

Interview with Sister Mary Francine Gould by Mary DeCock, BVM,
June 10, 1999, at Marian Hall, Dubuque, Iowa

MD This interview with Sister Mary Francine is for the Mundelein College History Project. The tapes and the transcription will be placed in the Mundelein College Archives in the Gannon Center for Women and Leadership at Loyola University, Chicago.

MD Sister, I am glad to be here today.

FG I'm glad to have you.

MD Good. And I know you have a good story to tell, because you told me yesterday and I gumbled it up! So tell me, I am interested in you putting a little bit on the tape here about your early life – before you were first missioned at Mundelein. Up to that point.

FG Well, I lived in St. Columkille's parish, but I when I started to school I went to the BVMs at St. Vincent's. When I finished grade school, we moved and went to Lourdes where I had the BVMs again. And then when I graduated there – then I went to Immaculata for one year. And then when I finished at Immaculata I went to what as then Mount St. Joseph, now Clarke College. And when I finished four years at Clarke, I entered the novitiate in 1927. Then I went to study after my novitiate; I went to study at St. Louis University for a year.

MD Tell me a little bit about how you got that assignment.

FG Well, when we were professed we all went—each one went with a provincial and she told you where you were going. And I could hardly wait to tell where I was going—I would be so important! I died when she said, “Sister you will go to Chicago and await orders” – no information. So I went to Annunciation in Chicago for about two or three weeks – still nothing—no information. They didn't know what on earth to do with me! And then finally, the news broke; I was to go to St. Louis (University) to study education—which I was never crazy about. But I had no choice. I went to St. Louis with Sister Sylvester (Geisler) and we lived in the convent there and went to the university.

MD Now, did Sylvester come from Mt. Carmel with you?

FG Yes.

MD We were always told that there were five sisters sent on to study –

FG Yes. Sylvester and I went to St. Louis – and I don't remember exactly where the others went. Sister Irma –

MD Irma, I think, went to Columbia.

FG And Sister John Michael—whoever was President. And Columba. And Columba died fairly soon afterward. And Sylvester didn't live too long.

MD So Columba and John Michael went to Michigan I think. Columba was the Treasurer at Mundelein when I went there. And John Michael was the President.

FG Yes.

MD So tell me about St. Louis.

FG We lived at the convent – Sylvester and I -- and we went over a block away to the university, and in order to get there—we had classes at different times – but we couldn't go from the convent a block away there by ourselves. We had to have a companion. So we each had to match up – whichever one had to go to the class, we went and sat in the library while the other one was going to class. And then we went together and back together.....

MD What was Sylvester taking?

FG Math.

MD Math.

FG I remember her title better than I remember my own –Lateral Area of an Oblique Circular Cone in terms of Elliptical Intervals.

MD That's impressive! Was that the title of her thesis?

FG I don't remember. No, her – what she did in order to make the study of her lateral area---she got a –she put—what do you call this stuff – she put this silver, this stick into a hole –a lateral area to make the oblique circular cone.

MD And that was her specialty?

FG That was her thesis.

MD What was yours?

FG The comparison of the educational theories of ? and somebody else, I can't think of his name right now. Two medieval educators. I found it very boring. (laugh)

MD Very boring!

FG I did what I could.

MD If you had your choice what would you have done? What area would you have chosen?

FG Well, I was a Latin major as an undergraduate. Of course, I didn't realize it was going to be an obsolete area, you know.

MD It's not now. It's coming back. So when did you get to Mundelein?

FG Well, we finished—I got my degree in June, and then we went up to a little bungalow next to where Mundelein is now – it's torn down, and we were very helpful in getting things ready at Mundelein.

MD That would be like the summer before Mundelein opened.

FG Before classes started.

MD Did you know what you were going to teach then? Or did you spend your time. . . .

FG Nobody knew what they were going to teach. But when, after they (the administrators) decided what they (the teachers) were going to do, they had so many that needed algebra, and they didn't have enough math teachers, so about four of us who had no math learned math enough to teach it. Sylvester would teach us one week and we would teach it to the kids the next one.

MD But some of them went through with their majors . .

