide.

Sister Monica:

By a landslide. It'd be 60/40. It's not right or wrong because what the church says, but the church says it because it is wrong. And that's a different way. And so it's a way to look at the language and the events of what's happening with a little bit of depth to trying to understand what's really happening.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. And you had to reach people who were not part of the church. Right?

Sister Monica:

That's right.

Larry Lee:

And then the campaign is over and rather than go back to teaching, which I think you loved.

Sister Monica:

You're right.

Larry Lee:

... you stayed in Lansing.

Sister Monica:

... Well, I went to, I'll never forget that, because I got a call from the principal who said, "Look lady, you have five classrooms waiting for you. You got to get back."

Larry Lee:

That was back in Grand Rapids?

Sister Monica:

"You don't understand. You don't leave a campaign." This is in September.

Larry Lee:

Oh yeah. That's way too early.

Sister Monica:

And she says, "You don't understand, you have five classrooms of girls waiting to be taught. So, I said, "Well, I'll have to go tell the big boss." So I asked Mr. Bergeson, who was the executive director at the Conference. And he said, "We're so busy. Can it wait til tomorrow?" "Sure." "Because we're going to Grand Rapids to look at materials management."

And so, I'll never forget. I got in the car and he said, "Do you like music?" "Yes." He said, "Do you like John Williams?" "Of course, I like John Williams." So, I said, "This man is not interested in what I've got to say." And my principal is hot on my back. So I said, "Mr. Bergeson," I said, "I have to leave because I have to go to a classroom." And he said, "Well, you can't leave in the middle of a campaign. What do you teach?" So, I told him and he said, "Well, we'll take care of that. So, you can continue."

Well, that was interesting. I called my principal that night and said, "They said they'll take care of it." Well, her language was stronger than I'll say. She says, "Take care of it. They better take care of it. What do you mean, take care of it? What are they going to do?" I said, "I don't know. We talked about the campaign on the rest of the trip."

Well, what he did was, he went to Aquinas College and got five teachers from their staff, be willing to for the rest of the campaign to take my place. And they had wonderful teachers. It worked out very, very fine, but there was a lot of cooperation like that.

Larry Lee:

Well, had to be. And we did talk about Ed Farhat and you've talked about him being such an important part of your life, actually getting to the Catholic Conference and probably mentoring you while you were there?

Sister Monica:

Oh, absolutely. Everything I know about political activity is due to his teaching. He had two rules basically, for everybody. One was, "Never lie under any circumstances."

Larry Lee:

Easy for you.

Sister Monica:

Yeah, I never lie, just be honest. And number two, and this was really the more important one that was more applicable, "Never promise anything you can't deliver."

Larry Lee:

Yeah.

Sister Monica:

And people thought-

Larry Lee:

You better know what you can deliver.

Sister Monica:

Yeah, right. But see folks thought that because I was at the conference that we're interested in it, that we'd have lists of every single kind of contacts. We couldn't do that, couldn't give our... And so often, because I never did figure out what party Mr. Farhat belonged to, but he often had people from both sides coming to the conference for an issue. Which is they were Republicans and Democrats were back and forth at the Conference, and we negotiated with them and we worked with them. So you had to be very honest, because if you're not, you'll be spending all your time making excuses trying to figure out what you said to who and when.

Larry Lee:

Right, yeah. And that's interesting, it was both parties, because back then, it was more fluid of on life issue between Democratic and Republican people.

Sister Monica:

Oh, absolutely. It was a different age.

Larry Lee:

It's not as sharply divided as it is now.

Sister Monica:

I remember Barney Hasper. I don't know if you remember him.

Larry Lee:

Democrat from Muskegon?

Sister Monica:

Democrat from Muskegon. I always talked to him, "Yes. Hello, I'm Barney Hasper. I hold Mr. Farhat's seat in the legislature." He always dressed up as Santa Claus, if you remember.

Larry Lee:

He did. Yeah, on the floor of the House.

Sister Monica:

Yes, on the other hand.

Larry Lee:

Just before the Christmas break.

Sister Monica:

Right. And then of course, Judge Ryan would come in from the Sixth Circuit. And I remember him very especially, because when they were vetting him and coming, the FBI came and interviewed me and I asked for the man's credentials.

Larry Lee:

And he was Republican.

Sister Monica:

He was a Republican. Yes. And he said, Well, he didn't have any credentials on him. I said, "Well, I can't give you any what I know about Mr. Ryan then." After he did talk me into being able to say what I knew. And of course, I knew Mr. Ryan from a couple sides. But he was also a very loyal member of the Knights of Columbus. So, I used to see him every year on the island at the convention.

Larry Lee:

At Mackinac Island at the Grand Hotel.

Sister Monica:

Right. And of course he was a Catholic Central boy, and he did get that seat on the Sixth Circuit then.

Larry Lee:

And then you served in a variety of positions at the Catholic Conference.

Sister Monica:

I was an associate and then a vice president and then an acting director.

Larry Lee:

And then public affairs.

Sister Monica:

Public affairs, right. And then the Conference had was really three divisions in it. It was because its founders, and that's a very important part, were laymen, professional laymen with Cardinal Dearden. And it was unique because the laymen served on the governing board, not in an advisory position. They were full governing members, and they really pushed for the conference. Actually, there were important commissions going on and there was no Catholic representation. And they went to the cardinal and said, "We need Catholic people in those positions."

Larry Lee:

So you needed an organization that was the policy voice of Michigan Catholics.

Sister Monica:

Right. And it's very simple, because there were two things happening in the public. First of all, Vatican 2 was coming to an end or was ending, and there was a new definition for church. And that definition was the people are the church. Not the building, not the structure, but the people are the church. And that meant people had to be secondly, the person is important, that everyone deserves respect and dignity. And to recognize that in a matter of justice and mercy. That then said that was not only public policy to be engaged in public conversations, but it was really an attempt to be just to what the needs were of the layman.

Larry Lee:

Of society at large.

