CATHOLIC SISTERS AND NORTH AMERICAN HISTORY: THE STATE OF THE FIELD

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CATHOLIC SISTERS' HIDDEN HISTORY

I learned early in my graduate career how provocative Catholic sisters can be as subjects of historical study. I was taking a course in U.S. Catholic History taught by Jay P. Dolan, a historian at Notre Dame, who founded the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism (the center I now direct) and eventually became my doctoral advisor. I set out to write a paper about the founding of the first Catholic women's colleges in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There were fourteen Catholic women's colleges established in the United States by 1910, and most of them had made gradual transitions from secondary academies into four-year institutions chartered to award baccalaureate degrees. Trinity College in Washington, D.C., was an exception. In 1897, Sister Julia McGroarty of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur announced that they would open a brand-new college in the nation's capital, one that would not evolve from a pre-existing academy.

This initiative presented Sister Julia with a host of logistical challenges, including fundraising, assembling a faculty, designing a curriculum, and buying land. On this last count, McGroarty's purchase of a plot located just one-third of a mile away from the all-male Pontifical Catholic University of America, which had opened in 1889, raised anxiety about coeducation, a prospect feared by Catholic prelates. More ominously, McGroarty's project became entangled with an ideological battle at Catholic University. Hearing accusations that the Sisters were aligned with the "Americanists" at CUA, a group of priests who championed the United States as the ideal place for Catholic flourishing, the Holy See even banned the Sisters from working on Trinity for about six months while Church officials investigated the nuns' alleged support of what many viewed as a dangerous heresy. Sister Julia wanted to plead her case in person, vowing that if she were a man, she would "put on her hat and go off to see the pope." But that was impossible, as women at the time could only be represented at the Holy See through a designated male proxy. McGroarty initiated a persuasive letter-

writing campaign, and she and other sisters relied on sympathetic male allies to mediate for them at the Vatican. The sisters eventually prevailed, and Trinity opened at last in 1901.

Knowing the basic outline of this story, I went searching for sources, particularly on the perspective of Sister Julia. So I checked out from the library a promising source in a book that profiled famous Irish-American women, McGroarty among them. Anticipating that I would find a wealth of information about Trinity's founding years, I was crushed to find only this: an interview with an unidentified Sister of Notre Dame, who, when queried about the superior's efforts to open the college gave this response: "Sister Superior prayed and Trinity was started".

I knew that this statement was certainly not untrue, in that I had no doubt Sister Julia had prayed. Yet it was astonishingly abbreviated, to say the least! It was only later, when I visited Trinity's archives, that I began to understand the source of her reticence. I discovered a letter that Sister Julia herself had written to her community shortly after the college opened. In it, she passed along the counsel she had received from Phillip Garrigan, vice-rector of Catholic University. Garrigan had reminded her that:

> …like the dear Blessed Mother, the Sisters were chosen to do great things and like her too, they should be satisfied that He alone be witness of their cooperation with His grace. The Blessed Virgin did not publish her history to the world; neither should we be concerned whether people know what we do or not.

The anonymous sister's abbreviated statement began to make sense. In heeding Father Garrigan's advice and directing her sisters not to "publish Trinity's history to the world," she had simply been acting with humility, seeking to imitate Mary of Nazareth[1].

There are a number of consequences to belonging to a religious tradition that has historically expected women to be far more self-effacing than men, and among them is the distortion of the historical record. In this particular instance, it would be Rev. Garrigan who proved to be the beneficiary of his own advice, as he and his fellow clerics at Catholic University are often characterized as the prime movers in the founding of Trinity College, credited for persuading the sisters to open a college in the nation's capital instead of a secondary academy. This is in clear contradiction of archival evidence, which shows that a

[1] See further in Cummings, K. S. (2009). Enlarging Our Lives: Higher Education, Americanism, and Trinity College for Catholic Women. In *New Women of the Old Faith: Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era* (pp. 59-100). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

four-year college had been McGroarty's intention from the start. This pattern recurs throughout Catholic history. In countless diocesan newspapers, parish histories, or congregational records, many of women's services and achievements within the Church are credited to the "good father" or "dear bishop" who served as their spiritual advisers or local ordinaries. The story of the founding of Trinity College thus points to an axiom about the historical study of Catholic sisters: as Suellen Hoy observed, "Obscurity and invisibility, though not uncommon in the study of women's lives in general, are particularly troublesome when they are sought after and considered measures of success" (quoted in Cummings, 2017, p. 2).

Breaking through this silence often requires not only more diligence on the part of historical researchers, but also more systematic and concerted efforts on the part of those who are in a position to do so. Because I direct the leading Center for the Study of American Catholicism in the United States, I have tried to do so in number of ways, including a recent initiative that, while small, is already making a decisive impact.