FG And so we survived. We did all right.

MD I live with Katie McHugh, and she told me you were her English teacher.

FG I taught a lot of English. And when I was at Mundelein, Sister Mary Angelita (Stackhouse) who was the head of the English department went through my transcript and I taught every course I ever took – so, when she told me I was to teach Newman, I nearly flipped. And so I said – I didn’t think I could do it. So I got the kids who were ready for it – such as they were – and I said I want to know what you know about Newman, and so I had a little questionnaire. And they didn’t know anything, so then I was all right.

MD So that was your first year of teaching.

FG Yes. Well, I was there for three years and I don’t remember which things I taught first, except the algebra. I had to teach it the first year. We didn’t have to do it all year long, but the rest of it – I don’t remember, but I just know that Angelita (Kramer) got every course I ever took, including . . .

MD Including Latin?

FG Including Latin. Not all the Latin courses I took. So the people I taught – I was good at Latin – it was my major – and I was better than at algebra.

MD Did you have anything to do besides teach?

FG I remember when Sister Justitia assigned me some new duty—it was number seven of my house duties. Every time I answered my call – she called one of us—it was a new duty.

MD Did you ever do the switchboard?

FG Oh, yea, I remember one time I was at the switchboard, somebody came up to me – “Why, what are you doing?” She was pretty indignant because what I was doing was turning thing off.. I took the switchboard quite a while. It was then that I did the story about – I did – I took care of all the business when Justitia was busy.

MD Tell me again.

FG Well, I was at the switchboard and some man—it turned out to be a priest—was trying to get Sister Justitia, and I knew that she was in conference with Mother Isabella, so I knew that you couldn't walk in on that. So, he – he was persistent, and finally he said, “Well, who takes care of her business when she's not able to take care of and it can't be transferred?” I said I do. I knew it was the only way I could get action. So he told me he was a priest talking for Cardinal Mundelein. So that gave me entree into Sister Justitia's room. I ran up – went up in the elevator—and she looked ready to tell me to get out.

MD You called Sister Mary Justitia and so—

FG We got to her and she was ready to tell me to get out. When I said “Cardinal Mundelein” she stopped, and I got out. I never knew what they discussed. I didn't get to that point when I say I took her business. I don't know what she did.

MD But you never—

FG She never knew that I took care of her business when she wasn't around!

MD But you used your ingenuity. She ought to have liked that.

FG (laugh)

MD So. Tell me about the girls. There were 384 students that first year. Now, I understand that some of them were freshmen, there were ----

FG Well, up to seniors—there were no seniors, but juniors.

MD What kind of girls were they? Where did they get them all?

FG They just – I mean, when I look at girls now, they didn't seem any different.

MD How did they recruit the 384 students? Where did they come from?

FG I don't know. We were so busy taking care of them we didn't ask for any - - you know - - they were there, and you tried to take care of them as well as you could.

MD There were --- I read the old Skyscrapers and it seems as though every department had a club, and activities. I wondered when they had time to study.

FG They didn't. I remember one time Sister Madelena (Thornton) came along, she said "I've got a lesson plan." That was a triumph. I said, "Oh, let's see it." She said, #1 Announce assignment,#2 -- That's all she had. You know, we didn't have time to—you know, we guided them along.

MD The students seemed to think it was wonderful.

FG I think the fact that we were young and enthusiastic and all took care . . .

MD I read somewhere that Sister Mary Justitia said she would take the job (of President) if she got young sisters.

FG I could imagine that would be. She wanted – that's what she wanted—to be able to control. And as I told you, she had an assembly with us, with the young sisters. I always got over way on the left side of the room where the hood would hide me so I could make faces when I didn't like all she was saying. But I couldn't tell her that.

MD Did she ever see the faces?

FG No. ' Cause I hid them – I "hood" them – I hid them under my hood!

MD Now --- was this sort of like novice prayers you were getting?

FG Yes, very much like that. One time – the first time we had Chapter (we still hadn't had Chapter, of course) --- somebody said the young sisters were supposed to go out, you know, and they don't stay for it. So she took just the young sisters – we didn't have the older ones. So, as each one got through they went out and it left two people finally. So one stayed. And the next time she said we'd all stay.

