Interview with Sister Corita Ambro
Interviewed by Christine Cleary
February 22nd, 2003
2:00pm
St Augustine’s Church

Cleary:
Please state your name?

Sister:
Sister Corita Ambro

Cleary:
When did you first come to St. Augustine’s or what brought you here?

Sister:
I first came to St. Augustine’s in June of 1970. My reason for coming here at that time was to do pastoral work among the deaf individuals.

Cleary:
So you sign?

Sister:
Yes, I have my master’s degree in deaf education. I had gone to Kent State University and I transferred to Conecious College and St. Mary’s School for the Deaf in Buffalo, New York. This was to finish up my master’s degree in deaf education. When I came back to Cleveland, I was working here at St. Augustine’s. I was also teaching at Agebel School for the Deaf in Cleveland. At the time they did not have the money to pay me a salary for working here. I had to work at the same time. Agebel was on E.55th and Carnegie at the time. When I first applied for a job, they didn’t let me have it because I was over educated. They did want to pay me for it. One of the sisters got ill so they needed a substitute and that got me into the building. I substituted for the rest of the year and did other substituting for the next two years. I was able to get a salary and continue working here.

Cleary:
St. Augustine’s School was closed then?
Sister:
Yes, this school closed in 1964. They closed because of the freeway going through. The
freeway was supposed to take the school building. They were able to fight to have the
highway moved over a little so that the school building would not have to be closed. That
school building is an extremely important building for the neighborhood and for those
here at St. Augustine’s. It was built in 1907. It had first to the eighth grade with one
classroom each. They used to have fifty to sixty students in each classroom. They were
full classrooms. After it closed, the whole neighborhood kind of went down. When I
came here in 1970 the church was not as vibrant as it is now.

Cleary:
What nationality did the church have?

Sister:
The church doesn’t have a nationality. It is a territorial church for the area. At one time it
was probably Irish. That’s because all the names on the windows are Irish. It is all very
interesting because that church was originally built as the Pilgrim Congregational
Church. The congregation got to big for this particular building. St. Augustine’s had a
small building on Jefferson. It was a small wooden structure. St. Augustine’s bought this
building off of the Pilgrim Congregational Church. This building was built in 1860. The
windows are the original windows. You do see Irish names on them. They were probably
releaded and the names put on for the people who paid for the window. The church has
beautiful tiffany windows, which are not traditionally Catholic. They are very
traditionally Protestant. They are up above the altar. They kept those from the original
Pilgrim Congregational Church. They are magnificent and true tiffany. We are proud of
those windows. The church itself inside was changed when it became a Catholic Church.
I don’t know what the walls were like when it was the Congregational Church. They
wanted it to look more expensive. They put in brick walls that are really just painted to
look like that. Nobody knows unless there is a chip. It looks brick with brown stones all
over. The bottom of the walls was wainscoting and they covered the wainscoting with
just a pressed board. Somebody painted it to look like marble. Who ever painted the walls
at that time did a magnificent job. You would not know that that was pressed wood, you
would think it was marble. They put in a couple of windows that are traditionally
Catholic, in other words, saints and flower windows. The other windows are very much
Protestant and very simple and beautiful. The Catholic windows are very ornate with
saints. The church used to have a bell. We found the bell finally. It was in the ceiling
above the organ. The organ is 100 years old. We decided to hunt for the bell one time.
They had had a fire in here and the steeple burnt down. Instead of throwing the bell out,
they lowered it here into the ceiling right up above the organ. We got up there one day
and found it. It is beautiful. It says Jennings Road Congregation Church and it gives the
date. We took a couple of pictures. One of our hopes is to get enough money to take the
bell out of there and put it on the front of the lawn. The inside of the church needs work.
We finished about a year ago, painting the outside. We started before that with replacing
the electricity. It had the original wires and they were brittle. We still have to do the roof
before we start the inside. The basement was just a couple of rooms. We changed that to
be used for our Hunger Center. The wooden floors were changed to cement floors with
bathrooms and a kitchen for the Hunger Center. When I first came here it had the wooden floors and about 15 years ago that was changed. We have constantly been updating it. The Hunger Center has been here for about 25 years. It started out just being a little soup kitchen. We made soup for the elderly. We used to give out bags of food to the other people. It just started out as a small soup kitchen but has grown to what it is today.

