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Frances Ratermann S. L.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee:	<u>Frances Ratermann, S.L.</u>
Interviewer:	<u>Eva Antone Ross</u>
Project:	<u>200th Anniversary of the Sisters of Loretto</u>
Location:	<u>El Paso, Texas</u>
Date of Interview:	<u>Sept. 21, 2010</u>
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Transcript No.:	<u>1696</u>
Transcriber / Summary:	<u>Jessica Molinar-Muñoz</u>

Ratermann was born in El Paso in 1932 and was born at a Masonic Hospital. She is the youngest one in her family and her older sister, Sister Helen Julius Ratermann, who was the oldest and was born in 1914, was also a sister. The location of the interview is 4108 Waco. Her mother's family went to live in Socorro, New Mexico and when the mines began to get shaky, they moved to El Paso. Her father was Julius Augustus Ratermann and came to El Paso because doctors believed he had Tuberculosis. Her mother was born in Socorro, New Mexico and moved to El Paso, TX and claimed she was born in El Paso because her heart was in El Paso. She grew up in El Paso. Her sister and brother went to St. Joseph's and she went to Loretto and graduated in 1951. Her brother Julius flew B-17 bombers in WWII, her other brother was an Engineer in the Air Force. Ratermann went to the Motherhouse in Nerinckx Kentucky-which is sixty miles out of Louisville. The first year students are able to pray a lot and learn more about their faith. She was in Denver in 2010 for a discernment meeting. She was amazed at the technology used and how people in various parts of the country were able to be a part of a meeting in Denver. She shared how she began teaching at Loretto. She also discusses going to Juarez to teach as well. The students went with her and were expected to be on their best behavior. They would go to the market and to the Cathedral in Juarez. The two speak about worldly issues and she also said she would tell a young person about the faith in the 21st Century that they need to live for something special. When Ratermann thinks of the Spirit of Loretto, she thinks about winning souls. Ross mentions using female intuition and female nature as a part of the Spirit of Loretto. They also discuss a stamp that could be used to commemorate the 200th Anniversary of the Sisters of Loretto.