Sister Monica:

Society, yes. And I think Representative Ryan, that long term philosophical Speaker of the House.

Larry Lee:

Bill Ryan from Detroit.

Sister Monica:

Yes.

Larry Lee:

Democrat.

Sister Monica:

And he called them necessities so that we were engaged in conversation with the person, so it didn't limit us for his needs of housing, food, shelter, health, education. So those became, because of this person made in the image and likeness of God, who was deserving and had rights in these areas, that became our agenda.

Larry Lee:

Was that a formally adopted agenda by?

Sister Monica:

Oh, yes. Yes.

Larry Lee:

Okay.

Sister Monica:

For what was a matter of justice and mercy. And it was for engaged in conversation with the public, and it was never intended to be for Catholics only. This was one with society, for all people. And that was an important part of it.

Larry Lee:

That's interesting, because I don't think that's the perception of it.

Sister Monica:

Right. If there is that, and sometimes that's not perceived both by Catholics and others, but that was never intended. And so all those issues then became a matter of justice. And one of them was certainly pension, health, insurance. And then that became another whole division of the Conference, so that all church employees were merited for a pension. There was also the issue of insurance. Now up to that time, every parish, of course, handled its own. And you can imagine almost a thousand parishes bringing them together was a big task. And one of the things that brought them together was, in fact, a fire in Chicago where 43 children were burned. And I don't know how many women religious, but they were burned. And those lawsuits start coming in Chicago that Mr. Gallagher, who was the insurance person that brought finally to religious organizations, insurance programs for church employees. And we had 15,000 people that were insured. So there was the public policy division, the insurance, as a matter of justice, and then the finance.

Larry Lee:

And as I understand it, it's the insurance, those benefits, that make you unique.

Sister Monica:

In the country.

Larry Lee:

In the country.

Sister Monica:

That, and the laymen in governance. Because there were Catholic conferences beginning all over the country. And Jerry Coomes was responsible, the first one, for starting an association of Catholic Conferences.

Larry Lee:

Former executive director, and then lobbyist.

Sister Monica:

The issues were probably similar, but not another one, not any other conference has an insurance program.

Larry Lee:

Did that come about around the time it was reorganized in '94?

Sister Monica:

Yes, right.

Larry Lee:

And that's when you became president and CEO.

Sister Monica:

Well, I was temporary for a while. Interim. And then when the conference was bifurcated for a while, then when it came on, I was appointed. I was making arrangements for the people that had applied. They put ads in the New York Times and across the country, and I did not apply. And Cardinal was very close to the end, asked me, "You have not applied. Why not?" And I said, "Well, I've been working here for 10 years." No, it was six, seven years.

Larry Lee:

No. More than that.

Sister Monica:

And I said, "I thought you'd know me. And I thought maybe if you thought I should do it, you'd ask me to apply." And he said, "No. Well, that's not the way it works. You have to apply. And then go for a psychological test. The deadline is Monday. This is Friday. And we'll make arrangements."

Larry Lee:

Oh my gosh.

Sister Monica:

So I went Sunday, this was an interesting thing, to Grand Rapids to this hotel, in this psychologist's room at this hotel. This was a whole new experience for me. And so I had the test. I spent all afternoon, written and oral. And then the next board meeting, I was appointed.

Larry Lee:

By the board?

Sister Monica:

By the board.

Larry Lee:

Unanimous?

Sister Monica:

Yes.

Larry Lee:

Well, and here you are the first woman to be, at a Catholic Conference, certainly the Michigan Catholic Conference. I don't think it's happened much since then either.

Sister Monica:

Well, there've been a couple cases.

Larry Lee:

A couple?

Sister Monica:

I think. Yes.

Larry Lee:

Okay. And you're also the first woman to have the National Association of Conferences. So, I like that he came to you to talk about that. So, this was not a grand design that you had to become Chief of the Catholic Conference?

Sister Monica:

I had no grand design, but the way it happened could have made it more in my estimation of a call. I like that. I think everybody's called to a vocation. Nothing happens by accident. I really think the divine plan is so beautiful and if you're listening, it works out, so it worked out well.

Larry Lee:

This is an era, I mean, certainly we're well into it at this point of the women's movement and liberation. You did not necessarily think of yourself in those terms though, I bet? In terms of breaking barriers.

Sister Monica:

No, I didn't. And I think there were some women who thought I was co-opted.

Larry Lee:

Oh, really?

Sister Monica:

And strong about that, but it worked out well because the board that included the bishops who were equal with the laypeople on the board and myself, we were leaders in a certain area. I mean, I knew the limits of my leadership. We were not a theological group. So, we didn't. Although people misunderstood and would call and say, "We got this divorce."

Larry Lee:

Oh, really?

Sister Monica:

Oh, we don't do that. But we were really very, very solidly on our mission, committed to it, and didn't deviate, and the bishops.

Larry Lee:

Seven of them?

Sister Monica:

All seven of them. They were leaders in a number of areas. They were leaders in their schools, finance, cemeteries. But when they came to deliberate at the board, they were there for public policy. And if a question came to the Cardinal, he had a form letter that responded, "Thank you so much for your inquiry. It is an important thing. Please contact Sister Monica Kostielney down at the Catholic Conference. We'll do it." So, they respected the Conference and my leadership, and that was a comfort to me. And in talking with my colleagues, there were a lot of, nobody else had that privilege because in every case the laypeople were a subcommittee advising the bishop.

Larry Lee:

So that was a big bridge.

Sister Monica:

That was a big, big, and that was very different. In Michigan and Cardinal Dearden, I asked him once, "How is it that you can be so bold and call to action all the people?" He said, "Because the Holy Spirit works through everybody. It isn't just priests and sisters." He really thought the laypeople had a responsibility and gave that privilege and responsibility. And so when you're working within your own realm, with people who respect that, we didn't deviate and get into other issues.

Larry Lee:

So it operated pretty smoothly then?

Sister Monica:

Very.

Larry Lee:

With you heading this organization, then these seven bishops from around the state.

Sister Monica:

Right.