Cleary:
Is that because the neighborhood has changed?

Sister:
Yes, because of the neighborhood and the needs of people, the change in the type of peoples that St. Augustine’s works with. When I first came here, we had just brought the deaf community into to St. Augustine’s Church. They used to be at Immaculate Conception on the eastside and at a number of other places. They needed a place that they could call their own. The church was not doing very well. There were not a lot of parishioners. The diocese thought they could send the deaf community over here to use the old church for their needs. The deaf community came here under Father Wilson. They did very well. Father Wilson was only here for 5 years before he retired. Father Coletta took over and stayed for only three years. Father McNulty came in and has been here for 30 years. When he came in the whole structure of the church began to change. We had the deaf community and he brought in the blind community.

Cleary:
When did he bring the blind community? What year was it?

Sister:
The deaf community has been here for 40 years and the blind community for 30 years. The church was slowly becoming a church for the disabled. As we were growing, about 20 years ago the mentally ill community came here. We have the deaf, the blind and the mentally ill as part of our parish. In the mean time the school down the street, OLA St. Joseph’s Center, 30 years ago became a school for the developed mentally disabled. It had been a Byzantine Catholic School. We also administer to the developed mentally disabled. So, we have the deaf, the blind, mentally ill and the developed mentally disabled. Plus, we took on the physically disabled and that is why we have a lift in the front of the church. You may ask, why do we have them all come here. One of the things that we find that people look for in a church, is community. A deaf individual going to his own church could not communicate with anybody else in the church. At St. Augustine’s the 10:00am liturgy is signed by the priest for the deaf community. Everything in the liturgy is in sign language. The music is in sign language. We have musicians but the choir sings in sign language. If a deaf person was to come to the 8:30am liturgy. It would be interpreted for him. We have interpreters at every one of our liturgies. There is a difference between a signed liturgy and an interpreted liturgy. At the interpreted liturgy, which is our 8:30am and our 12:30 the interpreter just signs what ever the priest is saying. The way of preaching or saying the liturgy is different with the deaf, you want to be very visual. With the deaf, we become very visual. We may act out the gospel instead of reading the gospel. This way they can understand it easier. We do a lot
of friendly things because they are an extremely friendly people. When they first come to church, they talk to everybody. They don’t come into church and sit down to pray. They come in to greet everybody. They haven’t seen everybody for a week. They enjoy themselves when they come. We do things just a little differently. The music is chosen so it is more easily understandable. You don’t want to use The Church Is One Foundation. It is hard to put into sign language that is meaningful to the deaf. We pick songs that are meaningful and can be put into sign language beautifully. You may ask why do we use music with the deaf. We found out those deaf individuals like deaf music. It all came about when I was talking to a deaf individual. I said how much I use music. Music makes me feel better and it relaxes me. He said, “What does music sound like”? I said that you could feel my throat and feel it go up and down. He said but what does it sound like? I was blowing on my finger and he still did not know what it sounded like. So, I wondered how could I make music meaningful to them. We help them feel the vibrations on the piano. We teach them the movement that goes with it and the words that go with it. They begin to enjoy it and love it. The melody for each song makes the song different. They catch the movement of the song being a little bit different.

Cleary:
So, they are moving along with the song, sort of like dancing with the mass.

Sister:
Yes, they can tell when the song is fast or slow. We can show loudness or softness by the size of our signs. We show excitement with our face. The deaf read body language. On Palm Sunday for example, we will be doing the Passion of Jesus Christ. We will not be reading it. At the 10:00am mass we will be acting the whole thing out. Mass takes a long time but they don’t care. After mass because we are truly a community they go over to part of the school building that has been converted to a deaf club room for them. They spend the rest of the day there. They cook dinners. They love being together and communicating with each other. During the week they have to communicate with hearing people.

Cleary:
Are these people from the West Side of Cleveland?

