

*Population and Reproductive Health*  
*Oral History Project*

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Northampton, MA

**Frances Kissling**

Interviewed by  
Rebecca Sharpless

September 13–14, 2002  
Washington, D.C.

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## Narrator

Frances Kissling (b. 1943) is president of Catholics for A Free Choice, an organization begun in 1973 to serve as a voice for Catholics throughout the world who believe that the Catholic tradition supports a woman's right to follow her conscience in matters of sexuality and reproductive health. Ms. Kissling has been called the philosopher of the pro-choice movement by *Boston Globe* columnist Ellen Goodman. Her papers are at the Sophia Smith Collection. [www.catholicsforchoice.org](http://www.catholicsforchoice.org)

## Interviewer

Rebecca Sharpless directed the Institute for Oral History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, from 1993 to 2006. She is the author of *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900–1940* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999). She is also co-editor, with Thomas L. Charlton and Lois E. Myers, of *Handbook of Oral History* (AltaMira Press, 2006). In 2006 she joined the department of history at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas.

## Restrictions

None

## Format

Seven 60-minute audiocassettes.

## Transcript

Transcribed, audited and edited at Baylor University; editing completed at Smith College. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Frances Kissling.

## Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

### *Audio Recording*

**Bibliography:** Kissling, Frances. Interview by Rebecca Sharpless. Audio recording, September 13–14, 2002. Population and Reproductive Health Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection.

**Footnote:** Frances Kissling, interview by Rebecca Sharpless, audio recording, September 13, 2002, Population and Reproductive Health Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Kissling, Frances. Interview by Rebecca Sharpless. Transcript of audio recording, September 13–14, 2002. Population and Reproductive Health Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Frances Kissling, interview by Rebecca Sharpless, transcript of audio recording, September 13–14, 2002, Population and Reproductive Health Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, p. 22.

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**Frances Kissling**

Interviewed by Rebecca Sharpless  
September 13–14, 2002  
Washington, D.C.

**Sharpless** Today is September the thirteenth, the year 2002. My name is Rebecca Sharpless and this is the first oral history interview with Ms. Frances Kissling. The interview is taking place at Ms. Kissling's office at Catholics for a Free Choice, 1436 U Street in Washington, D.C. It's part of the Population Pioneers Project. Okay, I really appreciate your seeing me this Friday afternoon, after a long night of proposal writing, but I think what we'll do today is just start, as we often do, and tell me your whole name and when and where you were born.

**Kissling** Okay, well, my whole name is Frances Kissling.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling** I was born in New York City in 1943, but I spent the first four years of my life with my mother and grandparents in Nanticoke, Pennsylvania, because my father was in the war. And then when he came back from the war we moved back to Queens, New York, which is pretty much where I grew up.

**Sharpless** Okay. Tell me a little bit more about your family.

**Kissling** Well, my mother is, I think, as with many people in this area of work, my mother is the principal parent with whom I had a strong relationship. My mother was an iconoclast, in her own way, from youth. She left Nanticoke, Pennsylvania. She was one of seven—the youngest of seven children—left

Nanticoke—Polish Americans—left Nanticoke as soon as she graduated from high school, came to New York, became pregnant with me, and got married, in that order.

I was the first of four children, two by my father, whose name was Thomas Romanski, so I actually grew up Frances Romanski. And then my mother and father divorced when I was about six—between five and six, before I entered first grade—and I had one sister [Sharon] at that point, so there were two Romanski children. And my mother remarried a German Protestant—German ancestry—a German-American protestant named Charles Kissling, and had two more children [Peter William and Kyle Charlene]. And so there were four of us in the family. It was the '50s, and so eventually what happened when I was, I think, about nine years old [was that] my stepfather adopted the two Romanskis and we all became Kissling, which was much more convenient. All the children went to Catholic school. This was an era in which divorce and remarriage was even less accepted than it is now. And so that's how I came to be Frances Kissling, as opposed to Frances Romanski.

**Sharpless**

Okay.

**Kissling**

Every once in a while I'd love to go back to being Romanski, which I think is a better name, but it's too much trouble at a certain point in life to make such big changes. And I grew up in a—my family was working class. I'm the oldest of four. I grew up in Queens and I went to parochial grammar schools and to Catholic high schools—I went to two Catholic high schools. And then after high school I went to St. John's University, a Catholic college, for one year. Left St. John's and entered the Sisters of St. Joseph in Brentwood, Long Island.

Stayed there for about nine months and left there. I went back to St. John's for another year and then transferred to the New School for Social Research, which is where I received my bachelor's degree.

**Sharpless** Okay, great. Well, let's back up and fill in some of those things. Tell me about what the Church was like when you were growing up, say, before you started high school.

**Kissling** Yeah, well, the Church was, of course—the Church was conservative, or at least—I mean at that point I don't think you even knew or were sensitive to whether it was conservative or liberal or progressive. It was just the Church. There were rules, and nuns wore habits, and school was pretty much sex-segregated—boys were on one floor and girls were on the other floor.

**Sharpless** But it wasn't a girls' school?

**Kissling** It wasn't an all-girls grammar school. It was an all-girls high school. You know it's that process of when do you send—when do you really, really, really need to separate young people? When they go to high school? So they don't do bad things if they're in the same school with each other. So that was when it became sex-segregated. But the classes were—in fact, I think the way it went, if I remember correctly, we were boys and girls in the same class till about the fourth or the fifth grade. And then we switched to all-girl classes and all-boy classes, even though we were in the same school. And, you know, pretty much the way you led your life was in an all-girls environment. I mean, I didn't play with boys. And there was always the playground: the boys were over on one side being rowdy and the girls were being less rowdy on their side—more talking with the girls—the boys were playing and the girls were chit-chatting

with each other. There was more of that. For me, it was probably a little bit different than for other kids because my mother was divorced and remarried.

**Sharpless** When she remarried, she didn't remarry in the Church?

**Kissling** No, she didn't get an annulment, she didn't remarry in the Church and she didn't marry a Catholic. And at that point, even a first marriage to a non-Catholic would have been a big deal and there would have been real questions even around that. So I was always aware of the fact that my mother was not—was different. She was not accepted by the Church.

**Sharpless** What about your siblings who were born of this union then? Did the Church make any discrimination against them?

**Kissling** No. I think that the notion that children were discriminated against, or the children were bastards or they weren't legitimate, or all of those kinds of things—I think a lot more is made of that than certainly is the reality of my experience. I mean, there was never any sense of stigma on any of us—although, my mother, because she was the Catholic in the partnership, was stigmatized. She was unable to receive the sacraments. Divorced and remarried Catholics can't receive the sacraments. My mother wasn't interested in being a Catholic. I mean, it was like it didn't matter to her.

**Sharpless** Why did she send you all to parochial school then?

**Kissling** Parochial schools are good schools. I mean, again, even in that time during the '50s, a parochial school education was perceived in the community as a better education, certainly, even though the problems in the '50s in public schools were chewing gum and rough-housing, not guns and drugs. But I think even within that context the sense was there was a greater discipline within the

Catholic schools. My mother was perfectly happy with us receiving a religious education and the values that went with that. They took us to Mass on Sunday. My parents would drive us to Mass on Sunday, but my mother never went to Mass.

**Sharpless** They would drive you to Mass and drop you off?

**Kissling** Yes, and then pick us up when it was over. But my mother had no personal interest in participating in the Church. And perhaps the most significant moment in—I was always religious, in the sense that—not in a pious sense, I was never a pious child. I never did much praying. The rosary never appealed to me, but more the conceptual message of Christianity and of Catholicism was of value to me.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling** And I remember, you know, talking frequently with the priest I went to confession to about my mother's situation. One of the defining moments for me in terms of the work that I do is—many of the defining moments are around my mother and her situation in life. The priest said to me, "Well, why don't you have your mother come and visit me and maybe I can do something for her?" I was probably in the sixth or seventh grade when this happened. And so I bugged my mother to go see Father Ryan and, "maybe he can do something and it will all be all right." I don't think I ever really believed like my mother was going to hell or any of that kind of stuff, because the religious education was not reinforced in the home. And my own experience as a working-class Catholic is that the nuns were, of course, the most liberated women I knew, even though they were traditional. They didn't have men. They

didn't have to worry about a husband. They didn't have kids. They were well educated. Many of them were fascinating in their idiosyncrasies as well as in their knowledge and intelligence. So I always liked the nuns, which I think was why—the model for me of the best you could do as a woman, other than get married, was to become a nun. And you know, I think that's a fairly typical experience of a certain subset of women within Catholicism.

So anyway, my mother went to see Father Ryan. She came home and I said, "Well, what's the story?" She was a bit sardonic and understated. And she said, "Well, Father Ryan said that if I wanted to be reconciled with the Church I wouldn't have to leave your stepfather because of economics." You know, [that would be] very hard in a working-class economy. My mother never went to work until I was seventeen years old. "And so we could stay together, but we had to live as brother and sister."

This didn't mean a lot to me at that stage. You know, I now see it in much greater significance. But the sexual aspects of my parents' life or anyone's life at the age of twelve were not a high priority in my—or I just didn't understand them. And she said, "If I did that I could receive the sacraments. I could go to communion," which is basically what remarried Catholics can't do. "And I could receive the sacrament of reconciliation, penance, and be forgiven for my sins, et cetera, but I would have to go [in private to the rectory or to parishes where I was not known]—I couldn't receive communion in the Church with everybody else."

And this is the basic Catholic shtick to this day, because that would give scandal to other people. Because, of course, other people would not know that



my mother was not having sex with my stepfather and so they would not understand how this divorced woman, who is remarried and living with the man she is remarried to—they would assume she is having sex, and they would assume that something was wrong here that she was allowed to receive the sacraments at the Church, or the priests were not obeying the rules of the Church. So she would have to go to the rectory, where the priests live, and receive communion in private. And I was outraged. That part of it I knew was wrong. This was—something is wrong here that somebody has to go to the kitchen door to receive the sacraments, because they can't handle this notion of scandal.

My mother never complied with this. She did what I asked her [to see the priest], which was gracious of her, but it wasn't something that appealed to her. And I remember talking to the priest about it and telling him what I thought. And he said, "Well, you know, what do you want me to do? I'm doing the best I can." He was a youngish, modern priest himself, but modern again within the context of the times and within the strictures of the Roman Catholic Church.

But we never—I mean, my mother was active. It was interesting, because she was one of the mothers who did things for the sisters, because sisters didn't drive cars at that time. They didn't go out alone. If Sister had to go to the doctor or she wanted to go shopping or she needed to do something, the mothers in the school would pick them up, drive them where they had to go. So she had somewhat of a relationship with some of the sisters and did those kinds of things with them.

**Sharpless**

You mentioned other defining moments around your mother. What are some

more things?

**Kissling**

Well, I think in general, just—not so much around Catholicism, but just—I mean, my mother was a woman who was married, divorced, remarried, divorced. When I was an adult my mother lived with a man she wasn't married to—in her fifties, you know, late forties and early fifties. She was a person who was very smart, not terribly well educated. She had a high school diploma but no formal education beyond that—hard working, all of those kinds of things.

The other thing that I think is important in terms of the work that I do is that my mother never should have had children. My mother didn't really want any of us. She was in many ways a very interesting parent, but in other ways, a very distant parent. She wasn't a toucher. She would've been much happier—she would've had a much better life if she had not become pregnant with me and continued the pregnancy.

And it's interesting. I talk about that not very often, for no other reason than I think there is a limit to the extent exposing one's personal life when you are a political figure makes sense. I mean, it's always kind of an element of give and take in it. Sometimes I do it and I think it's useful for people. Other times I think people can't really understand it in the same way they would understand it in personal context, that there's too much risk of people interpreting it in the light of the way they see reality, you know [if you do tell your story]. And so you end up with a cheapened personal life, because people say, Ah, you see, that's why she does this. She did this because her mother was divorced and remarried and she hates the Church. She's very angry at the Church. That's what's going on. Or, She did it because she never had a proper formation. She

didn't really grow up in the right kind of Catholic family. Maybe she hates her mother.

But I remember recently, a couple of years ago, I did a presentation at Boston College, which was sponsored actually by the Evangelical Christian ministry at Boston College—because the Catholic ministry never would have invited me.

**Sharpless** Right.

**Kissling** Forget it. And a student came up to me afterwards, one of the evangelical kids, and a woman, and she said, "You really should reflect on the fact that you should be so grateful that your mother had you and she didn't have an abortion." I said, "Look, I want to tell you something." And I said, "My mother never should have had children. She had a miserable life in certain ways because she had children. And I would gladly not have been born for my mother to have had a better life. It would have been okay with me."

And again, that whole thing—as a fetus, you are nothing, in that sense. You can't have this reflective sense of your own life. But as the adult you become you can reflect on that and make some decisions. In that sense, it would've been okay not to come into [the world]—it would've been all right. But if it would've been good for my mother, it would've been okay.

**Sharpless** I understand.

**Kissling** Yeah.

**Sharpless** How did your mother talk about these things? How old were you for example when you found out that you'd been conceived out of wedlock?

**Kissling** Hmm. I found out when I wanted to go into the convent, because you have to

give your birth certificate in order to go in. And it was, at that point, against the rules, the general rules of the convent, to accept someone who had been conceived out of wedlock.

**Sharpless**

Wow.

**Kissling**

So this was how I discovered it. Here was the birth certificate. Oh—you have to give your parents' marriage certificate, that's what it was. You needed the marriage certificate. So it was evident, at the age of nineteen, from the date of the marriage and the date of the birth—I seem to remember my mother and father were married in February 1943, and I was born in June 1943, so she was already pregnant. So we talked about it and she was open about it. And there was a lot of—so there was a whole rigmarole: should I be accepted into the order? Would they make an exception? They decided to make an exception, although it was very clear that they were forced to make the exception. And when I sort of decided to leave—with a little push—they were very glad I was going.

In fact, I remember, my exit interview was interesting. I went up to the attic of the convent—a very large convent. There were about seventy women who entered the order at the same time as I did. And one day the mistress of postulants who was in charge of us said, “Frances, do you want to go home?” And I said, “You know, yeah, I think I do.” And boy, they moved so fast to get me out of there. The next morning somebody came up to my elbow and said, “The Mother Superior would like to see you.” I went up to an attic and there was sort of a little French writing desk in this big, empty attic and Mother is sitting there in her straight-backed chair. And she said, “You know, we never

wanted you.” And I went downstairs and I put my [street] clothes on and my mother came and picked me up and I went home. I mean, it was not the biggest deal in the world, but it was very, very, very interesting.

**Sharpless** Hmm. Well, we need to put your mother’s name into the record.

**Kissling** Florence Rynkiewicz.

**Sharpless** Spell it.

**Kissling** R-y-n-k-i-e-w-i-c-z.

**Sharpless** Polish?

**Kissling** It’s Polish. That’s her maiden name and she was Florence Romanski and then Florence Kissling. And she died Florence Kissling. She died very young. She died at the age of fifty-nine.

**Sharpless** Okay. What else about your mom and those defining moments as you were growing up?

**Kissling** I think that’s—

**Sharpless** What were your defining moments in the Church that made you want to continue as a Catholic young person?

**Kissling** Well, I think—as I said, I think a big piece of it was the extremely positive relationships that I had with nuns in schools. I was very close with any number of them. They were very good.

**Sharpless** What order were they?

**Kissling** Sisters of St. Jo[seph]—well, in grammar school—I went to four grammar schools.

**Sharpless** Why is that?

**Kissling** We moved a lot. We moved every—

**Sharpless** All within Queens?

**Kissling** All within Queens. So there were different orders for each of those. The Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart in the first school. The Sisters of St. Joseph in another school. I think all the other schools may have been Sisters of St. Joseph. And in high school I went to a special high school for gifted—for smart kids. It wasn't for gifted kids. It was for smart kids. And there were five orders of nuns and each order taught in their area of specialty.

**Sharpless** How interesting.

**Kissling** Yeah. So, for example, the Daughters of Wisdom, who are sort of the Sally Field ones with the big bonnets. And this French order taught French. The Dominicans taught math, music, and German. Another order taught—the Josephites—taught English and something else. So you had the pick—

**Sharpless** That's really interesting.

**Kissling** —the cream of the sisterhood, in terms of who the teachers were.

**Sharpless** Fascinating.

**Kissling** Yeah.

**Sharpless** So how did you decide to go to St. John's?

**Kissling** Um—

**Sharpless** And which St. John's is it?

**Kissling** Not the good St. John's, the bad St. John's. (Sharpless laughs) I went to St. John's University in Queens.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling** Well, first of all, the first decision—I mean, in my milieu, going to a secular [college meant losing your faith]—at that time in the Church—now we're up to

about—I think I graduated in '61 from high school.

**Sharpless** So, right before Vatican II.

**Kissling** Right before Vatican II, and you didn't go—and very, very few people went to a non-Catholic college. If you go to a non-Catholic college you are going to lose your faith.

**Sharpless** What percentage of the young women from your high school went to college?

**Kissling** Most—I don't know what the percentage is, but most. This was a, you know—

**Sharpless** College prep?

**Kissling** College prep program and most people—it was more unusual not to go than to go.

**Sharpless** What were you smart young Catholic women going to do after you went to college?

**Kissling** We were going to become teachers. I don't think you would've found many who were—we'd get married—most would get married. You'd become a teacher. Some would go, of course, into nursing. A few odd people would have stronger ambitions than that. But mostly—again, it's a working-class—most of my classmates were probably the first—as I was—the first person in their family to go to college. And so the level of expectation, even among very bright women, was not very high in terms of academics.

**Sharpless** But that was the early '60s, too.

**Kissling** Yes. Exactly. I mean I think it's a combination both of—that's the way women were, although obviously a good number of women did get graduate degrees and did become professionals. So pretty much that was the expectation. I was only going to go to college for one year, because I was entering the convent.

**Sharpless** Okay, at what point did you make that decision?

**Kissling** I made that decision when I was probably in my—during my junior and senior years, my junior year of high school. I was encouraged—everyone—I was always seen as a bit counterculture and so there was a sense that it would be a good idea. All the nuns encouraged me to take an extra year. Go to college for a year before you go into the convent. Get a little more life experience. Be sure this is what you really want.

**Sharpless** Why do you say you were a bit counterculture, other than the fact that you had a mother who was different?

**Kissling** I think I was just—I mean, I think those are the hard things in life to figure out, why are you exactly who you are?

**Sharpless** But why do you say this—

**Kissling** I was never—I wasn't tradition bound, and I assume it has a lot to do with family structure. I was less inclined—I was more curious. I mean, I remember I got in trouble in my freshman year in high school, because I did a book report on Maupassant's [short story "The] Pearl," which was a risqué book. I shouldn't have been reading that risqué book and I got yelled at for doing that. Sister would get very red, upset with me. But the nuns were always very encouraging to me. They encouraged me intellectually. So, in that sense, I was always intellectually curious and a little different.

**Sharpless** What was it about becoming a sister that appealed to you when you were sixteen, seventeen?

**Kissling** I think that I am also a high achiever, and in the construction of the Catholic Church, being close to God is sort of an entrepreneurial, high-achieving thing



to do, you know. We are taught that there are three states in life: the highest state is religious life, the second highest state is the married life, and the third is the single life. You know, if you can't do one of the first two, then you become a single person for your whole life. And, of course, they're all good, but there clearly are degrees of better.

**Sharpless**

Hierarchies.

**Kissling**

Hierarchy. And so, you know, I always wanted to be at the top of the hierarchy. I've never been interested in being at the bottom of the hierarchy. And if, in my social milieu and setting, the highest is being a nun, then I aspired to the highest that I knew about. So that was the highest. The second thing was, I was always—along with curiosity—I was always a questioning kind of person. And I thought then, as I probably do now, that it's good for people who are questioning, who are not rigid, who have the kind of life experiences that I had in terms of a family that wasn't following the Catholic path and the straight way—it's good for people like that to be part of the structure of the institution. It's part of the possibility of change. And so, in that sense, it made sense. I think there should be people like me in that.

It's a similar thing to when I was at the New School: I was never very political in the—I couldn't tell you if my parents were Democrats or Republicans. Politics was not a topic at home. And so for me, even into college, you know, with the exception of, say, John Kennedy, politics was largely an irrelevancy. The people I knew were more conservative than liberal. And when I was at the New School was my first exposure. I mean I had no idea what I was getting into when I went to the New School for Social

Research—none. I only knew that when I was ready to leave St. John's that this was not where I belonged, that there were two places I considered going: one was Barnard and the other was this place called the New School, which I passed on the subway on my way from Queens to high school in Brooklyn. So let's check out this New School.

And when I was there some students approached me—I became involved in SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. I was a member of SDS. My politics changed dramatically, or I got politics that were mine. And I was invited on one of the very early trips to Cuba, while I was still a conservative. And I believed that it would be a good idea for somebody to go on this trip who was a conservative, because nobody was going to believe these commies when they came back from Cuba and said everything was great. Whereas if I went and I thought things were good, I would be a more believable witness for that experience. So that was part of the interest in being in the convent that I could do—

*Tape 1, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.*

**Sharpless**

Okay, so you went to Cuba. That's part of the impulse that sent you to the convent.

**Kissling**

No, I didn't go to Cuba. It turned out that I didn't go, but that was my willingness to go. My accepting of an invitation to go was that I wouldn't trust what these people had to say. I had to see this for myself, number one, and that I wasn't predisposed to believe everything I saw—whatever. But I ended up—I mean, I didn't go, because—this is a very interesting story. I don't know how much it has to do—but all these things make you who you are. I was

accepted to go on the trip. My mother and stepfather were separated by that time, and I told both of them that I was going. And my mother was very supportive. And my stepfather freaked out and he turned me into the FBI. (Sharpless laughs)

And so I went to get my passport. I put my passport application in. And I went back to that building in Rockefeller Plaza with the statue[s] of Prometheus [carrying fire and] Atlas holding up the world—and I went in to pick up my passport. And they said, Well, we don't have a passport for you. It hasn't come back. Would you please call this number in Washington? So I went to a phone booth and I called the number. It was the State Department, and a man whom I now know—he died recently—a man named Abba Schwartz picked up the phone and said, “Well, there's no passport for you, because your father has told us you are going to use your passport to go to Cuba.”

And I lied immediately. (laughs) I said, “No, I'm not going to Cuba.” I said, “Well, first of all, my father is not my legal guardian.” “And therefore your father has told us not to give you a passport, and you're not twenty-one, and you can't have one.” And I said, “Well, my father is not my legal guardian. My mother is my legal guardian and I'm sure she has no problem with you giving me a passport whatsoever.” And I said, “And I'm not going to Cuba anyway.” I said, “Look, you give me my passport. And if I go to Cuba, you prosecute me when I come back. But you don't have a right to withhold my passport.” And he said, “Well, we are. That's the way it is.”

**Sharpless**

So you didn't get a passport?

**Kissling** So I didn't get a passport for ninety days, because what we did was—I told the people who were organizing the trip—oh, he said, "I'm going to send somebody to talk to you. You go home." So two FBI agents arrived at my door, Mr. Crow and Mr. Robinson were their names, and they, of course, had gone to St. John's. And it was like a Catholic-to-Catholic sort of thing. They said, Well, we believe you and we're going to tell them to give you your passport. But, of course, there was no passport.

And so the people who were organizing the trip sent me first to Leonard Boudin, who was the big lawyer who handled Cuba. And then Leonard sent me to another lawyer who took the case, and we sued the State Department in a case called *Kissling vs. Rusk*—Dean Rusk was the secretary of state at the time. The government has ninety days from the time you file a case to respond, and on the eighty-ninth day they sent me my passport. But, of course, the trip was over and life changes and you move on to other things, and so—

**Sharpless** But you had taken on the State Department and won.

**Kissling** Yeah.

**Sharpless** Interesting.

**Kissling** It would've been better to win if they really didn't give me the passport and we took it to court.

**Sharpless** Right.

**Kissling** And then there [would have been] a court decision that said you cannot withhold passports, da, da, da, da, da, da. So in essence there's no decision. So it's not as big a win. It's a minor win—my willingness to take on structural things, willingness to take on powerful institutions, you know.

**Sharpless** Yes, yes, absolutely, absolutely. So you went to St. John's for a year before you entered the convent. What did you study at St. John's?

**Kissling** English literature—the same thing I studied at the New School.

**Sharpless** Okay. So tell me about your nine months in the convent.

**Kissling** It was very—I mean, again, this was a pre-Vatican II period of time. I wasn't unhappy. I mean, it wasn't a disastrous kind of experience.