Larry Lee:

Coming together.

Sister Monica:

Oh, absolutely. Now that is not to say there weren't disagreements on issues.

Larry Lee:

We could talk about one or two.

Sister Monica:

There were disagreements.

Larry Lee:

What prevailed?

Sister Monica:

What prevailed was, I think, the style of disagreements, which is what we should use today. Anybody that had a different opinion was not viewed as the opposition, like in a war situation. It was viewed as a reputable person having a different opinion, and the opinion was different. The person is not necessarily an enemy of yours. And that's helped me a lot in dealing with a lot of people who do not agree with positions that I held, still today.

Larry Lee:

Right.

Sister Monica:

Because in many cases, we were fighting lost causes, education being one. So that made a real difference. There was a great deal of listening. That's important, to come to resolutions and to work for the good of the whole. And the cardinal recognized it would be a big sacrifice for people to have to change their insurance program or would have change their insurance man. But for the good of, and what it would do would eventually save people money. It just developed into something really good with communication, because we're tied now communicating electronically with every single parish. So, the only one time we were walking out of the beautiful boardroom, cardinal said to me, "You never talk about women's ordination." Now I said, "Why would I? That's not an issue over here." But I said, "Cardinal, why be equal when you've always been better?" Cardinal just didn't have a word to respond to that.

Larry Lee:

Well, this is the new building, which opened.

Sister Monica:

Oh, this is in the new building.

Larry Lee:

That was your vision basically, to have this building.

Sister Monica:

That was a great experience. That was built as a vision. It took a little while to get permission to rebuild.

Larry Lee:

Because you had a building.

Sister Monica:

We had a nice building. Jerry Coomes built it. And when we started talking about a new building, I called Jerry Coomes and he was really excited. In fact, he helped facilitate talking to Joel Ferguson, who owned the hotel that we wanted to build on. He was supportive all the way. And we were running short of space and we didn't have meeting space.

Larry Lee:

And the visibility is amazing.

Sister Monica:

Yes.

Larry Lee:

Down the street from the Capitol building.

Sister Monica:

Right. That was important to stay in. Because there were a few people that thought land is cheaper out, but we could justify. So, I didn't want to get involved with any companies. So, I called the University of Detroit's architecture department and asked if they knew somebody that was an architect builder kind of person. He came and he interviewed all 55 members that worked there, what they did, what they needed, what kind of furniture, what their task was, how they handle mail. And it was a beautiful report. It was not long. I took it to the board, but he said, "But there's nobody here that can do this." There wasn't. We were all working hard.

Larry Lee:

Yeah.

Sister Monica:

We couldn't take time. He said, "But there is a way to do that. There are a few people in Michigan who are project managers who are both architects and developers and builders, and they're skilled in both, and they can manage and also finance." And he had a list of about seven people. So, I took that to the board, "This is what we need. There's nobody here that can manage it, but we need to hire somebody to manage it." That worked out well.

We did hire Tom Marchesano, who was competent. He had worked at the Paragon. He had worked at the school up in Grosse Pointe and built a natatorium there. He was just very excellent. Worked out two years time, budget 10 million. It was just little things, like we had the neighbor, the house that was next door, she was complaining that the materials they were using, all the equipment, were cracking her windows. So, I talked to Tom about it and Tom said, "Don't worry. I've already taken pictures of all the windows around. So, we'll show her where these cracks were long before you started." We used Christensen Builders. They were specialists in political buildings. They had done work at the Capitol.

We had three members of the board that were on a committee, and the four executives, and each executive brought certain, see, I believe in community committee work where each one brings his or her expertise that you don't try to. So, we had Joe Mahoney did finance, Paul Long did what we needed. Laura was insurance, and I was there to make sure that there wasn't, you know, I don't want my office looking like a boudoir.

Larry Lee:

You think.

Sister Monica:

When the furniture would come, we brought it all in for everybody to look at, see how many strokes the fabric had. And when they came, when I would go through the building and have to put my hat on and boots and say, "She's coming through and she's wearing white gloves, so turn the music down." And then one of the things we did, Tom said, "Now, it's not in your budget, but these men are working in through the winter. It would be very nice if you put a little temporary heat in for them." And they were very grateful for that.

Larry Lee:

I'm sure they were grateful.

It was Michigan.

Sister Monica:

That was that kind of thing that was really fun.

Larry Lee:

Meantime, you are dealing with a lot of issues that are really hotly debated in society.

Sister Monica:

Right.

Larry Lee:

Assisted suicide, education, you mentioned, which involves how we treat non-public schools and public schools, same-sex marriage, welfare reform. I mean, the list goes on and on. Assisted suicide, national spotlight on Michigan. Did you ever meet Jack Kevorkian?

Sister Monica:

Well, I was in a room with him, but I never talked to him.

Larry Lee:

Never talked to him?

Sister Monica:

I never talked to him, but I remember going to, was it Oregon where they really started that? It was in Oregon and meeting with the bishops there.

Larry Lee:

The one with Alzheimer's. Yeah.

Sister Monica:

Yes. There on how they worked with it. And that was characteristic of the conference to meet with your colleagues to see what, how this all, how it works. And so, I spent time in Oregon studying the way they did it. First of all, you do a lot of study and understand so that you make no mistakes. That was it. And it was, again, it comes down to language. There were so many people that made the, that it was just a compassionate thing to do, in terms of letting people die or terminating their life. And there was a

certain difficulty, because you could have a person near death and give him whatever morphine to kill him.

Larry Lee:

Right.

Sister Monica:

On the other hand, you could, in the same room, have a same person, with the same situation and give them palliative care, giving morphine. And so, Jack Kevorkian, he himself made himself look evil.

Larry Lee:

He was the practitioner who operated out of a van for some of these things.

Sister Monica:

Right. And so, we were successful and that was a good education and a good campaign. It's hard to put these important things in a minute and a half or two minutes or three minutes.

Larry Lee:

Right.

Sister Monica:

There was a lot of teaching, a lot of travel, and that was a tough one.