This program is tied closely to the history of another Catholic women's college in the United States: Saint Mary of the Woods in Southern Indiana, as well as to my home institution, the University of Notre Dame. Father Edward Sorin, the founder of the latter, spent over a year near Vincennes, a city in the southern part of the state of Indiana, before he came north to the University's present location in 1842. Sorin's arrival in Vincennes had heartened Mother Theodore Guerin, another French missionary who had established the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods near to that city in 1840. The two religious congregations had been connected in France, and Mother Theodore hoped Sorin would not only bring her news from home but also become an ally in her new habitat, especially in her perennial battles with the local bishop. For her part, Mother Theodore was eager to help Sorin succeed on the farm he established with six Holy Cross brothers. Knowing from her own experience what he would need most, Guerin sent them a gift of a wagon and a yoke of oxen.

To this day that yoke hangs in the refectory of Notre Dame's Corby Hall, where priests who work on campus live. It is accompanied by a plaque that identifies it as the one Sorin brought with him to campus. A few years ago, a student who worked in Corby brought it up in class, inspiring all of us to visit, to check if Mother Theodore's name appeared on the plaque. It does not. The scene nonetheless paints an evocative image. As members of the Congregation of Holy Cross gather for their meals, hidden in plain sight is an artifact that bears the fingerprints of a woman who, though she had been one of Notre Dame's first benefactors, is largely unknown outside her own religious community. It is a metaphor for

the lasting imprint Catholic sisters have made on church and nation, and for the ways in which their contributions remain unheralded and unremarked.

Thanks to the generosity of an alumna of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods (and widow of an alumnus of the University of Notre Dame), I had an opportunity to link Mother Theodore to Notre Dame's celebration of its 175th anniversary –and, more importantly, to use her story to support scholars who seek to move Catholic women from the margins to the forefront of historical narratives (Cummings, 2017, pp. 2-3)[2].

The Guerin grants are designed to be interdisciplinary, publicly engaged, and global in orientation, and as such, they reflect what I see to be crucial characteristics of contemporary studies of Catholic sisters. I'll elaborate on that in the final part of this article, but for now I will chart the development of modern historiography of women religious, and highlight a few of the thematic frameworks that scholars have utilized to integrate the history of Catholic sisters into larger historical narratives[3].

FROM INSIDER HISTORIES TO A THRIVING SUBFIELD

Any survey of historical literature on U.S. Catholic sisters must begin with the insider histories written and produced by sisters themselves. Indeed, however attentive they had been about cultivating personal humility, sisters had always been very scrupulous about maintaining meticulous records of their community's members and passing their stories on to their own members as part of religious formation. While often dismissed as "celebratory" or "hagiographical", many of these publications are nevertheless useful to contemporary researchers, containing as they do references to the sources upon which historians rely, such as data on foundations and foundresses, and information about the locations of archival material and primary sources (Raftery, 2017, p. 32).

The path to what we might call a modern historiography of Catholic religious history began in the 1920s and 1930s—not coincidentally, the decades in which U.S. Catholic sisters began to earn Ph.D.'s, with the efforts of sisters who produced a small body of studies that

[2] Details on the Mother Theodore Guerin Research Travel Grants may be found on the Cushwa Center's website: https://cushwa.nd.edu/grant-opportunities/guerin/.

[3] Coburn, C. K. (2004, Winter). An overview of the historiography of women religious: A twenty-five-year retrospective. *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 22(1), pp. 1-26.
McCauley, B. (2014, Winter). Nuns' stories: Writing the history of women religious in the United States. *American Catholic Studies*, 125(4), pp. 51-68.
Raftery, D. (2017, Summer). The 'third wave' is digital: Researching histories of women religious in the twenty-first century. *American Catholic Studies*, 128(2), pp. 29-50.

were often completed as part of a graduate degree requirement. While often celebratory, these efforts were distinguished from earlier in-house chronicles in that the authors followed professional rules of documentation and utilized sources other than convent memorabilia. A case in point is Sister Mariella Bowler's 1933 dissertation on Catholic women's colleges in the United States, which was completed at Catholic University[4]. Many dissertations about Catholic women religious would be completed at CUA, especially after John Tracy Ellis joined the faculty after World War II. Having taught in European universities, Ellis was appalled at the low standards for scholarship at Catholic universities in the United States and determined to raise them. His exacting expectations helped his students, many of whom were female, produce scrupulously documented dissertations that met standards of the historical profession (Cummings, 2019, p. 148).