MD So she was adaptable.

FG She was what? Not at that! No. She wanted things her way. That was it.

MD The pictures of the student body – they all looked beautiful and wealthy.

FG Not wealthy, that's certain. I don't know – but we weren't so conscious of the depression, I think, as people outside were because we didn't come in contact with them financially. So I don't think we were – I don't know where the people came from.

MD Were they good students? They must have been good students.

FG Yes. I don't ever remember worrying about failing someone. You know –in algebra.

MD So you were at Mundelein for three years.

FG For three years. Yes.

MD Where did you go from there?

FG To Clarke, finally.

MD Did you like Clarke as well as Mundelein.

FG Well I didn't have the pressures. As I said, Justitia provided pressures! See, I think the trouble was when I was at Immaculata, a senior at Immaculata, Sister Justitia thought I was just wonderful. I was bright, I had a car and could drive her places, and so I was pretty good. But when I got to Mundelein, my—the deficiencies of my character began to manifest themselves—and she went after them. So when I got to Clarke, Sister Mary Agatha (Farrell) knew that I had a hard time with Justitia and so she was considerate of me. So I had a good time there.

MD Well, Justitia had a lot of power, I take it.

FG Oh, yea.

MD There's a story about how she got the Chicago police to cooperate.

FG Oh sure, and like what I told you about the telephone, when the men were hammering outside and we couldn't hear, all I had to do was call in and say Sister Justitia wanted to have her telephone transferred so she wouldn't get all the noise.

MD So you spoke for her! You spoke for her?

FG Oh, yea. She had said she was going to be gone all day so I was ---but she changed her mind and came home early, and here I was with the telephones disconnected. I was in trouble.

MD You were in trouble. You were in trouble. What's your happiest memory of Mundelein?

FG The people who were there. The five of us who were young, and then the others, like Consuelo ...

MD Consuelo?

FG Yea—the one, the music teacher – Consuelo (Ramaley). Now they were nice. We had good times in spite of how hard it was.

MD So, tell me. When you were at Clarke what did you teach at Clarke?

FG Education for one thing. And psychology.—which I had no hours in it, but I had a background in the education courses, so I taught General Psychology for a couple of years. I didn't teach much Latin, my whole life. I taught some in high school – but considering that I majored in it, I didn't do much.

MD So where did you go from Clarke?

FG I went to St. Mary's. They needed a Latin teacher there. I think that was it. I went to St. Mary's and taught high school.

MD Were you there for a while?

FG About six or seven or eight years or something like that.

MD Did you like St. Mary's?

FG Yea, I did. But I found it kind of – I was afraid, because I was used to the freedom of college, and then all of a sudden I had to get kids in ranks and keep them silent and start writing on the black board and stuff -- and it just took me -- I didn't take it seriously—

MD Did they? Did the students?

FG Sure, we got along fine.

MD So they didn't take it seriously either?

FG Yea, we got along. One time we were going from our classroom to the auditorium. And they went in single file – the corridors were narrow. And I'm marching down the aisle with the kids behind me, thinking how funny this is, and I looked around --- and I was walking all the way down with nobody behind me. It just struck me funny.

MD Them too, I bet. Then, from St. Mary's you came back to Clarke?

FG I can't remember just what I did do there. Except that Sister Mary Ambrose (Mulholland) was the superior and when anything came up that needed to be done, she'd say "Get Sister Mary Francine." We were having a picnic and Sister Mary St. Clare who was the home ec teacher had to do something else and couldn't come to the picnic. So somebody had to cook the coffee. She said, "Get Sister Mary Francine." To cook the coffee for 300 people! I'd never cooked coffee for 300 people.

MD Did you know how?

FG No. But I asked Sister St. Clara (Sullivan) and did what she said. And everybody drank the coffee. They didn't die.

MD How long was you at Clarke?

FG Well, I was there – it was my last real assignment. I was at Clarke teaching, and then I was Registrar. And then I retired at Clarke in '72.

MD Did you like being Registrar?