Length of interview: 38 minutes

Length of Transcript: 15 pages

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- Eva: Hi, this is Eva Antone-Ross, and I am having the privilege of interviewing Sister Frances Ratermann, a Sister of Loretto on the 21st of September 2010. This is part of the Oral History collection that is in anticipation of the 200th anniversary of the Sisters of Loretto. Sister Frances is a native of El Paso, she has a rich, rich, history to share, and we are going to add this to other transcripts that celebrate this bicentennial of the Sisters of Loretto. The Sisters of Loretto came to El Paso in 1879. So, Frances, I am going to let you give us your full, legal name, please and your birthday if you can.
- Sister Frances: I can. My name is Frances Ratermann. I am a Sister of Loretto, and I am a native of El Paso. I was born there in 1932, and I am making this tape to help out our great celebration of 200 years.
- Eva: Were you born at home, or maybe at Hotel Du Hospital?
- Sister Frances: No, at the Mason Hospital, right down the street. Masonic Hospital.
- Eva: Masonic Hospital. And, my understanding is that you are the youngest of your family.
- Sister Frances: That's correct.
- Eva: And actually, one of the really nice things is there are two Sisters of Loretto in your family. Would you tell me the name.
- Sister Frances: That's correct. Sister Helen Julius Ratermann. She was born in 1913, 1914.
- Eva: I've seen a wonderful picture of the family here in the house. Let's say the street address we're out for right now.
- Sister Frances: Oh, everybody knows the street address of 4108 Waco, and Waco is the Indian word for echo.
- Eva: We are lucky to be within a stone's throw of both Saint Joseph's Elementary Parochial School, and on the other side of the North-South Freeway is Loretto Academy, and you got to be educated by the Sisters of Loretto for a long time, isn't that right, Frances?
- Sister Frances: Yes, I was very lucky. I was lucky with everything I did, but the Sisters of Loretto gave us a scholarship so that we could go on, and be at Loretto, and that was for my sisters and myself, at the end of everybody else.
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- Eva: Your sister, Helen Julius, was the oldest, and you're the youngest?
- Sister Frances: She was. Right, there were 18 years between us.
- Eva: Okay, now I've seen this lovely family photo that you showed me, and your mom lived in El Paso a long time. Would you tell me a little bit about both of your parents, and how they ended up here in this wonderful house?
- Sister Frances: My mother's family, the person in charge of the trip from Tennessee, they came across, and went to Socorro, New Mexico, the family, the whole contingent of them, and some stayed there, and some came down further when the mines began to become shaky, and didn't have value. My grandfather moved down to El Paso.
- Eva: And I think your mother's paternal name was Longuemare?
- Sister Frances: That's correct.
- Eva: L-o-n-g-u-e-m-a-r-e?
- Sister Frances: That's correct. And I think I just said the wrong thing. My father's people didn't come here at that time.
- Eva: Tell me the names of both your mama and your daddy.
- Sister Frances: My father was Julius Augustus Ratermann. He was from Ohio. He came to El Paso because they thought he had tuberculosis, and he didn't probably, but he got treated for it, and so did all of us down the way, and then my mother was born in Socorro, New Mexico because she went up there to be with her mother, and then she came down, and she always claimed that she was born in El Paso because that's where her heart was.
- Eva: She made a wonderful life, a rich, warm, family life.
- Sister Frances: We had a great family life.
- Eva: You were a music teacher, and so was your sister.
- Sister Frances: And so was my grandfather.
- Eva: Oh, okay. And so, talk a little bit about the ways music kind of permeated the family life.
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- Sister Frances: Oh, I guess permeated is a good word. On Sunday nights, we had wonderful times, singing and playing the piano. Then, with teaching, it was wonderful because the kids were very receptive to that, and you could change the whole world by getting the kids fired up.
- Eva: Music transmitted so much intellectual knowledge, but also cultural exchange. I know that this is one of the things that we are proud of here in El Paso because we're such a border city.
- Sister Frances: Very.
- Eva: Okay, you grew up –
- Sister Frances: I grew up in El Paso.
- Eva: In El Paso, in this very special Parish, and neighborhood.
- Sister Frances: My sister and my brother went to Saint Joseph's, which was just the way, and I went to Loretto. Well, so did my sister after fifth grade.
- Eva: You're talking about in lower grades. You got to go in a little earlier than your brothers and sister.
- Sister Frances: Right.
- Eva: We talked about the fact that there is a North-South Freeway –
- Sister Frances: Oh, terrible, yes.
- Eva: About, I'd say in 1958 or so, the city was expanding, and we needed a new bridge into Juárez, and actually that bridge probably made it easier for Juárez students to get across the border, and into El Paso, and to Loretto, but this neighborhood lost some houses.
- Sister Frances: The house I was born in. I wasn't born in it, but we were living there. This is what 4108?
- Eva: Yeah.
- Sister Frances: It was 4308.
- Eva: That's the address?
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- Sister Frances: Up the street, yes, and the little grocery store, and the little pharmacy, all of these things went.
- Eva: So in a way the neighborhood had a certain kind of dislocation, but Mother Praxedes was lucky that the Loretto location was not impacted, maybe actually some planner said, we can't disturb such an institution. Who knows, I can't say.
- Sister Frances: I've never heard anything like that.
- Eva: I am going down the list of questions. Real briefly, you attended Loretto, and graduated in what year?
- Sister Frances: 1950, or '51.
- Eva: Okay, kind of at the end of war time. How about your own family, did you have brothers or anybody involved with World War II?
- Sister Frances: I had a brother named Julius, and he flew the B17 bombers, and couldn't talk about it because he hated it so much. Then, my other brother, what did he do, 24. Wait, that's not right. He did other kind of bombers, as an engineer in the Air Force.
- Eva: In a way, they took kind of that training with mechanical things, and I want to mention that your family has businesses now in California. Can you tell us the name of the family company that is there in California?
- Sister Frances: He's expanded so much. It's **Gerrin** Welding is what it started out to be, and now it's a lot of different things.
- Eva: Okay, and which city is the business based in now in California?
- Sister Frances: It's based in – Where's the nuclear plant? I'll have to get back to you on that.