**Sharpless** Were you a novice at that point?

**Kissling** You're a postulant for one year.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling** Then you're a novice for two or three years, depending on the community. Then you take one year's worth of vows and then you take three years' worth of vows and then you take—postulants don't take vows. But it was, you know—

**Sharpless** What does a postulant do?

**Kissling** We went to school. Well, we went to college. The Sisters of St. Joseph have—I can't remember the name of it, but they have—they were the nuns at several colleges and so, in a way, the convent became an external unit of the college. And you had a normal university curriculum in the beginning, just as I would have if I continued at St. John's, until you would decide on an area of specialization, graduate school, and all that sort. But in the beginning you just go to college, you take classes. We had music class, we had drama class, we had English class. I was never much for the sciences, but it was a regular—you get up in the morning—you live in a dormitory, but the dormitory is private in the sense that you have cubicles. It's a set of cubicles with walls that don't go all

the way up to the ceiling. And so the bell rings at six o'clock in the morning or thereabouts. You get up.

There are some elements of it that are very comforting and communal that I remember. You get up and even though no one is speaking, you're all doing the same thing at the same time. You're getting dressed. You hear the sounds of people putting on their clothes, walking to the bathroom, to the showers, whatever. It was totally normal. I mean a lot of the things that you hear about from that era—yes, you took your shower naked. You didn't have to wear your underwear in order to go into the shower. Most of it was reasonably normal in that context, except that you were wearing long clothes and a veil on your head.

**Sharpless**

What did you wear? What was the habit?

**Kissling**

For postulants, we wore a long black skirt, many, many yards of fabric, as you see the nuns in various habits—a blouse, a black blouse with long sleeves and a simple round neck. You had a lot of underwear. You wore underpants, you wore a corset over the underpants, you wore a slip.

One of the things that was so wonderful about convent clothes was that you had pockets that were separate from your clothes. They were huge pockets like this, and there were two, and they were on a string and you tied them, and so the pockets were right there. And your skirt had a slit in it where the pockets would be and you could carry anything in those pockets—sort of the precursor of the backpack in a way. And they were wonderful, wonderful pockets. And then you wore a veil—we wore a veil without the white part, just a black veil that sat on your head. And it was only when you took your first

vows and became a novice that you received the white part and cut your hair. You didn't shave your hair, but you cut your hair short and then your face was covered to here, but—

**Sharpless** With the wimple?

**Kissling** But I never reached that stage. I left before that stage.

**Sharpless** What did your mother say about you going into the convent?

**Kissling** “If you want to do it, that’s fine.” That was both—my mother and my father very strongly encouraged me to do what I wanted. I made a lot of decisions on my own: where I went to school, where I went to high school. I was very—both my parents were very positive. You’re smart, you can do what you want—that sort of attitude.

**Sharpless** Now, this is your biological father?

**Kissling** No, this is my stepfather. My stepfather, for all intents and purposes, is my father.

**Sharpless** So Mr. Romanski was not a part of the picture?

**Kissling** He was not a part of my life at all. At all. I met him once and my mother had no contact with him. I met him once before I went into the convent. I asked my mother, I said, “I’d like to meet this guy who is my biological father.” I’d seen pictures of him in the family album. There were lots of pictures of him. There were lots of pictures with him with my mother. I knew what he looked like. And she said, “Okay, here’s his address and phone number. If you want to see him, call him up.” She had that. He lived in Buffalo. And I called him up and he was very gracious and he said, “Come and visit.” He was remarried, and had a son by his second marriage. Again, working-class life. He was a manager

of a parking garage in the Buffalo area. I spent a weekend with him.

He was really very eager to make a connection. He was nervous, of course. Little things like, You see she does things this way—that's the way I do it. Oh, she likes her steak rare—that's how I like my steak. It was that reaching out in a very, very nice kind of way. Because I was going into the convent—I'd like to meet this guy before I go into the convent—he took me to every convent and to every religious statue in the city of Buffalo, which I'm sure had no relevance for him whatsoever, but he was being a nice guy. We had a nice weekend. I left. The expectation, because I was going in the convent, was that we would not see each other or be in touch with each other for many, many, many, many years. I felt no connection. I was very happy to meet him. I didn't dislike him. It was fine, all of this, but it didn't mean anything to me—I didn't discover my father. I wasn't looking to discover my father. I was interested in who this man was who was my biological father, but I wasn't in need of a father.

My stepfather had been a good influence in my life growing up. He was a sportsman and we were very close. We did a lot of sports together. He played golf, tennis, horseback riding. We had all of those things together. My parents were—I mean, I don't know why my parents were the way they were. I mean, I think it's probably more intriguing how they became as liberal in a social sense as they were than it is that I became liberal.

I remember my father—I played hooky with my father one day and we went to a theater in Queens. It was called—I don't remember what the theater was called, but what was playing—I was in high school—in the first two years of high school, so I was fourteen, fifteen. And we went to see something called



the Jewel Box Review, which was a transvestite performance.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling** So that's what my father took me to see. I played hooky another time and we went to the racetrack. He was an only child, very different from my mother, in that sense, very indulged within his family, not very successful in business. He couldn't hold it together, kind of thing.

**Sharpless** And you were how old when they split?

**Kissling** I must have been sixteen. I think around sixteen, yeah.

**Sharpless** But you stayed in contact with him?

**Kissling** I stayed in contact for a while and then, once he turned me into the FBI, that was it—out of my life. Over.

**Sharpless** I'm sorry. You were going to say something about their split, I think.

**Kissling** No, I don't think so.

**Sharpless** Okay. So you were—

**Kissling** Oh, he was a deadbeat dad. You know, once they split he disappeared. He didn't support the family. And that was when my mother had to—so that was a transition for my mother. She had to go to work. She had to go to work to support the family. She went to work as a telephone operator and she worked the night shift from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. in the morning and had a very, very, very hard life.

**Sharpless** How old were your siblings at that point?

**Kissling** My nearest sister is five years younger than I, so she was twelve, because I was sixteen, seventeen. She was eleven, twelve. My brother is one year younger than she and my youngest sister is two years younger than that. My youngest

sister is, like, eight or nine years younger than I am.

**Sharpless** So, like twelve, eleven, and nine?

**Kissling** Yeah.

**Sharpless** Wow.

**Kissling** Very hard for them. Very hard for them. I mean, you know, when you look at our lives now—I mean, I was basically out of the house by that time. I was one more year of high school, off to university, off to the convent, out of the convent, back to school, et cetera. So the hardest time, in terms of the family, in terms of my mother being on her own, raising three children in a family where she had never worked before in her life—I didn't have that experience. My siblings had that experience, but I don't have it.

**Sharpless** Did your mother articulate at any point how hard it was being a single mother with children?

**Kissling** Sure.

**Sharpless** What did she say?

**Kissling** It's very hard. She cried. She suffered. She was tired. She was angry, frustrated, all of those things. She hated my stepfather for not supporting her. She was very clear about that.

**Sharpless** Is there anything else about the time that you entered into the convent that we need to talk about? Do you want to talk about what the nuns said about sex?

**Kissling** They didn't say anything about sex.

**Sharpless** Nothing.

**Kissling** We didn't talk about those things. I mean—I think this is also—

**Sharpless** Not even health classes?

**Kissling** I don't think we had health class.

**Sharpless** So no diagrams of the uterus or anything?

**Kissling** No, no, we didn't have any of that. There was none of that. We had home economics. But I have zero recollection of any real discussion about sexuality. A couple of things I remember—there were no discussions about sexuality but there were codes. There were ways you were supposed to behave. So, for example, in high school if you came to school and your skirt was too short—

**Sharpless** Did you wear uniforms in high school?

**Kissling** No. In my high school we didn't wear uniforms. But, you know, you were supposed to dress in a certain way. Sort of like the dress code of Catholics for a Free Choice now. (Sharpless laughs) And if your skirt was too short the sister took scissors and she took the hem down and you walked around all day with your hem down. If you had makeup on, she took you into the bathroom and you wiped your makeup off. So there were little things like, I think you better go to the ladies' room and water those tulips—take the makeup off your tulips.

I remember in the eighth grade there was a girl named Joanne Vecchio, who was voluptuous and who had big breasts and the sister believed Joanne was wearing a padded bra and took her out of the classroom into the bathroom and made her take her bra off so Sister could check. She checked the bra, not the breasts. She was not wearing a padded bra, but then they both came back into the classroom very, very, very red faced.

There was no expectation that we would be sexual. There was no reason to talk about sex. You knew what adultery was. You knew what lust was. You knew that you're not supposed to have sex before marriage. And there was

really nothing, nothing, nothing to talk about. I remember nobody in my high school left school, period, so nobody was publicly pregnant. Abortion—this was pre-birth control. But by the time I got to college there was the beginning of the talk about the potential of a change in the Church's position, but it was still forbidden.

**Sharpless** No oral contraceptives.

**Kissling** No. No oral contraceptives. There was, uh, let's see—abortion, of course, was totally beyond the pale. I don't even know if I knew what abortion was when I was in high school. It was completely—I knew about sex. My mother was also very forthright in terms of sexual education in the family. I knew where children came from when I was in the third grade, when I was eight years old. I told my classmates where children came from and Sister called my mother and explained to my mother that while she thought it was very good that my mother told me these things—she said, “that was totally appropriate”—that would my mother please tell me not to tell this to other children. It was not other children's business.

**Sharpless** What did your mother say?

**Kissling** She said, “Fine.” And she told me. That's how I knew. She said, “Look, they don't want you telling other people this. This is for their parents to tell them. Just stay away from it.” Exactly that kind of way. Just don't tell them anything, kind of thing. So I knew a lot about sexuality. I was very active in the Girl Scouts as a young girl. And in the Girl Scouts we had sexuality education, very minimal sexuality education, but I remember Kotex pads. Had a movie about menstruation and they showed it at the Girl Scouts. I remember when I got my

first period I went to my mother and my mother said, “Oh, I’ve been waiting for this.” And she brought out a little kit that she had for me with a sanitary napkin and a belt and da, da, da, and explained those things. So it was always pretty straightforward in my family.

I never had much—again, I went to an all-girls high school. We had tea dances on Thursday afternoons with our brother high school. I was never very popular. I wasn’t unpopular, you know, but I wasn’t there. I was going to go into the convent so I really didn’t do much dating, although I had some men friends in my freshman year in [college]. And I did some petting when I was a freshman in [college], but I never had sex. And then when I came out of the convent—I’m trying to think of—yes, my sophomore year in college, I had sex for the first time.

**Sharpless**

Okay. How was it that you decided to leave the convent?

**Kissling**

I didn’t believe. I remember having some conversations with other sisters or other postulants, really, about birth control, divorce, and remarriage. And I didn’t believe in these things. Now I remember when I went—part of the idea was that somebody who didn’t believe in these things should be a part of the Church, so that they can be of help to people who have these stories in their lives as well as maybe work to make these things change over time.

But it was not ultimately comfortable. It didn’t ultimately—the idea of being a representative of the institutional Church while disagreeing with these positions did not make sense to me. So I didn’t agree with the teachings of the Church. I had never agreed with the teachings of the Church, but I didn’t think it really mattered until I was placed in a situation where the teachings of the

Church were my life. This was my identity and I couldn't take that identity on. I didn't belong there. And when I left the convent I stopped going to church. I would say at that point I was no longer an active Catholic. I didn't particularly consider myself to be a Catholic. I didn't have any deep reflections on is there a God or isn't there a God. But it was unimportant to me. It was no longer important to me.

**Sharpless** So you became areligious at that point?

**Kissling** Yeah, yeah.

**Sharpless** How do you go from being—I mean, it seems to me that the progression I would expect is that you would be angry or mad at God or mad at the Church or mad at something.

**Kissling** Um, not my experience.

**Sharpless** Yeah, right.

**Kissling** Not my experience. I mean, there was nothing particularly to be mad at other than, you know, my sense of the idiocy of some of the positions. It was clear to me by that time that my mother—even though I thought she was in terrible straits—she didn't care. It didn't seem to hurt her not to be accepted by the Church. Even though that was an injustice, it didn't seem to be a personally painful thing for her as it is for many people, for some people. You know, I certainly understand now that there are those who suffered because they were separated from the Church. Didn't bother her.

And when she died, she didn't reconcile with the Church. When she died—she got lung cancer at fifty-nine years of age. She was a heavy smoker. She was very unhappy that she was dying. She was not reconciled to dying. She

did not want to not be here. But she did not have—when the chaplain came to visit her in the hospital she told him she wasn't interested. He went away. She made no expression. There was never any sense of, I want this kind of burial, or I want that kind of burial. Or, I want to be reconciled with the Church. We didn't call a priest to bring her the last sacraments, or anything like that. She wasn't interested. It wasn't a part of her life.

So again, I think in a certain way—and, as I said, I never was a pious person. I mean, my Catholicism never centered on going to Mass, praying the rosary, et cetera. That was not, for me, what it meant to be a Catholic. I was always more of an intellectual Catholic. I was always more, you know, the kind of person who would read Chesterton and C.S. Lewis, you know, Catholics—and then at the very popular level, now I can't even stand those people—or Thomas More—that was what Catholicism was about. It was more a philosophy to me than a theology.

**Sharpless**

Okay.

**Kissling**

When I was at St. John's I was in theology classes and I was one of those people who was always raising my hand and asking questions. The theology professor told me to sit on my hands and stop asking so many questions. And I got a C in theology. I got A's, mostly A's and a few B's, but a C in theology. And when I applied for the New School one of the things they said, Well, we're taking you because you got a C in theology (Sharpless laughs) and good grades in everything else. There's something here. There's something redeemable in this human being.

**Sharpless**

Interesting. Well, why don't we take a break and then we'll pick it up at the

New School?

**Kissling** Okay, good.

*Tape 1 ends; tape 2, side 1, begins.*

**Sharpless** All right, this is the second tape with Frances Kissling on September the thirteenth. So, you left the Church areligious at that point.

**Kissling** Right. And I didn't feel angry. I mean, I didn't feel positive, but I didn't think the Church had done anything terrible to me. In fact, I think I pretty much always felt, and still feel, that the Church played a very important, positive role in who I am. I know that I got a good Catholic education. My teachers cared about me. My education was individualized. My talents were recognized and encouraged. It was a reasonably rich spiritual and intellectual base.

**Sharpless** Now what were you thinking—

**Kissling** And they were wrong.

**Sharpless** Yeah.

**Kissling** They were wrong. And that's still sort of how I feel. I mean, I think that I say a lot of times in speeches that I make that the wonderful thing about the Catholic Church, and most religions, is that they ask the big questions. But they have lousy answers. And that's the reality. But I'm so glad that they're asking the questions that nobody else will ask.

**Sharpless** So, thinking vocationally, you thought you were going to be a sister at the convent. What were you going to do at that point?

**Kissling** Hm. I didn't really know. And I think that the rest of my life has been—I mean, I think about this a lot, because I think that the fact—there are several things—the fact that I wanted to be a nun and the fact that I lived in a limited



milieu, in terms of professional achievement, and that while I was encouraged to be whatever I wanted to be, the things I knew that you could be were very limited—

**Sharpless**

Right.

**Kissling**

—and so I missed a period of formation as a young adult, say, from sixteen to twenty, twenty-one, in which people are thinking about what they want to be. I wasn't thinking about what I wanted to be. I was going to be a nun. And then I wasn't going to be a nun. And so I would finish college. But I never really grappled with, What do I want to do? Do I want to go to graduate school, et cetera, et cetera. I always knew that I never wanted to be married. I always knew that. And I'm sure that that has a lot to do with my mother's marriages. Although I don't think it's only my mother's marriages. I also never wanted children. And so I'm very like my mother, except that I got what she should've gotten. It would be another way of putting it.

I talked to her before she died. I took advantage of—I spent a lot of time with her. I was with her when she was ill. I took care of her. And I asked her, did she remember any period of my life when I was interested in marriage, did she remember—as a child, in my play patterns—was part of my play pattern about being a bride or having kids? And she said, “No, it never was.” I was never encouraged in that direction. I was never discouraged in that direction. I remember my stepfather said to me at one point—the only thing I remember is he said, “You know, you're not going to get married until you're older.” And he was wrong, because I never got married.

So I didn't have a sense of professional direction. I didn't know what I

would be. I've never known what I—and I still don't know what I would be. My activist life and work life have emerged from life, you know. What needs to be done or what captured my fancy and passion is what I did. In a sense, that period in my twenties after graduating from university—and I went to an unconventional—you know, these weird things—I went to an unconventional school. I mean, I went to a school where there was no faculty to guide you. There was nobody who thought about whether I wanted to go into a graduate program or didn't want to go into a graduate program. I don't know how many people there were. We didn't have a graduation. I didn't go to graduation. I mean, there was none of that kind of stuff. There was no cohesive class, the class of '62 or whatever.

So it was very bizarre in a way—a very unusual pattern in that sense. And then, of course, the period in my twenties was more kind of an—the antiwar movement. I was very involved in the anti-Vietnam movement, you know, was post-bohemian, so more part of a hippie mentality, but never a hippie. I mean, I always washed and dressed and all those kinds of things. But basically more loose—of a generation that had a more loose life than a professional life.

**Sharpless** What else about your time at the New School—you mentioned your SDS [involvement]—what was the New School's curriculum? What else about the New School?

**Kissling** Well, I mean, it was for me a combination of the New School and, you know, going from Queens to the city, living in Greenwich Village.

**Sharpless** Okay. What was the Village like in the early '60s?

**Kissling** Mid-'60s. Mid-'60s by that time.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling** Um, coffee houses. And the New School was an interesting place in the sense that it was a place of ideas, lots of great minds, lots of opportunities. But you know, the philosophy of the New School—at least perhaps to some extent in the graduate departments—it was different. I mean, you could do anything. You could take a graduate course. You could take an undergraduate course. You could do this, so it was a very big mix of who your teachers were. But it did have that general, nonlinear style. You learned because you wanted to learn; you didn't learn because you were seeking a career or a degree. So it was very rich in that kind of way.

And of course it was a hotbed of radicalism—not as much as Berkeley or any of those schools because, again, it was a more alienated type of environment, a more individual type of environment.

**Sharpless** It had been a free-speech place from—

**Kissling** It started as a free-speech place, you know—

**Sharpless** So what was happening at Berkeley and Columbia wasn't—

**Kissling** And there weren't that many young people there, really. I mean those of us who were in our early twenties or late teens were the anomaly in the school. So you spent most of your time either with graduate students—I spent more of my time with people in psychology—or you spent your time with adults, with sixty-year-olds who wanted to go take a theater course or a history course.

**Sharpless** Uh-huh.

**Kissling** So it wasn't a community. It was definitely not a community. There was definitely not a community. It was lively. I mean, the Village was a lively place.

I was the cashier at a place called the Bleecker Street Cinema, which was one of the early art houses with French and Italian—all the films of Truffaut and Godard—so film was an important part of my life. That was it.

**Sharpless** How did you get involved with SDS?

**Kissling** I was talking to somebody in the cafeteria—

**Sharpless** At the New School?

**Kissling** —at the New School. Hang out with that crowd, get invited to go to a meeting, check it out. I took a poetry course with Leroi Jones, who was then known as LeRoi Jones [changed name to Imamu Amiri Baraka in 1968], and that course was important in the sense of the people who were taking that course were people who were more political as well as sort of political poets. So it was there that I met people who then turned me on to more radical politics, which made sense to me.

**Sharpless** What sorts of activity did that particular group of SDS do?

**Kissling** We talked. (laughs) Well, there was a very small amount of campus organizing. I don't even remember what it was about. One meeting [was] with the president about things we didn't like. But it was sort of, you know, it didn't matter. It wasn't a place you could really resist. And it was the very early days of SDS so it was before there was a platform with a set of activities, in other words. It was before Port Huron, I think—well, it couldn't have been before Port Huron. But it was before SDSers made the decision to go into the community, to move to Newark, Hoboken, wherever, and organize, in that sense. So I never got that involved that I did that.

**Sharpless** You talked about Vietnam?

**Kissling** Hmm. Protests, basically. I was arrested at the first demonstration. Well, what happened, too, was there was sort of a way in which the trip to Cuba—meeting the people in the New School and being invited to Cuba, not going but remaining in touch with people in the Venceremos Brigade and SDS—and Progressive Labor Movement, a very, very, very left movement. And then everybody who was part of the group that I would have gone to Cuba with came back. I was twenty-one so it would've been 1964. I went to the one of the first demonstrations at the UN against the war in Vietnam and got arrested.

**Sharpless** Uh-huh. What happened when you got arrested?

**Kissling** I went to the police station. They booked us and let us go. And then the charges were dropped. We never had to go to court. I don't think I was ever convicted. I may have gone to court, but I honestly don't remember.

**Sharpless** Now, of course, there is a lot of discussion about the roles of women in the SDS. Now, from where you stood, what were women doing in the SDS?

**Kissling** Not much. They weren't in leadership. It was mostly the classic white male movement. I wasn't in the leadership of SDS, so I had much less of a sense—I mean, I was a member, I went to meetings, but it wasn't a deep commitment. And so my sense of it as a movement against which I would react and resist as a woman didn't exist.

**Sharpless** When did you hear the first stirrings of the women's movement?

**Kissling** I think I wasn't a member of any women's groups. I was never in a consciousness-raising group. I mean I knew there was a feminist movement. I always felt empowered. I mean, an aspect of my life—I don't use the word empowered very much, but I felt power. I always felt that I was in charge of

my life. I was in power. I was never anybody's patsy. I mean, I had boyfriends and men I was involved with. It wasn't terribly important. Most of my earlier relationships—I would not say they were important or serious to me. For me they were more sexual relationships than they were committed relationships. So again, I've never felt unliberated. That's never been an aspect of my identity.

I think the first feminist I ever read was Shulamith Firestone. I think in a certain sense I probably became part of the abortion rights movement before I became part of the women's rights movement.

**Sharpless** Tell me about that.

**Kissling** And it was, again, somewhat accidental. I was living with a man. We rented a summer house—this is now 1970, '69, '70—we rented a summer house. The people we rented the summer house from, one of them was a doctor at Albert Einstein, a child psychiatrist at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. His partner was Judith Stacey, you may know—she's a feminist theorist, did a lot of work on the family, the family in China—teaches at the University of California at Davis. And some doctors he knew—he's a child psychiatrist—he's the head of child psychiatry at Oakland Children's Hospital. But this was on the East Coast. We're all East Coast people. He knew some doctors from Albert Einstein who were opening an abortion clinic.

Abortion became legal in New York in July 1970. And these doctors were looking for someone to run the abortion clinic and he thought I would be very good at that. And he introduced me to the doctors and they hired me to run the clinic.

**Sharpless** Okay, this was an abortion clinic, not a family clinic.

**Kissling** This is an abortion clinic. This is 1970, fall of 1970, New York City, in that first wave of abortion clinics that were opened at that period of time. And there, in a sense, was—I became more concretely aware of and peripherally involved in the women's movement, in the sense that in the context of the abortion clinic movement one of the dynamics was that these freestanding clinics would provide quality of care.

In a sense this was a precursor to what later became more formally the women's health movement, or within the field of family planning, population, et cetera, the notion of comprehensive quality care that didn't just focus on your reproductive organs. And it's interesting in a way that that effort started in the context of clinics that essentially provided one service. All these clinics did was abortion. Whichever ones they were, they did abortions. They gave you family planning after your abortion. But nobody went to these clinics as a family planning patient. You went to these clinics to have an abortion.

**Sharpless** Right.

**Kissling** And most of them were pretty good, whether they were—the one that I was involved in was called the Pelham Medical Group in Westchester, New York. They were counselors, real counselors—mostly youngish, but not too young—feminist women who wanted to see that women got well cared for. And the impetus, really, for doctors who owned these clinics—and most of these clinics were started by doctors—there were some exceptions, you know. The Center for Reproductive and Sexual Health in New York, which was actually started by the Clergy Consultation Service, Arlene Carmen—Howard Moody from

Judson Memorial Church started that clinic. Barbara Pyle was the first executive director. But most of the clinics were started as profit-making enterprises by male physicians.

**Sharpless** Interesting.

**Kissling** That's how they started. Planned Parenthood in New York City didn't open an abortion clinic early on. The Planned Parenthoods were not in the vanguard of starting abortion services in the United States of America, either in California, New York, Colorado, Hawaii—they were latecomers. And even after abortion became legal in 1973, it was a very hard effort to get the Planned Parenthoods to open abortion clinics. They didn't want the stigma. And so that was my first exposure to—that was the moment in which I became an active feminist, knowing the movement, involved in it, but always mostly around health and around abortions. And so I started running an abortion clinic.