Larry Lee:

Education.

Sister Monica:

Oh, that was very, very, very hard. And it still is now.

Larry Lee:

We have what we call Parochiaid proposal.

Sister Monica:

And we're not using that term anymore.

Larry Lee:

We're not using it, but it was aid to non-public schools directly from state resources.

Sister Monica:

Right. And although we were successful in so many areas, when it came to the voucher or education, Parochiaid, we never won. We didn't. I think I looked at a number of things. We looked about abortion and education, assisted suicide. The Parochiaid one lost big.

Larry Lee:

Big.

Sister Monica:

All the time.

Larry Lee:

And again, that was one that Governor Milliken was against you.

Sister Monica:

Right. Yeah. He was good to the end on that.

Larry Lee:

Yeah.

Sister Monica:

But I think part of the reason that it failed.....

Larry Lee:

It's in the constitution because of the vote.

Sister Monica:

Yeah. Right. People don't like to touch the constitutions.

Larry Lee:

Right.

Sister Monica:

It felt there was not union. There was strong unity and union in the opposition. MEA was a very, very strong people. And the people they served were very strong and united and supportive of their position. They wanted to continue their local government, local schools and not tamper with the pot of money that was coming out. That was a false part of it, but they were so united on that. Whereas in the non-public school community, they were divided in their support. There were some that did not want any religious loss. And if there was going to be any effect by losing some religious accoutrements or anything, symbols.

Larry Lee:

Or how much control could the state exercise if you're participating with them funding.

Sister Monica:

They didn't want to give up control. They didn't want to lose the religiosity of the event, and so there was just not union.

Larry Lee:

Because in addition to Catholic schools, there are Christian reform schools.

Sister Monica:

Right.

Larry Lee:

And Lutheran schools.

Sister Monica:

Right. When we lost, we lost big. When we lost, that was maybe by 30 to 70. And what was tragic about that is that

Sister Monica:

But when we lost, that limited our freedom, and when you limit somebody's freedom.....

Larry Lee:

The freedom of the Catholic schools?

Sister Monica:

Catholic schools.

Larry Lee:

Yeah.

Sister Monica:

Was that parents lose, society loses ... and that should have been a really liberal factor, but it wasn't. And we did lose, and that was sad.

Larry Lee:

And enrollment has continued to erode?

Sister Monica:

And the cost has gotten because again, you have salaries, and costs have increased. And so there were then attempts, and we were successful in some of them; we did get busing, if you recall....

Larry Lee:

Right, and non-instructional services.

Sister Monica:

Right. And also those services that were mandated by the state.

Larry Lee:

Correct.

Sister Monica:

And after a while, especially when the violence came out, there were rules about how many bushes you could put around your school and what kind of bushes they had to be, because there was the violence of people hiding behind bushes. So, we did gain something, and what was very important that was not understood or appreciated by the MEA ... and they were the strongest ... was that we were paying taxes and we supported their issues. Do you remember the piece that was going to refinance and change the financing of public schools?

Larry Lee:

Proposal A.

Sister Monica:

Because our children were in public schools, we supported that. So, we supported education ballot issues that supported public schools, but that was never given to us.

Larry Lee:

You had various governors with you and against you. Why don't you talk a little bit about how you related to the various governors over the years?

Sister Monica:

Well, there were different governors, beginning with Milliken through Blanchard, Engler, Granholm.

Larry Lee:

And the sides could change depending on the issue.

Sister Monica:

Right.

Larry Lee:

For instance, welfare reform.

Sister Monica:

Right. Governors come to their positions really pretty confirmed in their own views, so you can start right at the beginning, and no, you're not going to change anybody's mind. That happens before they get elected and maybe why they get elected. So, there are some issues that the governors agreed with us on and we cooperated and helped when we could, and there were very significant issues where they disagreed. So, we agreed to respect and honor the governor for his or her position and despite the differences that could be almost warlike and keep us apart.

Larry Lee:

Right. Today, would be warlike.

Sister Monica:

So, I met with the governors almost regularly. When the blessing of our building was there and had Governor Granholm there, they were picketing her outside the building.

Larry Lee:

Because of her stance on abortion and choice.

Sister Monica:

Right. And she was the governor and that was it.

Larry Lee:

And also a Catholic.

Sister Monica:

Right.

Larry Lee:

Yeah.

Sister Monica:

But for the most part there were regular meetings, and they understood us, and we did not try to convince anybody of anything. But we worked mostly with the legislature than with the governors.

Larry Lee:

Yeah, you would.

Sister Monica:

And that was great. And do you know one of the great legislators just died?

Larry Lee:

Dale Kildee, Flint.

Sister Monica:

Dale Kildee.

Larry Lee:

Democrat, almost a priest.

Sister Monica:

Yes. And I remember especially, he was very helpful. He liked to be the teacher and he liked to make sure that you understood fully. And I remember there was some compensation given to Indian tribes ... they had casinos and so we had a grand idea of what these Indians could do with their money. And so, I met with Kildee and he says, "No, no, wait a minute. No, don't be telling the Indians what to do with their money." And again, it went right back to that human respect that he had for and the rest, the differences. And the Indians up in Marquette, they've done some great things. They built housing for their people when the air patrol moved out.

Larry Lee:

The base, yeah.

Sister Monica:

The base moved. But he was like that all the time. And he visited the conference frequently, and it was close to us and we were blessed with him. That parochial thing, that started with Lyndon Johnson, which was really surprising because he wanted the Great Society and wanted everybody to be in school, so it didn't work out. When it got to the states, and I remember sitting next to the MEA, I forget his name. He was head of the MEA at the time, and he said, "You know, we're sitting next to the dinner and we're battling on this field." And he said, "I got to tell you something, though." He said, "My mother would turn over in her grave if she saw the two of us here, not because you're a parochial supporter, but because you're Catholic." It was really interesting. His whole thing was my religion. I don't know what he was, but that wasn't Catholic.

Larry Lee:

You don't know what he was?