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) played an important role in developing the historiography of women religious. In enjoining women religious to return to their roots, with a view to translating their founding charisms to the modern world, the Council inspired a number of communities to write new community histories. While most were published by the communities themselves or by Catholic presses, and remained quintessentially "insider" histories, they also signaled a shift from hagiographical approaches to serious historical analysis. Throughout the 1970s, sisters' interest in examining their history became more urgent, as they increasingly looked to the past to understand a turbulent present and to chart a decidedly uncertain future. One of the most remarkable publications to emerge from this period was Mary Ewens's *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth-Century America.* Originally written as a Ph.D. dissertation in American Studies at the University of Minnesota and published in 1978, the book explored "the changing relationship between American nuns and the society in which they have lived" (Ewens, 1978: 2). Examining American attitudes about sisters as well as the history and law regarding religious life in the United States, the book represented a landmark publication. As Bernadette McCauley noted, it was one of the first studies that reflected contemporary approaches of the budding field of social history and adopted a more critical edge[5].

Vatican II also indirectly shaped Catholic sisters' history by fostering cross-congregational collaboration. Efforts in this regard had, of course, predated the Council. By the late 1950s, the Sister Formation Movement and the Conference of the Major Superiors

[4] Bowler, M. M. (1933). *A history of Catholic colleges for women in the United States of America* (Doctoral dissertation). Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.
[5] See further in McCauley (2014, Winter).

of Women, the umbrella organization of Catholic sisters, were bringing members of different congregations together in annual national assemblies, thereby building bridges across what had once been considered impenetrable barriers. In this process Catholic sisters developed self-understandings as "sisters", as opposed to identifying exclusively as Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Sisters of St. Joseph, Franciscans, Dominicans, or any of the other four hundred or so congregations of vowed religious women represented in the United States.

The burgeoning feminist movement also intersected with Council directives to shape sisters' relationships with the hierarchy and their own histories. Feminist concerns inspired the Conference of Major Superiors of Women to change its name to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 1972. Members argued that the word "superior" in the former title had emphasized hierarchy and unilateralism rather than inclusion and collaboration, and that the incorporation of "women religious" emphasized their identity as women (Cummings, 2019, p. 193).

In 1975, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious initiated a study of the state of community archives. Completed under the direction of Evangeline Thomas, the data was published in 1983 as *Women Religious History Sources*. Advancements in archival organization complemented a flurry of new publications, many of which were surveyed in Elizabeth Kolmer's 1978 essay in *American Quarterly* and in her 1984 magisterial survey (Raftery, 2017, p. 31).

In 1987, the aforementioned Professor Jay Dolan convened a Colloquium on the History of Women Religious (CHWR) at the Cushwa Center. The purpose was to bring together historians of women's religious communities as well as leading historians in U.S. women's and religious history to discuss how Catholic sisters might be more integrated into larger narratives of U.S. history. Participants' concerns about the future of Catholic sisters' history were intertwined, as they continue to be today, with fears about the future of women's religious life in America itself; by the 1980s, massive departures and decline in new vocations signaled a steadily rising median age of women religious and a dramatic drop in overall membership. Most participants were Catholic sisters who were serving as archivists or historians of their own congregations. Many of them held academic positions at the colleges founded by their respective religious communities (at the high point, 1967, there were 120 Catholic women's colleges in the United States).

There were only a handful of non-sisters present. In addition to Professor Dolan, the sisters were joined by Fordham's Rev. James Hennesy, SJ, and Notre Dame's Professor Philip Gleason. Also participating in the conversation were two female historians who were

not members of religious communities: Margaret Susan Thompson of Syracuse University and Kathryn Kish Sklar of University of California Los Angeles, then one of the pre-eminent scholars in the emerging field of U.S. women's history (Cushwa Center, 1987, p. 3).

This gathering resulted in the establishment of the History of Women Religious Network. Founded separately from the Cushwa Center, and overseen by Sister Karen Kennelly, CSJ, the conference met for the first time at the College of St. Catherine, in St. Paul, Minnesota from June 25-27, 1989. There were 251 participants, including historians, archivists, and other interested persons from Canada, Australia, the Philippines, and France, as well as 31 states, who took part in the first conference of its kind to be devoted solely to the history of women religious. Twenty-one were lay (three men), and 104 "canonically distinct congregations" were represented as well. It has met every three years since then – most recently, as previously noted, at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana[6].

In 2004 Carol Coburn grouped the historiography on Catholic sisters into several broad thematic categories, naming the first and largest of these "Americanization". Broadly defined, this term refers to the interface between religious, ethnic, class, gender, and racial identities in the United States. Historians have documented that whether Catholic religious orders emigrated from Europe or were founded on U.S. soil, sisters had to contend with the taint of "foreignness" in a nation and society in which a Protestant majority often equated Catholicism with anti-American beliefs and practices. Although schools, churches, priests and male religious were often targets of harassment and occasionally violence, many scholars have argued that gender bias accentuated religious bigotry when it came to attacks on communities of women religious. As women who lived and worked in all-female environments; created and maintained schools and hospitals in the public domain; wore mysterious, distinctive clothing; and took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, rejecting motherhood, nuns elicited a variety of Protestant fantasies which occasionally sparked violence. A case in point involves the burning of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts in 1834, an event chronicled in Nancy Lusignan Schultz's *Fire & Roses*, published in 2000 (Coburn, 2004, p. 4).