FG Yeh. It was an interesting – actually that whole thing – but in those days we didn't ask. I was still in the place where you didn't say, "I'd like to do such and such." So all of a sudden I thought, "What is this?" But I wouldn't say so – I was assigned temporarily. Well, they finally—after about two years, I was assigned permanently as Registrar.

MD you told me yesterday that you – how you simplified the way of keeping grades or something?

FG Oh, yea. We had a card that had holes all the way around and you punched it with a punch that left an opening. And so you put a needle – something like a knitting needle into those holes and if you punched the notch in it, it (the card) would drop out. And those were the ones that were in that class. Well, if you wanted to teach two courses, the kids were in two courses and you punched it, and they dropped out. If they were in this other course, then you had a problem; you had to figure out another place to put them. So it worked pretty well.

MD So, you created your own computer!

FG Yea. And when we got to the computer stage, I kept the cards and that fall—because I had heard that Notre Dame, when they got their computer they had to close down the classes for two or three days and do something else while the computer -- - so I was all ready with my cards in case -- - But the computer worked.

MD Yes. So that was the end of the cards.

FG And now I can't remember how on earth we did things with it. The details are misty in my mind.

MD Well, you did what you could to make the job easier.

FG Well, it worked fine. I can remember when we were deciding whether the nuns were - - what we would do with the nuns for summer school. We'd have a conference with the Provincials, and I'd sit there with my needles explaining to them what we could do and why we couldn't do this. And ---

MD Well I'll bet they were impressed! They probably were impressed.

FG Oh, they were. They asked me about it—if they could use the needle for things within the province, of course,

MD So Clarke was quite different from Mundelein, wasn't it? Clarke seemed quite different from Mundelein.

FG I suppose it did.

MD Was that because the students were different -- a different kind of student?

FG I don't think so. I don't remember thinking things were so different. I just was always plunging into something new and trying to learn what I was supposed to do with the new thing. So—

MD that was your “roll with the punches.”

FG Yea, And you had to take the punches from the start.

MD Yea. Literally. Literally. Were you at Clarke when the fire occurred?

FG I had retired by that time, but I was still living at Clarke and I was working over here at the desk in Marian Hall. And so in the morning when I finished the work at Marian Hall I went back to Clarke for lunch and whatever for the afternoon. And when I got back from Marian Hall there was a fire going, and I wasn't too impressed. There were fire engines there and it was a little bit – but I didn't thing anything of it.

MD Did you lose your things? Were you living in that building?

FG Yea. I kept looking out and every so often another building – the glass would blow out of the window and it meant the fire had got in there. I slept up in a funny little room off the chapel—off the second floor of the chapel choir loft, and my window was closed and my door was closed. And I said there was nothing happening in my room. And there wasn't. So when the fire was over, my room was full of smoke and full of—you know— so my clothes – I washed my clothes and you could still smell the smoke for a long time. But I didn't have anything burned. I didn't get all my things back because they wouldn't let us stay very long in the building – they were afraid what was going to happen in that building. So I only got some of my things back – some of my things I never saw again.

MD So, actually you were sort of lucky – sort of lucky. Some of them lost everything.

FG Oh, yea. I had enough back – and then we had to decide where we were going. And Sister Carolyn Farrell organized where there would be rooms to go—for those who lived in the building—and we had some choice. And I went over to the Mother house where they were fixing the first floor, making it into apartments. And I went to live in the apartment where we cooked our own meal—and I never had (cooked).

MD So you moved to the Mother house?

FG And I stayed there – I lived there for several years. And then as I said, when I got to the point where I couldn't stand for very long—I'd start to do the cooking and then I had to sit down—sit for five minutes, For every minute I cooked I'd have to sit for five minutes, and I thought I've got to get out of this. And then I got so bad in my walking and my back that—I kind of think they had a rule at that time that they didn't have the people in the Mother house in wheel chairs—so I was in the walker and it was just agony to walk. I'm better now than I was then – so they decided I should come over here and that was it.

MD Probably because you don't have to walk as much.

FG And as soon as I got here, I got a wheel chair, so I had no problem.

MD So looking back, you've been in the community – some sixty – almost seventy---

FG Seventy-two years.