Sister Monica:

I didn't know what he was, but he wasn't Catholic.

Larry Lee:

He wasn't Catholic, for sure.

Sister Monica:

So I was interested. He was very concerned about what his mother thought.

Larry Lee:

So, what about other people? You dealt with a lot of consequential people. Frank Kelley-

Sister Monica:

Frank Kelley was good. He was-

Larry Lee:

Attorney general forever.

Sister Monica:

Yes. We met regularly, and toward the end, he was doing research on his book that would eventually be written. We were close to the speakers all along. I remember Bobby Crim.

Larry Lee:

Followed Mr. Ryan.

Sister Monica:

Mr. Ryan, and the one from Ypsilanti.

Larry Lee:
Gary Owen.

Sister Monica:

Gary Owen. Every time I'd go see him, he'd say, "Now, look, I'm not doing anything for you. You don't even have to come here until you stop using Ann Arbor as your place of residence for that hospital, instead of Ypsilanti. You're on Ypsilanti ground." And he was real strong about that.

Larry Lee:
That was St. Joseph Hospital.

Sister Monica:
That was St. Joseph Hospital.

Larry Lee:
Still has a Ypsilanti address, I think.

Sister Monica:
Yes. But it's still there, and they've got a lot of land. They're doing some housing there now, which is really good. And of course, Mr. Ryan was the philosopher, theologian.

Larry Lee:
Teacher, again.

Sister Monica:
Teacher again, yes, and his wife was head of paper for the Dorothy Day House. She was very involved in justice work for the poor.

Larry Lee:
Another big focus for you, justice for the poor.

Sister Monica:
Yes, justice for the poor. The poor were always important. And that flows from a definition of what a human being is and what their rights are, and poverty. In a country like ours, nobody should be poor.

Larry Lee:
Giant topic, of poverty and healthcare and nutrition and housing. All of those were things she worked on.

Sister Monica:
Were really big. And one big, big one was when Pat Babcock was head of the social services he had a big program, and the program was to unite the welfare recipients from the Michigan welfare reform coalition. And the utilities, and everybody that had social workers, that had to do with services ... nonprofits, essentially, the nonprofits. And he had this good program which was interesting because he

assigned the Michigan Catholic Conference to chair it, so I was named to chair this and bringing together the utilities and the welfare reform people.

Well, so they met well over a year, every month, and they met in our building. The welfare reform folks, they were poor. They had no cars. They had no transportation so their social workers drove them, and they had no childcare so they brought their children. So, it was a room that a lot of these presidents of the major utilities were not used to dealing with good kids running around and people, but they were very well-behaved. We met for a year, and sometimes it was volatile; for me, a real eye-opener on the different utilities. Edison is very different from Consumer, and the presidents of those were there.

Larry Lee:

Were the municipal utilities different as well?

Sister Monica:

Yeah, Carl English was there from Consumers. And interestingly, the head of Edison's daughter went to Mercy High School, so he kind of thought I'd know his daughter: Mercy, Sisters of Mercy. And we worked for a year, and the content of a lot of the discussion was how much money the utilities were going to be assessed from their profits to pay for the legal fees of the welfare reform people filing suit against them. So, you can see, once there's money, it's very tenuous. But it worked out really, very well. There was legislation that was formed after that, from that. The reports were accepted. And it was kind of something that never happened before, and I know that it's happened since.

Larry Lee:

Here we are, as a society, quite divided. We find divisions almost everywhere, and they're very, very deep. You seem to have a pretty optimistic outlook about a lot of things and how we can solve them. What do you think we can do to get moving back to a society that works together well?

Sister Monica:

Well, like trying to resolve anything, you have to look at what is happening, and really examine what is happening and try to figure out why. And when you realize that in this argument, there's no understanding of definitions. People just talk and scream, argue, and there's not a conversation which involves two parties to listen, to think. And that, I think, is very important. And that's not enough, though. In trying to resolve some of this great division, you have to have some engagement. You have to be with these people and understand who and what they are. And then you begin to treat people not as an enemy, but rather, "He's somebody with a different opinion and has a right to that opinion." And that is what we have to try to do in our society, and I think it is very, very important to understand what is at stake here.

What are some of the results of the way we're looking at things? What is hurt? What is killed and why, and is that what we want? What is it that we are fighting for, or that we hold a position for? Do we know that? Or is it just going along with what the mob goes along to? I think it requires really sort of an intellectual assessment of what's going on and then trying to work for change, in what popularly is being held in different segments of the country, what they call a contemplative dialogue. So, there is a time of quiet. There is a time of prayer. There's a time of understanding and engagement with other people and then coming back to work out the differences.

Larry Lee:

When do you think people will find time to just be contemplative? That's a big order, isn't it? It's a tall order for a lot of people.

Sister Monica:

Right, it is. It's going to be interesting to see what happens after the pandemic. How much will we have changed? How much will we keep the same? And how will we use the electronic technology that is becoming more and more available, more cheaply? And who's using it, for what purpose, at what expense?

Larry Lee:

So let me return to your time at the Michigan Catholic Conference, your 16 years as president and CEO, and the remarkable people you must have been around or met and been introduced to. So how many popes are in that crowd?

Sister Monica:

Oh, that's a big list. That's an exciting list, and there were a number. Meeting Teddy Kennedy was good. Plus, I had a lot of colleagues that, in their own states, were revered and honored, and it was a pleasure to work with them. There were trips to Rome. Some were business, when Cardinals were installed. We did have an annual meeting in Rome of state Catholic Conference directors, and it was a pleasure. During Cardinal Maida's induction into the cardinal club, he invited me to meet with the Holy Father. And so, I met with him, and it was interesting, because one of the things I wanted to do while I was in Rome was get a new pair of Italian leather shoes that were not orthopedic. And I did get them, and that was the day I was going up to see the Holy Father, and people were reminding me, "Be sure and show him your shoes! Be sure and show him your shoes." I showed him my shoes, but he didn't pay much attention.

Larry Lee:

He's got the red ones.