**Sharpless** Tell me about the clinic. Was it a full-time clinic?

**Kissling** Mm-hm.

**Sharpless** Had the doctors—?

**Kissling** The provision of abortion services now in clinics is very different than it was. It's very hard for them to be full-time clinics. They aren't a lot of full-time clinics, because there aren't enough patients. It's a funny mix, in the sense that on the one hand there aren't enough abortion providers. On the other hand, most of the abortion clinics are not seeing the volume that they saw. When abortions became legal in the middle of 1970 in New York, it was a zoo. New York was a zoo. We would see maybe one hundred women on a Saturday in a small clinic. No doctor worked in the clinic full-time. But there were a lot of



doctors. And so a doctor might work two days a week, sixteen hours. Even the doctors who owned the clinic I worked in didn't work full-time. There was a full-time staff. I mean, women were coming to New York from all over the country in the first three years. It wasn't legal in Kansas.

**Sharpless** You couldn't get one in New Jersey or—

**Kissling** Right, exactly. So women were flying into LaGuardia. You had all of the sort of Wild West elements of a newly legalized procedure. I mean women were coming from states where it was illegal. As far as they were concerned it was illegal. The mentality was still clandestine even though it was legal. Taxi drivers would kidnap your patients and take them to other clinics that paid them money for bringing in a patient.

**Sharpless** Other abortion clinics?

**Kissling** Yeah. Yeah. It was a very interesting time. So clinics would hire vans and limousines to pick up their patients at the airport so they wouldn't get stolen. It's interesting. I was [in a clinic recently in Latin America], which is a very high-quality clinic, and in the four-block radius of that clinic there are about twenty-five abortion clinics. And the same thing: there are men on the streets, if they see a woman who looks like she might be looking for the clinic, they go over to her and say to her, Are you trying to go to the name of the good clinic? Yes? Well, come with me and I'll take you there. And they take them to a substandard facility. So there was a ton of that kind of stuff going on.

You also had women—shell-shocked kind of situation—young women with their boyfriends. They'd arrive in the parking lot at six in the morning after driving from Kentucky, sleeping all night, scared, not knowing what's

going to happen, waiting for the clinic to open. You'd arrive to open the clinic up. *The Night of the Living Dead*. It was in many ways—of course, it was a wonderful and important time. We so needed these kinds of services so terribly—[they were] terribly, desperately needed. Such an enormous relief for people. For the first time they could go to a place and get an abortion and it would be legal and it would be all right.

And on the other hand it had all the characteristics of an illegal procedure. It wasn't a legal procedure. You knew it was legal, but it was still, in terms of mentality, it was still illegal. Because there's this one place you can go and once you get in that place it's legal. But all around you in terms of everybody's mind, the world, everything, this was still an element of going to an illegal abortionist. You still felt there was that quality to it.

**Sharpless** How much had you thought about abortion before you were hired to the clinic?

**Kissling** Not a lot. I'd never been pregnant. So I had no personal experience about abortion. In my lifetime I have had two unprotected sex acts in however many years I was able to get pregnant, from my first sexual encounter, which was with a condom, to until I was—I think I was sterilized when I was thirty-three. I just didn't do unprotected sex. So I didn't have that. And as I said, growing up as a Catholic, abortion was not a central topic. So I don't have the same basic anti-abortion stance that would come from being educated as a kid—you know, Here's a fetus, don't kill the little babies.

**Sharpless** Right.

**Kissling** I also think that for me, because I've always approved of birth control, it never

made any sense to me that one should not use birth control—because I never was interested in getting married or having children. And I certainly didn't want to be pregnant. There was always a predisposition towards contraception and an understanding at the deepest human level that being pregnant, if you don't want to be pregnant, if pregnancy is not part of your identity—because pregnancy is not part of my identity: for me to be pregnant would be terrible. I don't want to be pregnant. Not only do I not want to have—I do not—that's not who I am. That's not in my head. And yet I want to be sexual, and therefore contraception is essential, and abortion, if you become pregnant, is very, very important, so you don't violate your identity as a human being. And so, that was always the way. I never thought about it very much. But that was certainly always the way. If I thought about it, I thought about it.

And I didn't have a moment's qualm when I was asked to run an abortion clinic. I mean it was, Oh, I can do that. For me it was the first experience of having a job that had meaning. I was in a position where I could do something good and something that I felt was politically, culturally, socially important. And I could get paid. And I was the boss. This was great. I couldn't think of anything better. And it was hard, and it was interesting, all of those things. It was an opportunity to think about these questions. There was a very lively movement, so there was an enormous amount of conversation about what we were doing.

The clinic I worked in had both first- and second-trimester abortions, first-trimester abortions in the clinic, and second trimester, up to twenty-four weeks, in the hospital and with intra-amniotic procedures, because that's how

they were done in the United States then for a very, very long time, before D & E [dilation and evacuation] became popular. And so there was a lot to think about and talk about and be engaged in. And it was great.

**Sharpless** Let me turn the tape over.

*Tape 2, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.*

What was the reaction of the community to the presence of the abortion clinic?

**Kissling** Um, the clinic was not immediately in a residential area nor was it in a commercial area. It was a freestanding building with a substantial amount of space around it. So there was no community reaction against it.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling** And there was no picketing. All that stuff for the most part started much later, after *Roe v. Wade*. There would be an occasional—very occasional, you know, twice a year—parent that would be kind of hanging out, waiting to see if—because they heard their kid was coming and they wanted to—there was a gas station across the street, I remember. There was a priest one day who was hiding behind a gas pump waiting for somebody that he knew. The parents had sent the priest to—

**Sharpless** Intercept?

**Kissling** Intercept. And he's sort of hiding behind the gas pump, waiting. Nothing ever happened. So in that sense, it was a very safe time. It was a time when people felt very energized by what they were doing. There was very little negativity. The climate was—I mean, New York, of course, was New York, and it was an extraordinary place, and we did these kinds of things in New York. And so it

was very cosmopolitan and very feminist and very '70s.

**Sharpless** Uh-huh. What effect did *Roe v. Wade* have? Well, let me make sure—when did you go to the National Abortion Federation [NAF]?

**Kissling** The National Abortion Federation wasn't founded until '75.

**Sharpless** Okay. So were you still at the clinic when *Roe v. Wade* was passed?

**Kissling** I was at the clinic when *Roe v. Wade* was passed, yes. Now, the other thing is that my whole family got involved. My brother was a van driver. My mother was the head of the telephone operators. My younger sister was a telephone counselor. Over time you brought people in who worked in the clinic. So in my family it was totally acceptable. Everybody in my family is pro-choice. I mean, my brother falls into the population category. He basically—if poor, ignorant people could be sterilized, forcibly, he thinks that is a great idea. He's the only one in the family—it's hard being a boy in a family of such strong women as my family was. So he had a really tough time. But he's like, Just sterilize them. Sterilize them.

**Sharpless** Just do it.

**Kissling** Just do it. So that period was a very easy and rich period.

**Sharpless** What impact did *Roe v. Wade* have on your work?

**Kissling** Well, for me, I worked at the Pelham Clinic for about two years and then I became the executive director of a place called Eastern Women's Center, which was another abortion clinic in Manhattan. And I was working at Eastern Women's Center when abortion became legal. It did not have a big impact on any of—I mean, I'm sure there had to be places where now there were women that were not coming from other states so that the patient volume was lower.

Some clinics certainly closed, but certainly the other thing is, it took some time following *Roe v. Wade* for—in many states people didn't open clinics that quickly. Some places they did, some places they didn't. And so it really took a very long time, I think, before the effects were felt in a variety of ways. And I left the clinic in end of '73, beginning of '74, so the impact had not yet been felt. It was still—you felt pretty much the same.

**Sharpless**

Okay, then where did you go at the end of '73?

**Kissling**

I went on vacation for a year. I moved to Southeast Asia with my partner. We lived in Panang and traveled throughout Southeast Asia for a year, which was a great experience. And then came back, and when we came back I was approached by IPAS, which was first known as the International Pregnancy Advisory Services when I worked for it.

The phenomenon was that when abortion became legal in '73, the Scaife family in Pittsburgh, Cordelia Scaife May, gave a one million dollar grant to Planned Parenthood to serve as a revolving loan fund for Planned Parenthoods around the country to open abortion clinics. So this is one of the ways Planned Parenthood was dealing with the resistance within the Planned Parenthood community to opening abortion clinics. And a year after that, in '74, a similar grant was made to start IPAS for IPAS to do the same kind of thing largely in the developing world. And IPAS was—you tell me if you don't want me to talk about—

**Sharpless**

No, I do.

**Kissling**

IPAS was started by Malcolm Potts. A man named Jürgen Jenks, who was the former—either CEO or very high-ranking corporate officer—in Georg Jensen,

the Danish company, and who had worked in India with the Tatas for a very long time, who are a family very well known for their work in family planning. And Don Collins was a part of that. He was the program officer at the Scaife Foundation at that time. And Leonard Laufe, who was a medical doctor in Pittsburgh. Those guys started us. And they were, again, like Lone Rangers, mavericks, kind of, running around the world, trying to get people to take their money to open illegal abortion clinics. And somebody recommended me to work with them. And they hired me, first as a consultant to work with the Radical Party and the women's movement in Italy.

At that time abortion was not yet legal and women were going mostly to Yugoslavia. And there were a series of clandestine, illegal clinics that were run by the women's movement and, in a way, by extension, with the Radical Party. And the Radical Party was the party that was responsible for the divorce reform, the referendum legalizing divorce. And they were the party that was sponsoring I think it was '75 referenda on legal abortion in Italy.

And so these guys felt that maybe—because I'm a feminist and I'm a radical—maybe I could convince the Italians to take their money. And that, in a way, was my first exposure to the population side of this. I mean, I didn't know anything about populationists and international issues and any of this stuff at all. I knew about abortion rights.

**Sharpless**

And you were providing it on a grass-roots level.

**Kissling**

A service—right, exactly—in the U.S. And, of course, this was a great opportunity to learn more and to be out in the world and everything. So I went to Italy and talked to all these people.

And Emma Bonino was—well, the Radical Party was, you know—I don't know what their tendency was. They were probably Maoist, but I wouldn't swear to it. They were basically a far-left party, Communists in the Italian government system. And they were a small party, but an influential party. And Emma Bonino was, and still is, one of the leaders in the Radical Party, so they also had a very strong feminist stance. Bonino was the European commissioner for human rights at the beginning of the Afghanistan stuff, and she's very well known internationally. And so they were young European leftists, leftist feminist types, you know.

And so I would go over there and meet with them and have coffee and talk about this, and ultimately they decided—and learn what they were up to. And that was a point: a bunch of abortion clinics were raided in Florence and Rome and, I think, Milan, but definitely in Florence and Rome. And people were arrested from the clandestine clinics.

Ultimately the Radical Party decided that they weren't going to take the money from America, that this was potentially too problematic, that first [of] all they “knew” we were all CIA. And even if we weren't, as they put it, they would be accused of taking money from the CIA, so they were better off not taking this money. And also at the time I would be going over and meeting them and talking to them and finding out what they were doing and telling them about what we were doing, you know, because it's not constant. IPAS would ask me to go to Tunisia and see what was going on in Tunisia. They sent me to Nigeria, which was the worst three days in my entire life.

**Sharpless**

What happened?



**Kissling**

Nothing, which is what made it the worst three days of my—I had no idea about any of this. I mean, I just got on a plane and went to Nigeria. I had my shots and I had my visa and all that, but I didn't believe—I never believe certain things. Like people say, Oh, it's so hard. You can't go to Nigeria without somebody meeting you at the airport with a car. And you have to have this, and then the reservation—and all this stuff. You know, I just spent a year in Southeast Asia basically with a backpack. I could go anywhere. I mean, I went to Cambodia during the war. I was in Laos—all of this kind of thing. This is just the kind of way people talk about what they see as hardship. But that's not hardship.

So I arrived with no hotel reservation. I met a guy on the plane and he had a driver meeting him and we went to the same hotel. They didn't have rooms. They finally found me a room. And I didn't have an itinerary and a sheet of paper [saying] you're going to see Dr. So-and-so and this one and that one and the next one. I did what I always do: I get there, pick up the phone, I call people, and you go see them. Of course, nothing worked. It was just terrible. So after three days you dial a phone number and they connect you with anybody in that town who has a telephone, it doesn't matter what number you called. It's just totally wild. So I couldn't accomplish anything. And I sat there and I said, Well, what am I going to do? And I said, Well, okay, I've got two choices. You can keep trying. Don't give up and maybe it will work. Or you can get the hell out of here. I went to the airport and I took the first plane out of Nigeria that I could get out of Nigeria and I went to Ghana, and that was the end of that.

The next thing I did for IPAS was to open the first—I don't think anybody left at IPAS knows this history of their own organization, because they're all gone, dead or mum. Abortion became legal in 1976 in Austria. And IPAS wanted to open a clinic in Austria that it owned and that it could use as a source of revenue for the work in developing countries. And they had first made a partnership with Marie Stopes. Marie Stopes is the British Margaret Sanger. She's dead, too—same era. And there's an organization called Marie Stopes that was also setting up abortion clinics around the world, also from a population control perspective. And so Marie Stopes and IPAS were trying to open a clinic together in Austria so they would have a source of income. The guy who runs Marie Stopes had not succeeded at all. And so IPAS said, Why don't you try? You go and see if you can do it.

I said okay and I brought in one of the two doctors who had owned the clinic in Pelham, who is a very good businessman. And we went to Austria together to see if we could find a doctor so we could open a clinic. Among the first things we did, we visited the various people in the political parties. And there was a doctor named [Alfred] Rockenschaub, who was a Social Democrat, and he was the head of the Semmelweis-Clinic, which was a very, very big prestigious [hospital], you know, like Boston Lying-In Hospital or something, in Vienna. And he had been very, very influential in working for the legal change. No abortions were being performed in Austria. It was legal, but it was unavailable. I remember talking to him, and we said, Nobody's doing abortions. What's going on here? And he said, "Well, now that it's legal we wouldn't want to rock the boat." (Sharpless laughs) That was his attitude—

better we don't do anything for a couple of years.

So we started hanging out in emergency rooms and talking to doctors in emergency rooms, and Hachamovich, who was the doctor who was with me, his theory was you needed to find a doctor who was in trouble. You needed to find somebody who was getting divorced, who needed money, somebody who would take a risk. And so we kept asking and asking and we finally found one and we hired him, and we hired a local woman to run the clinic. And we opened the first legal abortion clinic in Austria. And there are a couple—I don't know how many—I don't know much, because we opened it, we played with it for a while, kept it going, and then moved out, in that sense, and left it to IPAS, and whatever they did, they did. So I worked with Ipas for about a year and a half doing that kind of thing. And during that period of time I was doing that I also did some work for them in Mexico helping to open a clinic, an illegal clinic, in Mexico—again, in this period between '75, '76.

**Sharpless** Not to sound naïve, but how do you open an illegal clinic?

**Kissling** You find a doctor who is willing to do abortions. That's the first thing, find a doctor. Now they already had the doctor for Mexico. And you rent a space and you start doing abortions.

**Sharpless** What keeps the government from shutting it down?

**Kissling** What kept the government from shutting down illegal providers in the United States of America prior to 1970? Bribes and a lack of political will. There's never been a real political will to stop illegal abortions. And again, in a Catholic context—for example, [the clinic I visited recently in Latin America] was celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary as an illegal clinic. The clinic is a half

block from the Church, a big church. And when they opened the clinic they went to the Church and they said, We want to tell you what we're doing. We don't do illegal abortions. What we do—I mean, we have a multi-service center—what we do is if a woman comes to us and she has started to miscarry, to have a spontaneous abortion, we complete the abortion. That's what we do. We want you to know because somebody may come to see you and say that we're doing abortions. We're not doing abortions. We're cleaning up after botched abortions or we're servicing women who have begun to abort or miscarry.

And they make contributions to the Church. The Church takes their contributions. And so there are many euphemistic ways, and mostly people just—again, I was starting to say that this thing with the Catholic Church, and this goes back to the thing I said about my mother and hypocrisy and scandal: the Catholic Church doesn't care if you have an abortion. They don't want the abortion to be legal.

**Sharpless**

Hmm. That's an interesting distinction.

**Kissling**

It's okay if you go have an illegal abortion. I mean it's not okay, but it's not something they have to do something about because it doesn't affect the moral climate of the country, of the culture. It doesn't upset a patriarchal norm around who controls the body. There's an element of guilt and suffering and danger, which is good. I mean, for example, when the institutional Church now writes about RU-486, they say one of the reasons they're freaked out about RU-486 is that women won't know that they're having an abortion. They say it right out loud: Women will not know they are having an abortion. They will

not suffer the pain and trauma associated with killing a fetus. It will become more natural and it should never ever become natural. So if you have an illegal abortion the society has not broken with the moral tradition of the Church, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

So that's a piece of the package. While I was working for IPAS as a consultant I went to a conference in 1976 at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. The conference was on abortion. It was a small conference, maybe a hundred people, 120 people there. And one of the purposes of this conference was to establish—but once I got there it became clear that there were some people—it was sponsored by the university—who wanted to form an association of abortion providers, and in a sense that conference was the birth of the National Association of Abortion Facilities, NAAF.

**Sharpless**

Okay.

**Kissling**

And the impetus for it came very strongly from the profit-making abortion providers who increasingly over the years felt that they were second-class citizens, that you had Preterm and you had Planned Parenthood who felt that they were the good guys. Now that they were finally doing abortions, they were doing them for good motives and not for profit. And then there were these “scum” doctors who had opened clinics and were just doing it for the money. And they didn't want to have anything to do with those people. But those people felt that they were worthy human beings who were doing good things. And now they wanted their own professional association. And, you know, if the Planned Parenthoods wanted to join, fine, and if they didn't, they didn't care. And also they wanted an association because things were beginning—

even though it was very early '76, they wanted to develop common schemes for purchasing. They wanted to negotiate as a block malpractice insurance rates. They wanted to have their own professional association in terms of meetings and all of the good things.

And so they were forming the National Association of Abortion Facilities. And I was there and people liked me. And they said, Would you be on the steering committee? And I said, "Sure, I'll be on the steering committee." So that was sort of how it began. Very quickly there was a lot of pressure from the Planned Parenthoods and the non-profits that this association was a bad idea: these people have the wrong politics and the wrong whatever, and we couldn't let this happen. I tried in that period to see if we could figure out a way that everybody could come to the same table—proportional representation. You know, Well, I'm not joining it as Planned Parenthood of New York City because I have to have my vote. We have to have our this, that, and the other thing.

So we worked out a system for proportional representation. The feminist clinics would have two seats and the large non-profits would have this many seats and the large profits would have—and then doctors' offices. What were the different categories of abortion providers in the United States of America and how could you see that nobody felt that any one subset ruled? And this didn't work. In a certain sense the profit-making providers were just—they'd had it. They didn't have to give these people what they wanted. Screw them.

**Sharpless**

To what extent were they apolitical? The Planned Parenthoods and the feminists all have their sort of ideological agendas, and the others—

**Kissling** Well, the feminist clinics—I mean, at that point, '76, there still wasn't the threat—there was the threat, but it wasn't seen as terribly real—of a constitutional amendment. There was not, other than the Medicaid question—which, of course, is one of the most important turning points, in my opinion, in the abortion movement, which we can talk about—but other than Medicaid you didn't really have anything going on with waiting periods, teen consent. That stuff hadn't emerged yet.

**Sharpless** Hyde Amendment and all that stuff.

**Kissling** Right. Well, the Hyde Amendment—that's Medicaid. That had already started in '75. Hyde started introducing it in '75. It didn't pass. I think the one in '76 or '77 passed. And then you had the Medicaid case and we lost. So they were less political in the sense that they weren't seeing themselves as a trade association that lobbied on the merits of issues. So it didn't work and I pulled away from NAAF. And everybody who wasn't a part of NAAF formed something called the National Abortion Council. And I was the head of the National Abortion Council.

And the explicit goal of the National Abortion Council was to bring the National Association of Abortion Facilities to its knees. (Sharpless laughs) That was it. That's what it was there for. If the National Association of Abortion Facilities would not come willingly, they would be forced to come. And indeed that's what happened after about six months of the two organizations competing, and now NAAF [is] not growing, and NAC having access to more money because we were the good people who knew the donors. John D. Rockefeller III gave a grant. And finally a committee, a negotiating committee,

was established. The two organizations merged into the National Abortion Federation and I was the first executive director.

**Sharpless** Okay, let me change the tape right quick.

*Tape 2 ends; tape 3, side 1, begins.*

All right, this is the third tape with Frances Kissling on September 13th. Okay, so NAAF—

**Kissling** —and NAC merged and I became the first executive director.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling** And I did that for about a year and a half to two years.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling** I left and, you know, it was classic formation of a new institution, getting membership together, getting some kind of a modicum of a program going. We produced a consumer guide for patients seeking abortions. We had a professional meeting every year for training and development and education. And that was about what we did in the early stages. And in that period of time, in late 1977, Rosie Jimenez died. And Ellen Frankfort, who was a friend of mine, who was a feminist author in New York, wrote for *The Village Voice* and wrote a book called *Vaginal Politics* and was well known for writing on issues, got in touch with me. And she wanted to do a story and asked if I would help her out. And I said yes.

**Sharpless** She wanted to do a story on Rosie's death?

**Kissling** On Rosie's death.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling** And so I said I would help her out. I was still working with NAF. And we took



a trip to McAllen, which is where Rosie died, and the conventional wisdom—now, did you talk to Carl about this?

**Sharpless** No, not about this at all. No, I didn't.

**Kissling** Okay, this was during the Carter administration, and Califano was the secretary of health. And the conventional wisdom, following the investigation by a CDC epidemiological service team, was that Rosie had gone—because there was a cluster and Rosie was the one who died, but there were some other people with infections and things like that. And so the claim of the women's movement was that Rosie died because of the cutoff of Medicaid funds. And the CDC reports said, No, she didn't die from the cutoff of Medicaid funds. She died because she was a Mexican American woman who was ashamed that she was pregnant and went over the border and got an abortion in Mexico from a *partera*.

And we went and we found out that they were completely wrong. This isn't what happened. She went to—the arrogance of it all—she went to the very physician in McAllen who had given her one or two previous abortions, and who denied her an abortion this time, because Medicaid no longer paid for the abortions. And so she went to an illegal *partera* in McAllen, got an abortion, got infected, and died. And the doctor who treated her when she was infected was the same doctor who had turned her away for an abortion and he never even knew she was the same woman. He never even knew. The CDC came down and investigated, and the guys were friends of mine. They played tennis with Chester—you know Daniel Chester, or Chester Daniel, the doctor—and came back with the report that was crap, complete and total crap.

And so Ellen decided to write a book and asked me to work with her on the book. I was also politically, like, furious, because one of the great struggles in the abortion rights movement in the United States is the struggle between those in the movement who desperately want abortion to be mainstream, normalized, et cetera, and for whom the best political strategy is to stress the threat of abortion becoming illegal and unconstitutional, which means that people like you and me can't get abortions—nice, middle-class, white folks.

And that wing of the abortion movement that is more radical and places its commitment in access to the poor believes that—while certainly a far overstatement and exaggeration—believes that when abortion was illegal it was poor women who died, for the most part poor women who died, poor women whose fertility was threatened, poor women whose lives were screwed up, and to some extent, women with resources had a much better chance of finding abortion.

And now we faced a situation, after four years of abortion being legal and a constitutional right in the United States of America, where we seem to be going back to a reality in which poor women who could no longer use Medicaid, if they lived in the wrong state, were not going to have access to abortion, and women who did have money would have access. And that the movement, in general, was not interested in making access to Medicaid abortions for poor women the centerpiece of the political struggle in the United States.

And I'm on the side—for the most part without any ill will, you know, towards anybody else—I'm on the side of the poor. That probably historically

has to do with A, the fact that I'm a working-class person who has been through a broken family with a mother who could just about put shoes on the feet of her children, so this is who I am. I have class loyalty, you know. And also as a Catholic due by the social mission of the Church and the notion that the poor should be our first priority.

I was the executive director of an association that was part of a movement that didn't exactly share the strategy that I thought flowed from those values. I think people shared the values to a large extent. I don't think the abortion rights movement is a racist movement. I think historically the population movement is both a racist movement and a classist, eugenicist movement. But that's a question in terms of what you're doing, and even the work, as we get deeper into the next stage of our work, which becomes more international, and therefore population becomes an issue, which it is not in the first part of my career. The first part of my career and my commitment is the reproductive health movement. It's a health movement. It's a rights movement. It's a health movement, but it has nothing to do with population.