Women religious also had to address issues related to Americanization, particularly ethnicity and class, *within* their own communities. Congregations transplanted from Europe had to minimize, if not eliminate, class and ethnic conflicts within their own communities in order to attract new vocations among native-born women. In their ground-breaking *Spirited*

[6] Further information can be found at https://www.chwr.org/first-triennial-conference-1989-recap/

Lives, Carol Coburn and Martha Smith, CSJ, examine the ethnic and class struggles within the Sisters of St. Joseph, a French congregation that arrived in the United States in 1836 and quickly translated their constitutions, customs books, and teaching manual to attract postulants and alleviate ethnic rivalries in their own community. Historian Suellen Hoy has chronicled the "greening" of French congregations over the nineteenth century, as Irish and Irish-American women supplanted the French-born founding generation in overall membership. Hoy and others examined in detail the factors that attracted second generation Irish American women to Catholic religious life, as well as recruitment efforts U.S-based congregations undertook in Ireland to attract Irish-born women (Coburn, 2004, p. 6; McCauley, 2014, pp. 59-62).

Diane Batts Morrow's *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time* (2002), is notable for its pioneering analysis of race, gender, and religion in the story of the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Its founder, Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, a free woman of color in Baltimore, spent a decade convincing white church leaders that black women could have a vocation before establishing the Oblates in 1828. This congregation was one of three in the United States that were open to women of color. After their founding the Oblates suffered from the effects of white racism in American society at large and also within the Catholic Church. Batts Morrow documents that the Oblates were repeatedly denied financial assistance from diocesan officials, even when funds were freely disbursed to white congregations in Baltimore. The congregation also had to contend with hierarchies based on skin tone, class, and ethnicity within their own membership. In making it possible for Baltimore's free black children to receive the education that the city's public and Catholic schools denied them, the Oblates left a lasting legacy on Baltimore and on the nation (McCauley, 2014, p. 58).

Emily Clark's *Masterless Mistresses*, a study of the French Ursulines who arrived in Louisiana and who had received nine people as part of their contract with the Company of the Indies, was one of the first scholarly studies of Catholic congregations' complicity with the institution of slavery. Individual congregations are coming to terms with that as well – men and women– and the conversations surrounding this have been fruitful, if painful. There will be many more studies forthcoming on this subject, as well as on a less studied subject, Catholic sisters' interactions with indigenous populations (McCauley, 2014, pp. 57-58).

After "Americanization", a second thematic category includes accounts that seek to demonstrate the impact of Catholic women's apostolic activities on American life. As Coburn and others argued, the absence of Catholic women religious from traditional historical

narratives was perhaps most egregious in the arena of U.S. social history, given the scope and scale of the educational, health care, and social services Catholic sisters provided ordinary Americans from the early nineteenth century until the early 1970s. Women religious built and staffed schools, hospitals, and social service institutions that served millions of Americans –Catholic and non-Catholic, rich and poor, young and old, the deaf and disabled, and the racially and ethnically marginalized. As historian Leslie Tentler put it in her influential 1993 article in *American Quarterly*, "Had women under secular or Protestant auspices compiled such a record of achievement, they would today be a thoroughly-researched population. Remedy is surely needed" (quoted in Coburn, 2004, p. 8).

A quarter century later their absence has been remedied in part. Though there is much more to be done, a number of historians have focused on Catholic sisters' role in providing the heavily subsidized labor that created the vast Catholic parochial school system in the United States, a system characterized by Sister Pat Byrne as "the largest private educational enterprise known to history" (quoted in Appleby, Byrne, & Portier, 2004, p. 55).

Another thread involves sister-nurses. One of the earliest studies to consider this was Mary Denis Maher's *To Bind Up the Wounds*, which considered Catholic sisters' service in the American Civil War (Catholic sisters constituted twenty percent of all Civil war nurses). Analyses of sister-nurses and hospital development, particularly Barbra Wall's *Unlikely Entrepreneurs* and Bernadette McAuley's *Who Shall Take Care of our Sick*, revealed important differences in models of health care and management within institutions staffed by sisters compared to those run by the state or other charitable institutions (McCauley, 2014, pp. 60-62).