Sister:
They are from all over Cleveland. We have about eight hundred families registered that are deaf. We also have the blind community. When we first brought them in we had services for them once a month. We do their liturgy differently. We put them around tables, eight at a table. The bread and wine would be put at each table. At the time of the offertory the bread and the wine would be passed around the table. As we go through the mass we explain to them if Father’s arm are out stretched. Since they can’t see the gestures we tell when things are being done. It is called audio description. We use this when we do the combined masses with the deaf and blind together. To get the mass across to the blind we use audio description. The have a little hearing aid and I’ll speak into a microphone and explain everything that is going on in the church. Only the blind can hear it. It is not disruptive for anyone. When we do the Passion the deaf get a lot out
of it because of what they see but the blind person is not. So the audio description explains everything that is happening with the Passion play. The blind community love being with the deaf community. They feel so accepted. Some don’t just come for that one Sunday a month that is blind Sunday with a liturgy and supper. Some like to be picked up for another mass. We pick up on Sundays. Who ever needs to be picked up can call during the week and we will pick them up for Sunday.

Cleary:
So you have a van service?

Sister:
We have about five vans. The men from the Hunger Center are the men who drive for me. It’s a way for them to give back to the church. Sometimes the mentally ill can get here. Sometimes they can’t. Not all of the people who come here are Catholic. The mentally ill community has more non-Catholics than Catholics. They come three days a week. Not all of them come to mass on Sunday. They come Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays to socialize.

Cleary:
Do they meet in the Hunger Center or at the school building?

Sister:
They meet in the school building. That’s why the building is so important. The deaf clubroom is downstairs. The third floor is for the mentally ill. We have pool tables, TV’s, a kitchen, and pinball machines. We always feed them a meal. We found out that the mentally ill most often can not prepare enough food for themselves. We will feed them when they come on those three days. On Saturdays they go bowling. In the summertime they go off to Swings-and-Things.

Cleary:
Do you also provide a van to pick them up?

Sister:
Yes, whatever activities are planned we provide a van. That is called Links West. The church and people who are generous fund all of these activities that we do.

In the basement on the other side of the deaf room is what we call Walsh Hall. This is the parish hall. It is the hall that is generally used for the blind community. It’s also available for the area Tremont senior citizens. On Tuesdays it is used for deaf senior citizens. The area senior citizens also include the blind but not the deaf because of the language barrier. We have about 150 senior citizens that come on Tuesdays. Only about 40 to 50 who come to the area senior citizens group. We always serve a meal. The deaf seniors like to play a game called dingo. They also have speakers. The Tremont senior citizens like to play bingo. They also have speakers that come in and work with them. They go places like the Carousel and Cedar Point.
Cleary:
How does the Hunger Center work?

Sister:
The Hunger Center is open seven days a week for breakfast and for lunch. Those are the two meals that many people do not provide. There are a number of places that provide suppers. We are the only place that takes care of breakfast here in the city of Cleveland. We are averaging 280-300 people for breakfast in the morning. It is a great meal. The gentleman that works for me felt that it was important for these people to make some decisions on their own. So for breakfast he lets them tell him how they want their eggs. He usually gives them three eggs, fried potatoes with bacon, sausage or ham. The men and women love the way that he treats them. It is hard to find someone who will treat the homeless or the poor in an honorable way. I have some wonderful volunteers who come but they can not relate to the homeless. We want the homeless and poor who come down here to always feel loved and wanted. Acceptance and love is what we primarily do here. They look for hugs and contact. I didn’t do that for a long time. One day an old friend came in and I gave him a big hug. Afterwards a homeless man came up to me and tapped me on the shoulders and said you’ve never hug my like that. I didn’t realize it at the time but he was telling the truth. I told him O.K. Jimmy I’d give you a hug but not today. I couldn’t do it that day. He was a guy with bugs in his hair and his nose on his mustache and food on his beard. I just could not do because he stunk to high heaven. It took me almost three months of prayer before I could give him a hug. On one August day, I said oh what the heck and I gave him a big hug. That day changed me inside. Since that day I’ve been able to touch them and hug them and make them feel like they are really accepted. They can’t feel that total acceptance if you keep that distance. That is very important in their development. I do not try changing them. I don’t think that that is my responsibility. My responsibility is to feed them good meals, love them and to accept them. I have found that by loving and accepting them that many have tried to change. Some of them have succeeded in changing. I had a car stolen and the men said how could you take that. You did so much for that person and then he stole your car. Yes he did and I can’t say that I wasn’t hurt by it. I was. I still have to forgive because that is what Jesus told us. They don’t understand the concept of forgiving. It is very difficult for them. I had one gentleman who was always fighting. I told him he really needs to learn how to turn the other cheek. That is what we are taught in scripture. You can walk away from situations. He tried it and ended up with a broken jaw. He did learn something from the situation. He still comes back and says that he did really well this week and he turned the other cheek maybe two times. Maybe he didn’t succeed the whole way but he was able to do it at least once or twice. Many are from Vietnam. You just have to accept them just the way they are.