So anyway, at that point I decided to leave the National Abortion Federation and to work with Ellen on the Rosie book. We did it. The book was a resounding failure, as most books in America are. Probably, you know, maybe a couple thousand were sold.

**Sharpless**

But it was a popular press. It was a good press.

**Kissling**

It was a very good book. It was very good press. It was Doubleday. Yeah, but it didn't sell. This happens. And, you know, well, some might say, Well, that's also a clue about the political messages that work in relation to keeping

abortions safe and legal—that the poor message doesn't work. Americans don't care about poor people, but they do care about their rights and their kids and their teenagers and da da da da da da da. So I did that.

And shortly after the period the book came out, there was an effort to create something called Abortion Rights Action Week, which was supposed to be grassroots activities, and I worked on that. It was a coalition thing. And at that point in time—and I don't think I even knew that Catholics for a Free Choice existed. So anyway, there was a woman named Patricia McMahon, who was in a sense the second executive director of Catholics for a Free Choice. And Patricia McMahon was an Irish working-class woman who worked for a company that made harnesses and bridles for horses in the United States there in the Baltimore area.

She went to Ireland in '76, '77, and she was appalled at the state of Irish women and contraception, and she came back wanting to do something about it. She called up the Ms. Foundation and said, "I want to do something about this." And they said, There's this group called Catholics for a Free Choice. Why don't you call them? She called Catholics for a Free Choice. She convinced them to hire her as the first executive director full-time. They did it. They had no money. And she went about trying to build a stronger board. And she came to me and she asked me did I want to be on the board of directors of Catholics for a Free Choice.

So this was a defining—this is the defining moment of my life, okay? And the question for me was, Am I a Catholic? Am I a Catholic? I don't go to church. I don't believe in the teachings as they relate to sexuality, women, and

reproduction, but am I a Catholic? And so I struggled. I said, “Oh, I’ll think about it.” And I struggled with that a lot, and I decided—what we decided was that I wanted to—I wasn’t not a Catholic, okay? I had always felt that the abortion rights movement lacked a moral dimension, that working in the clinics, you know, seeing that politics is the black and white of, Is it legal, isn’t it legal. It’s not about whether it’s right or wrong, when it’s right, when it’s wrong. Something is either legal or it’s illegal. Either you can do it or you can’t do it. And in the context of the struggle about abortion in the United States there really was not much space, nor was it particularly wise, to explore the moral dimensions, because morality and ethics is murky. There is no yes/no. There’s a lot of maybes. And “maybe” is not useful in politics.

So there was no space for this in everything I had done. In the clinics there is space for this, actually. Inside the clinic there’s plenty of space for, Am I doing the right thing? So it’s no accident in a way in my life that working in the provision of services and working for Catholics for a Free Choice are the major elements of who I am. I couldn’t care about Capitol Hill. They have to drag me to Capitol Hill. I’m not interested in going up there. I just don’t—it’s not my thing.

So anyway, I was very interested in the fact that Catholics for a Free Choice was a space where the moral dimensions of the issues could be explored. I also believed that social change occurs at the margins, not the center. From political tactics I don’t think you make big social change by being part of the establishment. The establishment doesn’t make change. Getting into the establishment doesn’t make changes, it just makes you the

establishment. I mean, that's what I see most of the time. Are there exceptions? Of course. So I think if you really want to make a change you're much better trying to do it from the margins than you are from trying to be popular in the center. Not a very dominant view in our time, but that's my view. And see if that's a possibility.

It's a kooky little nothing organization. You can do whatever you want because you're not going to hurt anything. Nobody's going to listen to you. Now these Catholic nuts over there in Catholics for a Free Choice who want to talk about morality and, you know, believe in God, and da da da da da da, let them do what they want and we'll have them come once in a while to one of our press conferences and they'll show their Catholics support us. But basically we could do what we wanted. I like being in places where you can do what you want. I am ultimately a subversive person.

**Sharpless** Let me ask you a question for a minute. Now when you ask yourself the question, am I a Catholic?

**Kissling** Right. Let me get to that part.

**Sharpless** How did you answer that?

**Kissling** I said, "I think I'll join this group and find out if I'm a Catholic. This is one of the things that I can do." I said, "I think I'm going." I said, "Well, Kant [and Nietzsche] talk about the will to power. Rollo May talks about the will to love. Maybe there's something called the will to believe—because if you look historically at the Catholic Church, there is an element of struggle in each person of faith where they reject their faith. Every serious person has doubt. There may be many non-serious people who lead totally unreflective lives and

who never doubt anything. But most thoughtful people have doubts about all sorts—it's like, again, the will to love. You doubt that you love somebody. Well, you know, you act as if you love somebody along the route to rediscovering or discovering the reality of that love.

And so I said, "I'm going to do this. I'm going to try this in the context of exploring whether there is a will to believe. I'm going to reenter this milieu of Catholicism—world and community of Catholicism. And I'm going to find out if exercising my will to believe will make it a reality.

**Sharpless**

You'd been out of the Church fifteen, sixteen years at this point?

**Kissling**

Yeah, so '63, '64, about there, and it's now '78, '79—yeah. And I consider myself—many people would say, I've always considered myself a spiritual person. I think that in a certain sense, the root—and I actually had this conversation with Jeannie Rosoff. Jeannie Rosoff and I had this conversation once. Jeannie's a Catholic, too. And we were talking about what we believe. What do we really believe? And I said to her, "Well, I can say for sure that I believe that life has meaning. I'm here to do something. I have an obligation to do something." She didn't even believe that. And it is a belief, because life could be totally meaningless, totally random. I mean, who says we're any different than the ants or the birds or the bees or just another species, and we go about our life and there is no meaning other than the meaning you give it. I believe, for no rational reason whatsoever, that there is meaning beyond the meaning I give to life.

That's a beginning. That's a beginning step, in a way. I mean, if you believe that, you sort of believe that there's something outside of each of us as

individuals. What gives it that meaning? If the meaning does not come from me, than what does it come from? So that's sort of a starting point along the path to reestablishing belief from the beginning rather from the catechism: there is a God, you are—you know. But I believe that ultimate thing, which is, you go back to the basic Baltimore Catechism.

**Sharpless** Here's her grant proposal of the day.

**Kissling** The Baltimore Catechism, you know, has, Who is God? Why did God create you? God created me to know, love, and serve him on earth and to be happy with him in Heaven. That's like from second grade. I believe that. The other thing is that as I worked—going from the board of directors to the staff, if you want to—as I worked in Catholics for a Free Choice and I became exposed to the Catholic Church of today as opposed to the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church I knew, I discovered that I'm more Catholic than most of the progressive Catholics I know.

**Sharpless** In what sense?

**Kissling** Um, in what sense?

**Sharpless** How do you define Catholicness?

**Kissling** Well, I mean—in a sense, I think, there are elements of my belief and practice that are more traditional, in a certain way. Even though I'm not a pious Catholic and it's not what appeals to me about Catholicism, I'm more connected to the actual reality of ritual. I don't like it a lot, but I go to church. I receive the sacraments as much, if not more, than many of the people who are in this movement, more than many nuns who are in this movement. I mean, I have nun friends and nun colleagues who have not stepped foot into a church



in twenty years, and they're nuns.

**Sharpless** That's interesting.

**Kissling** And it's very interesting, because I remember we did this press conference in 1983, I think, and there were four speakers on the panel—me and a nun were two of them. And the media's question to me was, Do you go to church? Because that's also what people think it is to be Catholic. All you have to do is go to Mass on Sunday and you're a Catholic. And they never asked her. And she doesn't go to church. She never goes to church. But it would never occur to them that a nun doesn't go to church.

**Sharpless** No.

**Kissling** It would never occur to them in a million years. But anyway—and also because I am more reflective about some of the ethical questions than even many progressive Catholics are.

**Sharpless** So, do we—I'm trying to think if we—

**Kissling** Do you want to go more into what does it mean to be a Catholic?

**Sharpless** Yeah, let's do that. And then maybe we can start with—

**Kissling** Okay, I think it means a lot of things to be a Catholic. I don't think there is any one definition of what it is to be a Catholic.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling** Was Joan of Arc a Catholic? I mean, she was a heretic one day and now she's a saint. Is Hans Küng, who publicly rejects infallibility? I don't publicly reject infallibility. I may privately question it, but I'm not out there saying it doesn't exist. Are they Catholics? Is Pat Buchanan, who rejects the entire social justice teaching of the Church, a Catholic? So we have the twentieth- to twenty-first-

century problem of even one of the most rigidly structured world institutions.

I mean, what makes a Jew? I talk to my Jewish friends all the time. I say, What do you believe? Is there anything you have to believe to be a Jew? Do you believe that the Messiah is still coming? Do you have to believe that there is going to be a Messiah and he is going to come in order to be a Jew? And it's one of these cultural things—

**Sharpless** Uh-huh, you hear about—

**Kissling** It's not a relevant question. That's a Catholic question to a Jewish person. The cultural difference is so profound, this question is not relevant. It's like the questions around—another one that I think of a lot—many of the meetings where we talk about North/South questions, here we are talking about the right to refuse treatment, okay, to people who don't have a right to treatment. It's such a luxurious question. What are you worried about, the right to refuse treatment—we just want to get treated.

**Sharpless** You're talking about North and South.

**Kissling** North and South, right. You know, this is a big ethical question for us. Some guy, you know, has a gangrenous foot and he won't let you amputate it. Well, some person has no food, they can't get retroviruses, and we're talking about the right to say no to medicine? I mean, it's the same sort of thing, that kind of question. But anyway, the problem is that there is really, at this stage of the game, in terms of what I have learned, in reentering the Catholic world from a progressive perspective while paying attention to what conservatives have to say, is that I don't think there is any longer an answer to that question. First, I think it is a matter of self-definition. It's like identity politics. I'm a Catholic. I

was raised—whether you want to call it a cultural Catholic—

**Sharpless** Ethnic Catholic—

**Kissling** Ethnic Catholic. But I'm more than a cultural and an ethnic Catholic. The system against which I test goodness and evil—even if I can use the word evil—is the Catholic system. I may reject elements of that system, which I have every right to do as a Catholic. There's nothing that I do as a Catholic that makes me not a Catholic. So in that sense I'm a Catholic. In another sense—and it goes back to the more inchoate realities, the questions of will and identity—I was baptized a Catholic. I don't reject my baptism. I don't reject the sacramental reality of the Church. I'm not a slave to it, in the sense I don't feel like I have to go to church every Sunday and receive communion every Easter.

But there is a part of me that is sacramentally, intellectually, spiritually, culturally bound. I think like a Catholic. I know how Catholics think. Catholics think differently than Protestants and Jews and Hindus and Muslims and everything else. We have different sets of experiences, et cetera, et cetera, that are part of who we are. And I'm a part of that.

As I said, I also think—and this has been published and you may have read it or whatever—but I think that there are different kinds of Catholics. At this moment in my life and in this part of my life, where I am a Catholic for a Free Choice, the identifying characteristic of my Catholicism is resistance. That's who I am. I am a Catholic in resistance, in the long tradition of resisters. I can look in Catholic history and find people who are Catholics who have done it historically and followed the same route that I am following as a Catholic.

Other Catholics are pious Catholics. They pray. They go to Mass. That defines their Catholicism. Other Catholics are social justice Catholics. They're Catholics for whom the most essential part of being a Catholic is following the social justice message of the Gospel: doing good, creating justice, fighting against the death penalty, whatever—against poverty. All of those kinds of things, that's a social justice Catholic. There are conservative Catholics, ultra-orthodox conservative Catholics who believe that the identifying mark of who you are as a Catholic—for them, but they believe it's for everybody, which is the difference between them and me—is loyalty to the Pope.

We're all different kinds of Catholics. It's enough. It's enough, in terms of for me, it's enough. Is it enough for the ultra orthodox Catholic? No. For the ultra orthodox Catholic, I am not a Catholic. Now, I then use an external measure. That's my internal measure. The external measure is, have they kicked me out of the club? The answer is no. Do they know who I am? They know who I am. Every bishop in this country knows who I am. The Pope knows who I am. I have no doubt—I mean, right now he probably doesn't know who anybody is, to tell you the truth—but aside from that he knows who I am.

**Sharpless** Let me turn the tape right quick.

*Tape 3, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.*

**Kissling** He has been asked to excommunicate me. Petitions have gone from the United States of America to Rome from ultra orthodox Catholics saying, Please excommunicate the following pro-abortionists: Frances Kissling, Ellie Smeal, Patrick Leahy, Mario Cuomo—bobbity boobity babbity boo. And the Vatican has either remained silent or said to them, Oh, we're not doing that. We're not

doing it.

And so, in the eyes of the Church, I am a Catholic. I may be a bad Catholic, I may be a good Catholic, I may be a misguided Catholic, but I am a Catholic. I choose to be a Catholic. I will not renounce this identity for many, many, many reasons: political reasons, social reasons, stubbornness reasons, characterological reasons, and spiritual reasons. I don't want to be anything else. I want to be a Catholic. I'm a Catholic. And they're stuck with me. And it kills them that they're stuck with me. And, you know, then you look at certain things—okay, just to put this also into population prospective. I agree with the Catholic Church on population control. I disagree with them on abortion. But I have the same analysis they have of the evil of population control. I think population control—I think it's legitimate to worry about population size and growth and all those things. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. But the mindset of too many people—I reject it.

**Sharpless**

Are you talking about like the Chinese one-child policies?

**Kissling**

I reject it. I reject it. I think it's wrong. When you apply a whole range of ethical standards I don't think the enactment of that policy meets the standards of ethical and moral conduct. One of the other things—this is sort of like a little sideline—but it's like I'm more interested in morals than I am in ethics. They're really the same thing, you know, like people always ask this question, What's the difference between morals and ethics? And they get this answer back, Well, morals are each individual element and ethics is a system. That's not the right answer, because in reality—it's just not true. I mean, Ruth Macklin once talked about this and I've thought about it a lot after she talked

about it. She said, “These are the same word. One is a Greek word and one is a Roman word.” And just expand that notion of Greek word, Roman word in another way. One is a cool word. One is a hot word. The Roman word is hot. The Greek word is cool. One has passion associated with it. The other has logic associated with it. But they’re really the same thing. You don’t say in a passion, That’s unethical, you say, That’s immoral! You know? But it really is—they’re the same thing. They’re the same thing. Anyway. You want to go more? I’ll go. You’re dead. (laughs)

**Sharpless** I was thinking we probably should stop for today.

**Kissling** (laughs) Okay.

**Sharpless** But we’ll pick it up in the morning. And you can get your grant proposal in the mail.

**Kissling** Yes.

*End of Interview 1.*

*Interview 2*

**Sharpless** Okay. This is September 14th, 2002. My name is Rebecca Sharpless and this is the second oral history interview with Ms. Frances Kissling. The interview is taking place at her home [near the zoo] in Washington, D.C.

Okay. We had, I thought, a great first interview yesterday, and when we stopped, we had talked about your deciding that you were a Catholic. You had been asked to go on the board of Catholics for a Free Choice. And we talked about, you know, your deciding that, yes, you are a Catholic. But the second aspect, I think, of your decision you mentioned was that this was something that you wanted because it took the moral implications of abortion seriously.

**Kissling** Right.

**Sharpless** Could you say more about that?

**Kissling** Well, I mean, I think if you look historically at the abortion rights movement in the United States, there always was kind of a sharp distinction between legal and moral. And that, as I think I said earlier, that there is a way in which something is either legal or not legal. And so the movement for abortion rights concentrated very much on rights, and not at all on morality. And so you had this fairly sharp split between those who were opposed to abortion, who were predominantly religiously based and predominantly Catholic in the early years. Now, you know, that shifted in the '80s, but certainly the founding of an anti-abortion movement was a Catholic phenomenon. It was founded by the Catholic bishops and concentrated very much on the question that abortion was immoral because it was the taking of the life of the fetus.

Also, if you think historically about the relationship between women and

morality and look at it through a feminist lens, morality, and concepts of morality, have always been used against women. So you never really won as a woman if [the issue of] morality was raised, because it was always the control of women's behavior because of the—you know, we could talk about this for a hundred hours—of the historic sense that women were, ever since Adam and Eve, women were morally corrupt. We're all morally corrupt in a Christian context, but women were especially morally corrupt, and moral corrupters, so that from a moral perspective women needed to be controlled. So, you just look at that in a very shallow kind of a way, a surface sort of a way, you then get to our time and the notion that if we as a movement were to deal with morality on the abortion question, we would lose, because the moral discourse is controlled by men and is weighted against women.

So first, there was the simple question. Something is either legal or not legal, and morality is not the determinant factor. Second, that moral systems were predominantly used against women and were therefore suspect as a way of doing abortion discourse in the public arena. And the third element is religion, which is more closely tied to morality than it is tied to rights, and that since the move against—there also was in the movement a deep suspicion of religion and of religious people, you know, an early perception that goes with kind of the prejudices of the country at the time. All Catholics do what the Pope tells them. All Catholics are anti-choice. Religious people are more likely to be against abortion than people who are not religious, and the dominant reality [is] that much of the abortion rights movement was a secular movement.

So all of those things contributed to a way in which in abortion you don't



talk about morality. And Catholics for a Free Choice seemed to me to—and of course as someone whose grounding was in a clinic, where I dealt with people for whom abortion was a moral issue—

**Sharpless** The people having the abortion?

**Kissling** The people having abortions, who more than not did have a sense of wanting to know whether they were doing right or wrong. Was this justified? Even though they're going to do it—even women who would say, I don't think this is morally the correct thing to do, but I have to do this, you know. So in that context, both in terms of my Catholic background, in terms of my experience in the abortion clinic, it always seemed to me that the inability of the movement to deal with the moral questions was problematic for me first and foremost. And I also believed then, but even believe more strongly now, that the inability to deal with the question as a moral question undercuts the long term success of the pro-choice movement.

So, Catholics for a Free Choice seemed to be this ideal space where those questions could be dealt with as Catholic questions, but also as broader, moral questions—you know, that it wasn't just a Catholic thing. And I was attracted to working on that part of the issue.

**Sharpless** Now, in essence, because of this historic male, conservative—they had sort of staked out the moral high ground, and a lot of the secular people weren't willing to touch that.

**Kissling** Right. And I think one of the other things—oh, no, go ahead. Did you want to ask a question?

**Sharpless** Well, I was going to say, what was it about the founders of the CFFC that

made them decide to take this on?

**Kissling**

Well, I think the fact that they were Catholics, and I think that in some senses even in its origins, the three women who founded Catholics for a Free Choice—in their own mind, I don't think they ever imagined CFFC to be as strongly engaged in the moral discourse as it is now. I mean, I think they too saw it more in a—I used to describe Catholics for a Free Choice in its founding period as a Catholic ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union]. You know, it was, in essence, a civil liberties organization—which is very much in the Catholic tradition. But the way in which CFFC dealt with these issues in its founding period, from say, '73, even to the time that I got involved in it, when it was really just beginning to grapple with moral issues, was as a matter of conscience, of the right of Catholics to dissent, those kinds of things. It was the right to religious liberty.

Those were more the founding arguments, and it was only—you know, as you go through a progression of how an organization matures in the same way a person matures, that you begin to see the layers of the onion being peeled until you get down to—I think first a more feminist interpretation comes into CFFC, and along with that, a sense of morals and ethics.

**Sharpless**

Okay. So you looked at these things and decided to get involved.

**Kissling**

So I climbed on the board of directors, you know, and I was on the board of directors from around 1978 to '82, when the Irish woman I think I talked about, Pat McMahon, decided to—and as a member of the board of directors, I was as active as board members can be, but it was not a board where the board members were equivalent of staff or anything. (both speaking at once)

You went to three or four board meetings a year, you dealt with budget, you dealt with program priorities.

**Sharpless**

Were you still at the National Abortion Federation?

**Kissling**

I had left the National Abortion Federation end of '77 and beginning of '78, when I started working on the Rosie Jimenez book—worked on the Rose Jimenez book '78, '79. When I went on the board of Catholics for a Free Choice, I was working on a short-term project called Abortion Rights Action Week, which was an effort to organize grassroots activities throughout the United States, culminating in a specific week of activities. I don't remember what week it was.

And then I worked for two years from—in '80 I was the acting executive director of a Washington D.C. foundation called the Youth Project, which gave grants to grassroots organizations nationwide who were involved in social change—groups like SOCM, Save our Cumberland Mountains, and ACORN, and all of the community action kind of stuff that was going on around the country was supported through that. And then in '80 their executive director had taken a leave of absence to work on—probably it was Ted Kennedy's campaign for president at that point. And I came in and did that for a year and then worked for the second year for a consortium of family foundations who were interested in doing that kind of funding in Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico. So I spent a year traveling in those areas getting educated about the movements among the Hispanic/Latino people and advising the foundations on that.

**Sharpless**

And learning how foundations work, or did you—

**Kissling** Yes. And learning how foundations work. I mean, I think those two years made me the successful fundraiser that I am because I knew from the side of the desk where you were giving away money what you wanted to know, and how to do it, and what it was about.

And also, although I think I'm more naturally this way, I developed a sense of the equality of relationship between a donor and a donee—you know, how to work in that structure in a way where you are not a supplicant. I give them an opportunity to give their money away successfully. Without me, they can't succeed. The donor cannot succeed if there are not people out there to receive money who do a good job. So, you know, I developed a philosophy around that. So Pat McMahon, who was the executive director of Catholics for a Free Choice from around 1978 to '82, really took it from nothing, took it from more than an idea to the first stage of institutionalization. She guided the organization through a process in which it decided—it had been organized as a 501C4.

**Sharpless** Lobbying.

**Kissling** A lobbying organization, which meant that it was not eligible for foundation money. She took it through a process in which it decided to become a 501C3, therefore eligible for foundation money.

**Sharpless** And donations.

**Kissling** And donations, right, that were tax deductible. Right. She made, I think, an extremely wise decision that what the organization needed were some foundational publications that laid out the Catholic pro-choice position. And she got the first grant for those from the Sunnen Foundation in St. Louis,

Missouri. And the Sunnen Foundation, through the early years of CFFC, that period of time till probably late '80s, was a major supporter of Catholics for a Free Choice, and a controversial supporter of Catholics for a Free Choice, because the Sunnen family, who were the foundation, were very strongly committed both to the concept that there were too many people—

**Sharpless** Populations, yeah.

**Kissling** —in the world, a population-control perspective, even though they were mostly domestic funders, and to abortion rights on their own terms. So when you look at the cast of characters throughout the history of this movement, you have people who are strictly reproductive rights people, who believe in a woman's right to choose, who are committed to abortion because of women's suffering and rights and whatever, and you have others who have entered that movement who are much more only concerned with—and not in a malevolent sort of way—but are concerned that there are too many people and the effect of those too many people on the planet, on the United States, on the economy, on individual well-being [as] negative, and therefore enter the movement because they want to see fewer people.

And then you have some people who have both going on at the same time, when the two are not connected in a certain way. You could disconnect both of them and those people would still be—even if there were no population problem in their minds, they would be committed to abortion rights. And then you have others for whom population is it.

**Sharpless** It's possible to be a population person without being a feminist, for example.

**Kissling** Well, for sure. You know, it's quite possible to be a population person without

being a feminist, and it's quite possible to be an advocate of abortion rights without being a feminist. It's very hard to be a feminist and be primarily motivated by an interest in population. I don't think it's impossible. I think, probably, if I thought about it long enough, I could articulate a feminist argument in this. But generally speaking, I think that the drive for reducing population does not—the people who are engaged and the organizations engaged in that do not have a feminist consciousness. They do not see the world and the problems of the world through the lens of what is—I mean, how do we define feminism? You know, go back to that basic definition: is feminism a basic commitment to women's well-being? That's the positive definition and, of course, the more negative definition is non-discrimination.

You can look at it—it's the two sides of the coin. A feminist is one who believes women should be treated equally with men and should not be discriminated against. That's the easy, mainstream sort of way to look at it, because nobody believes in discrimination. And then the deeper way is the sense that you look at and test all aspects of law, culture, et cetera, asking the question, What affect does this have on women's equality, well-being, health, et cetera?