MD Seventy—two years! What's the most interesting thing that you did during those seventy-two years?

FG I don't know – I just – I enjoyed everything, you know. I enjoyed the contrast between teaching college and teaching high school; and I enjoyed—one time I had a real lively bunch of home room – and I went to one of them whom I knew was one of several in a large family, and I said, “What does your mother do when you get all excited like this and they all get out of breath?

 “Oh, she lets us all go on for a little a while and then she says, ‘Now that's enough.’ “ So the next time my kids got tired, I said, “Now that's enough.” And like magic—I found out that was the magic phrase. You said “Now that's enough” and everything went quiet!

MD So that was ---- you liked St. Mary's?

FG Yes. I liked St. Mary's. (the cuckoo clock sings out the hour of eleven!)

MD I like that clock of yours! (time out for the cuckoo) O.K – we don't have to compete with him now. That's a unique one.

FG Not for another hour.

MD OK. Well, if you were going to talk to some of our new members at this point, our young sisters, what would be the advice you would give them?

FG “Roll with the punches!”

MD (laugh) Roll with the punches!

FG Live with – you know – try to – live with the adjustments that have to be made as life goes on. Not quite the same – certainly as we had. I used to get so bored with those meditations we had – you’d just begin to pray, maybe you were getting into praying a little bit and they’d say—“Second point.” It was such a relief to me when we were on our own for meditation and didn’t have to change our posture with the second point.

MD Were you glad to see the changes with Vatican II?

FG Yes. Very much. I went along with them – I never had any problem.

MD You remembered how to make a choice!

FG Yea. I – as I said – I made a few choices –quietly – even if I didn’t make them actual, I made them in wish

(End of side 1)

(Side #2)

FG -- you wouldn't have to say second point when the meditation – so many things like that that I was so glad to have changed. If there was anything that I didn't like, I don't remember. One time when I was a novice Mother Isabella came to the dining room and when—we were in the white veils, you know – we had recreation, and I said “Good evening, Mother,” and she said “They'll never accuse you of being vain, dear.” (Laugh) because I never was really right in the habit – I never really got the things the way they should be and so I was really relieved to change.

MD Did you like Mother Isabella?

FG I was scared of her. You know. One time before I entered I used to take the nuns somewhere and I got a carload of nuns in the car, including Mother Isabella, and she announced that everybody was to keep still – not to talk to the driver, it would disturb her. So I had to sit there and not say a word. The others could talk, but I couldn't talk.

MD This is when you were a student?

FG When I was a student. Yea.

MD Well, that was a test!

Fg Yea. I kept still.

MD So you had Mother Isabella, Gervase. She was at Clarke, I think wasn't she – Alberta...

FG Then we began having – then after that – I didn't pay much attention to them – we had some of the more immediate, you know ---

MD Well, I'm interested in your college career, anyhow. Not in – though Isabella certainly had a lot do with the creation of Mundelein.

FG She did. She and Justitia really made it, you know – and when you think they really didn't have much experience of college, you know, they hadn't had much experience with it, they had no teaching experience – they did a pretty good job.

MD Well, Justitia was at Catholic U—

FG Was what?

MD Justitia went to Catholic University at the time when they were not teaching women, you know, and they had great difficulty getting into classes; so, she must have really appreciated being able to teach young women.

FG Yea. As much as she did.

MD As did Mother Isabella. I think Mother Isabella was in her sixties when she got her high school diploma from St. Mary's High School. She was Provincial.

FG I can't . . .

MD Isn't that amazing.

FG Yea.

MD It's just amazing. She picked up her credits at universities and the Art Institute. and somebody you never heard of had tutored her. Interesting, interesting transcript. But, a great builder.

FG Yea. Of course most of this -- we didn't—we were down in the --you know, way away from what was really happening, you know. We did our job, and we took care of the business when the superior wasn't there.

MD (Laugh) And you called yourself Justitia's stand-in!

F Yes.

MD Well, it's been wonderful to have this opportunity to talk to you –

FG Yes, I've enjoyed it.

MD And to get to know you. I'm going to turn off the tape now.

End of interview