

NEW GENERATIONS OF CATHOLIC SISTERS

The Challenge of Diversity



Mary Johnson, S.N.D.de N.
Patricia Wittberg, S.C.
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To the next generations of Catholic Sisters in the United States

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New Generations of Catholic Sisters

Introduction

IN THE EARLY 1960s, the Second Vatican Council urged the Church to use the social sciences in shedding light on both its internal self-understanding and its external mission. Since the Council, the Church has often done the latter, using social science to examine and focus its mission in the world. There has been resistance, however, to doing the former: using the same sociological tools to look at the Church itself. It can be threatening to do this, because sociological analysis requires us to examine and admit what is working and what is not. No human organization is perfect, and all organizations must do a realistic examination of themselves from time to time. The Church must do it since it is a human organization with a divine mission that is essential to the life of the world. Religious life must also do this self-examination because its mission is essential to the life of the Church.

There are hundreds of charisms contained in women's religious institutes in the United States—all of which are distinct and beautiful, and all of which are needed for the complex mission of the Church today. Each institute is marked by its own rich history, structure, and culture, and each needs to conduct periodic self-examinations as internal and external pressures cause it to change. We focus on one of these changes, a generational analysis of the vocation to the vowed religious life in institutes of women religious.

Generational analysis is not a familiar lens for some, and it may challenge the conventional wisdom about the future of religious life in the United States. Indeed, depending on the social location, one hears speculation about multiple futures, some hopeful and open to new initiatives, and some pierced with fatalism. Nineteenth-century sociologist Georg Simmel's story of the "Society of the Broken Dish" is helpful here.

Simmel recounted the story of a group of French businessmen who went to dinner. During the meal, a dish fell on the floor and broke into a number of pieces. One of the businessmen noted that the number of

pieces equaled the number of diners at their table. Considering it an omen, one of the men suggested that they constitute a society in which they owed one another support and aid. Each took a piece of the dish home and agreed that upon death, the piece would be sent to the president of the society who would glue the pieces together again. The last survivor was to glue the last piece of the reconstituted dish and inter it. Simmel continued: "The 'Society of the Broken Dish' will thus dissolve and disappear. The feeling within that society, as well as in regard to it, would no doubt be different if new members were admitted and the life of the group thereby perpetuated indefinitely" (1950, 124–125).

The group, not the individual, is the unit of analysis for sociologists, so Simmel knew how important new members are to the life of a group. He also knew that new members are important to how a group feels and acts, and to how it is perceived by outsiders. We know that the life of a group cannot be taken for granted, especially if it has been entrusted with a sacred mission. Theologians also remind us of how important the charism is to the life of a group and to the world outside it.

We present data on religious life from several studies conducted over the past fifteen years, and we encourage institutes to interpret the data in the light of their own charisms. We are very aware that the backdrop for this conversation, at the present time, includes multiple conversations among the laity, the clergy, and the hierarchy, as well as multiple tensions in religious life. But we believe that all of those conversations should not produce a "swamping" effect, whereby the conversation about vocations to the vowed religious life is paralyzed and fails to move forward.

It has been a privilege for us to collaborate in providing sociological analysis in this particular book. We hope that it complements the existing body of theological, psychological, and spiritual writings on religious life, and that it casts light on new voices and visions in the new generations of religious life in the United States today.

Ultimately, the decision of each institute to move into the future regarding vocations to the vowed religious life belongs to the members of that institute in their deliberative bodies of assemblies and chapters. We hope and pray that, given the great needs of the Church and the world, the Holy Spirit will inspire institutes to welcome, like the elder Elizabeth's welcome of the young Mary, new generations of talented and committed Catholic women, who bring a rich diversity of generation, age, race, ethnicity, and

ecclesiology. These institutes, and the whole Church, are challenged to provide the spiritual sustenance and emotional and structural support to those who are called by God to be sisters.

Mary Johnson, S.N.D. de N.

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April 29, 2013

Feast of St. Catherine of Siena

Chapter 1

Religious Life in the United States

TOWARD A NEW DEMOGRAPHIC DEFINITION

Maria was sitting in the lounge area of the campus ministry office at the Catholic university where she was in her second year of law school. Although she had often walked by this office, this was the first time she had actually dropped in. As she waited to see one of the campus ministers, she reflected on what had brought her here.