- Eva: That's all right. We can look it up, and reference it later. Does the business have the name Ratermann at all in the title of the business?
- Sister Frances: Yes, yes. Some of the offshoots he has a different kind of business where he has no customers come in, but he takes their order, fills it, and sends it out.
- Eva: So it's a pretty big California business.
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- Sister Frances: Very.
- Eva: That's wonderful. I'm glad that he has prospered in that way as a vet.
- Sister Frances: My mom said to him when we were all getting older that he should leave El Paso because there was not any work for him in El Paso.
- Eva: But there was tons of work for the rest of us, and you in particular. Tell me about where you got to go to college, and what degrees – you've got both a Bachelor's and a Master's, so let's get those credentials down.
- Sister Frances: I went to El Paso Loretto Academy. I graduated in May, then I played around, and had a great time, and then in August of that year – I should know it by heart, I went to the Motherhouse.
- Eva: The Motherhouse in Nerinx, Kentucky, and I'm going to spell Nerinckx the special way. N-e-r-i-n-c-k-x. It's a post office box that is in the basement of the Motherhouse in Nerinx, Kentucky.
- Sister Frances: That's right.
- Eva: It's about 60 miles outside of Saint Louis.
- Sister Frances: No.
- Eva: Outside of Louisville. Keep me on track, Sister, I need it. Okay, you went through a postulant time. So tell me a little bit about that, and how that was part of your education.
- Sister Frances: I think it was a surprise to me, that we prayed, and it shouldn't have been. It was surprise to me that we had – I wanted to go to China, here I was doing dishes, and I had a hard time sometimes thinking this is not what I am aiming for. But I caught on that the little things make a big difference, and I had a great time getting accepted to be a Sisters of Loretto.
- Eva: You were six months a postulant, and then –
- Sister Frances: The first year is a canonical year, and you do things that would let you be able to pray, and to experience more knowledge.
- Eva: About the church itself, and the teachings of the church?
- Sister Frances: That's right.
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- Eva: Okay, go ahead.
- Sister Frances: And then I went to – That was the under – what is it, when you just begin. Anyhow, we're skipping that. The first year, I'm really dull. Just hang on for a second.
- Eva: Yeah, we can pause.
- Eva: This is Eva Ross and we had an interruption and we are back with Sister Frances Ratermann is currently speaking about the discernment meeting that the Loretto community, which means the vowed and Co-members. She and about 12 other people were up in Denver over a weekend in September 2010. I am going to ask her to back track, and talk about the technology that got used, and what people said or the impact of being able to communicate this special way.
- Sister Frances: I think being able to look at somebody and hear what they are saying, and know that the next person speaking was sitting in Kentucky, or the next person who was going to talk back her ideas would be in Saint Louis, and those of us from Denver, and Southwest, and El Paso, we were all there. They would give their comments, and you would see their faces. They would go up to a microphone, and you would be sitting right there with them in your room practically.
- Eva: Did you have a sense that people had a lot of preparation, I mean did people come with the equivalent of a written speech about various aspects of the future of the order, or thoughts that they wanted to interject, or was there a certain kind of spontaneous back and forth?
- Sister Frances: I think there were both. Whatever people thought at that moment, and they wanted. I wanted to – I enjoyed listening to them saying this is what they thought. This is a word they didn't understand. One of the best speeches started out with the person had been asked to give a speech on discernment, and she thought that was a great idea, except she had no idea what discernment really meant, and so then she went on to talk about it. Administration has done a great job of giving us opportunities to learn new techniques for communication.
- Eva: When you say the administration, are you talking kind of about the Executive Committee of the Sisters of Loretto.
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- Sister Frances: Kind of, but mostly the people who are on committees, who volunteer to do different things, and set up the whole arrangement.
- Eva: When I was here before, you also talked about the idea of how living together over a whole life span, as you have lived with so many people over a whole life span, and you talked about a pineapple and an artichoke. I don't know, maybe we can – How did that analogy help you understand new things about living with the Loretto members of the community?
- Sister Frances: Oh, it was a beautiful way to do it, but each one was a little bit different, so we'll go to the last one.
- Eva: Go right ahead.
- Sister Frances: It was an artichoke, and I happen to love artichokes, but anyhow, it has an outer shell that you pullback, and they have little thorns on them, so while you're pulling them back it's nice, but you have to be careful because of the thorns, and then you come to the nice little part, but it's not the heart of the thing, so you do and start pulling off that –
- Eva: It's kind of a finer thistle, but still a little peccadillo.
- Sister Frances: And very scary if it gets caught in you because it's powerful. Then you finally get rid of that, you have the heart of the artichoke.
- Eva: Of the vegetable, and in a certain sense, the heart of the person that you've patiently sought, and they've revealed to you to, too.
- Sister Frances: Right. So it was fun to listen to that, and to see, even as it was being done, you could feel a warmth. There was somehow through the whole thing, a big sense of we are all in this together. A lot of love. A lot more love than you can expect.
- Eva: I think you can expect pretty much love from a gathering of the Sisters of Loretto.
- Sister Frances: For sure. I think I went short on that.
- Eva: My personal experience is that they have been very patient with my own artichokeness, is I guess what I wish to say at this point. This is your interview, not Eva's. This meeting that you just came back from was in the Fall of 2010, and they talked about current events, and many things that are happening in the order, but we didn't talk about either your summers as a teacher, or your
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summers now, and I know you do a lot of work with Nazareth Hall, and Sisters who are in Nazareth Hall, up the street, on the grounds of Loretto Academy. Describe your summers, and describe the work you do at Nazareth if you don't mind. Your summers as a young nun.