Cleary:
Where does the food come from?

Sister:
From private donations because we get nothing from the diocese, United Way or any other places. We are strictly supported by volunteers.
Cleary:
Do you always have enough food?

Sister:
Not always. Usually in July and August we start to run out. The people are so understanding. We have fun with it. We create things. Sometimes we create the worst concoctions and sometimes it comes out great. What I give them they are always grateful for it. We do not have complaints. In the summertime we garden. From Cleveland State University we get the seeds. We have two plots, one behind the school and one down on W5th. It is about two acres that we garden. We do zucchini, squash, collard greens, carrots, onions, tomatoes, corn, beans and peas. All of these things help get us through the summer. Many of the men from the Hunger Center help us with the gardening. We have a group from here and from St. Noel’s Parish to garden. We are partners with St. Noel’s. You have heard of Church and City. It means a city church and another church get together to serve each other. We are partners with St. Noel’s in Willoughby Hills. We have a group of people from here and a group of people from there to do the gardening. The men from the Hunger Center pitch in but not all of them. The men will think of little things to do for them when they are out there in the garden. The garden is taken care of during the week mostly by the homeless people. They do a wonderful job. The Hunger Center came about when the need for more food came along. We use to do a pantry, which was giving bags out at Thanksgiving and Christmas. It got to the point where we were doing about 11,000 to 12,000 bags of food. We would finish with the 12,000 bags of food and the line would still be down the street. That’s when we decided to change it to hot meals because you can serve more people. We give them a very healthy serving. When you do rice and chicken together you can feed a whole lot more than a bag of rice and a turkey. Also, a lot of the homeless men and women who come here don’t have a place to cook. So coming here is better for them where they have a well-balanced meal. They come early in the morning. We open up at five in the morning and we usually close about two or three in the afternoon. They could stay here all day if they want to, it’s up to them. I have to close at three because I have to get the hall ready for the evening AA meetings. We have AA meetings on Mondays, which is called the Hear and See. It is hearing and deaf people both. On Tuesdays we have the Big Book. The Monday meeting we have about 150 people attend. The Tuesday meeting, which includes the Big Book, you can’t find room in that hall. There is about 200 to 250 people. At that meeting they study the AA book rather than have a lead. On Wednesdays we have religious education for our children and we also feed our kids. The hall is open for AA on Fridays. On Saturdays we try to keep it free because we have so many programs for the parish. We do those on Saturdays and Sundays. For example, this Saturday after mass we will have a light supper like stew and start our appreciative inquiry. Which is asking each other about their experiences with this church. We have something every single Saturday during Lent. Going back to the Hunger Center we wanted to continue with the soup kitchen. We do deliver lunches to the shut-ins and the handicap people. We are delivering about 283 lunches a day to people who fall through the cracks for Meals on Wheels. They can’t afford the dollar a day or five dollars a week. Men from the Hunger Center deliver those meals for me every single day. That is beside the 200 we feed at lunchtime. It is quite an
extensive program that is completely funded by donations and volunteers. I have two staff members that are paid.

Cleary:
How many staff members are here at the church to help run all these activities?

Sister:
Jack is my main cook for lunch and Bob is my main cook for breakfast. They are the only two who get paid and the rest are volunteers. They volunteer and get a free meal. We give them other things too, as they need it like shavers or shaving cream, toothpaste or toothbrushes. We always have that available for them. We also do a clothing distribution. Whatever comes in that is what we give out. Last week we had two people who were able to get apartments and we go hunting for furniture for them. We are able to get furniture into their homes. For the homeless, we have a social worker that is here fulltime and tries to get people into the voucher program. When we run into problems with heat and electricity we try our best to help them out. One of the problems is they don’t come to us until it is too late. A gentleman came to me last week and he needed $800.00 dollars for his electricity. He never paid his bill for six months and it was being turned off. I would never have $800.00 dollars to give people. Had he came to me each month I may have been able to handle it. Sometimes we work with the companies to get them lowered a little bit. That’s what we try to do with the homeless. We try to get them jobs. We were able to get two guys a job this week. It’s not to say that they are going to keep their jobs. That’s one of the reasons that they are homeless. They may last six months. Part of that is due to the Vietnam experiences. They have never been able to get their lives back together. Some of it is due to the alcohol involved and to drug addiction. We still try to get them jobs and hope they will stay one month longer.