Sister Monica:

No, they were not the red ones. So, he asked who I was, and the cardinal might have said, "She runs the church in Michigan." And he says, "Run the church in Michigan?" He didn't understand that. He said that and then he smiled and blessed me and we went. It was a short but a very meaningful meeting. Cardinal had a very human touch to him. He was a man who was a bishop.

And I remember once when we were looking at property for the new building, I took him around the city and was showing what we were looking. And we stopped at, actually, the place where we eventually bought the property, and we stopped and he said, "You know, it's a good thing you never got married." And I said, "That's a funny thing for a cardinal to say. Why do you say that?" He said, "No man could ever afford you." Because every time we wanted something, "Take down that paper wall that you're building out there. We don't need a wood wall. We need a rail, we need an iron ... and we need a little courtyard with a fountain. If we're going to be a neoclassic building, you do what a neoclassic place has, a fountain, and a fountain that could go out and have lunch." And so he said, "Well, you're across the street." I said, "I know, but we need a little courtyard." He says, "All right."

Larry Lee:

So you won again.

Sister Monica:

He liked fine things too.

Larry Lee:

Which naturally leads into another thing I know that you are very proud of, and that's the artwork in the new building.

Sister Monica:

Yes, we have a nice collection. The main part that exists through the building is two-by-six pieces of glass Venetian mosaic done by a 70-some year-old sister, Ignatius Denay, who did them on her knees because you had to do them on the floor. And there's one that welcomes people in the lobby, and then in the departments. But every single piece that's in has to be reflective and related to either the geography of the conference or the mission. Peter Max is one of my favorites. It's a big piece. It's gorgeous. And we have Pat McCarthy, the watercolor expert, did a beautiful one of the Capitol that we have.

Larry Lee:

Because that's where he worked. He was a political journalist.

Sister Monica:

For many years, yes.

Larry Lee:

Yeah.

Sister Monica:

And he also did the seven cathedrals, and he really liked the Marquette cathedral the best. So they were just great paintings. And we have, of course, the cross that comes in from Oberammergau. We have a picture by Mrs. Musser, and it is the picture of what you see.....

Larry Lee:

Marlee?

Sister Monica:

Yes. Of the St. Anne's Church on the island, from Mackinac, the race, that perspective coming in from the water. And she was very pleased that we wanted it. She was a very accomplished artist. We have a nice collection of the Virgin Mary paintings from around the world. The staff really enjoys it. It lifts the spirit and they enjoy giving tours to other people about it. We have another one at the side door that welcomes. It's a big, five-foot diameter, maybe, of the works of mercy and a wood carving done in France by Pierre Batique. Although Pierre was in France, did a lot of work and had a home in France, he did live in Plymouth and he was very fascinated with the Civil War, so he's done a lot of carving of Lincoln and the Civil War. But he did this piece in France. Actually, he did a little piece that I have in my apartment. Immigration wouldn't let it in when the driver went to pick it up at the airport.

Larry Lee:

What'd they think was in there?

Sister Monica:

I don't know, but they must have looked at what we were sneaking into the country. So, it was a Friday, we were having the board meeting the next week, there'd be an unveiling and a blessing. And called Senator Levin's office. He answered the phone. It was Friday, about seven o'clock, and it was there when Tom Marchisano, the building manager, went to pick it up. He couldn't believe the transformation and what happened and how this person just couldn't do enough of lifting it up, and also, "Who do you know?" kind of thing.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. You know everyone, that's who.

Sister Monica:

Senator Levin was very helpful. The cardinal, at one time, was looking at property in Washington, and because Levin was in charge of the armed forces, he was chair of that committee. And the armed forces owned that property, and he made it available to the conference. That was very good.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. You made a reference to the art in your apartment, and we are in Chicago. You left Michigan a few years after retiring. You're now living in this Sisters of Mercy retirement village, I guess. It's quite lovely.

Sister Monica:

Yes, and brand new.

Larry Lee:

Yeah.

Sister Monica:

And I was able to bring some of my art, some of it personal. I have a favorite of St. Peter, the first Pope. It was painted by Leland Beaman, who was in Jackson, Michigan at the time, has now moved to Arizona and is doing scenes from Arizona. But John McCain became a great collector of Leland Beaman's work and has quite a collection of it. But this Peter is right after he's been forgiven by the Lord, and it's a very touching picture. I have by my niece, who is an artist. While she was a student at Connecticut, did a picture of an icon of Michael the archangel, and did it right as a true icon, making the paints, and did it with an iconographer teaching them, that they did it in silence and with oil on their hands.

Larry Lee:

A lot of discipline.

Sister Monica:

Yes. It's very good.

Larry Lee:

A lot of discipline.

Sister Monica:

Yes. Really a treasure. I have a few awards that I've hung up, just a reminder. I have a Thomas Moore Award from the Diocese of Lansing, is very special because it's local. And I've also received the Papal Award, the blessing; that was at another occasion when I was leaving. And my service on the Jesuit Volunteer Corps ended with a statement of their purpose, and I still hold that close to me and like that, too.

Larry Lee:

So, you're here, and it doesn't sound like you're disengaged. You're not engaged like you were back then, but tell me a little bit about the things that really capture your interest and what you like to work on and see more improvement.

Sister Monica:

Well, we as a community and at religious communities are one of the seven-year programs of Laudato Si, the cyclical by Pope Francis, so the climate is really very important for me at this time. And because I love the approach, and that is to learn about it before you start doing anything. We've had a three-day session here with the Catholic climate group in Laudato Si and Creighton University did a climate conference. It was all by scientists. Well, mostly scientists and ecologists. The last person to speak was Ilia Delio, a marvelous Franciscan sister who has got two PhDs, I think. And Lansing Diocese is one who is committed to have every single parish to have a program on it, and that's a big, big, big job, big problem.

Larry Lee:

This sounds like a long-term project.