And a person whose primary values are focused on, The world would be a better place if we had fewer people, is not looking at the world through either of those two lenses. They may have elements of it. When I talk to people who are to this day primarily moved by—who have fixated on, There are just too many people, you know, and they now have a rhetoric and some insight that, Well, yeah, women are suffering and too many people means that they can't

work or they get worn out too soon. And that has become a piece of their discourse and a piece of their thinking, but it's not the dominant.

For example, I remember at the time of Cairo asking a number of people—you know, Cairo is marked as this point in which there is a so-called paradigm shift from a too-many-people, we-need-to-stabilize-the-population mindset to a mindset in which women's education, women's well-being is the key. I asked a lot of people—and most people don't answer questions like this when you ask them, and you don't really care if they do, you just want them to kind of think about that question: If it were proven that women's education resulted in more babies, would you be for women's education? You know, the obvious thought behind that is: Is women's education a means to an end or is women's education a value in and of itself?

So is there really a paradigm shift, or are we talking at the level of tactics and strategies? How do you reduce population? We cut the cream off the crop with family planning provision, and we've reduced the population as much as we can using a single strategy. Just give them the pills, drop them in the planes—the Rei Ravenholt approach, and I like Rei enormously as a person.

**Sharpless**

And the idea is that if you just provide the technology that people will go—

**Kissling**

People will use it. Just give it to them, give it to them, give it to them, you know, that kind of thing. And most people believe now that there is a limit to the effectiveness of that strategy, that that strategy will take you 70 percent of the way to the goal of reducing population size and growth. But you still have that thorny—you know, this is the era in which we are dealing with how do you deal with that other 30 percent, you know, roughly speaking. There is a

perceived continued need to reduce population in some places in the world.

**Sharpless** India, for example.

**Kissling** Right, and—

**Sharpless** Africa.

**Kissling** Africa. Well, Africa is—I mean, there's less of a need because (both speaking at once) AIDS is doing that [which is not my belief, but what a hard-core populationist might say].

**Sharpless** AIDS is taking care of that. Yeah.

**Kissling** But at any rate, there is a need for some continued reduction of population in India, China, et cetera. And the provision of contraception has worked, but it hasn't achieved the desired goal. So, what more needs to happen to reach that desired goal?

**Sharpless** And that goal is?

**Kissling** To cut the rates further.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling** To convince and get people to have fewer children. We have convinced a significant part of the people who have a high drive towards reduction by simply making the means available. A person like Steve Sinding has put forward [a more ethical] argument that there is still a substantial slice of people left who say, when asked, they want to have fewer children, and therefore we do need to continue the drive to provide contraceptives. There is a ready market already committed, already convinced, that will do it if we just do better and more provision of contraception.

But I think there is a general acceptance in the field of population that



there need to be other strategies and other techniques, including women's educat[ion]—you know, the Kerala [India] example is the common one that everybody cites: for every two years of education, a woman will postpone [pregnancy] boobity-bobity-bibbity-boo—that argument. So that is a piece of the discourse and a piece of the strategy for further reducing population. But as I said, I think the central question in my mind, as a feminist, is the question of how much of that is actually a paradigm shift and how much of it is, more or less, an increase in the number of strategies available to achieve the same goal.

**Sharpless** A means to an end.

**Kissling** A means to an end. And you know, all means to ends are not evil. I don't have—I mean, I, probably in my own positioning of myself in the issues, am somewhere between—I'm not Betsy Hartmann. You know who Betsy Hartmann is?

**Sharpless** Tell me.

**Kissling** Betsy Hartmann currently works at Hampshire College. She heads the international program at Hampshire on development and reproductive health, and she is a critic, a longtime critic of population policies and population programs. She worked in Bangladesh. She wrote a book called *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*. She's the feminist thorn in the population establishment's side. She's the feminist equivalent of Julian Simon. And you know who Julian Simon is? Julian? Okay. Julian Simon is—I mean, and this is interesting in terms of what you're doing. Maybe a missing element is the persistent critics of the population establishment, and maybe—you know, I don't know enough about the funding and the whatever, but maybe interviewing one or two of

those people would be very, very important. Betsy is part of the radical feminist's camp.

**Sharpless** And she sees the guys wanting to sterilize women, and she—

**Kissling** Absolutely, and she sees the abuses, and she has concentrated on the abuses. She also comes from that part of feminism, not totally, that has a stronger suspicion, a very strong predisposition and suspicion to distrust doctors, scientists, et cetera. So she tends to look at things more, you know, like look what—Norplant sucks, Depo-Provera was no good, high technology is not the way to go. We need women-controlled methods. And she sees the harm and doesn't see the good—doesn't see any real good. I'm not there, okay, but I'm more friendly to that position and to those people than the population establishments would be. I mean, these are people—you know, Betsy would be a persistent critic of AID.

One of the dilemmas now for many people in the feminist movement—feminists who are women's health advocates and reproductive health advocates—is we are placed in a position of defending the funding of an agency that we think does a very bad job. (laughs) You know, it's like, we don't think these people in AID have adopted any new paradigm really, whatsoever, and yet because the right is trying to de-fund them—we are the very people who for decades were saying they do bad stuff, and we're now the people who have to say we need the funding.

**Sharpless** But AID is the enemy of your enemy.

**Kissling** Exactly. Exactly.

**Sharpless** So, yeah.

**Kissling** Although, increasingly, AID will become the enemy.

**Sharpless** Yeah.

**Kissling** It's all very complicated. So anyway, where were we?

**Sharpless** Well, let's see. Let me turn the tape over and then we'll start over. How's that?

**Kissling** Okay.

*Tape 1, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.*

**Sharpless** When you decided to go on the board of Catholics for a Free Choice in 1982, where was the discourse at that point on both sides?

**Kissling** In the country?

**Sharpless** Uh-huh.

**Kissling** Okay, in between '78 and '82.

**Sharpless** In '78 and '82. Yeah.

**Kissling** I think it was a point when a pretty firm decision had been made that the funding issue for poor women was lost. The recognition that *Roe v. Wade* did not settle the issue had sunk in, that we would need a continuing movement, and that defending *Roe v. Wade* and the right to abortion would be a long-term, ongoing battle, and that the argumentation needed to be focused on the threat to a constitutional overturn of the law (both speaking at once) through the courts.

**Sharpless** That was still very much alive.

**Kissling** Yes. Oh, yes, very much alive. We were at the beginning stages, very, very, very beginning stages of the chip-away strategy of the anti-choice crowd. The waiting periods, informed consent, teenager/adolescent notification and consent, where abortions would be performed—those strategies had begun to

emerge. The Akron case [*City of Akron v. Akron Center for Reproductive Health*, 1982], which was a key case, was already well along the way. And so that was the way in which the movement was functioning at that point. And there were the beginnings, but really only the very, very, very—in terms of my world, the Moral Majority was being born, so we were in the throes of the pre-Reagan Moral Majority involvement.

**Sharpless** The Protestants are just starting to get involved.

**Kissling** Right, exactly. That was the period when conservative Protestants decided that the belief that they had had—that it was wrong to be involved in politics, that what a conservative Protestant, what an Evangelical or a fundamentalist did in life was to separate themselves from the Devil, which included politics—that world was not the world of a person of Evangelical faith. And they were indeed at that point when they had become so afraid of how their values were eroded by women's rights, by abortion rights, by free sex and all of this stuff. Everything they held dear was falling apart, and so they had no choice but to overcome their value of staying away from politics and get involved in politics. So that was just beginning in that period in time.

The Catholic Church was still the dominant force, and we were still pre-Operation Rescue phase. The anti-choice movement had not yet decided that legal means were not going to do it. So it was still very much a legal battle, but that was the state of the discourse and movement at that point in time.

**Sharpless** Okay. Pat McMahon decided to leave Catholics for a Free Choice.

**Kissling** Yes. She burned out. And it was a very interesting moment for me, a very important moment in my professional life, as you can see from this interview,

and from my personal history. I grew up moving every two years. Every time the apartment had to be painted the family moved to a new apartment or a new house or whatever. And my professional trajectory was—I went to two colleges. I went to four grammar schools. I went to two high schools. My high school was bifurcated. The first two years were in one place and then the second two years we came from all over the city to the central senior high school. I went to a university for two years, and then I went to a two year senior college. And my jobs seem to be two-year jobs. I am a classic founder. That's who I am, and I have all the characteristics, good and bad, of founders.

**Sharpless** Get things started and move on.

**Kissling** And then I get bored. I create something and then I want to go somewhere else. You know, it's like, Oh, this is getting too boring now. And I was—you know, it was '82, I was a little bit older, but certainly didn't think of myself as at the tail end of my professional life, by any means. But I looked at Patricia McMahon.

**Sharpless** Tell me a little bit more about her. We talked a little bit about her yesterday.

**Kissling** Again, as I said, working-class, Irish woman, deeply dedicated to the issues, without a background in either activism or reproductive health. You know, someone who came in sort of from the side, but with enormous passion—very congenial kind of person. I guess I wouldn't—I mean, obviously had good instincts about where to take the organization—did a very good job.

**Sharpless** Right. But not a lot of—

**Kissling** But burned out. But burned out. You know, was not particularly equipped in terms of background to handle an institutional phase of an organization. You

know, the board's a pain in the ass. They want to get involved in everything. There's infighting in the movement. And [she] had not had the experience to be able to go with that, whatever. So she did very well to do that founding phase, and now she wanted out. And I looked at her, and I said to myself, This is very interesting. In some ways, she is doing what I have always done, which is when—it's slightly different. I mean, in my case, it was boring. In her case, I think it was a little too tough, but I could be wrong.

But in essence, something she had created was now successful. The hard creative moment was over, and the challenge—and she was throwing it, in my opinion, throwing it away. You could look at it that way. And I saw in her move a parallel to the way that I had so far functioned in my own life. So I said it would be interesting to see if one could combine both. Is there not a way to work in an organization, or company, or whatever, and keep it alive creatively as well as have it be stable and deal with the day to day, boring elements of the broken toilet, the raising the money every year, the constant personnel crises and management and all that kind of stuff.

**Sharpless**

How do you keep it stable and dynamic at the same time?

**Kissling**

Exactly. And keep yourself interested in it. You know, Can I do that? So it seemed to me that CFFC was an excellent challenge. Not so much a challenge, but an excellent place to test that and to do that, and so that was a piece of my personal/professional goal in going to CFFC. That's what I wanted to see if that could be true. And it has been true. I mean, plain and simple, it has clearly worked, which has worked for me. I don't know about other people in other organizations in that sense, but I definitely was the right person in the right

place at exactly the right time.

And in some ways, it would seem that that has remained true for twenty years. I mean, people would still say, Would there be a Catholics for a Free Choice as strong as whatever it is now, if there were no Frances Kissling? What would happen? What would the identity, nature, scope, et cetera of Catholics for a Free Choice be if I got hit by a bus or decided to go do something else? It's still institutionally very, very, very tied to me, you know, which is, on the one hand—it's the way it is. This is the way it is, and it's pretty good. On the other hand, it's troubling, in a movement kind of a [way]—you know, when something for so long is identified with—that CFFC is Frances Kissling. Is CFFC Frances Kissling?

**Sharpless**

Does it have a succession plan?

**Kissling**

Right. I don't know. I don't believe much in that kind of planning. Obviously I didn't plan that way in my own life. I've seen too many instances where succession planning [doesn't work out]—you know, this is the designated replacement, and it doesn't happen, somebody comes and bumps the designated replacement off. I think the question is more than succession planning. The question is, can you have an organization—the reality is that CFFC at this moment with me in place should be more than me. There should be other people within the world—CFFC should be identified with more than one human being. So that at the same—this is happening, but it's not happening in Washington. It's happening internationally.

One of the interesting things about CFFC is that it is both a U.S. abortion rights organization, a reproductive health organization in the U.S. context, and

it is an international organization. There are very few organizations that really do both with any kind of relative equality. You know, NARAL [National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League] is U.S., Planned Parenthood is big and complicated. Population Action lobbies in the U.S., but it's an international organization. It doesn't really work on domestic issues, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

But CFFC really works diligently on both, and there are counterparts to me in other countries. There is a Frances Kissling in Mexico, and increasingly what is happening is that we're now in a point where we're pulling those people together, and I could very well see when I leave Catholics for a Free Choice that the next president will be one of these people from Latin America who will move to the United States and live here and run the organization and make it even more—in that context—automatically make it more international. Because a piece of the dilemma for the organization right now is that it is both.

Okay, what is this office in Washington? Is this CFFC U.S.A like there is a CDD [Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir] Mexico, and a CDD Brazil, and a CDD Argentina, and a CDD Canada, or is this the international headquarters of an international organization? And we don't know yet. We haven't figured this out. Like we always said, there was always a tension in the organization. Some people on the staff want to say we're an international organization.

**Sharpless**

And you certainly have that international component in your office.

**Kissling**

Absolutely. And at the same time, I always say we are a U.S.-based organization that works internationally. But we're butting up against whether that's true or not true—still true or not true.



**Sharpless** So when you took over in 1982, what was the—describe the organization for me in 1982.

**Kissling** In 1982, there was a staff of about—let's see, there was an editor of *Conscience*; there was a grassroots organizer, there was the executive director, who became me, and there was a secretary—a secretary or two secretaries. Maybe there were two administrative secretaries. That was the staff.

**Sharpless** *Conscience* was up and running.

**Kissling** *Conscience* was up and running in its news—*Conscience* was a broadsheet. It was newsprint, big-size newsprint. And the budget [of the whole organization] was about \$250,000, \$275,000 a year. That's where the group was.

**Sharpless** In four years, that's not too shabby.

**Kissling** Very good. It was very good, and for 1982, it was still certainly the smallest of the reproductive rights organizations, if you looked at what would be seen as the mainstream of organizations. There were, of course, some more radical feminist organizations that were even smaller, but among the NARAL, Planned Parenthood, ACLU, even the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Rights, that configuration of groups, CFFC was the baby.

**Sharpless** But where were they getting that quarter of a million dollars a year?

**Kissling** From the Sunnen Foundation, the Ms. Foundation, the Playboy Foundation, maybe the Gunn—a couple of the family foundations had come in by that time. So that's where the money was coming—the Veatch Program, the Unitarian Church Program on Long Island. That was where the money came from, and we had just received—when I came in, they had just received their first grant from the Ford Foundation for \$19,960 to produce a study on how

Catholic women felt about abortion by going into abortion clinics and interviewing women. And so of course that would be another breakthrough to get to Ford, to be recognized in that world. And since there was a grassroots organizer, there was a very active attempt to organize CFFCs in the states, and so there were maybe fifteen individuals in ten different states who had signed up to be community activists within the CFFC structure, and a lot of time was spent on working with those people.

**Sharpless** Okay. How much courage did it require to be a Catholic for a Free Choice in the late '70s, early '80s?

**Kissling** Probably less than it requires now, because—

**Sharpless** This was before John Paul was Pope.

**Kissling** This was before John Paul was Pope. The Catholic bishops were very active on the issue, but they really hadn't paid much attention to CFFC. The real, real serious crackdown on pro-choice Catholics had not yet occurred. The—

**Sharpless** People like Charles Curran.

**Kissling** Charlie still had his job. That didn't happen until much, much later. It was still reasonably okay to be a Catholic for a Free Choice, yeah. Somebody once told me—and I've never been able to find it in a book, and the person who told me this doesn't remember having told me this because I went to them and said, Where did you get this?—but Gandhi once defined five stages of the way in which power reacts to the powerless. The first stage is you ignore it. And that was certainly the stage of Catholics for a Free Choice up to '82—it began to shift in '82. So we didn't exist. We were, you know, microscopic in the minds of the Church. We didn't get much exposure. We had this president who

crowned herself Pope. We had this priest who baptized a baby, but other than that, we weren't on the radar screen, so they just ignored us, and therefore we didn't exist.

The second stage is marginalization, and that was the stage we started to get into from '81 forward, and that is when the bishops say, Oh, it's only a few disgruntled people. It's one woman with a fax machine—there was a mimeograph machine at that point—they don't represent anybody. Don't pay any attention to these people. You know, newspaper reporters might call them and say, bo-bop-a-bopitty-bee, and they would say, No, no, no. So that's the second stage.

The third stage is attack. And of course, the stages overlap and go on at the same time. And that really didn't begin until—I would say '84 or '86 is when attack, serious attack, began. And then the fourth stage is co-option, which also, in some senses, is the beginning of integration, because the co-option goes two ways. The power structure tries to co-opt certain elements of the demand for social justice, so you have, for example, this pope saying he is the feminist pope—called himself the feminist pope. Or you have the use of women, of somewhat more conservative women within the Catholic community, articulating a new feminism, which is also what's going on: we're not like those old feminists. You know, the equivalent of the anti-feminist feminist in the secular world goes on.

And the final stage is that the power, the institution, changes. So even if Gandhi never said it and somebody made it up or I dreamt it, it makes a lot of sense to me, so I'd like to think that someone did that. So '81 was a very

important point in the organization. Turns up like a little sign post on there—in '81 the organization testified before Congress for the first time.

**Sharpless** How did that come about?

**Kissling** It was the period of time when, if I remember this correctly, because I'm not sure if I remember this, but I think it was testimony around this business of hearings on the Hill, on when human life begins, were going on. And the organization testified, and Mary Gordon was a member of the board of directors at that time. She was one of the people who came down to Washington and participated in some way in this testimony, and the organization had a press conference, and the press conference got on the cover, front page, of the *New York Times*. So that was a moment, and that was a moment when I think the institution said, Well, maybe we ought to pay more attention to these people, and they issued their first official statement.

**Sharpless** They, being the bishops?

**Kissling** The bishops—about Catholics for a Free Choice. This organization does not represent the Catholic Church. Its positions are directly contrary to boopitty-boppitty-bee. It was a fairly mild statement—you know, we don't want anybody to be confused. Somebody might think these people, because they call themselves Catholics for a Free Choice, represent the Church—ba-ba-ba-ba. So that was the first significant moment in—

**Sharpless** Yeah. To get called to the Hill and called down by the bishops.

**Kissling** Right.

**Sharpless** You're getting there.

**Kissling** Right. So there I was in 1982 in a little brownstone on 17th Street, off U Street,

just a few blocks from where we are now, and we began to grow.

**Sharpless** Okay. Let me change the tape. Good spot.

**Kissling** Okay.

*Tape 1 ends; tape 2, side 1, begins.*

**Sharpless** Okay, so a little brownstone on 17th Street.

**Kissling** Right. And we began to—I think one of the first—

**Sharpless** I'm sorry. Who is we?

**Kissling** Me and those two program people and two secretaries and a board of directors—began the process of [deciding] where was CFFC going to go in this next stage of its life?

**Sharpless** Tell me what kinds of people were on the board. You mentioned Mary Gordon.

**Kissling** Mary was on the board, although she wasn't terribly active in that phase. The chair of the board was a woman named Carol Bonosaro, who was the staff director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights here in Washington, D.C. Two people were on the board who were involved in abortion clinics. One person on the board was a lawyer in D.C. who was a volunteer in some of the abortion cases and was also on the NARAL board. The board was all women, and the staff was all women. There is also a moment when men entered the picture, but we'll get to that when we get to that. It was a small board. There were probably a couple other people who I am not remembering, but it was a reasonably small board of directors. And, as I would put it, it was a board of directors that was more part of the abortion rights movement than part of the Catholic world. And—

**Sharpless** They weren't all Catholic.

**Kissling** It was a requirement. You had to be a Catholic to be on the board of directors. I would say that one of the key things that happened between '82 and '84—was a conscious attempt to shift the organizational power structure from a board of directors that was a predominantly pro-choice movement board to a board that was more identifiable and more identified with the Catholic side of the mission of the organization—to begin an effort to integrate Catholics for a Free Choice into the Catholic community.

I mean, one of the realities about Catholics for a Free Choice is that among Catholic progressive groups, we actually were one of the first. There was a Catholics for a Free Choice before there was a Women's Ordination Conference, and there was a Catholics for a Free Choice before there was a church reform movement, before there was a gay rights movement in the Church. And so, in a certain sense, in that first phase of the organization there wasn't a community in the Catholic Church readily available for CFFC to relate to other than the women's community, the pro-choice community, the NOW community, the NARAL community, et cetera. But—

**Sharpless** The progressive elements of the Catholic Church (both speaking at once) are just not—

**Kissling** Were just organizing in that same period that CFFC was organizing. And of course, the other thing about Catholics for a Free Choice, and this is still largely true, is the people in Catholics for a Free Choice do not come out of the longstanding Catholic thing. There aren't a lot of ex-priests and ex-nuns. There aren't a lot of Catholic workers, you know. Our identities are not—and

it's not just me—our identities are not rooted historically in Catholic activism. We're not the *Commonweal* crowd, you know, which speaks to how that crowd also relates to us. And so I began an effort of trying to reach out to Catholics, to the Catholic groups that exist. There was the beginning of a coalition of women's groups. I got us—well, first, the board—

**Sharpless**

Okay. How did you do that? How did you identify people?

**Kissling**

You know, you read, and you looked around, you saw who was writing on things. Some people told me about other people. For example, one of the first people we pulled into Catholics for a Free Choice was Daniel Maguire at Marquette University. A Protestant—Charlie Reynolds, who was the guy who had organized the conference at the University of Tennessee that I had been at when NAF got started, was a Protestant theologian. I talked to him. He told me about Dan Maguire. I called Dan Maguire and I roped him in. Dan Maguire told me about Mary Hunt, and I roped Mary Hunt in. And so that was kind of—I looked one day at who had been on the founding board of Catholics for a Free Choice and saw that Rosemary Radford Ruether had been on the founding board of Catholics for a Free Choice and, you know, she somehow wasn't there anymore. There was a split in Catholics for a Free Choice around '76.

**Sharpless**

Okay. Very early.

**Kissling**

Very early. Catholics for a Free Choice was up in New York. It was the brainchild of these three New York Irish Catholic boards, and on the first board of directors was Rosemary Ruether. Mary Segers—I don't know if you know—Mary Segers is a historian, political scientist at Rutgers who does

political science in the context of Church stuff. Jerome Segers, who was her husband—I don't know what Jerome does—and, you know, people like that. And they were lost—so what happened is, in '76 Bonosaro had gone on the board of directors. I don't know how they got her, but she was on the board of directors.

And there began to be—while the group was in New York, a kind of Washington contingent developed, and there was a conflict. There probably were many levels to this conflict that are lost and only in the hearts of the individuals who were part of it, but the substantive element of the conflict was, Was CFFC going to become, as the New Yorkers wanted, a kind of a social-service counseling agency that took the pro-choice message, including the message about abortion, about contraception, into the Catholic schools? That was the vision of where CFFC should go on the part of the two remaining founders, because the founder, Patricia Fogarty McQuillan, died of cancer in 1974 or '75. And so that probably also meant that the first founder—there was no founder. The founder was gone—she died. So in terms of institutional dynamics, there was a vacuum. Who was going to go into that vacuum? Was it going to be the two other founders who were not as strong as the first founder, and who had this vision of going to the kids, doing adolescent stuff, or the vision of the Washington-based folks who saw [that] CFFC as a political organization was needed in Washington?

Well, whatever happened, the New York people lost, and they formed another organization called Catholic Alternatives, which fussed around for a couple of years and never really went anywhere, and then kind of died. And the



other people took Catholics for a Free Choice to Washington, D.C.—took the name and took the organization to Washington, D.C. And they hired a person very, very, very part-time, you know—like maybe she worked a day a week. And what Catholics for a Free Choice did in that pre-Patricia McMahon period when it was in Washington—that person was a lobbyist who worked with the pro-choice coalition and was physically present on the Hill, and that was what CFFC did. And in the fray, people like Rosemary, who were probably not deeply wedded to either side of this argument, fell by the wayside.

**Sharpless** (both speaking at once) And you were looking around—

**Kissling** I've never asked her—I was looking around. I looked at the old stuff. I saw Rosemary Ruether's name, and so we got Rosemary back involved.

**Sharpless** I'm sorry. You said—you were trying to say, you never asked her?

**Kissling** I haven't asked her. I mean, I'm going to have to ask her about that, and Mary Segers, too. I've never asked Mary Segers about this.

**Sharpless** Why they disappeared?

**Kissling** Why they kind of—I can see from the early minutes that the Segers were actively disgusted by something. You know, that they really just—a pox on all your houses, and we don't want to have anything to do with you. That's not Rosemary's style, and there's no written record that would indicate that that was her style, or that she took that stance, so I don't know. But I will ask her. I now think to ask her about that part of it.

**Sharpless** But by pulling in people like Rosemary Ruether you were able to deepen (both speaking at once) the discourse.