Sister Frances: Well we always went - Thanks to Sister Agnes Marie, we went to schools to get the latest and the best education.

Eva: In music instruction?

Sister Frances: For me it was music. For somebody else – when we were in the novitiate, going through our first training, they had this wonderful course on how to plan the bulletin boards, and do all those kinds of things, and I thought, oh, I can hear the music, and I was in there, and I was learning geometry or something. I finally asked, couldn't I go. I get really **[inaudible]** pass if I got in that class, but that was because they looked forward, and saw what people were going to be needing, and they sent us away to learn.

Eva: Did you have free time during the summers as a teaching nun?

Sister Frances: The question is did we want to have, and yes, we made sure we got it.

Eva: One of the sweet things about Frances is her sense of humor. Go for it, Frances, you tell me.

Sister Frances: Most people went to school. Sometimes you were trying to get your degree, so you went to school for six weeks, and then another six weeks. That was hard. I didn't do that because I had the privilege of going to school all year.

Eva: Because you happen to be in Saint Louis and Denver where the order has colleges?

Sister Frances: Yes, I went to Webster College, and then I went to DePaul University, but I did that in the summer.

Eva: You didn't have to hop around to subject area or grade level very much, like some Sisters of Loretto were elementary teachers and they were all of a sudden high school principal, or a go teach world history. You got to mostly concentrate, to apply totally, your music talents and training.

Sister Frances: That's correct.