As much as Maria was enjoying law school and preparing to practice immigration law back in the large West Coast city to which her parents had immigrated thirty years earlier, she felt a stirring of something deeper that she knew she had to explore, if only for the sake of her peace of mind. Sitting in the campus ministry office confirmed the interior confusion she had been feeling over the last several months. Her eyes passed over a bulletin board that included "Come and See" invitations from several religious institutes of women, some in various kinds of habits and some with only a small symbol affixed to secular clothing. All of the sisters in the pictures looked happy and were pictured in the context of their daily lives: in one case a monastery, in another a school, and in a third case a health clinic in a developing nation. One poster showed a group of women at home having a meal together. "How did all of these different women get to where they ultimately wound up?" she mused.

Maria had called for an appointment to meet with one of the four lay campus ministers who, with a priest, staffed the office. She had not known whom to ask for, so she said

she would meet with whomever was free that day. She was there at the urging of a law professor, a member of the Focolare movement, whom Maria had met while spending an undergraduate semester in Italy. Maria had also been inspired by the Italian lay movement Sant'Egidio and their work for peace. She had gravitated toward both, but her law professor friend had encouraged her to explore other forms of consecrated life as well. "Consecrated life," Maria had said to her friend, "What's that?"

While undergrads congregated in one corner of the office to plan their spring break trip to Honduras, Maria chuckled to herself. She was glad her mother and grandmother could not see her now, for two very different reasons. To put it mildly, her mother would not appreciate her exploring the possibility of becoming a Catholic sister. Her parents had worked hard to put her and her siblings through Catholic schools. The tuition money had not come easily, and her mother had complained that during all those years, her children had never had a sister for a teacher. Several of the other mothers in the parish had agreed that it was a shame the sisters were "dying out." Maria's mother was proud of her lawyer-to-be daughter and would not be happy to hear that she was exploring the possibility of becoming part of what many called a "dying breed."

Maria's grandmother would also react negatively to Maria's interest, but for an entirely different reason. A devout Catholic, she had been born in Mexico and had come to the United States only a few years earlier to join her daughter's family. She would be thrilled that Maria was interested in religious life, because she had had two beloved aunts who were nuns. They had lived in a monastery not too far from her home village. While Maria's great-grand aunts had died long before she was born, she had often heard her grandmother speak lovingly of them and express the hope that someone in the family would enter that monastery. Her grandmother's daughters had pursued other ways of life, so now she turned to the next generation for the fulfillment of her hope. Maria knew that

her grandmother would not look kindly on her appointment that day. Was not her inquiry at the campus ministry office like the American “shopping around for Masses and parishes” phenomenon that her grandmother could neither understand nor accept? The Mexican monastery had been good enough for other family members, so why wasn’t it good enough for Maria?

Maria’s mind continued to spin. She started to think of the sisters whom she had met in recent years. Although she had never had a sister as a teacher in school, she did get to know the one who had served as a pastoral minister in her parish. Later, during her post-college year of service in an inner-city adult education center, she had met the two sisters who ran that facility. While the three sisters she had encountered were different in personality and background, they all seemed very committed to the people they served. That had impressed Maria. She had lost touch with all three over the years, so she could not contact them now. In fact, she could not remember the names of their religious institutes, if indeed she had ever known them. And so today was the day to find out more information. She had huge questions for the campus minister: How would she know if God was calling her to the religious life? If her call was real, was religious life really “dying out” in this country?

At that moment, the door opened, and a female lay campus minister younger than Maria invited her to come in. How would the campus minister respond to Maria’s inquiries about the calling she felt stirring within her, and about religious life for women in general in the United States today?

MARIA’S STORY POINTS to two of the levels on which young adult Catholics live as they try to find their future paths: the personal relationships they have with God and the social contexts in which they discern and live out those relationships. The story also points to the intersection of spirituality and sociology that describes these two levels. Spirituality concerns

itself with the call of God and the discernment of God's desire for the individual and the group; sociology concerns itself with the networks and institutions within which that call and discernment take place. Sociology therefore examines the issues of religious form and function, personal and institutional identity, organization, culture, gender, ethnicity, age, and generation that are manifested in this story.

Maria's first question for the campus minister, "How would I know if God is calling me to become a sister?" is a question that women ask spiritual directors, wisdom figures, vowed religious, family, and friends who know them well. The answer to the second question, "Are sisters dying out in the United States?" is one about which people have a variety of opinions. Some respond based on their own experience; others repeat what they have read or heard from Catholic commentators. In this chapter, we put forth some answers to Maria's second question. As we shall see, there are many opinions about the identity and future of Catholic sisters in the United States.

Every organization must concern itself, to some degree, with how it is seen by others—especially those organizations that, by necessity, must attract new generations of members. Since an identity can attract, repel, or do neither, it is incumbent upon the organization to determine how its identity is being defined, who is doing the defining, and with what consequences.