Social service was another important arena, especially before the early 20th century, when the U.S. government provided no social safety net. Maureen Fitzgerald's *Habits of Compassion*, a study of Catholic sisters and welfare work in New York City, makes a compelling argument that state-supported services were created in the early 20th century as a reaction to Irish-American sisters' dominance. Sister Mary Irene Fitzgibbon, a Sister of Charity of New York, opened the New York City Founding Asylum in 1869, a place that provided shelter to six hundred women and 1,800 infants at a time.

Other historians have focused on the role of ethnicity in the development of settlement work. M. Christine Anderson, for example, focuses on Cincinnati's Santa Maria Institute, which was established by biological sisters Justina and Blandina Segale of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. Like the population they served, these sisters were migrants from Italy. Blandina also spent time in the American west, where she had a memorable encounter with

the legendary "Billy the Kid". Segale's story has recently captured significant attention because her cause for canonization has recently opened (McCauley, 2014, p. 61).

Hagiography and historiography have always been closely intertwined, and it is notable that several prize-winning books to emerge in recent years have focused on American women religious who are now canonized saints. Women make up more than half of the twelve people who died in territory now claimed by the United States who are recognized as saints by the Catholic Church. I will mention my own work on the sister who became the first U.S. citizen to be canonized at the very end of this article. For now, I will reference a new biography of the first U.S.-born person so honored, Elizabeth Ann Seton. A member of an elite New York family, Seton converted to the Catholic church as a widowed mother of five in 1805. Four years later she founded the Sisters of Charity, the first women's religious congregation established in the United States. Numerous biographies appeared of her in the late 19th century through the mid-20th, with the last of these written by Annabelle Melville in 1951 (a version of her dissertation written under the tutelage of John Tracy Ellis at CUA).

In 2018 Catherine O'Donnell published *Elizabeth Ann Seton: American Saint*, the first scholarly biography of Seton to appear in well over fifty years. Despite the subtitle of the book, which her editor insisted upon, O'Donnell treats her subject not as a Catholic hero but as a woman of letters in the early republic, negotiating motherhood, widowhood, and leadership in the midst of the birth of a new nation. Though it received the distinguished book award this past year from the Conference on the History of Women Religious, O'Donnell's biography, along with Sarah Curtis' *Civilizing Habits*, a biographical study of Philippine Duchesne, RSCJ, and two other French missionary women, show how far the study of Catholic sisters has moved away from insider histories. For O'Donnell, the frame is early America; for Curtis, it is the French empire. Biographies are underway for other canonized American women, including Katharine Drexel and, I hope, Mother Theodore Guerin.

O'Donnell and many other contemporary scholars who focus on Catholic sisters – whether those as well-known as Seton or those who are more obscure– make serious attempts to engage historians of American women. This is a significant shift in the field and points to third thematic category into which recent studies of American Catholic sisters can be grouped: social activism and women's leadership.

When I entered graduate school in the mid-1990s, women's history had been a thriving subfield for two decades. But because the field developed in tandem with the modern feminist movement, its early practitioners largely focused on the white, middle-class, native-born, Protestant women who either espoused or prefigured feminism. Recently this history

has been immeasurably enriched and complicated by paying conscious attention to differences of race, class, and ethnicity among American women. Yet few historians appreciate the extent to which religious identity also confounds traditional categories and questions, and as a result have treated Catholics (or women of other patriarchal religious traditions) with remarkably little nuance. Until very recently, they surfaced in women's history texts only as "anti-s" –anti-suffrage, anti-birth control, anti-abortion, anti-Equal Rights Amendment. Historians such as Ann Braude and Maureen Fitzgerald have identified "the Protestant frameworks embedded in the writing of U.S. history," noting that "Protestantism often functions as an unmarked category in women's history because religion is not analyzed as a source of difference, just as whiteness disappears when the impact of race is only considered for non-whites" (Braude, 2005: 183). Sisters have been invisible in 19th century women's history in large part because the "measures or signposts of their public power do not fit the framework for understanding the public power of Protestant and elite women during the same period." Moreover, as I and others have noted, scholars working on women's history continue to evince "a certain squeamishness about religious faith" (Raftery, 2017, p. 31).

Nevertheless, progress has been made, particularly as more historical work emerges on the post-Vatican II period, in which Catholic women religious increasingly embraced feminism and other social movements of the period. There is plenty of evidence that traditional dynamics obtained. In her memories about the founding of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966, for example, American feminist icon Betty Friedan recalled that Sister Joel Ellen Read, a School Sister of St. Francis and history professor at Milwakuee's Alverno College, was "particularly eloquent and commonsensible, breaking through the quibbling over details that could have kept the institution from being born" (quoted in Braude, 2007, p. 240). Read herself, by contrast, does not even remember speaking at meetings, and considers her part in the founding of NOW to have been largely symbolic. Read's failure to recall details about her role is likely a symptom of years of conditioning in convent life, in which she and other community members were exhorted to downplay individual achievements for the good of the whole. Shortly after NOW was founded, however, the directives of the Second Vatican Council would combine with the resurgence of feminism to compel sisters to speak for themselves and to have their achievements and contributions acknowledged –as the majority of American Catholic sisters are manifestly determined to do today.

