

Member Spotlight

Sister Carla Mae Streeter, OP, ThD

Interview by Chris Reilly

“The story is utterly ludicrous, Chris. If you don’t think God has a sense of humor, that will change your mind.” So began a fascinating and wide-ranging conversation on March 18, 2025, with recently retired ITEST board member Sister Carla Mae Streeter. She was referring in this comment to her unexpected decision to join the Dominican order when a young woman.

That decision was not an obvious one. As a child, Sister Carla Mae had developed a strong introversion and fear of speaking publicly, instigated by her experience with convulsions and their remedy – a shocking immersion in cold water. She explained that “I could not even stand up in class, in grade school, and give a report on geography. I would be panic-stricken because I was so fearful of anything.” This, of course, suppressed any desire to become a teacher like the Notre Dame sisters she interacted with.

Nevertheless, Sister Carla Mae “knew from confirmation that I wanted to seek God in a very exclusive way in my life.” It became clear in our conversation that the Holy Spirit was working through her. For example, she would stop in church to pray, “to learn what this meant, to try and give my life to God.” She found a pamphlet in the Lost and Found area, “and the pamphlet had all curly edges. It was obviously pretty old. And it had sisters dressed in white.” Those sisters turned out to be Dominicans, and Sister Carla Mae found herself joining the Racine Dominicans following a wonder-driven visit and her parents’ serendipitous reunion with sisters who had taught them in school.

But there’s more to the story. “When I went to the pamphlet, Chris, there was a picture of a sister in the chicken coop. And I took one look at that, and I said, that’s what I can do. I can take care of those chickens, and I don’t have to talk to anybody.” Sr. Carla Mae is well aware of the irony. “I joined the Dominicans to take care of chickens.” She had joined the order of preachers and “could not speak.”

Anyone who has known Sister Carla Mae over her time as a religious education professional, her 38 years as an Aquinas Institute professor, and her public teaching as an author of several books is aware that she has great proficiency in communicating. How did this happen? She explained that one day, a priest visited Racine and pleaded for sisters to assist in educating students at a new school in East Troy, Wisconsin. Sister Carla Mae was too young to assist but distressed by the need. “Anger doesn’t exist well with fear, right? The energy converts.” The next day, her English teacher instructed her class to prepare a mock interview with a famous person over the weekend. Sister Carla Mae paired with a friend, “and we cooked up a slapstick routine that sent the entire class just about rolling in the aisle. I think most of it was because they had never heard me say peep.” In her later years, she has developed a freedom from her “constriction,” and she is often “bursting to say something if someone would just ask me.”

She added, “We could use more teachers who are bursting to share what they know.” We also need preachers for whom, unlike teachers, the emphasis isn’t on ordered information but conversion. “And so, you give just enough information to trigger that, but you are really after a relationship fostered. You’re a matchmaker.” The mind and the heart need to work together. “Rational intelligence and emotional intelligence, when they are married, when you’ve got the two hands clapping, that forms a good preacher.”

This topic led naturally to a discussion about philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan, who has a special place in Sister Carla Mae’s scholarship and interests. “I would call Lonergan an

Aquinas scholar in a new key. What Lonergan does through consciousness analysis, through interiority analysis of the human consciousness, is to give Thomas a psychological methodology that speaks to today's science." Originally an economist by trade, Lonergan applies the scientific method to the study of theology. He is fascinated by St. Thomas Aquinas' assertion that intelligence can be known only in its act (*Summa Theologica* I, Q.85). "What Lonergan is interested in is dynamism, in flow," the process of moving through understanding into judgment to arrive at knowledge. "And so, the elements of the phantasm come together, and they keep questioning and questioning until the weaving goes on and finally the light bulb goes on." But then the thinker/researcher needs to ask even more questions. "When the *questio* is quiet, probably because of limited data, then you reach a tentative judgment and it's always tentative. Why? For us, because we're not God, and we always can get more data."

There's more to Lonergan's process. "You have to ask a question of value. In other words, not what is it [the thing or alternative you are evaluating], but what's it worth to you? And it's only when you ask a question of value that you get off your fanny and do something." Religious love is also essential to cognition, "and when it's permeated by religious love, it's like a room fills with lavender. It's like the whole cognitional process just absolutely glows." This applies especially to the goal of preaching: "You have a person be absolutely captivated by Christ, you know, who's the bridegroom." The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity are like an electrical socket. "Like when you plug something in a three-pronged socket, you're grounded, and the current is special," for faith is a gift of the Word, and hope is a gift of the Father. "Charity is the Spirit's flooding," and when connected with the human consciousness, "it's electrified. The person is electrified by the Divine."

It is this sensibility that led Sister Carla Mae to ITEST. With an educational background in music, "what led me to ITEST is really education. The conviction that we have to bridge." Persons absorbed in fascination with scientific discoveries often "fall off the bike," losing their religious belief out of a kind of "shock" that indicates a supposed divide between the worlds of science and faith. She said, "I sensed that Teilhard de Chardin was a bridge between what I had been taught in the novitiate and what was exploding in the media, that we had to have a discernment process." Sister Carla Mae often discussed with Fr. Robert Brungs, SJ, a founder of ITEST, the need for leading people through that process, "how they could just have their faith open like a peony, open like a flower from a bud, where they would be delighted in their faith, and what possibility it brought them, rather than fear, a fear-laden Catholicity."

Sister Carla Mae advised the members of ITEST to keep questioning positions on difficult topics like artificial intelligence or LGBTQ concerns. "What's your foundation for that position or that opinion? Have you checked the data on both sides? What's going on?"

To that end, she is hoping to tackle, in the near future, some emotionally charged questions about the role of women in the Church. The answer is not for women to strive to be the same as men. "The unaddressed elephant in the room is what is the unique gift of the feminine consciousness to both culture and the church?" She is looking forward to writing about the wisdom of Chardin and Edith Stein on this question.

We at ITEST are very grateful to Sister Carla Mae Streeter for her decades of Board service and companionship as a member of ITEST. (She will continue to be a member.) We are grateful for that moment when she embraced the urging of the Holy Spirit to join the Order of Preachers and share her talents and scholarship with us.

As she told me, "It was my coming out party, Chris. And nobody has been able to shut me up."

We hope they never do.