**Kissling** The identity, the discourse, what we talked about, et cetera, et cetera. And then,

as a piece of that process, the people who were more identified with the abortion side of the organization felt their power. I mean, there were two things. One, they'd hired an executive director, who was a powerful person, and who just automatically—me, in terms of style, is in charge. I'm in charge. I mean, this is now a staff-led organization, and I'm very happy to have a board of directors, but I don't call you—you know. Patricia was much more—she also had a lot of leadership qualities, but she would talk to the chair all the time, and the chair was very engaged in everything. She would tell them what proposals—you know, the way small organizations also are.

I wasn't that kind of person, and I was bringing in all these people. They were accepting it, you know, and then they looked around, and they saw that, hm, they didn't have what they used to have. And they were unhappy, and there were arguments and struggles and so forth and so on. And slowly that part of the organization eroded, and it was a new organization in that sense. It was an organization where board members were not thinking about what would NARAL want Catholics for a Free Choice to do. Some of these people didn't even know who NARAL was. You know, it was the culture, the value base. The perspective shifted dramatically in that period of time.

We were invited to—there was this developing coalition of women's groups in the Church. We asked to join. They invited us to a meeting. This was probably '83 that this happened—they invited us to a meeting. I showed up at the meeting, as did the Conference of Catholic Lesbians, and they had had an enormous fight before we had showed up about whether the lesbians and the abortionists should be allowed to join. And they said to us, We're terribly sorry,

you can't stay at the meeting. We were turned away at the door of the convent where the meeting was taking place here in Washington, D.C. Before being turned away I said, "Well, you know, not fine, but okay. This is the decision you've reached. I think out of courtesy you owe it to both of us to invite us into the room and to allow us to make short presentations about who we are, and then we'll leave." So we did that, both groups did that, and we left.

**Sharpless** They were afraid you were too radical.

**Kissling** We were too radical. We were too radical. And the coalition included—at that point, it included things like the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which is the official organization of religious communities. You know, all of the nuns. So they were also like, We can't be at the same table with these people. If we're at the same table with these people we're going to get killed. We just can't do it. So then when I got back I wrote this long letter saying, "You are acting like the bishops. Whatever you say about who you are and what your values are, your behavior is the behavior of a hierarch. And this is not what we're supposed to be." Doobitty-dobitty-dee. And they were moved, and they changed their mind. You know, being called a bishop was, you know—(laughs)

**Sharpless** A dagger in their heart.

**Kissling** A dagger in their hearts. (laughter) And so we and the lesbians were invited to join, and the—

**Sharpless** I'm sorry, tell me what that group's name is again.

**Kissling** It's now called Women-Church Convergence.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling**

I think it was called Women in the Church Coalition or something like that. The mainstream groups left, in some cases simply because they had to. You know, it was like, Look, we don't mind being at this table, but we can't, we just can't. And in some cases it was because [they felt], No, we don't think this is the direction the movement should go.

This is always the struggle within the progressive Catholic movement. It's still the struggle within the progressive Catholic movement around Catholics for a Free Choice. Are we too radical? Is this the time to take on these issues? Our strategy is, you work on the hardest issue, okay, which is abortion, and the other issues kind of fall [in place behind that]. Their strategy is, you work on some of the easier issues, and then maybe over time you can take on the harder issues. So it's a different organizing strategy.

**Sharpless**

Is that the kind of thing you were talking about yesterday about working from the margins rather than the center?

**Kissling**

Yes. I think that that applies too. I mean, you know, and it's classic liberal/radical politics, questions that play themselves out in every organization. Do you want to work with the Democratic Party? Do you want to work within the Democratic Party? Do you want the Democratic Party leaders to value you? Do you want to be invited to the convention? Do you want to work to change them that way, or do you want to be outside, demonstrating against the Democratic Party? So we are kind of classic outsiders in certain—in certain circles, we are outsiders. So, at any rate, that change happened. So that, I would say, would be the characterization of the first years of my [tenure at CFFC]—and the culmination of that was the *New York Times* advertisement in 1984.

**Sharpless** Tell me about that.

**Kissling** One of the things that's part of the strategy of making the identity of Catholics for a Free Choice more explicitly Catholic was the idea of testing whether or not there were a significant number of Catholic leaders who would be willing to sign a statement, a moderate statement, about abortion. Would people come out of the closet a little bit? Was this something they could do? And so, Dan Maguire and his then wife, Marjorie, and I drafted this statement called "The Catholic Statement on Abortion." We drafted it in '83 at the meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics—professional society, mostly Protestant, but that some Catholics belong to. And so we drafted the statement.

We started asking people to sign it. We got a reasonable number—probably got about fifty people who signed it in the first year who were liberal Catholic theologians: some nuns, a priest or two—mostly people who were in academic life, because the statement started from an academic conference. And the Maguires' milieu was a Catholic milieu. He's a Catholic academic. And so we had about fifty people sign it, and we didn't know what we were going to do with it, you know, we didn't have a plan at that point. And then we got into the 1984 election cycle.

**Sharpless** Reagan two.

**Kissling** And—yes, Ferraro and Mondale. And of course the nomination of Geraldine Ferraro for us, for Catholic women in particular, was a monumental positive boost, you know, that the first woman vice-presidential candidate is a pro-choice Catholic. This was the greatest thing for us. For the bishops, this was a blow.

**Sharpless** Their worst nightmare.

**Kissling** Their worst nightmare. Their worst nightmare. And something, I think, they never believed could have happened. It said that the Democratic Party didn't give a hoot about the Catholic bishops. The Democratic Party believed that it could win. Ferraro was a plus for the ticket, that it could have a Catholic pro-choice woman on the ticket and win the election. So it said to the bishops, We recognize that Catholics are pro-choice, that you, who are our traditional ally in the Democratic Party—no, we don't need you. So politically, this was a very significant kind of decision, and the bishops reacted. They went after Ferraro.

So Catholics, you know—the crew of people that we were then involved with by that time in the progressive Catholic community organized. And we got people to—this is not Catholics for a Free Choice, because Catholics for a Free Choice doesn't do this, but in this larger coalition we got people to go to campaign rallies with signs saying, I'm another Catholic for Choice, Catholics for [Ferraro]—dadada-dadada-da. And we decided to publish the ad in the *New York Times*. And so a call went out in the network of the Catholic groups, particularly the women's groups, that this was going to be published in the *New York Times*, and there were probably about fifteen, sixteen nuns on the ad already from the academic side. And another bunch of them signed it because it was going to go in the *New York Times*, and [they wanted to] defend Gerry. Okay, this was how that last group of signers saw it. And so it was published in the *New York Times* a month before the election.

**Sharpless** And for those who will hear the tape and haven't seen the ad, what all did it say?

**Kissling**

It said basically that—the piece of it that was most ultimately criticized was that said that there is more than one legitimate Catholic position on abortion. It talked about the polls. The polls show that Catholics were pro-choice, doo-di-di-di-dee. It said that there is more than one legitimate Catholic position on abortion. It called on the bishops to open a dialogue on the question of abortion, that the style in which abortion should be dealt with in the Catholic community is one in which we talk about the question of abortion and work it through.

And it called on the bishops not to penalize any—that penalizing Catholics who were pro-choice was not the way to go. That's essentially what it said. No person who signed that ad signed anything that said their position on abortion was pro-choice. The ad did not say pro-choice was the right position. It simply laid out a series of facts and called for dialogue in a non-punitive approach. The Vatican did nothing. Nobody did anything. I mean, there was a little bit of a reaction. It got a little bit of coverage in the press. After the election, the Vatican wrote to the presidents of the religious orders that have members who had signed the ad, and it said, You must get from those women a retraction.

**Sharpless**

Who asked for this?

**Kissling**

The Vatican. There's an entity in the Vatican called the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, which has changed its name, but that was its name then. And that entity was in charge of all of the orders of nuns and the Jesuits and the Mercys, and the men and the women and everything. And so it wrote to the presidents of those communities, the mother superiors and the general secretaries and whatever you want to call them, and said, The following

members of your community have signed an advertisement which appeared in the *New York Times*, and this is against Church teaching, and we want you to go to that sister and tell her to retract her signature.

And they used the word retract, which was a big mistake. And so what happened was, there were twenty-four—there were actually twenty-five nuns who had signed it, but the Vatican only identified twenty-four. There was one that they didn't figure out was a nun. And there were two brothers, religious brothers and two priests who had signed the statement. In fairly short order, the priests and the brothers retracted.

They called me up on the phone. They sent me letters [saying], Take my name off the ad. Okay. The women were not about to retract, and so what ensued then was a two- to three-year struggle, negotiation with the Vatican around what was going to happen. And it was very, very public. I mean, one of the things about the organization and about Catholic reform efforts is not to allow things to happen in secret. Traditionally, one of the Vatican's advantages in dealing with members of the Church that it wishes to discipline is it imposes secrecy, and people obey that secrecy. But they didn't impose secrecy, and nobody—and we all had learned, you know. We knew the *New York Times* was our best friend. You know, that the struggle over reform in the Catholic Church is going to take place on the pages of the newspapers and in the TV and in the radio because we don't have access to the Church mechanisms, so we need to use secular mechanisms to get the message out.

So this was plastered all over the pages of all the papers in the United States. The nuns were identified. There were press conferences. There was



everything, and so all this was an enormously important moment. It's probably the crowning moment of solidifying public recognition that Catholics are pro-choice. You know, when CFFC started, everybody believed that Catholics were not pro-choice, and that Catholics did what the bishops told them. And so the process from the founding of CFFC to 1984 is a process of making it visible and known to everybody that Catholics do what we want. We are not these—this is not that the tenets of nativism, the know-nothingism, et cetera, around Catholics, that prejudice has to die.

And this contributed greatly to the death of that prejudice. That prejudice is still alive in this country. And in fact, there was a conference on anti-Catholicism recently, and I'll give you the web site for it if you want to look it up. And [Andrew] Greeley did some small-scale, like a 500-person little study, and still found that 58 percent of the people he studied think that Catholics do what the Pope tells them. You know, it was a little late, but anyway.

So that was a very, very important in terms of putting CFFC on the map, a very important moment in terms of public recognition that Catholics were not pro-choice [sic], and both solidified CFFC's relationships with the broader Catholic community as well as got us criticized. You know, there were all these people [who said], They got these nuns in trouble. We got these nuns in trouble, you know, kind of stuff going on, so—

**Sharpless**

A couple of things—in looking at your website, part of it, I think, looks to me like part of it is getting the word out and saying, if you're a pro-choice Catholic, you're not alone.

**Kissling**

Right. Exactly. And we have a publication that—I think we still have it—which

is called *You Are Not Alone*, which is directed to women who are having abortions, which is, you know, kind of—and has those liturgies in it, you know, that you talked about: the liturgy for reconciliation and closure, and the liturgy for decision making—that kind of stuff in it as well. But yeah, that is certainly part of it, though.

**Sharpless** You're getting a message out there that pro-choice Catholics were feeling isolated.

**Kissling** Right. Right. I mean, the thing that I've experienced so many times is—less now, or now in a different way—when I go somewhere, and I'm renting a car, or I'm buying a plane ticket, or whatever, and I have to say to a stranger [who asks me], What is your place of employment? “Catholics for a Free Choice.” Oh, I'm a Catholic, and I'm pro-choice, and I didn't know you were around, and it's so great to know that you're around. Now, it's more like, I know about you, and I'm so glad you are here. You know, there's much more recognition that we exist, a much greater knowledge of the organization and an immediate like, Thank God that you people are here, and that you're doing this work, and it's so important for me, and that kind of stuff.

**Sharpless** How did you answer the papal authority crowd?

**Kissling** The people who say you have to do what the Pope tells you?

**Sharpless** Yeah. (Kissling laughs) You laugh?

**Kissling** Well, I mean, I think that there's always been a part of our strategy, which is that there are people you can reach and there are people you can't reach, number one. Okay. So, there's certain—I mean, again, in CFFC there's always been, I think, from the very beginning, a recognition that there are many more

people who are ambivalent about the question of abortion than has generally been recognized by the pro-choice movement. You know, for years everybody relied on 75 percent of the public—

*Tape 2, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.*

**Sharpless** Okay, I'm sorry, 75 percent are pro-choice, and they think that that's—

**Kissling** So we're the majority, and the reality has always been that 20 percent of the people are gung-ho pro-choice. Used to be that 10 percent of the people were gung-ho anti-choice. That number has increased. And the rest—the 60 percent in the middle—they're pro-choice; they're not pro-choice, they're, Abortion is terrible, but I wouldn't want to make it illegal—has been ambivalent. And the mission of Catholics for a Free Choice is to reach that middle ground. I mean, part of it is, of course, within the Catholic community, to activate Catholics to speak out on the issue, but the other part of it, because Catholics for a Free Choice operates in a world that is—we don't operate in a Catholic world. We operate in the world, and the pro-choice Catholic message appeals to the middle, whether they're Catholic or Protestant or Jewish or have no faith whatsoever. They appeal to the more ambivalent crowd, you know. And so that's always been who we have directed our message at. You know, we're the people who say abortion is a serious moral matter. You know, it's not simple.

**Sharpless** Yeah. And one of the things I was fascinated with on the website is this whole issue of ensoulment, and the whole question of when life begins, and when a fetus becomes a baby, and all those really knotty, gnarly issues. How do you deal with those? I mean (both speaking at once) I know it's huge and complicated.

**Kissling** Well, you deal with it—I mean, again, we are also the people in the movement who have said you must deal with the question of the fetus.

**Sharpless** Right.

**Kissling** You know, we are never going to win this business if we let them have the fetus.

**Sharpless** They have the pictures of the little beating heart, and the little fingers, and the—

**Kissling** You know, you pit fetuses against women and women lose. You know, babies against women, the babies win. Always. So it never seemed to us that you could ignore this. Now, of course, as Catholics, we are more forced to deal with the question of the fetus, because the public exposition of the bishops' argument is that abortion is murder—

**Sharpless** Life begins at conception—

**Kissling** Abortion is killing, life begins at conception. They don't say personhood begins at conception. They themselves would never dare say that. So our job has been to take on this question forthrightly from a Catholic perspective, although you can then extrapolate from the Catholic perspective to other perspectives. You know, the Catholic perspective is a good place to start—in either philosophical, sociological, theological terms—because the Catholic position is the most developed position. So if you can refute the Catholic position, you have refuted everything else. Okay. I mean, none of the other faith groups really have as well-defined statements on personhood, when does life begin, fetuses, et cetera. So by debunking the Catholic position, you win.

To go back, for instance, to how do you deal with the ultimate loyalist—so

I'm out, and I'm making a speech, and always, the end of my speech, you know, there are always a few people in the audience who are of this Opus Dei ilk—whether they belong to Opus Dei or not, they're Opus Dei-ilk Catholics. And they'll stand up and they'll say, This woman has excommunicated herself. Why are you listening to her? She is not a Catholic. You cannot be a Catholic and have this position.

And my response is actually to turn the loyalty question on its head, so to speak, and I say to them, Look, I'm always fascinated by people like you because you claim to be loyal to the Pope, and that the Pope makes the rules. Now, the Pope and the bishops, my bishop in Washington, D.C., have not said I am not a Catholic. They are the ones who decide who is excommunicated. You don't get to decide. And if you are so loyal to the Pope and the bishops, how dare you take upon yourself as a lowly lay person the right to say that I am excommunicated. That is not your right. And our bishops and our Pope have, for whatever reasons, decided that excommunicating Catholics who disagree with them on the question of abortion is not what they're going to do, and I would say they're not going to do it because they don't have the right to do it.

I am sure it frustrates them, the bishops, that they can't go out there and excommunicate all of us, because it would just be so easy to end this dissent within the Church by taking that action. But even they, in the service of something they believe so profoundly, will not pervert the structure of the institutional Church and misuse excommunication to deal with this problem. So it shows—if they could excommunicate us, they would do it tomorrow. Tomorrow. And they really can't. Of course, it's a little scary, because every

time I do that there's a little part in the back of my head that says, Someday one of these guys is going to do it. They're not supposed to do it. It's against the rules, but against the rules doesn't really ultimately stop them. You know, I mean, if they felt they had to do it, they would do it.

But so far they haven't done it. They hired lawyers after we got involved internationally and were active in the UN at the population conference. They hired—we found this out from an insider—they hired attorneys to find out if they could go to court and sue us to prevent us from using the name Catholics for a Free Choice. And all the lawyers told them no. I mean, like I always say, you're not Coca-Cola. You don't have a trademark. You think I shouldn't call myself—we shouldn't call this organization Catholics for a Free Choice, take us to court. Take us to court. But they know they can't.

**Sharpless**

This is asking you to speculate, but why this issue? Why are the bishops so exercised over the abortion issue?

**Kissling**

Yes, I think, it's a good question. You have to see it in the context, I think, of the whole spectrum of sexual and reproductive issues. It's a package. It's not just abortion, but abortion and, increasingly, the other sexual issues. The other reproductive issues have become as vehement. You know, when we started in '73, abortion was the issue. They had given up on contraception 150 percent. They weren't doing anything against contraception, and now they're back to working against contraception. So it is, again, a new solidification of the entire package of freedoms related to sexuality and reproduction. Abortion is the most visible sign that a person or a couple, a woman or a couple, does not accept the teachings of the Church relative to sexuality.

**Sharpless** Which is interesting. For so many years sex was for reproduction only.

**Kissling** Well, not precisely. That every sex act must be open to accepting procreation if it occurs and must not interfere with the possibility that it will occur. You can have sex for pleasure, and you—like, you know, they're not crazy enough to say every time you have sex your intention must be to get pregnant. But your intention—you must be open. It may happen. If it happens, you accept it. And abortion is the visible reality that you don't accept it. It's not hidden.

Contraception is hidden in a certain way. Abortion is a woman with a belly going to a doctor to have a visible act performed that makes her not pregnant. And it occurs both with married people who are allowed to have sex, and with unmarried people who are not supposed to have sex either. So you have obviously also had sex. You know, we now know it. It's visible. There you are.

It's like—for instance, it's a very interesting thing, for example—in recent years there are isolated cases where kids in Catholic schools, Catholic high schools, get pregnant. They're not so isolated, and it becomes visible. The kid doesn't have an abortion, and the schools have been challenged by—you know, first the approach historically was you just got kicked out of school. That was it. You were pregnant, and you got kicked out of school. Well, then they started—

**Sharpless** That was the way it was in my high school.

**Kissling** Yeah, exactly. And then they became cognizant of the fact that there was something dissonant about this in the face of a campaign against abortion. Because what they were saying was, Don't have an abortion—keep your baby. The good thing to do when you have this thing happen, this horrible thing

happen to you—and you did this bad thing—is to embrace life. And the pro-life—and we will take care of you, and we will give you the layette, and we'll do everything for you. And then they're kicking you out of school because you followed their advice and their moral direction. You didn't have an abortion.

So for the most part, they stopped kicking the girls out of school, but then these cases come up. The most recent one that was in the South, and they let the girl stay in school, and it was time to graduate. And she was still pregnant, and she had this big belly. And the bishop was coming to give the diplomas, and they couldn't tolerate—this is answering your question—they couldn't tolerate the physical presence of an unmarried pregnant woman being handed her diploma by a bishop. The woman is dirty. This is dirty. And so there is this—it's, you know, the historic prejudice against women and against sex, which is part of most religion, not just Catholicism, but is very profound in Catholicism and is made more profound by—

Well, okay. First of all, why this issue? Anytime anybody is as passionate about an issue as the bishops are about abortion, any institution automatically—it's about power. So in what way is abortion and/or reproductive [issues]—and family planning, but abortion, as the most visible sign—threatening to the power of the bishops? That's the answer to your question. The Catholic Church is one of the few remaining religions that teaches implicitly that people who do not have sex are better qualified to hold power. Because that is a requirement for holding power, is that you agree to be celibate. You take a vow.

And since most people are unwilling—the vast majority of the population



is unwilling to give up sex for power, the prohibition on sexuality enables the maintenance of an elite core of leaders. It also happens to be all male, but it could function with women and men—you know, celibate women. So it is a combination of, you have to be a man, and you have to say you won't have sex. So the implicit—again, they would say, Oh, no. No, of course not. Everybody is valuable and worthy and holy and everything, and you're reading it wrong. But the message is, if you're a man and you don't have sex, you're qualified for power. If you have sexual rules then that becomes more liberalized. You erode this notion that not having sex makes you a better person qualified to have power. That's my explanation.

**Sharpless** What about the element of misogyny?

**Kissling** Well, misogyny, of course, is a part of it, in that sense that, you know, women are the ones who get pregnant. Women are the temptresses from the beginning. Again, a pregnant woman is a visible sign of a sexual woman. A pregnant woman who does not redeem her sexuality through motherhood, but negates it through abortion, is a particularly odious person. You know, women are responsible for it all.

**Sharpless** And so this 1984 ad really brought all of this out into a public arena.

**Kissling** And again, it showed the difference between men and women, because here you have these four guys who immediately did what the Vatican told them and these twenty-four women who said, No, we're not retracting. This is ridiculous. We're not going to do this. And then the Vatican said, Well, okay, you don't have to retract, but what you have to do is tell us that you accept. You have to write something that says you accept the teachings of the Church on abortion.

And so the communities went through very complex processes. It was a very interesting moment in religious communities. I mean, I think that history has yet to be written. How did they deal with this? Mary Hunt and I wrote an article for the *Journal of Feminist Studies on Religion* on all of this—what happened and who did what. Some communities wrote statements for the sisters. Oh, then they brought it down one level further, which was, Okay, they don't actually have to write the statement. You have to tell us—you, the president of the community, have to tell us that you have discussed this with the sister and she accepts the teaching of the Church. So it was a case of—I mean, the Vatican lost big time, they lost big time in terms of their authority, because they couldn't get what they wanted.

**Sharpless** In the South we call that craw fishing, where we just kind of go backwards.

**Kissling** Yeah, exactly. And so some presidents of the communities, without the knowledge in one or two cases of the sisters, and without the consent of the sisters, told the Vatican, Yes, I talked to Sister So-and-so, and she agrees.

**Sharpless** They lied, in other words.

**Kissling** They lied. You know, they made whatever justification—whatever casuistic approach to, Well, I didn't actually talk to her, but I really know that she does accept it. And some sisters said they accepted the teachings of the Church because they took the Catholics for a Free Choice view that the teaching was pro-choice. They didn't add that sentence, but that was the point. Yeah, I accept the teaching of the Church, and the teaching of the Church is that I have a right to my conscience on this and that, you know, dadada-dadada-dadada-da.

And a couple of them were holdouts. The two in West Virginia are the best known. They wrote the book *No Turning Back*, Barbara Ferraro and Patricia Hussey. And they were the only ones who from the beginning said, Look, not only will we not tell them that we accept the teachings of the Church, we want to tell them that we're pro-choice. This is who we are. We're pro-choice, and we're not going to say anything other than that. We're going to tell the full and total truth. And they stuck to that position to the very end. In the end, their community backed them because the issue, again, was a power issue. Who controls—this was between the communities and the Vatican.

The Vatican, by canon law, does not have the right to dismiss a sister from an order. The order dismisses the sister. The Vatican calls for the order to dismiss the sister. If the order says no, the Vatican has some recourse, but the recourse is not to dismiss the sister, the recourse is to dismiss the president. It's like employment, you know. Like, I mean, the board of directors can say to the CEO, We don't like the COO. We want you to fire him. And [if] the CEO says, I'm not firing him, they can't go in and fire the COO, they have to fire the president and hire a CEO who will do it for them. It's the same.

So the battle was at another level beyond the abortion level. The battle was religious communities asserting their authority under canon law to decide who is a member of their community and who is not a member of their community. And in the end, the school sisters, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, which is the order that these two women belong to, said, We will not dismiss them. And the Vatican said, Fine.

**Sharpless**

So the president of the sisters really stuck her neck out.

**Kissling** Defied the Vatican. Yeah. Right. And she won. They all won. Everybody won. The sisters—you can bet your boots that the president and the executive team was not happy with these two women, and that these two women were not treated that well along the way to the sisters saying to the Vatican, Screw you.

So when it was all over and the community won, the sisters resigned, and they are now not sisters. They are just two women running a homeless shelter in West Virginia. No, not an untypical solution or ending in many of these kinds of employment discrimination cases. An example [would be], there's an employee [who] sticks it out at the bank till she wins her suit. And then, you know, she says, Okay, it was pretty ugly and all my co-workers hated me even though I was doing the right thing. I was making trouble, and people don't like trouble makers, and now I'm quitting. It's the same phenomenon.