Vatican II's directives prompted many American sisters to choose new forms of ministry and inspired them toward a commitment to civil rights and other social justice movements. In 1965, a number of U.S. sisters converged on Selma, Alabama, to join civil rights activists under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on a march to the state capital of Montgomery, to protest restrictions on African American voting rights. Selma not only represented the first mass movement of whites into the civil rights movement, but it also served as a highly visible marker of the church's engagement with the most pressing social problem of the day. Selma's white marchers were disproportionately Catholic, and habited nuns attracted a great deal of media attention at the time. Within the last decade they have also attracted the attention of historians such as Amy Koehlinger and Mary Henold (McCauley, 2014, p. 65; Coburn, 2004, pp. 16-17). Many members of CHWR are also members of the Berkshire Conference in Women's History, which also meets every three years. This is a new development.

These three thematic subfields are hardly comprehensive, and there are many developing areas (e.g., Catholic sisters' missionary work outside the United States, beginning in the early 20th century but becoming ever more important in the 1960s and 1970s). The 2015 publication of Margaret McGuinness' *Called to Serve: A History of Nuns in America* includes a rich bibliography that provides a more comprehensive picture of the scholarship. *Called to Serve* won the Distinguished Book Award at the 10th Triennial Conference of the History of Women Religious held at Santa Clara University in 2016. By then there had been an important change to CHWR, one that correlated with changes in the history of American Catholic sisters more generally.

THE FUTURE OF CATHOLIC SISTERS' HISTORY

For 25 years, Sr. Karen Kennelly had run CHWR the way sisters had led so many institutions and organization: with no budget, no help, and no formal structure. By 2013, however, Sister Karen became too elderly to continue her leadership, she asked me to absorb it into the Cushwa Center, which I agreed to do for the remainder of my time as director. CHWR is at a pivotal moment, and it is not clear whether it will survive –or even if it should. Some suggest that the conference, having accomplished its founding goal of integrating Catholic sisters into larger narratives, should dissolve itself. Having just hosted the most recent conference, I believe there is still a place for the conference, but like everything else, it will have to adapt. It must become more collaborative, more engaged, and global in orientation.

The first arena of collaboration must be among congregations of sisters themselves, a process often made difficult by what many regard as irreconcilable ideological differences, especially those that have led to congregations being labelled either "traditional" or "progressive". The United States is unique among nations in that it has two umbrella organizations of Catholic sisters. This resulted from a division in the early 1970s, when a group of superiors, unhappy with the feminism and activism of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, founded a competing organization. Now known as the Council on the Major Superiors of Women Religious, it received canonical approval in 1992. By and large, members of CMSWR are more traditional than members of LCWR (though some congregations are members of both), in the sense that they are more likely to live in community, more likely to wear habits, and more likely to focus their ministries on teaching and health care. But the differences should not be overstated. As sociologists and CHWR members Mary Johnson, SNDdeN, and Patricia Wittberg, SC, have observed, "Some commentators, for ideological purposes, attempt to create generalized typologies that mask the complexity of the religious reality, arguing that all new entrants go to traditionalist (CMSWR) institutes and few or none go to LCWR institutes" (p. 17). They show that these stereotypes are not only inaccurate but also dangerous, in that they accentuate the polarization of Catholics in the United States and undermine attempts to respond to the challenges women religious face in this country. Among these challenges, of course, are conserving and commemorating their history. At the CHWR meeting at Santa Clara in 2016, there were two sisters wearing habits. One of them, surveying the room with wariness, asked me if she would be welcome. I assured her that she would, and she was. Still, it is clear that most of the membership of CHWR skews more progressive.

The demographics of the CHWR membership suggest that collaboration between religious women and lay scholars is even more vital to the future of the field. There were 137 presenters on June's program. Of those, thirty were sisters. None appeared to be younger than sixty. None have academic positions (in part because the number of U.S Catholic women's colleges has declined precipitously; today there are fewer than ten). The women who do enter religious life are not, it seems, becoming academic historians. The history of American Catholic sisters will be written by people who are not themselves members of religious communities. (Incidentally, there were 23 men in attendance, a significant increase from CHWR's early days.)