We shall analyze several definitions of vowed religious life that are suggested by Maria's story, including definitions found in the media, as well as those used by scholars who study institutes¹ of sisters today. We begin with the famous admonition of W. I. Thomas, an influential social scientist of the early 1920s, about the power held by those who define a situation: "If men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928, 571–572). Others refer to this as the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy. References made by commentators about the decline or impending death of an organization are not to be taken lightly because of the power these definitions have on constructions of reality.

Definitions in the Media

Several prominent and influential writers have recently used the rhetoric of decline, diminishment, division, and death when speaking of institutes of Catholic sisters and have advanced widely varying reasons for this decline. In his *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most*

Powerful Church, Charles Morris offers a typically pessimistic vision of the future of religious sisterhoods in the United States: "If the demographics of the priesthood are daunting, the future of the female religious orders is probably hopeless. . . . Since nuns are 'lay,' or non-ordained, religious, exit from the religious life was always much easier than for priests. . . . by the 1990's, about half of all nuns had left" (Morris 1997, 318). Secular factors, he believed, were also involved: "The mass resignations may have related less to Vatican II reforms than to the feminist movement. Nuns filled executive positions in Catholic service institutions long before similar jobs were opened to women in secular organizations. As lay women's professional horizons broadened, the convent lost much of its comparative recruitment advantage." He concludes, "The brute fact is that in about ten or fifteen years, for all practical purposes, there will be no working nuns in America" (Morris 1997, 319).

In *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*, Peter Steinfels advanced a similar argument: "Today the number of sisters has declined dramatically, and with almost no new recruits to the convent, many of these religious orders are destined to disappear" (Steinfels 2003, 113). Later in the same book, he opines that "[a]fter the Council, women's orders were reassessing their missions and rules of life at the same times as the women's movement was transforming social attitudes and practices. Existing disciplines and loyalties could not easily survive two such simultaneous and interacting upheavals. More significant than the religious orders' loss of members has been their inability to attract new ones. Many orders of sisters are primarily devoted to caring for their own elderly, and smaller orders will soon go out of existence" (Steinfels 2003, 327).

Other journalists echo Steinfels and Morris. According to Kenneth Briggs, "Mass-going American Catholics wonder what happened to that huge cohort of remarkable, black-swathed women who appeared then disappeared from their vulnerable lives" (Briggs 2006, 230). Briggs asserts that it is the hierarchy of the Catholic Church itself that has caused the decline, by imposing rigid and unreasonable restrictions on women's institutes. In contrast, George Weigel asserted that there was a neat split in types of women's religious institutes, roughly corresponding to those that continue to wear habits and follow a traditional way of life, as compared to those that have discarded these practices. The former largely belong to the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR); the latter are members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). According to Weigel, "there

can be no denying that the ‘renewal’ of women’s religious life led by the LCWR and its affiliated orders has utterly failed to attract new vocations. The LCWR orders are dying, while several religious orders that disaffiliated from the LCWR are growing” (Weigel 2012, 2).

Sometimes the sisters themselves have added to this journalistic perspective. An article in *The New York Times* quoted a seventy-three-year-old sister who had recently retired as the chief executive officer of one of the largest networks of Catholic hospitals in the country: “We can’t be maudlin about this. I mean, yes, we are a dying breed. We are disappearing from the face of the earth and all of that. That being said, perhaps this is a moment for people to acknowledge the contribution that has been made by women religious throughout our history in the United States.” Her own order, she said, had stopped recruiting several years ago: “It was painful, but I think it was also courageous to say we’re just not going to recruit anymore. Let’s just live out the rest of our lives to the fullest that we possibly can and thank God for what we have been able to do. And when the time comes, as they say, the last person turn the lights out” (Sack 2011).

Social Science Research

Vocations to the religious life have also been a focus of social scientific research over the last three decades. In a 1982 national study of Catholic sisters in the United States, sociologist Sister Marie Augusta Neal, SNDdeN, listed changes in society and the Church as reasons why fewer people were entering religious orders. Neal also pointed to several of the internal policies the sisters had adopted: requiring candidates to have some college and/or work experience prior to entrance; failing to invite vocations from new immigrants; and the reduced probability of young women coming in direct contact with sisters in ministry (Neal 1984, 70–74).