**Sharpless** Right. So what did the end of this discussion mean for your organization?

**Kissling** A lot more visibility, a lot more discussion of the abortion issue, many more allies for the organization. Mostly, you know, 90 percent positive, 10 percent, you know, the kind of resentment that I talked about in terms of those people who would say we got the nuns in trouble. We used them. Right. But no, it was a very important and a very good moment.

**Sharpless** Okay. Well, let's take a break for a few minutes.

**Kissling** Okay.

*End of Interview 2.*

*Interview 3*

**Sharpless** Today is September 14th, 2002, and this is the third oral history interview with Ms. Frances Kissling. The interview is taking place in Ms. Kissling's home in Washington, D.C. All right. When we left off we were in sort of the mid-'80s. I wanted to talk about the shift into the international work, so let's talk about your move outside the United States, if you would.

**Kissling** Right. Well, I mean, I think that there were a couple of—two things that were kind of the impetus for making the shift to international work. One was Pope John Paul II. This man, you know, who is now, at this moment, the longest living Pope—the Pope for the longest time—was the first Pope who really took advantage of modern technology and saw his papacy as being a worldwide phenomenon, a worldwide ministry, and didn't see himself as someone who spent all of his time in Rome, ruling from Rome. You know, he, in many ways, is a very charismatic personality, has a very strong spiritual and mystical side, and saw himself in the papacy as a role model. And so this is a Pope who traveled all over the world, who reasserted the teachings against—or the positions, the mind-set, in which sexuality and reproduction and reproductive rights, sexuality and birth control and abortion, were seen as central evils of the modern world to be fought. You know, he sees his papacy as a countercultural—the Church as a beacon in a culture gone awry, a modern culture in which liberalism, individualism, hedonism, et cetera, all are dominant, and that the Church should be the symbol against this.

And therefore he moved out into the world, in a way in which criticism of abortion, criticism of sexuality, criticism of birth control is a very dominant

part of the message wherever he goes. You know, the example of the Pope going to Brazil and being told by Brazilian Catholics that they don't have enough priests and what should they do about this, and his exhortation is that they should have more children. You don't have priests because you don't have enough kids. If there were more kids, more of them would want to be priests.

So, you know, that has a certain logic to it, but that kind of message repeated all over the world on a fairly consistent basis [as] part of a general—I mean, you see it in terms of the current stage of his papacy—part of a general way in which suffering is seen as good. He sees his papacy now, where he is so debilitated physically, as a visible symbol to Catholics of the value of suffering in the world. And in that sense, you know, when you see that this is the mind-set of that man, you can immediately see how this is set up in a narrowly constructed way, in terms of the interests of much of the modern community to alleviate suffering, and the role that reproductive health, the ability to control fertility, plays in alleviating women's suffering and the suffering of families particularly in the developing world. You can see that the stage is set for a major conflict on these issues.

So we look and we see this Pope is going all over the world, and he is preaching against everything that we believe. And we also received from colleagues, from some group in Colombia, a copy of one of our publications that somebody had translated into Spanish—just suddenly appears on my desk one day. And being the entrepreneurial, opportunistic type that I am, gets me thinking, Well, maybe what we have at Catholics for a Free Choice is important and applicable to other people in the world.

**Sharpless** Because the majority of Roman Catholics live in Latin America, correct?

**Kissling** I think so. I actually know this—I've read this recently.

**Sharpless** But it's a huge population.

**Kissling** Yeah. It's a huge population, and they're Catholic, right. So it got me and others in the organization thinking about whether or not CFFC should be active in other parts of the world, particularly Latin America, because it is so Catholic. We had a concern. You know, as sort of progressive/liberal Catholics, we are very involved in all of the questions around cultural imperialism, North/South dialogue, the appropriate role of Americans. Enormous problems, particularly in the reproductive health field historically, in terms of perceived and actual imposition of family planning and coercion—all of these kinds of questions were on our mind as a U.S. organization.

Did we have a right and a role to play on questions related to reproductive health in the developing world, and how would we do that? How would we be perceived if we did this? And so we decided to take a look. First of all, to define ourselves. Are we Americans first, or are we Catholics first? Do we do this as Americans, and what would it mean to do it as Americans? Do we do it as Catholics? What would it mean to do it as Catholics? Could we successfully present ourselves as part of one holy, apostolic, universal church acting in concert with people who shared our values as Catholics, rather than as Bolivians and North Americans?

So those were some of the kind of questions we had, and we started a process, and I led the process. I mean, I would say the general process of Catholics for a Free Choice—similar to some other organizations, as a new

area of work—is led by me. That when we are exploring something new—and that’s of course what also keeps me alive and interested in staying in the organization—this question of boredom never occurs, because when we think about something new, then I go out and I explore it, and I check it out, and it keeps me alive. And then if we adopt it as a regular program, other people in the organization take it on to actually do it, but the first exploration is mine.

And so I started to travel in Latin America, to go to conferences and meetings, to do what one does. You pick up the phone and you talk to this person. Who do you know who might be interested? And you develop a list of people to meet and explore things with and talk to—what you want to do, and what you might want to do, and what could you do. And so we did a process of that for about a year. We were having a national conference at CFFC, and so we also invited a dozen of the people we met in traveling to come to CFFC, to go to the conference and to have a two-day meeting to explore whether or not CFFC would be valuable in Latin America, and what kinds of things we could do.

The other dimension was in the United States—23 percent of the U.S. population is Catholic, okay? So while we are the largest single faith group in America, we still are only 23 percent of the population. So being a Catholic for a Free Choice in a country where you are not the only, or the dominant, religion has a certain meaning. What meaning would it be for there to be Catholics for a Free Choice in a country where 90 percent of the people are Catholic?

**Sharpless**

Nominally.



**Kissling**

Nominally, right—and where there really is, in most of—no other really strong religious identity in the country. So those were some of the questions we had. We brought together this group of a dozen people. We talked, you know, for two days about these issues, and it was pretty clear. It was clear that people thought there would be some real value in taking these ideas—the work that we had done in terms of articulating how you can be Catholic and pro-choice is universal. There's no difference in the Catholic position in Mexico than there is in the United States. The stuff that we are doing is not U.S.-bound, it's theologically bound, and so getting this stuff out into Latin America, in everybody's opinion, made a lot of sense.

I met at a feminist conference in Costa Rica a Uruguayan doctor, Catholic feminist doctor, named Cristina Grela, who thought she was the only person in the world who held pro-choice Catholic views, and who agreed that she would become the regional representative for Latin America for Catholics for a Free Choice. And that was how it started. And she started from Uruguay, which, of course, is a very good place to do this, because Uruguay is the least Catholic country in Latin America with the most progressive laws. There is no barrier to the work, and the bishops are not as powerful there as they are in some other countries. Uruguay was, you know, founded in its modern state incarnation by Freemasons, and has never had the same ties to the Church. And so she began the process of traveling in Latin America, developing publications, developing mailing lists, and—

**Sharpless**

She is a medical doctor?

**Kissling**

She's a medical doctor, but she was always a—she's a women's health activist

more than a practitioner. She actually was never a practicing physician. She was a researcher. She did biological research of some sort, and she provided women's health services. In other words, she was one of those people who are—you know, like there's a women's clinic, and she would be a doctor in the women's clinic, but she never had what you would call a regular private practice of clinical medicine.

**Sharpless** Was she an abortion provider?

**Kissling** No. She never provided abortions. I mean, primarily, she's not really a clinician, you know, so she saw women for med[ical reasons], but it wasn't a heavy clinical practice even in that sense. So she started to do this in '87, and, you know, then a slow process of the growth of Catholics—there was a very big discussion about the name. Catholics for a Free Choice is a very northern name. We, in the U.S., have had many conversations, you know. Every five years I get a bug to change the name of the organization, and we go through some process about whether we should change it, and in the end, we don't change it, because Catholics for a Free Choice, the concept of choice, and even the concept of free choice as a theological concept, had a lot of meaning in the '70s.

It has become—that meaning is still valid, and there is still an enormous importance in holding it out as a theological concept even now, but in the popular parlance, free choice has become degraded conceptually. And so there's always the sense of, How do we deal with that? What I said to people in Latin America was, You do not have to use our name. You can pick a name that is close, you can pick a name that is far. You can call yourselves whatever

you want. I mean, the other element of the organization is—not that we don't get accused of it within our own circle—is we don't want to be the Vatican. We don't want to be the Vatican of Catholics for a Free Choice. We don't want to impose our set of rules on people who choose to be pro-choice Catholics in an organized way anywhere else, even in the United States. There's no formal affiliation process. Once in a while I hear about people who are calling themselves Catholics for a Free Choice who I didn't even know. You know, they get in the papers. They do something, and they're called Catholics for a Free Choice. I didn't know about them. Where the hell did they come from? But it's fine, you know, it's okay. We can tolerate a wide degree of diversity around us.

So they chose the name *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir*, Catholics for the Right to Decide, which, you know—it's long and it's awkward, and it's whatever, but it is more consistent. And you know, basically, the interesting thing—which is why I think, in part, why the bishops hate the fact that we have this name—is that in the United States people in the movement just call us the Catholics. Oh, go ask the Catholics what they think about this. Go ask the Catholics what they think about this. And in Latin America, it's *Las Católicas*. What's *Las Católicas* position on this? So it's like, we're the Catholics, you know, we're for those people. We're what they know of the Church.

And so the groups began. It's been a very interesting—and they grew slowly. We've been able, over the years, to have some very significant funding, from our perspective. I mean, not significant by the standards of organizations

like the Population Council or Pathfinder, but very good support from Hewlett, Packard, Ford. Ford was our big foundation supporter. Ford helped CFFC become international, work in Latin America. They were the people. José Barzelatto, who was the director of the Ford program when it revived in the late '80s—José really saw to it that we had the resources we needed to really develop strong groups in Mexico and Brazil, the regional office in Uruguay. And that was really what it was pretty much like in the beginning. And as time has passed, Bolivia has become a very strong CDD, and then there are smaller, less well-funded groups in Argentina, Columbia, Chile, Peru.

There's the beginning of some work now in Central America moving out from the Mexico axis, or the Mexico group. And some of these groups are, you know, proportional, I would say, to Mexico, in terms of power and money. The Mexico program has a budget of close to a million dollars a year. They're a major player. Some of the CDDs have been started by people with strong theological backgrounds. Some have been started by women's health activists. We generally take in a kind of a—we do some going out. We did some going out and beating the bushes for people, but the reality of this movement, this Catholic movement for choice, is that it is totally dependent on finding a person.

And it's a much different reality than any other group. Whether it's, again, the Family Planning Associations, the Population Councils, the Pathfinders, the whomever—any one of these organizations has a real possibility of hiring professionals, just hiring professional people. And you get varying levels of commitment to the issues in these organizations and other organizations,

because it's a job. For some people it is a job and a passion and a commitment, but for some people in these organizations it is a job. They could just as easily be working for the American Red Cross, or the International Red Cross, or the environment movement, or anything else—caring, but primarily professional. For Catholics for a Free Choice, it's a commitment. There's no way you can be working in Catholics for a Free Choice without first and foremost being totally, passionately committed to the issues.

First, you destroy your opportunities for any other work in the world. I, and many of our [allies]—I would never be hired. I mean, my board worries sometimes. Oh, Frances is going to leave—they used to worry. They now get it straight that it's not going to happen—Frances is going to leave us. She's going to be picked up—Planned Parenthood, or this group, or that group, they're going to hire her because she's so good. The reality is, almost nobody would hire me, not just because I am who I am, which is a piece of it, you know. I mean, what do you do with independent people like me in institutions? I'm not really the kind of person who's likely to work in those sorts of places.

And, you know, my sense of myself is as prophetess. I am a prophet. It's corny, but the reality is, that's what I am. And I view my work in the tradition of the prophetic within religion, and I would be that way wherever I worked. And that's how the people who work for Catholics for a Free Choice and with Catholics for a Free Choice around the world are. In each of these places, as I said before, there are now prophets who have taken a very, very big step in the sense that they have no place to—you burn a lot of bridges when you identify with an organization like this. This is true for other people in this movement,

in the sense, again, of many of the people who have worked on population, or family planning, or reproductive health issues, have put themselves at the center of controversies, taken unpopular positions, whether I agree with their positions or not, and ruined their careers.

I don't know about other people, but for me, that's who I am. I could not imagine doing anything else. I have no—I'm well aware of what prices I pay for who I am, and those prices are totally acceptable to me. And up to now I've been very lucky, because my home in Catholics for a Free Choice has continued to be secure financially all this time. You know, I feel that I could say that the resources are there for me to be able to make a living and do this work as long as I choose to do it. And I'm lucky, because the whole institution is a prophetic institution. It's not like I'm working for AID [United States Agency for International Development], and I'm the maverick in AID. I'm the head of a maverick organization.

Everybody in the organization is a maverick. The board is—yes, out there. I don't have a board that reins me in, and says, You really shouldn't have said that about the Pope, or, Well, we really don't want to go that far out, you know, could you be a little bit more cautious. You know, the motto of the organization—the culture is not caution; the culture is provocation—that's what we're here to do. So, that has developed in Latin America. You have similar people who run the organizations in Latin America who will pay similar prices, and do pay similar prices in that sense. So it's hard to find people. That's where we started this. Finding somebody—we are rare breeds—finding the people who are willing to do this, who are Catholic, who are feminist, and

who are still willing to identify with the Church. And in Latin America, it's an even more difficult task, because the trajectory of left politics, left feminist politics of the past thirty years, is anticlerical.

**Sharpless**

It's been very secular.

**Kissling**

It's been very secular. These women have rejected the Church in ways that—within America, you still have more people who identify with the Church or the Churches than you do in—who are feminist, et cetera, et cetera—than you do in Latin America. So it's been a tough road. Where there are CDDs is where there are personalities—is where there is a person to do this, who's willing to take it on. And the other part of that is that when we attract a person who is this kind of person, I think, the professional, personal profile of the people who are heads of the movement—because it's both a movement and a profession, you know—we have an extraordinarily high rate of articulate, creative, public spokespersons. Everybody is good in the public arena. We don't have anybody who doesn't know how to go and speak at a meeting. They're all preachers. We're all preachers, and we're all good preachers. And that's one of the characteristics of the whole movement.

When we got involved in the international arena is, of course, when the question of population—as opposed to the question of reproductive health, abortion rights, family planning—got onto the organization's radar screen. I don't think we really knew anything about—you know, we didn't know anything. It wasn't part of our sphere. We didn't work—our colleagues, when we were a domestic U.S. organization—our colleagues were not the international population organizations. This was a side of the movement that

we didn't know about. I mean, we certainly knew about racism in the movement for abortion rights, but not as a population issue.

As a domestic U.S. issue, we knew and understood that, you know, that the history of the movement in this country, in terms of forced sterilization—the Buck case. I mean, the New York City cases against sterilization. We knew a little bit about—of course, as an organization, as new contraceptives were developed, the questions of whether those contraceptives were to be imposed on poor women. Even in the modern era, you know, in the '80s and '90s, when Norplant was becoming available, judges who wanted to force women, you know, You don't have to go to jail if you get Norplant—that kind of stuff, you know. So we understood, and we were opposed to all of those measures—again, coming from the core of the way in which we looked at reproductive rights, and the core of a feminist religious perspective rooted in human dignity and rooted in women's autonomy.

**Sharpless**

Against coercion.

**Kissling**

Against coercion. And we're against—like, now when we deal with, say, the China question, our standard response to this is we're against coercion. We're against the coercive nature of the Chinese family planning policy. And we're against the coercive nature of the Vatican policy, which would like to coerce women not to use—would like to use the law to prevent women from being able to choose not to become pregnant. These are two sides of coercion, and we just don't believe in it.

We have a high—I think there is within us—you know, I'm talking not just about myself, but about people in the organization. There's a higher tolerance



for poverty, and for struggle, economic struggle within a family, because of our own histories. Very few people in the organization are other than working-class Catholics. Most of the people in the organization do not come from upper-middle. They might come from middle-middle, or below. And probably more of us grew up in families with more rather than less children—not huge amounts of children in most cases, but, you know, four children would kind of be more the norm than two children, and some would have higher than four and a few would have less.

And so when we look at the question of how many children a family can support, our standard is different to start with than many of the people who are in this movement. And what it means to support a family is also different. I mean, we're not looking at—I once saw a videotape that was done by a woman named Martha Stewart, who used to do a lot of videotaped conversations, and there was a person on the videotape who had had a child out of wedlock and didn't have an abortion. I mean, this was a tape of people who didn't have abortions, who chose not to have abortions. And she said, My standard for what will be giving my child a good life is not that I can afford to send my kid to Harvard. I don't need that much money in order to support my child and feel that I will have raised somebody in love. We may not have all the advantages of material goods, but my child will be a productive member of society. And I think that sort of also influences the way we—at the human level, that influences—

*Tape 1, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.*

**Sharpless**

Okay. Sorry about that.

**Kissling** No, no. So that very much influenced [us] as we entered the debate on the international level. You know, people wanted us. I mean, the other element is that we are this group that people want, in a certain way. They're not always happy when they get us. You know, it's like the Chinese proverb, Be careful, you might get what you—or whatever it is—you might get what you wish for. So that when 1984, the Mexico City population conference—we were not very active, although there were a lot of people in the population organizations saying, We got to get those Catholics down there, we got to get them involved so they can counter the influence of the Vatican.

And we weren't prepared in '84. We weren't big enough. It wasn't a—as I said, it was still not yet on our radar screen. We were domestic. You know, it was after this papacy was well established, more international, when the Vatican became much more active in the United Nations, that we saw more and more the importance that we do that. So—

**Sharpless** In terms of programmatic work, what sorts of things do the CDDs do, or what did they do in those early days?

**Kissling** They were very allied with the women's movement. They spread information. They had a magazine. They developed a magazine called *Conciencia* to—mirrored *Conscience*. They went to conferences, they participated in meetings. This was all prior to '94. Ninety-four, for many organizations, particularly in developing countries, is a point of departure in terms of the work, because of all the work created by the Cairo consensus, in which groups then began to monitor and work more closely with government—but they basically spread the message. You know, they did early evangelization.

**Sharpless** Now, did they cooperate with one another?

**Kissling** Yes. Because there was the regional office.

**Sharpless** Okay. In Uruguay.

**Kissling** And they worked with Cristina, and they would meet once a year—once every other year. Once there was more of a critical mass, they would start to have an annual conference. They would discuss mutual problems. Cristina would travel from CDD to CDD and meet with them and provide training and all of those sorts of things.

**Sharpless** And what was the relationship of—

**Kissling** They're small. They were very small. I mean, most of these organizations in that period from '87 to '94, really—and after '94 some progress began to be made. Most of these groups, except for Brazil and Mexico, had a budget of five thousand dollars a year. They were volunteer groups. They went out and did occasional things, but they were not—you know, maybe there were three or four of them, but that's it. So that was the state of it. The regional office had a budget of \$75,000.

**Sharpless** Okay. And what was their relationship to the Washington office?

**Kissling** The regional office.

**Sharpless** The Washington office—(both speaking at once) all of them.

**Kissling** All of them. Collegial, network, more like movement relationships. We gave them money. Occasionally that created problems, you know, tensions. I mean, we have our share of, You are the North Americans, and you are using your money to impose on us. And you know, at one point with the regional office—Cristina came for a meeting, and she said, "Well, you know, like we're talking

in the office in Uruguay, are we employees of Catholics for a Free Choice or are we not employees of Catholics for a Free Choice?”

**Sharpless**

And what was your answer?

**Kissling**

The situation is ambiguous. It's ambiguous. You know, it's like, Let's talk practical reality. There is no one who is, say, the director, even at that point in time. I said, "Look, Cristina, in a sense, you are an employee of Catholics for a Free Choice, or a consultant to Catholics for a Free Choice, because we write a check directly for you every month. We do an annual evaluation together every year. We decide how much money you will make. You know, you can say this is what you—we have a negotiation, but the reality is, in the end, we say, 'Okay, you're getting a 10 percent raise, you're getting no raise, you're getting a 20 percent raise. We now have more money, we can actually do a big raise,' whatever it is. So, with you, there is, in a sense—there is an employment relationship.

“In another sense, there is no employment relationship, no relationship with any of the other people who work in the office, because you hired those people. You decide all of these things about them, and we have nothing to do with them. We don't even necessarily know their names, and that's fine. In another sense, we're obviously not your employer because we couldn't fire you. We have no ability to say, 'Okay, you are no longer the regional representative of CDD.' Because you could say to us—what we could do of course is not pay you. We could say, 'We're no longer paying you.' We have that power, but the reality of the power dimension is such that you could say to us, 'Screw you. I am the regional representative. I am going to continue to be the regional

representative, and I will find somebody else to give me the money, or I will do this without money.””

And this is true in every one of the entities that is—we call them sister organizations, is how we define it now. It’s true with every one of them. They all are separately incorporated. They each have their own legal structure. In some cases, we hired them. We found them. In some cases, Cristina found them, you know, because then she was the regional director, and she decided at a—we had a financial commitment to the regional office Brazil and Mexico. And Cristina decided that she wanted to create—that the future of the movement—our vision of the movement was the regional office, and the regional office operated throughout Latin America. Her vision of the movement was the creation of CDDs in many countries and a network that the region served, but that the important elements were the CDDs. We didn’t think this was a workable strategy. We knew—

**Sharpless** We?

**Kissling** Catholics for a Free Choice in the United States.

**Sharpless** You and the board?

**Kissling** The board, right. We talked about this. When it’s something like that, I talk to the board, and I say, Look, here’s my thinking on this. What do you think—boopitty-bopitty-bee. And primarily it was a financial matter. We did not wish, nor did we feel we could financially afford, to take on the financial support of other entities in Latin America. And we had now—by the time this was going on, we had enough experience to know how money can be the biggest problem between people, that people depend on the money, but also need and

want the freedom. And we would be raising the money from Hewlett, for example, or Packard, or Ford, or whomever who would have certain expectations in terms of results, impact [et cetera]. We would be giving the money to people who were removed from the donor, but we would be accountable for whether the groups did what the donor intended, and what we had told the donor would happen.

And we didn't want—we knew this was a recipe for disaster, and so we said, Look, Cristina, you can do whatever you want. We can't and don't want to tell you what to do, but what we can say to you from the perspective of our autonomy, because you have autonomy and we have autonomy, is that we will not establish any direct relationships, financial or otherwise—one-on-one relationships—with CDDs that you establish in Latin America. We will participate in collective activity. You know, you have a meeting, you want us to come to the meeting, we'll come. You don't want us to come to the meeting, we won't come. You know, [if you say], We want to be Latin Americans by ourselves—fine. We want you to come—fine. We would do collective training or collective whatever, if asked, but we will not have one-on-one relationships, because we know they will create expectations that we will fund, and we can't. So you can go ahead and make this, but we're going to keep doing Mexico, Brazil, and you. And if you want to take on the responsibility for finding money for all of these people, you go right ahead. And so she went ahead, and they have established—they got a grant from Ford in Latin America, and that's how people got five thousand, six thousand, seven thousand dollars. They began to do their meetings and to do that work.

And it's been wonderful for us, because, over time, what has happened is that the—in terms of the structural North/South tension kinds of things, power relationships, they have been replicated, which helps us, because it becomes less of a North/South thing and more of a who-has-money, who-doesn't-have-money thing. And so maybe the regional office puts pressure on us to give them—and Brazil and Mexico in different ways, say, Look, give us the money and leave us alone. Okay, but now they have the same pressure. They are in both positions because the Chile group, the Columbia group, the Bolivia group, the whatever group, says to the regional operation, You get us money, and you leave us alone.

So they're now learning—we're all learning so much about what of this is systemic, and how does it play itself out, and what does it mean, and how do you—you know, because they now feel like they're getting accused of being non-democratic, and boopitty-bopitty-boo. All this stuff goes on. And then it happens in a country, because the Brazilians will say—the Brazilians need to deal with the people who say to them, You need to have CDDs in the states in Brazil. And they now know, because they've been through it with the regional operation, and they've been through it with CFPC—no way. No way. We know what happens when you have sub-groups. So all these elements of movement building, all these dynamics are, you know, tied up in it.

The Mexicans decided to have a—the closest and easiest relationship is between Mexico and us. It's totally, totally clean, easy, et cetera. And then Mexico gets in trouble with South America, which says, The reason you get along so well with them is because you Mexicans—it gets into the whole global

politics—you Mexicans, you've accepted your subservient status to the United States of America. You know, and part of the Mexican culture—you're just another one of them.