Sister Monica:

It is, and it's a seven-year project, and this is one year for this. Education continues to be my interest. There are not people that are bold and audacious. They're afraid to get out of their rut, and I think the pandemic did offer time to be creative. Why not declare a year of reading and what that could do with people, get them excited about reading and reading what they want?

Larry Lee:

Sounds like the teacher in you talking here.

Sister Monica:

Bring in the teacher! We had 460-some thousand people recently have quit their jobs. Now we have jobs that are so available, but we don't have people prepared to use them. And everybody can't go to college. Everybody shouldn't go to college. There are education opportunities, and now with this education at home, I think that changes things drastically. We've had big surge in corporations selling their property and buildings because we're not using them for offices. In Chicago here, it's been a major change. McDonald's, I think, was one, but there are a number of them.

I don't know what that means in terms of long-term, but I see on the realty section of the Tribune, they're showing, now, the new houses, all who have an office in them, for where to put your computer,

and all kinds of advice on what to do, how to dress when you're going to work at home and the rules that are accompanying it. If you have children there, you have to have a nanny for that child. You can't have a child without an aide. It's come to be a whole new industry, and that's good.

Sister Monica:

I've talked about aging as being a stage in life that needs to be recognized as a stage in life, not after your life is kind of over and you're at the end sitting in this period that's very transformative, very spiritual. Should have the task of reflecting on your achievements of life. The first part of the pandemic it allowed for that and stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage, right? So, it was a time where you could do all that rich spiritual stuff for reading and it's getting a little tired now. I can't wear that mask anymore. But we're wearing it because we have followed every single pandemic rule that the CDC, that Chicago, Michigan, the doctors have put in, we followed. And so, we've had an absolutely pure record with residents. We really have been, really very good.

Larry Lee:

So also, in your time here, there must be lots of reading that you've been able to get to? What are some of the things that you find very enriching or illuminating?

Sister Monica:

Well, yes, there are, I have a subscription to The Tablet. And because I have that, it's a Christmas present every year from my sister. She knows I like it. It's the International Catholic Magazine. And it's got a whole different perspective, a much wider base, and a larger arts section, larger book section. It's probably maybe comparable to America Here, which I love that Jesuit too, but we get that in our library. And of course, everybody reads the NCR, the National Catholic Reporter, it came into vogue when kind of a wider church understanding and different. So, they have a new board that I'm appreciating their writing. I thought at first, I was not as wed to it as I was to my good old tablet.

There's this good, good, good controversial, and good arts section, good reader section, good stories. And they often have a series of, they've got a series on religious life now, that's very broad and different. And the latest one was on a story of a young man, kind of a hippie who was maybe thinking of a monastic life in his time, and he went to try out a seminary in silence and what that meant to him and how he was an artist. He was a communicator, and then he left, and why he had to leave. And it's just a wonderful magazine.

Larry Lee:

And what about books? Do you have like a favorite book that you've discovered since you've been retired?

Sister Monica:

I'm getting used to Mary Oliver. She's really, I just got a recent book of all the stuff that's never been published and it is so different. You know they used to say the difference between poets and scientists were the poets took simple ideas and made them so difficult. You had a hard time understanding where scientists were doing just the opposite. They were taking complex issues and making them simple. I'm not sure that's true. And I haven't read many novels. I am going back though to some old books. I'm in the process of sorting my library and I'm looking again. I just started Leon Bloy's, The Old Woman, The

Woman Who was Poor, and looking at some of the older books. And I have a friend who recently passed away who wrote a book of the humanistic values of four Jesuit leaders.

And the Jesuits are not, not usually identified as being part of the humanistic culture, but they're founder Ignatius. And, and he's written a really fine book. Didn't get any awards, but I've had only read in my life I've only one, and now I'm going to read the other three. So, I'm reading more spiritual books and some of the new ones on evolution that those are important because that's, that's all new to me and that's, it's happening. And it affects every single thing. And then I have a very favorite book that I often pick up and look at. It's The Divine Proportion by Pie Hemanway. She is a philosopher and it is the formula of pie as it affects architecture, art, science. And it shows the unity and oneness that we talk about when we talk about climate. And that's what's wonderful. I have a couple of treasured books and that certainly is one of them. I just came in touch with a brand new commonplace with an unusual title. And it's a commonplace book that comes from the 1800's where people had a notebook of some kind and it, when they saw something they liked, they wrote it down. And the book was kept in a common place in the house someplace cupboard in the kitchen. And I have a dear colleague who worked, we worked with very closely on capital punishment, capital punishment. And that's such a, fortunately, it's not valid in Michigan. We have a constitutional prohibition due to Mr. Gil Wanger, who has been identified as the abolitionist of the century, but he was the youngest person at the Republican convention reviewing the constitution and put the language in very, very grateful.

Larry Lee:

Unique in America, I believe that it's in the constitution.

Sister Monica:

Right. So those are a few of the things that I'm reading.

Larry Lee:

Have you thought about what your entries would look like? What would you write down if you had?

Sister Monica:

I would probably write something if I would, that if you're talking about personal, certainly something very modern, I think I would, if from, from a book that's that has a, you know, but something personal would be very transformative. You know, it's hard to, you know, I look at things differently. I value things differently. I appreciate things more than I ever had. I still think of, there were a couple times, did I ever thank that person for what they did. Oh dear. Because gratitude is a, I hope a gift of mine, but I just, there are times now that I get, you know, I think I never thank that person and that's, that's disturbing.

Larry Lee:

A sad realization, isn't it?

Sister Monica:

It is. It really is. And, and so the spiritual transformation I hope it has spilled over into dealing with people and to respecting everybody has God made in the image and likeness of God that needs to be respected and the dignity acknowledged.

Larry Lee:

So, this question also comes from books in a way, but I'm going to make it broader. The New York times, Sunday book review has a feature called "By the Book" and it asks authors or well-known people about their reading habits and a lot of other things, how they organize what they read, what they think is overrated and whatnot. One of the questions though, that's interesting is what would people be surprised to see on your bookshelf. When they asked that of Jane Fonda, she said the Bible. So, the question really is broader. What would people be surprised to learn about system Monica?