Lay scholars cannot write the histories of religious women unless they have access to sisters' archives. This can often be difficult to gain. Some religious orders fiercely protect

their privacy. Many communities cannot afford the expense of maintaining an archive, or spare a sister for full-time work in them. Some of the larger US orders have opted to centralize collections in one major repository, where researchers can work under a trained archivist, religious or lay. The Society of the Sacred Heart, for example, established its official American Province RSCH repository in St. Louis, while the Daughters of Charity did so in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Similarly, the Sisters of Mercy established the Mercy Heritage Center in North Carolina, which holds the historical and administrative records of the Mercies in the Americas since 1843. Some 5000 linear feet of records in 36 collections are open to researchers (Raftery, 2017, pp. 38-39).

Last summer, Boston College announced it would launch a major fund-raising effort to create a centralized Archives for religious orders of both men and women. Early enthusiasm suggests this has a great appeal, particularly for those smaller communities who may not exist for much longer[7].

Collaboration among academics is also crucial. For one thing, as Irish scholar Deirdre Raftery points out, interdisciplinary and international networking are valued by major funding organizations (p. 37). The sociologists mentioned above, Patricia Wittberg, SC, and Mary Johnson, SNDdeN, have been stalwarts at CHWR conferences, along with other staff members of the Center for the Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), a leading research center based at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. One fruitful collaboration was sponsored by a consortium named Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (FADICA). In 2015 they hired me to review ten years of sociological studies commissioned by CARA, and produce a report that would relay the findings in a matter accessible to the general public. The report, "Understanding Catholic Sisters Today", can be accessed here:
https://nationalcatholicsistersproject.org/images/ResourcesReportsPics/WeAreSisters.pdf. It is emblematic of a second crucial characteristic of future historical scholarship, to become ever more engaged beyond the academy.

One of the most exciting initiatives to emerge from a commitment to greater engagement was the traveling exhibit *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America*, which toured the United States between 2010-2012, making stops at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Museum in New York, and other

[7] More information on this initiative may be found on Boston College's website: https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/bcnews/faith-religion/jesuit-catholic/catholic-archives.html

distinguished venues. It was developed by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, in consultation with many members of CHWR. It included rare artifacts and photographs from more than 400 communities to explore how Catholic sisters shaped America's social and cultural landscape from 1727 (the year the Ursulines arrived in New Orleans) through the present. A few of the items on display included: a letter from President Thomas Jefferson to Marie Thérèse Farjon of St. Xavier, written in 1804, assuring her that her community would still be able to govern itself following the Louisiana Purchase; a nurse's bag used by Sister Anthony O'Connell, a Sister of Charity, who pressured Army doctors to allow sisters to tend to soldiers on the front lines during the Civil War; the story of Mother Alfred Moes who, after witnessing the destruction of Rochester, Minn., from a violent tornado in 1883, proposed to William Mayo and his sons that she would build and staff a hospital if they would agree to provide the medical care. Moes' collaboration was a significant milestone in the development of what is now known as world-renowned Mayo Clinic.

Through the joint sponsorship of Saint Mary's College, the University of Notre Dame, and the Center for History, *Women & Spirit* was on exhibit in South Bend, Indiana, for three months in fall 2011. I had the honor of giving private tours to everyone from the president of my University to our local bishop to grade school children in Catholic and public schools. One unanticipated coincidence was that the exhibit was touring the country at the same time the Vatican was conducting two separate investigations into Catholic women religious in the United States. The first was an Apostolic Visitation conducted by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The second was a doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Motivating both was the perception that the majority of Catholic sisters had been too influenced by "radical feminism" and had strayed too far from Catholic teaching. Both investigations ended quietly soon after Pope Francis' election in 2013, with no deleterious consequences for sisters. One of the positive outcomes, surely unintended by the Holy See, was an outpouring of support and gratitude by Americans, Catholic and non-Catholic, for Catholic sisters' collective contribution to church and nation. Many Catholics, aware of the myriad problems within the American church, especially clerical sexual abuse, were frustrated that the Vatican chose to identify sisters as a problem.

The Conrad Hilton Foundation had been a major underwriter of the *Women & Spirit* exhibition, and in 2015 Hilton funded two initiatives designed to teach Americans more about Catholic sisters past and present. The National Catholic Sisters Project promotes greater understanding and meaningful connections with Catholic women religious and seeks to make

contemporary sisters more visible. It sponsors a variety of programs, including an annual weeklong celebration of National Catholic Sisters Week, held during the second week of March, which is Women's History Month. In one facet of the program, college students are paired with sisters to conduct oral histories. Efforts are underway to design a bilingual national curriculum for use in both public and private secondary schools. Two of the scholars spearheading this effort, "Called & Consecrated: Exploring the Lives of Women Religious", attended the most recent CHWR meeting[8].