We run a camp out of the church in the summertime. The camp is run for the neighborhood and it is a six-week program. It is run for the neighborhood, the homeless and the disabled. Last year we had close to 160 kids in camp. We run it out of O.L.A. St. Joseph’s Center, the school down the street for the developing disabled. College kids work the camp for us. We have one program of 17 to 20 kids who are severely disabled. We received phone calls that there were these children that nobody would take because they need to be diapered. So we have started to take them. We are in our third year of taking those severely disabled. Most of them can not talk. They can not move. They are in wheelchairs. We don’t know how much intelligence that they have because they have no way of expressing themselves. We have one little one who only screams unless you are wheeling his wheelchair around. As long as he is in motion he is O.K. The driver of the bus says he can’t wait to get here in the morning. He can tell by the expressions on his face. There is something that we are giving them because it makes them very happy. It also is a little bit of rest for the families.

The Hunger Center men do a lot of work in the neighborhood. They feel that the neighborhood had accepted us and that was not an easy thing to do. We give back to the neighborhood. When we have the big Arts and Cultural Festival in September it is the homeless men who do all the set up and clean up for it. When we first came into the neighborhood there was a lot more poverty but it has gentrified. There were a lot of complaints in the beginning about the Hunger Center. The only way I felt I could resolve
it was to help them appreciate the people who come in. We work with the Tremont West Development Corporation. We serve meals to them. We are here to serve the neighborhood people too. It is a different neighborhood now than it was originally when I first came here in 1970. There were a lot of gangs in the park. The park was a very dangerous place to go. There were a lot of gang fights.

Cleary:
You are right across the street from the park. Did you still have a lot of people coming here or did they not feel safe to come here in the evenings to attend your activities?

Sister:
A lot of people did not feel safe coming here. That has all changed. Before when there were fights in the park, I would go and break them up. I have never been afraid. When people would steal from me, I would go to their homes and get it back. The police would get so angry with me. I have developed a respect from all the people because I could go anywhere in this neighborhood and nobody would hurt me. I have had such a great love for this neighborhood. The neighborhood is different now with all the newer people who have come in. The newer people are much more older or middle aged adults without children. There are fewer families with children and that is a danger to our school. The Tremont School, they wanted to close it. We had to work hard to make sure that they keep it open.

Cleary:
Is that because there were not as many students?

Sister:
There were not as many students.

Cleary:
Are these middle-aged adults helping the church at all with donations?

Sister:
No. It is interesting in the church because we get people from different areas. We get a lot of people from Euclid, Shaker Heights and Parma. They all belong to the church. One woman is from Euclid but prefers to come here. She didn’t grow up here but she feels more comfortable here. The people in the neighborhood don’t come up this far. I think some people are still afraid of the Hunger Center. Some of the newer people will go to St. John Cantius, which is in the middle of the Tremont neighborhood. We are the outskirts of the neighborhood. Professor Street is the middle of the neighborhood and that is where St. John Cantius is located. It is closer to their new homes down the hill. They don’t get frightened by the homeless, although the homeless should not frightened anybody. They sometimes do. If people don’t understand homeless people, they are generally frightened by them. I try to work on that by introducing them to homeless people in the things that we do. We had the annual meeting of the Tremont West Development Corporation and we prepared the meal. We set up and tore down. These were all homeless individuals who did that. We have a catering business. We started it with the homeless to give them a
little bit of money. We have done weddings and anniversaries on the property and off the property. Our biggest wedding was out in Berea at their new hall. It was for 400 individuals.

Cleary:
Can you definitely rely on these people to show up?

Sister:
Oh yes! They give such a good impression. I keep clothes for them upstairs. I like them to dress in white and black with a tie. When people donate those items, I keep them and put them away upstairs. They also help me with funerals. We dress them up as pallbearers. They do a lot of little things that people don’t really know. They are always so generous.

Cleary:
Thank you for your interview, you covered more than enough.