Sister Monica:

Probably that I'm very simple.

Larry Lee:

Really?

Sister Monica:

You know, I mean, I'm simple. I like simple things and that I have a great appreciation for life and life's gifts and other people. I mean, I have been overwhelmingly gifted by love and charity and you know, of friends and family, and somebody said, what, what is your greatest gift? And I have to say life, and I have been really very, but what would they be surprised? I'd if I suppose if you ask somebody, it would probably, they'd probably say something that I wouldn't think of. I'd like to know.

Larry Lee:

I'll ask around.

Sister Monica:

Ask around. I think there are some people who, former students who did think I was strict and I'm not strict as strict is not a good word. I'm a person. I mean, somebody might say, I don't understand where she stands, because I do think that we misuse labels and we have this false conception that if we label something, you don't realize you really diminish it and you exhaust its meaning. And when it comes to a liberal and conservative, there I'm a Robert Frost fan. He said, I hesitate to be radical while I'm young, unless I be conservative when I'm old. And I used to use that when I was young.

Larry Lee:

It's good.

Sister Monica:

Grateful for net now. Yeah. I mean, I really, I don't want to say I'm getting liberal, but I do think we misuse the terms conservative and liberal. To be conservative, is to conserve.

And we have in our tradition of church, a beautiful tradition in many ways that should not be lost. And I'm not talking about the Latin mass. I am talking about the rich spiritual traditions of what the saints did. That is so rich and will never live long enough to see it to be a liberal is to be a practicing person of our most cherished gift. The free will, because liberal people are freeing and we should be honored our free will, but we don't, I don't, I don't even know that anybody even talks about the natural law today or anything talks about free will, what that means. Where does conscience fit into that? I mean, there, there are, there are just these, this language that we used to have that we no longer use.

Larry Lee:

But not in meaning meaningful ways. Right?

Sister Monica:

Right. I'm not turning liberal, but I am, I am turning freer. I mean, I was even free enough to read kid's book on the longing of the heart and that could, could judge it. She's a good writer, wonderful researcher and it's fiction. I never smoked pot so I don't know.

Larry Lee:

I don't know if that began and ended the definition.

Sister Monica:

But I did go to the outdoor concerts where everybody was smoking pot. I mean, I was fascinated by the cinema foreign film for a long time. And I just really loved them. But this aging is really, I think a whole, despite anything else, it is a new time for me. And I just haven't figured it all out, but it's wonderful. I mean, in some ways nothing has changed, but I hope, in some ways I'm a better person, but I don't know. And I can't judge that, but I mean, we all grow and sometimes we even don't realize it.

Larry Lee:

So, I know you've answered this question before, but I still think it's worth it here. If you could have a conversation with your younger self, what advice would you say?

Sister Monica:

It's interesting that you say that because I got an interesting invitation to a graduation just this year and the card was an announcement. And it was an empty piece, a little piece of empty stationary in it, and it said your gift to me is to write what you think your best advice for me is. So, I had to think about that for somebody else. So, I went through that whole process of what am I going to tell this young woman, what am I going to tell her? So, I talked to a few people, I talked to my sister and she came up with trust yourself, and I would add to that to trust the spirit. The spirit works in everybody, and we have to listen to the spirit and trust the spirit. We, we forget, we forget the biggest and most important virtue of our lives at this time. And that is love. And if we just understood that God made us, God loves us and only asks that we love back everybody else. I mean that, there's a certain simplicity to all of this.

Larry Lee:

Back To that.

Sister Monica:

Yeah. But right back to love, and it does come back. You know we sang the songs of love in the sixties and seventies. And, but, but really that's the transformative part where these kind of old words just take, take on new meaning in a very significant way. I mean and even, even things that we enjoyed, I remember the night before I entered, I was at the community. I went to a boblo with my last date, but one of the things we did that week, I saw Carousel. The Botsford Inn used to have a good theater, and that was theater in the outdoors. Now, when I look at that, it's a terrible play in terms of the way women are treated part of the transformation that occurs in old age, you know, that, and I have even come to really appreciate, not that I didn't before, but opera, new music.

I mean, I've just really, and I'm even learning new things that there is a German musician, young man they're reimagining these things at certain classic pieces. I watched recently the reimagining of Carmen and it was called CarMAN, but it was on Carmen. And instead of being in this Spanish Piazza, it's in a fixed car fix at shop the opera Carmen, sure. With these people and their t-shirts and cigarettes rolled up. I mean, so reimagining is a whole new art form that's going on. So again, that's aging is even to know it and to want to see it and then to appreciate it or not make a judgment about it. So that's kind of like, yeah, there's just, just a lot.

Larry Lee:

It is.

Sister Monica:

It's a very rich time. It's been. And then of course, when you live with people who have great backgrounds, you know, you have professors here and nurses and teachers, and, you know, a rich, really a community that exists nowhere else in the world, the way a religious community lives. I mean, there just isn't that kind of a group and, you know, a commitment given a life of sacrifice, given up pleasures of life, you know, and for a greater cause and service to God's poor sick and uneducated. And that's it.

Larry Lee:

Which is what you pledged when you were back in 1955.

Sister Monica:

Right.

Larry Lee:

Well, sister Monica, thank you so much for spending time with the political history society. We appreciate your insight and wisdom and wish you well here in Chicago.

Sister Monica:

I really have to say the pleasure was all mine. I really, I feel humbled. I felt humbled just being asked. And I feel even now, and this is amazing. This is the only experience of any of mine that you do only once. Because you know, the old thing about teaching, there's no such thing as good writing. It's good rewriting. And one of the students that graduated in 71, sent me a note and reminded me of that. So, if I were doing what this videographer were doing, I'd have to do two takes, three takes, do it over right? And you have this great trust, great beauty in a wonderful, wonderful society. And you have been really inspiring. Thank you.

Thank you again to the Michigan Catholic Conference for sponsoring this oral history. We are grateful to Sister Monica and the MCC for their contributions to our great State!