**Sharpless** The *norteños* [northerners], yeah.

**Kissling** Right. Exactly. It's so fascinating. And they decided to start a promoter's movement, where they would get people in some of the thirty states in Mexico who would be CDD spokespersons, and, you know, do occasional activities and distribute literature. And so the whole question came up: Should these people be paid? Is this militant activity—you know, *militancia*, in the Spanish term—or is this a job? And then you have one staff person—we have to pay these people. And then the director's saying, "Well, I don't know if we have to pay these people," and going through all this dynamic. So, you know, that's a piece of the expansion from a U.S. to a more international movement.

What does a network mean? You know, the problem for Latin America is that the network, in a sense, existed first, and the groups existed second. This wasn't a case where women's health organizations grew up in separate countries, and then there were many of them, and they decided to come together as a network. This was a case where there was a regional office that fostered the development of national entities and brought those national entities into a network founded by the regional office. And so they're dealing with a lot of this stuff.

**Sharpless** Have you worked in areas besides Latin America?

**Kissling** We're working now in Africa. We're working in Europe, but Europe is a very different situation. In Europe we simply hired a person who's our European



representative whose function is—she's, in essence, a member of the CFFC staff who works in Paris. And there's no effort to form groups or anything. It's a representational thing. But she does a lot of work in Europe, and she works with the European Union and goes to conferences, and we do things, and that's it. But it's very different.

In Africa—we just started to work in Africa two years ago. We've always been afraid of working in Africa because we viewed African Catholicism as extremely conservative, and because the overlay of race politics also concerned us. We didn't know if we had the ability to do this, to do it well. You know, we didn't want to go in and make mistakes.

Making mistakes—we pay very—I mean, it's an interesting dynamic for the organization, because it is, as I say, this provocative organization that is very, very, very risk-taking, that really is out there on the one hand. On the other hand, we know that we pay very dearly for every mistake we make. We don't have the same permission to make mistakes as many other organizations do. You know, if the Population Council fucks up RU486—which they did—it's a problem, but it's not the problem it is if we make a mistake.

**Sharpless** Why is that?

**Kissling** We have more enemies. We have more powerful enemies who want to destroy us, and who will seize. And we are watched and monitored more than anybody else. You know, I'm not saying other people aren't. I have no martyr complex whatsoever, but this is a reality. These people pay attention to what we do, and any chance they can to destroy us, they will.

**Sharpless** So they could use the racism card, or use the whatever card.

**Kissling**

Right. If we made—I mean, we could make a mistake. We could genuinely do something insensitive. We could be bulls in the china shop to—you know, we could—whether we make mistakes or not, they're going to attack us. But they're certainly going to take advantage of mistakes that we make. So we were reluctant to move in Africa without really having—getting our act together. And, you know, partly through the work in the United Nations over the last eight years, from '94 forward, we began to know more women in Africa. We began to feel a little bit more confident. We began—you know, again, it's a very personal way of operating. We met people. I met people. Other people in our office met people who did ethical work, work ethics, and we found a way to start working with a couple of people. And now we work pretty much under the rubric of Catholic Voices in Africa. There are three groups that have developed—one in Zimbabwe, one in Uganda, and one in Kenya—who are affiliated with us in the loosest possible way. They are at the totally voluntary level.

What we're doing is providing—you know, we pay for people to go places. We pay for them to be in meetings. We pay for them to go to conferences. We pay for them to be at the UN. We provide publications. We are prepared to underwrite some small activities in terms of a publication here and there, but we're not at the stage of establishing entities. And the people are not at that stage. And what happens happens. We are very—we just kind of go with—you know, we're aggressive, but we don't have a ten-year plan. We don't have a five-year plan. We have the broad outlines of what we want to achieve, but we have no written document that says this is what we're going to do.

When people read our strategic plan, which is now—when did we do the strategic plan? We probably did the strategic plan in '95 or '96. We did a strategic plan, and it may have been a little earlier than that. And it's very different from other people's strategic—people look at our strategic, and they go—(laughs) It's a visionary statement. It's a visionary statement. You know, we'd like to do it. We'd like to be in Africa, but there's nothing below it that says, This is how we're going to do it. And this is our timeline, you know, and the board is not involved at the beginning. The board doesn't care about that. They—you know, the board trusts me. This is another part of what makes me able, as an individual person, to do what I do.

We have had our moments as an organization. There have been two very powerful moments within the organizations where my leadership has been challenged, and I'm not talking about them. But they have existed, and we have had our fights, and I have emerged the leader. I have fought for my leadership. And that is a leadership in which my board is not a patsy—they are not a rubber stamp. They are seriously engaged in the big questions about this organization, but they are not engaged in either the day-to-day or the how, even at the big level. They are not involved in how we are going to do things, and they're very comfortable with that. But they are involved in whether we are or we are not going to do things. You know, if we're going to be international, they're involved. If we're going to have an office in Europe, they're involved. If we're going to take a position on euthanasia—in other words, if we're going to go into euthanasia as part of a life issue, which we have not, they would make that decision. I would not make that decision. I would not even think of

making that decision. So, that's big stuff. That's what they're engaged in.

They are also a fabulous, fabulous sounding board for me. I have people I respect enormously, people whom I want to engage—the kind of people I would want in my home to have a substantive conversation about issues are the kind of people who are on our board of directors. So, when we were thinking about doing more in the area of human sexuality—how do you draw the links between when is sex ethical, legitimate, moral, blah-blah-blah—that kind of thing. Or if we were going to do more on gay rights, the first thing we would do is have a board symposium. My board is a symposium, and we would sit around for two days with the board and the staff.

The other thing is that in the structure of the organization, a lot of people who come to work for CFFC are surprised—every staff member is welcome at every board meeting. The board meetings are not closed. There is an executive session—when they talk about money, my salary, my personnel review, things like that—which is closed, but the entire board meeting is open to every staff member. And the staff benefits enormously from the brain trust that the board represents. I mean, again, people like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sheila Briggs, another theologian, Marysa Navarro, who's the chair of the board, you know, who is a historian, who is the chair of the Latin American studies department at Dartmouth College, who was the first woman to work at Dartmouth and to get tenure at Dartmouth. I mean, this is a very, very bright group of people. And the way they inform the work, aside from things like passing the budget, and paying attention.

You know, I'm also, I think, very good at saying to board members, "Look

at this budget. I'm proposing we spend 25 percent of our money in the following place. You have a policy decision to make here." I tell them what policy is. I don't keep them in the dark. It's a policy decision how we allocate our resources, and I will do that with them in that way, at a senior, conceptual level/strategic level. But we'll sit for two days and talk about the issue, and the staff benefits enormously from it. They learn. I mean, they have exposure. You know, young Catholic women come to work at Catholics for a Free Choice, and they have an opportunity, three times a year, to sit at the table with Rosemary Radford Ruether. This is important. This is like, Wow, I get to do this.

**Sharpless** It's amazing. Now, one thing I wanted—

**Kissling** How are you doing? Are you going—are you wearing yourself out? I'm fine.  
(laughs)

**Sharpless** Maybe we could take a break in a minute, but let me ask you one question before this tape runs out. You've talked about the prices you're willing to pay. To what extent have you felt like your personal safety has been threatened?

**Kissling** I don't feel my personal safety is threatened. I'm fearless. I mean, my personality is such that I am afraid of nothing. I mean, I think, also in that—so there's that personal characteristic. I mean, I went to Bogotá, Columbia, last week. Everybody in my office was, like, shaking in their boots. It was nothing to me. You know, I was in Cambodia during the war because I wanted to see Cambodia before there was no Cambodia. So this is a general way in which—I also think that there is a way in which the decisions that I have made about who I am—no marriage, no children, nobody is dependent on me. Other than

I prefer that somebody doesn't shoot me, I'm not afraid of any—I don't have to worry that if I say something wrong, I'm going to lose my job at X university, and if I lose my job at x university, my children aren't going to be able to go to college. You know, I have constructed my personal life in a way, unconsciously, that permits me to be an enormous risk-taker around personal security, in that sense.

Then there's also reality, or experience, up to now. As we talked—I have been in the phone book up until this year. I've never gotten a threatening call at home. I have never gotten a call at home. I've never been threatened. Our office has never been picketed. You came to our office and the door was unlocked. We're now thinking of locking the door because the board would like us to lock the door. So we'll lock the door. We'll have a little keypad. But questions of when I go out to speak, there are nasty people, but we have not been—we got, at the office, one of the anthrax letters that went out six months ago or whatever to a hundred or two hundred places. It wasn't anthrax. It made people a little nervous, but it wasn't a big—you know, this is it. This is the extent of it. We get nasty mail, but that's it. There's never been—it hasn't happened. There hasn't been a threat.

What we get—what I get is—there is a certain amount of physical hatred. Hatred—there's hatred directed at me in a variety of ways. I mean, it's a very interesting personal phenomenon in the sense of I am now a symbol as well as a person for any number—in a small world. It's a small contained world of Catholicism, you know, for all these rightwing nuts. From Patrick Buchanan to William Donahue of the Catholic League, to the local bishops, a strategy has

evolved to cast Catholics for a Free Choice as an anti-Catholic hate organization. This is the current way in which Catholics for a Free Choice is talked about by its enemies. Those are the words they use.

I understand this as a strategy. These strategies have effects, and so it is personally painful to be—I mean, on the one hand, it's like, Hey, you know. When you open a novel and read about Catholics for a Free Choice, or when you read an article on the Catholic progressive movement, either I personally or the organization is used as an example. We don't need people like Frances Kissling. Okay, where you are generic for a—

*Tape 1 ends; tape 2, side 1, begins.*

**Sharpless** This is the second tape of the third interview with Frances Kissling on September fourteenth. Go ahead.

**Kissling** You have had an impact. That's what that says. You have had an impact. If they are there citing you—(both speaking at once)

**Sharpless** You're in the popular culture.

**Kissling** Generically, right. You're part of the popular culture. You are an icon, you are a symbol, you are all of these things. You are an example. People think you're going to be well enough known that they can just site you as an example of something they like or they don't like even though the article is not about you or even not about that issue is a sign of success. Okay. That's nice. On the other hand, it's never nice. I mean, I also pride myself on being accurate, on speaking clearly, on all sorts of things about how I communicate the message of the organization. And it is very annoying to have that distorted by people—deliberate distortion, as well as they just didn't get it.

I recognize that if enough of these rightwing groups and the bishops often enough say, in public, Catholics for a Free Choice is an anti-Catholic organization, Catholics for a Free Choice is a hate group, Catholics for a Free Choice wants to destroy the Catholic Church—this will affect the way in which people see us or are willing to relate to us. So this is troubling. For example, we have reporters that call the office to interview us, and they've also interviewed the bishops, or they've interviewed other people. And we have had several reporters say, either to me or to whomever in the office—to John O'Brien, who's our vice president who often talks to these people—Boy, those people really hate you. They really, really hate me and this organization.

It is not comfortable to have that much hate coming at you. It doesn't worry me on a security level, because I don't think you can—also, you know, part of the kind of leadership I am, the kind of person, leader, I am, who I am, is I'm interested in what you can do something about. You know, I do have the discipline to say—as I said before, look, there are 10 percent of these people you're never going to reach, and I don't care about them. I don't spend one minute worrying about those people. I can't do anything about them. This I can do things about. So the same thing is true with this. There's nothing you can really do. You shouldn't be foolish in terms of security, but there is nothing you can really do to protect yourself if somebody wants to shoot you, beat you up, attack you. They can do it. I could have five locks on my door, you know, and if they really wanted to get at me, they could get at me.

So I'm not going to spend my time worrying about this. I'm not going to be ridiculous. It's like, you live in a neighborhood, you don't go walking about



at 3 a.m. in the morning in Central Park. Okay. You do the same kind of thing. You behave within a circumspect sort of a way in terms of how you move in the world, but if somebody wants to do me physical damage, they can do me physical damage. So I don't even think about that, but I don't like the hatred. I don't. I personally do not like the hatred.

**Sharpless** What else about the Cairo conference?

**Kissling** Well, Cairo—

**Sharpless** Shifted the United Nations.

**Kissling** Yeah. I mean, I think first of all, in a certain sense, it starts with Rio.

**Sharpless** Okay.

**Kissling** Okay, because Rio was—

**Sharpless** Did you go?

**Kissling** Yeah. Rio was the precursor moment for the debate that would occur in Cairo. Rio was the moment, also, when the analysis was, the Vatican is in bed with the feminists. Jessica Matthews did this op-ed for the *Washington Post* in which she bemoaned the convergence between the Vatican and the feminists on the question of population because there is a similar position with very different values behind it. The Vatican in Rio was saying, We are against population being articulated as a cause—in their case a cause, not necessarily the major cause or whatever—of environmental degradation. Population is not the problem.

I mean, when you look at this whole dynamic and the modern era now of population politics and movements, you still have a left contingent which rejects and has a concern, deep concern, about the way in which population

size and growth as an issue is articulated in the economy, and security, and in environmental issues. You have a Catholic Church that takes a position, and you have feminists who take a similar position, that population size and growth is objectively neither the cause of environmental degradation, economic instability, threats to the security of the U.S., et cetera. This is not true, is the position. And beyond that, you then have the posture that says, The solution to environmental problems, to poverty, et cetera, is not reducing the number—the major solution is not reducing the number of people. This is not the way we are going to solve this problem. The major problem with deforestation is not poor people doing slash-and-burn agriculture because they have too many children. The major problem is corporate interests, like Japan, going in and destroying the forests. And the problem in the world is that we, the powerful, don't have enough power over the corporations to stop them from doing this.

So even if we know this is true, we are powerless, as powerful people, to stop it, but we do have enough power over poor people to get them to have fewer children, either voluntarily or involuntarily. So even though we may recognize some of what these leftists and do-gooders are saying about this strategy as ethically problematic, the reality is, it's the only solution we know how to implement. This is what we think we're dealing with in that sense. So this came to a head in Rio.

And the women who were present in Rio were from the radical elements of the women's health movement and the feminist movement—predominantly third world women with some involvement of the IWHCs [International Women's Health Coalition] of the world, the WEDOs [Women's Environment

and Development Organization] and the IWHCs. But this is predominantly a third world message. This is predominantly not a first world message. You cannot make women the instruments of your desire to have a better environment.

And so this was the convergence, because both the feminists and the Vatican were saying the same thing with different goals and with different values, but to the person whose paradigm is a population paradigm, a reduced population paradigm, it really didn't make any difference that these two things were different. These were just two problems that they didn't have the power to overcome. So what emerged from that was the desire in the United States to try to do something between Rio and Cairo to diffuse the tension between the feminist women's health community, the population establishment—which is how I refer to them—and the enviros. The powers that be did not want to go to Cairo—the funders and others did not want to go to Cairo with a problem, with all these people fighting with each other in Cairo over these questions.

The other thing which we haven't said, but which is a part of the larger picture—and CFFC fits into it in a certain way—is the role of the Ford Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation in changing who was at the table. Because the reality was these tensions have existed forever. Feminists have been saying this crap since, you know, Bucharest. Left-wingers have been saying since Bucharest that the best contraceptive is economic development, you know, but the reality is that prior to Rio, the feminists, women-centered, reproductive rights-oriented, anti-population sentiment groups didn't have the tickets to get at the table. They didn't have any money. So Ford and MacArthur

in the '80s—the mid-'80s forward—began making substantial investments in the international women's reproductive rights and health groups. So that by the time we came to—worldwide, and CFFC was a part of the beneficiary of that large hassle, though the money was not given to us all with exactly the same—in the sense of seeing that we would become a part of this force that would advocate for a shift in the paradigm, but in effect we became a part of that. So, women now had—we existed. You know, there was a Joan Dunlop, and an Adrienne Germaine, and a Carmen Barroso, and a Sonia Corea, and we could go on with a Bella Abzug, and Rachel Kyte and all of the people in the broad women's movement who had been funded, who had professionalized, and who now had a place at the table.

So, we were there. And Catholics for a Free Choice was a part of that. So now we are in post-Rio, pre-Cairo, and everybody is worried that these voices are going to muck it all up for the family planners, for the populationists. I mean, the population thing is so hard to define in a way, you know, but at any rate, we're going to muck it up. So something has to be done. In conversations with Pew, which had put itself in the picture at this point—and is now thankfully out of the picture, as far as I'm concerned—Pew was interested in could anything be done to do something about this, and talked to me about this.

And I had been very involved in a project called the Public Conversations Project, out of Boston, which is a group of family therapists who decided that the abortion issue was completely out of control, totally polarized, and that from what they could see as outsiders when they looked at the debate and the

discourse, it was like dysfunctional family. It had all the characteristics of dysfunctional family. And they started a project to pull together pro-choicers and pro-lifers to talk to each other, et cetera, et cetera, and do dialogue. And so I suggested that we get in touch with the Public Conversations Project and that we create a dialogue between the women's health people, the population people, and the enviros, and really see if we could reach some—not so much reach a consensus, but at least have a better understanding and respect for each other so that maybe this would help when we got to Cairo, that people wouldn't be all over the place.

And so that happened, and there were several meetings that included the major women's health leaders, people like Tom Merrick from the [World] Bank, Joseph Speidel was at Pop[ulation] Action at that point—Joseph Speidel, Sharon Camp, the people who were the population players, some of the big enviros. And we spent time going away to retreats and talking to each other and really sharpening some of the senses of these issues. And I think it was helpful. For us, in a sense, that was our introduction to—in a serious way institutionally, with an institutional role—to the debate. That's when we entered the discourse about population, as opposed to just being a reproductive—to being what we were, you know, which is a Church reform group, a reproductive rights group, a women's rights group, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

And we've never, in a consistent or a very central way, directly addressed—we've done a little of it, but I don't think we've ever gotten tagged as anti-population people. We're not seen as the Betsy Hartmanns of the world,

although I think we've made it clear in a variety of ways, in some of the things we've written in *Conscience* and some of the speeches that we've made at conferences, things like that, that we don't share the interpretation of facts that those who are primarily concerned about population size and growth as a problem or controlling it as a solution. We generally don't share that view, but we're not heavy-duty antis, and we don't totally reject. At the same time, we don't say that these are not important issues to address. We don't say, You must not talk about population size and growth. To be concerned about that is evil. You know, we're not there.

Mostly, we don't care. We think you can do what we do, which touches on population without being concerned. Generally speaking, my own personal view is that population size and growth is not as much of a problem as some people think it is. And I certainly don't think it's the solution. Controlling population is not the solution to other issues. At the same time, I think, allowing women to make decisions about how many children they will have, what the nature of their family will be, et cetera, has a very, very important effect on the well-being of the whole of society. But I'm interested in it exclusively because it's good for women. That's why I'm interested in it. It may have these other effects, and I think those other effects are good, but they don't motivate me or this organization a tit, a jot, at all. They don't motivate us.

**Sharpless** What about Beijing, then?

**Kissling** Well, Beijing, of course, was a much broader entry point for us into the question of women. When I talked about the unpeeling of the layers in

Catholics for a Free Choice, you know, the starting point, from the right to choose abortions, the right to exercise your conscience, the right to bodily autonomy, the right to religious liberty—as all Catholic principles—then saying, Well, you know, the Catholic Church believes in all this stuff, and we look at the Church, and it applies all of these things to war. Look at just war theory. The Catholic Church isn't against killing. It's never been against killing, really, it's just against women deciding to take the lives of their fetuses, you know, which is taking life.

So if it's not about killing, and it's not about the right to conscience and religious freedom, what is it about? What's the next layer under that? Well, okay, part of the layer is sex, and then the other part of the layer is it's about women. So, in that context, the whole mission of the organization in the context of reproductive health issues has become to look at this, and to look at this through the reality that what the Church is about is the control of women, and not just the Church. The Church is not the only patriarchal institution that women face. Other churches, of course, other synagogues, other temples, and governments—I mean, the control of women is the nature of societies as we know them.

So ultimately, if you want social systems that respect the right to have an abortion, the right to make decisions about children—numbers of children, when, where, how, who, family, et cetera, the role—you can get some social change without dealing with the core issues. You can. We see it. But ultimately, if you want security, long-term security, and a change in the paradigm, if you want to call it that, or a change in the world concept, you've got to change the

basics. Until women are not feared, are not discriminated against, are welcomed, and treated as people, reproductive rights will not be secure. Until women's fertility is not owned or desired to be owned by either the churches or the state, we will continue to have these battles. And so in that context, the larger question of women's rights—and for us, the question of women's rights situated in the way in which religion sees and treats women, is the point of Beijing. That's the entry point, and that's also a point where my work becomes more interfaith.

Okay, so that's another element of where we are now, and where I am now. My role as prophetess, pioneer, provocateur, person who pushes the envelope, you know, says the emperor has no clothes, which is the role that people like me play, is now in the broader [realm of] raising the question. I think one of the things that we do—I mean, I don't know if I said this yesterday—the thing about religion is that it asks the right questions but it has lousy answers. Part of my function is to ask questions. You move people along more, and my goal is to move people along. That's my role. I'm a communicator, an educator, a change agent, all those things. My experience is, you move people along more by asking questions than by giving them answers. If you can figure out the right question that will make people think about something that they have been unable to think about up to then—that will push them out of the box they have decided to live in—then you really do the work. For Cairo, one of those questions was, How come a state that has one thousand citizens, all of whom—ten of whom are women, all of whom are men—has no population problem whatsoever, has so much to say [at] a



population conference?

**Sharpless** That being the Vatican.

**Kissling** That's the Vatican. You know, that's the question. It's getting to the right question. So the question is now, in the context of Beijing and in the context of the rise of fundamentalism—because the other thing we're dealing with now, as Catholics for a Free Choice—I mean, the two things we deal with now are the whole question of the appropriate role of religion in the public's view. That's the question. What role should the Catholic Church have? What role should other churches have? How do they participate in society? They are part of civil society. They are very, very important institutions. They can do good things, they can do bad things. What space should they occupy?

They claim, and the Catholic Church prominent among them, that the space they wish to occupy is privileged. They want a privileged space. They are more important than environmental groups. They are more important than lawyers. They are more important than doctors—all of the elements of civil society, the arts, both institutional and cultural. Religion, religionists—and not just the Catholic Church has this position. This is, I think, where it's going now. Religion sees itself as foundational to culture, to society. Religion is not just an organization, religion permeates your being. You know, we are not religious in the same way—we do not belong to the Catholic Church in the same way that we belong to NOW. And therefore, that status, that identity, that way in which religion functions within the whole society, speaks to its having a privileged space in public discourse, in law, in all sorts of things. And all religions, including the Protestants, claim this. When I say what I just said in

meetings that include, you know, Methodists and Episcopalians and Jews, they don't like it. None of them like it. They all want a privileged space and believe they deserve it. So that's a big, big question.

The other question, in the context of fundamentalism—which is, you know, the entry point that we've made into the discourse at Beijing and beyond—the two questions to which we mostly know the answers, but which are important to flesh out are, why do all forms of fundamentalism require the control of women? What is it about the control of women and reproduction that is essential to the fundamentalist goal? Second question, Why is government more willing to ally itself with fundamental religious tendencies than progressive religious tendencies, both from a fear perspective—why are they afraid of fundamentalist religionists, but they're not afraid of progressive religious fundamentalists?

So some of it, we know, comes from fear. Those fundamentalists will shoot us, (laughs) and the progressives won't. But also, why—even in the absence of fear—why does the U.S. government worry more about the Christian Coalition and the Moral Majority in each of their phases? And in the current era, why is George Bush more reaching out to within—he's got religion, but why is he reaching out and making coalition with conservative religionists and not with progressive religionists?

So those are the two big questions when you think beyond reproductive health and rights that we see as part of the work of the future—how to deal with those as fundamentalism in its effort to control women's lives combines more with conservative forces in government to turn back the clock on

women's reproductive health and rights.

**Sharpless** It's a big agenda. Well, we have talked about any number of things in the hours we've been together. Are there any topics that we haven't touched on that we need to talk about?

**Kissling** I don't think so. I mean, you know, I'm sure we could—

**Sharpless** We could go for days.

**Kissling** (both speaking at once) think of a hundred, but I think we've touched—from my perspective, there's nothing I feel like I want to say, Now listen, we didn't do this, and I want to be sure you get this into the history because this is a very important product of the—

**Sharpless** Well, why don't we leave this as an open door, and if either one of us thinks of something we need to talk about, we can have another go at it.

**Kissling** Absolutely.

**Sharpless** All right. Thank you so much for your time. This has been just great.

**Kissling** Good. This is fun. I love to do this.

**Sharpless** Good.

*End of Interview 3.*