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- Eva: And did they ever ask you to do any other big administrative job or be assistant principal, or something like that?
- Sister Frances: No.
- Eva: Were you interested in any way?
- Sister Frances: No.
- Eva: Okay. A question on my sheet asks about visiting Juárez with students.
- Sister Frances: Oh, I loved going to Juárez. I loved taking them, and surely being in a foreign country, that wonderful feeling you get, and the kids who came from Juárez, I don't even think they appreciated it as much, that crossing that border was like going into another whole world.
- Eva: Absolutely.
- Sister Frances: For both sides, and I brought kids, but I will say that I also really worried about being over there with kids. I told them that we would go over, and we would see these things that were very pleasant things to see, but if anyone did any fooling around, or said the wrong thing, I'd be headed for the border, and they can come when ever they wanted.
- Eva: There were to behave properly, and get back and forth in every way, legally.
- Sister Frances: Yes, and not make any unnecessary comments or whatever.
- Eva: They were to mind their P's and Q's in whatever language they needed to?
- Sister Frances: And they did. They were wonderful. It was a great experience to share it with them. In fact, a lot of them have come back, and gone to Juárez or have gone to Mexico City, or whatever.
- Eva: Yes, some of your students are still working.
- Sister Frances: Right.
- Eva: In Mexico, or whatever.
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- Sister Frances: So it's different.
- Eva: I think you are also a tour guide sometimes for other members of the order. How about when you took other people, Sisters of Loretto, where did you go in Juárez with them, and what reaction was their first visit, even long ago into Juárez?
- Sister Frances: That wonderful feeling of a new experience, and a challenge. We would go to the market, and we'd go to the Cathedral. Of course, you have all those stories that go with everything, and as I said, I'd be saying all the different things that everybody's heard a hundred times.
- Eva: You'd be having your block by block description.
- Sister Frances: And here is where the first bullet revolution came.
- Eva: You were not afraid to drive in Juárez?
- Sister Frances: Cautious, but not afraid. Now, yes, afraid.
- Eva: We're having terrible violence in Juárez, and the city is regularly consternated, and on both sides of the border, we're trying to figure out what to do, and how to do it, and how to act for peace and justice, and it's a super big job today, that's absolutely for sure.
- Sister Frances: And it also deprives the kids of having – not the kids, but everybody having the experience of going to another culture, and it's just right down the street, and now you can't do that. You can go and look at the fence, and you hate it so much that you can't stand there, and make any good comments about it.
- Eva: We'll have to work on it for however long it takes. That's the only comment I have at this particular point.
- Sister Frances: I'm not sure that when we were on the workshop that we just went to, that we covered it was done with a Sky – I can't say that.
- Eva: Skype?
- Sister Frances: The Skype, and it made that so much richer because we saw the people who were talking, and you experienced their faces. You can look at them, and see those who were enjoying this, and those that were not. I just thought it should be mentioned there because
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it also makes that Loretto is one of the forerunners, so to speak, using that technology.

Eva: Yes, absolutely.

Sister Frances: I want one of the banners for the Jubilee to have Loretto with the Sky – If I could say that, it would help.

Eva: Skype.

Sister Frances: And have it go, and have the sisters with the – what are those things? The words going up into the air.

Eva: A satellite kind of thing?

Sister Frances: And have it say the future is in our hands, and have the religious life, as well as –

Eva: The technological aspect of getting it around the world.

Sister Frances: I can just see it. Well, even now, we can talk to the sisters over in Pakistan.

Eva: Yes, this relates to the discernment meeting, but you told me that the four nuns who are in Pakistan, which had horrible flooding here in 2010, there was great concern for their safety, and the impact on the citizens of Pakistan; a dangerous place always. These new, young, missionaries are in Pakistan, so that sense of mission is very bedrock to the Sisters of Loretto. I want to go through the end of my questions, then you can look at your paper, and we'll wrap it up, I think. So what historic events changed the Sisters of Loretto in your lifetime the most? Do you want to state maybe two main historic events that changed the order? I don't know, maybe Vatican II?

Sister Frances: Oh for sure Vatican II changed the whole thing. I was trying to think.

Eva: Any one President of the Sisters of Loretto.

Sister Frances: Oh, Sister Mary Luke.

Eva: Okay. Tell me about Sister Mary Luke.