Other sociologists attributed the decline in vocations to the declining power of traditional Catholic beliefs. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark argued that “[i]t is not at all clear that one can accept vows of celibacy and poverty on behalf of abstract ideas about virtue and goodness. We conclude that the crisis of vocations thus reflects a crisis of faith and the deep erosion of the power of traditional Catholic symbols and sacraments” (Finke and Stark 1992, 268). Therefore, “...unless the church is able to re-establish greater tension with its environment it will not be able to restore the rewards needed to maintain high levels of sacrifice by the religious. It takes a vivid conception of active and potent supernatural forces

to motivate people to make major sacrifices on behalf of faith, because only such active forces can plausibly deliver the great rewards on which a favorable exchange ratio rests" (Finke and Stark 1992, 271). According to Finke and Stark, therefore, religious institutes of women are declining because they and the Church are no longer sufficiently challenging to appeal to the idealism and enthusiasm of youth.

Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh, another sociologist, examined one institute of women religious in the United States and concluded that "[d]uring the past thirty years a number of factors, external to the orders themselves, came together in time and space and led to specific structural changes within religious orders of women in the United States. These structural changes, in turn, interacted in such a way as to make the demise of the institution virtually inevitable" (Ebaugh 1993, 162). She went on to list such factors as the new collegial approach to authority articulated by Vatican II, expanding secular opportunities for women, declining birth rates, credentialism in professional associations, and the rise of feminist ideologies in the society.

In addition to sociologists, researchers from other disciplines have also studied religious life. In the early 1990s, psychologists David Nygren and Sister Miriam Ukeritis, CSJ, conducted a study of 9,999 religious sisters, brothers, and priests. These researchers were concerned with the organizational structure and strategic effectiveness of religious institutes in their mission to alleviate "absolute human need." They argued that religious sisters, brothers, and priests needed to address issues of individualism, leadership, authority, corporate identity, and role clarity if they were to take advantage of a closing window of opportunity to revitalize their institutes (Nygren and Ukeritis 1993, 245). However, Nygren and Ukeritis also believed that this would be very difficult to do: "Most religious would see some return to normative behavior as necessary, but they are reluctant to do so if that means returning to the sect-like distinction of religious life of the past" (Nygren and Ukeritis 1993, 185).

Economist Sister Mary J. Oates, CSJ, also argued that the strict lifestyle of sisters, the influence of the civil rights and feminist movements, and women's widening professional opportunities have played a role in the decline of religious life. In addition, however, she cited a "critical agent" that she felt had been overlooked by previous scholars: "It is the effect on sisters, most of whom were parochial school teachers, of the rapid progress of American Catholics to middle-class status since the 1940s." But meeting the needs of the middle class in the suburbs did not call forth the

same commitment from idealistic young people as addressing the many needs of earlier immigrant generations had. Oates felt that the remedy was for the institutes to concentrate on helping the poor: "If the progressive spirit that spurred nineteenth and early-twentieth century parishioners to fund free schools for poor and working-class children again flourishes, idealistic and generous young men and women, religious and lay, will again emerge to conduct and support them" (Oates 1995, 163).

Whatever its cause, the predicted demise of all or most of the religious institutes of women in the United States has ominous implications for American Catholicism, should it come to pass. Religious life in the United States is both an organization and part of a global social movement within the universal Church. Several scholars have remarked on the great potential of international networks of religious sisters to create new solidarities and bring about social change. According to Finke and Wittberg, newly formed religious orders were a source of spiritual renewal and adaptation to changed social conditions in previous centuries, keeping the Catholic Church comparatively free of the schismatic and sectarian fission that bedeviled Protestantism (Finke and Wittberg 2000, 156; see Masini 1998 for the social change role of sisters in recent times). Some observers see this creative and adaptive role as missing in religious orders today. Father Thomas Reese, SJ, asserted: "The Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits were the engine of reform in centuries when the papacy and the hierarchy were corrupt. But no major religious communities arose during the twentieth century except Opus Dei and the Legionaries of Christ. The sisters' communities, which built the American church during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were decimated after Vatican II. Today it is the conservative groups that have vocations" (Reese 2004, 150). This, he felt, will rob the future American Church of its most creative and philanthropic element. As Frank Butler, former president of Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, Inc. (FADICA), stated, "In many ways, the charity of religious women has been the most formidable influence in the tradition of Catholic philanthropy in our day" (FADICA 2010a,b). Without women's religious institutes, or with only a limited number of traditionalist ones, these authors conclude, the Church will be less able to engage with a rapidly changing world.

Comments such as these, both the popular and the scholarly, reflect a specific "ideological frame" (Mannheim 1955). According to Mannheim, human beings must make sense of the events of their lives, and so they construct a framework to explain them. The constellation of negative