The Hilton Foundation also launched, in collaboration with *National Catholic Reporter*, an initiative called Global Sisters Report. This is an independent, non-profit source of news and information about Catholic sisters and the critical issues facing the people they serve. A network of journalists report about their lives and works, and sisters write commentary from their perspective. Hilton and other foundations that support Catholic sisters have been slow to fund historical projects. This is all the more reason for historians of women religious to be collaborative and engaged. It is up to us to show foundations that a greater understanding of the history of Catholic sisters can help to ensure a vibrant future.

I opened this essay with a story about the first women religious I ever wrote about, I'll close with some observations about the one I have written about more recently, as a way to underscore the importance of conceptualizing Catholic sisters' story as "global" even before the contemporary era.

December 22, 2017, marked the centenary of the death of Frances Cabrini, a native of northern Italy, founder of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (M.S.C.), and the first U.S. citizen to be canonized a saint. The milestone inspired commemorations in the United States and in Italy, where Pope Francis was particularly effusive, praising Cabrini's courageous efforts to bring the love of Christ to those who had traveled far from home. Francis' admiration for Cabrini predates his elevation to the papacy, and, in fact, the former Cardinal Bergoglio's familiarity with Cabrini's congregation in Buenos Aires was one reason its members anticipated that he would include Cabrini's shrine in northern Manhattan on his itinerary during his 2015 trip to the United States. Though Cabrini may have seemed a logical person for him to highlight, Francis did not visit her shrine, even though he was nearby; neither did he mention Cabrini at all during his sojourn in the United States. Far from a slight, this

[8] Further information about programs sponsored by the National Catholic Sisters Project is available on their website: https://nationalcatholicsistersproject.org.

omission is instead a reminder of the importance of vantage points: like most Catholics born outside the United States, Pope Francis does not regard Cabrini as particularly "American".

U.S. Catholics referenced Cabrini's citizenship, which she had applied for and received in Seattle, Washington, in 1909, to celebrate both her beatification and her canonization as national triumphs. Though Cabrini herself never disclosed her reasons for seeking naturalization—in all likelihood, she had been following the advice of her lawyer, as U.S. citizenship not only helped Cabrini secure the congregation's property holdings but also facilitated her frequent border crossings--Cabrini's admirers in the United States, readily imputed other motives to Cabrini's declaration of allegiance to the American flag: having become "so enamored of America", they insisted, she "fully realized how her work could identify itself with the great destinies of the new world". According to Chicago's Cardinal Mundelein, Cabrini had viewed naturalization as a way "to link her institutions more firmly to the country". One biographer explained that while Cabrini "had from the outset intended to seek naturalization", the practical demands of running the congregation had prevented from doing so for two decades[9].

A map of Cabrini's travels designed by her successor, Mother Antonietta della Casa, provides a very different perspective. Gold-embossed dots mark the sixty-seven foundations Cabrini established on three continents between her first Atlantic crossing in 1889 and her final one in 1912. Della Casa and other of Cabrini's spiritual daughters in the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart viewed the founder as a woman whose life and loyalties transcended national boundaries. It is telling, for example, that Mother Saverio de Maria, MSC, never mentioned her naturalization as a U.S. citizen in the biography she published of Cabrini in 1927, instead portraying Cabrini as a nomad whose worldly wanderings were punctuated by periodic return visits to Italy. Mother Antonietta's map of Cabrini's transatlantic travels also suggests that her U.S. destinations served as constellation points rather than termini[10].

Cabrini may have been exceptional in many ways, but she was typical of many Catholic men and women religious who grasped that their mission transcended beyond national boundaries, even if they spent their lives within one country. Cabrini shared far more

[9] All quotes come from Cummings, K. S. (2018). Frances Cabrini, American exceptionalism, and returning to Rome. *The Catholic Historical Review*, 104(1), pp. 1-22.

[10] Mother Antoinetta Della Casa, Carta geographica**, "***Distanze percorse dalla Serva di Dio F.S. Cabrini nei suoi viaggi di terra e di mare***,"** 271-272, in *Frances Cabrini's Ordinary Process in Chicago on Fame of Sanctity, 1928,*5636, Cong. Riti, ASV. Credit: Vatican Secret Archives

in common with a Missionary Sister of the Sacred Heart in Buenos Aires or London or Rome than she did with her neighbor in Chicago, Jane Addams, and she envisioned herself neither as "una grande italiana" nor as a citizen of the United States, but as a citizen of a world that was much "too small" to contain her religious zeal. As such her life, can and should inspire historians of women religious to cross national or continental boundaries in conceptualizing their investigations. I hope that in sharing my perspective on how the historiography of Catholic sisters developed in North America, and how it is evolving, my colleagues who study sisters in South America might find other points of confluence and inspiration for collaboration.

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