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- Sister Frances: Also, I guess kind of like Mother Praxedes when she was here, she went out, and she would find the spot, and then somebody else, another sister would come along, and do all the –
- Eva: Fill it in?
- Sister Frances: Yes, and I think besides Sister Mary Luke, there were other people who deserved credit, and we kind of skip over that, and kind of go to the ones because we know, and she was there, and she made a difference, and she pushed it through, and she made sure it was all gonna happen.
- Eva: Sister Mary Luke in a certain sense was an artist, like you. I think she loved to dance.
- Sister Frances: Oh, she did. She loved life.
- Eva: She loved life, and she loved the Lord.
- Sister Frances: Oh yes.
- Eva: How long did Sister Luke live?
- Sister Frances: Oh, a long time, but I don't know.
- Eva: I think she died in 2006, and I got to go with some students to the Motherhouse, there are quotes from Sister Mary Luke Tobin on the wall, and a new book has just been published that is related to her relationship with a Trappist monk, Thomas Merton.
- Sister Frances: Merton, yeah. But also, there is another book out, Feeler, and she just has published it. I haven't read it. I'm looking over there because there it is.
- Eva: Yes, you'll get a chance to read it sometime.
- Sister Frances: It's like a little hint. I don't know.
- Eva: That's okay. Let's just move on to another question. What would you say to any young person this year about the religious life in the 21st century? You have any contemplation or musing about religious life in general for this modern century?
- Sister Frances: I'm not sure, I don't know. I think that mine is still in the process of cooking up. How is our life. It has to have something that makes it special, and a way to be with God, and be with people,
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and obviously we need something more than what we have right now. We have great past things, but we don't have the future things as much. If we get those, maybe we don't need to have, right now, [inaudible]. It's gonna come. The spirit is gonna come, and then we will have the way to reach out to people.

Eva: You talked about having faith in the Holy Spirit –

Sister Frances: Very much.

Eva: As an order, and I think that's another bedrock teaching within the order, or a part of the faith of the members of the Sisters of Loretto or the Loretto community, but Christine Navarro, who is a Loretto alumni, and helpful in all ways about this oral history project, is the Director of the Oral History Institute. When we were talking about these questions, I said, the spirit of Loretto as it has been worked out over time by hundreds, thousands of individuals here in El Paso, and across the nation, across the planet. When I say the Spirit of Loretto to you, what kinds of phrases come into your head?

Sister Frances: Probably nothing comes into my head at all about anything, but I'll give this a try.

Eva: Go for it. We'll go back and forth, and maybe we can feed one another a little bit about this.

Sister Frances: Winning souls. That happens to be one. I can't think. I know that I have all those answers.

Eva: I was quiet on purpose because it's an interview technique, and I'm trying – I was gonna let us both contemplate a little bit about winning souls. When I think of the Spirit of Loretto, part of it is about kind of we're all in it together, and a real sense of unity that comes from experiencing, for me, there's a thing about experiencing unity with women, the special things that women bring when they are together as a group. I know that there are co-members who are male, I know there are all kinds of wonderful leaders who are men, but I think a part of the specialness of my education, and my experience of teachers, and mentors, life-long mentors to me, is about reveling and using female intuition, female nature.

Sister Frances: That's interesting. [inaudible].

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- Eva: Christine, maybe we'll keep on asking that question over time. I understand that there is a chance that the order will get a U.S. Postage stamp to celebrate.
- Sister Frances: I understand that, too. I think that is exciting.
- Eva: Did they say anything about that when you were on the technology up there in Denver?
- Sister Frances: Not this time. They've mentioned it before, when we were in the process of getting it approved, and all those things. Everybody was excited.
- Eva: You and I have been working, and sharing pictures of your family, and talking about potential exhibits, either at the downtown city museum, or perhaps on the Loretto campus, and I am working with the sisters – I was like, we can't just do the celebration of the 200th anniversary quickly or with just a few events. There is so much rich history here. Is there anything on your notes that you think we need to be sure gets on this tape?
- Sister Frances: I don't think so. I think we covered it pretty much.
- Eva: Well, let's see if the two of us, in the spirit of Loretto, can keep on encouraging others to do and share. One of the phrases that we have used is from our hearts to your hands, and so for that, we'll wrap up our interview today, and maybe we'll get to talk again after the 200th anniversary.
- Sister Frances: That will be exciting.
- Eva: We'll see how far we get, and what we think is the new thing to apply the Spirit of Loretto to. That's it for today.
- Sister Frances: Thank you very much.
- Eva: Oh, it was a pleasure. I so enjoy being with you.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 38 minutes