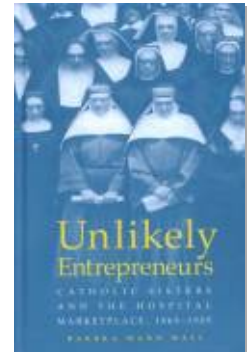




PROJECT MUSE®

2. "All the Advantages of a Religious Life": Religion, Gender, and New Public Roles

Published by



Wall, Barbra Mann.

Unlikely Entrepreneurs: Catholic Sisters and the Hospital Marketplace, 1865-1925.

The Ohio State University Press, 2005.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28305>.

➔ For additional information about this book
<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28305>

2

“All the Advantages of a Religious Life”

RELIGION, GENDER, AND NEW PUBLIC ROLES

Consider with me and see where have been gathered together more providentially to be benefited with all the advantages of a religious life a larger number of poor, unqualified, ordinary, and working class girls as all of us are.¹

Mother St. Pierre Cinqin, CCVI
December 18, 1889

These words that Mother St. Pierre wrote to the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, most of whom had entered religious life without material resources, reveal that a religious vocation could bring certain advantages to women. Prevailing social trends limited some women's prospects, but by joining a religious congregation, Catholic women could create a space for themselves to nurse, teach, administer hospitals, and manage finances. In the convent, sisters obtained opportunities for job training and preparation for the marketplace, underscoring economic goals for them. Furthermore, although the clerical hierarchy of the Catholic Church excluded women, sisters developed alternative spiritualities that allowed them to stand apart from both the church hierarchy and other women.² This held considerable attraction for women who had few alternatives in the outside world.

In the context of church and societal ideas about gender and religion, Catholic sisters took on new aspects of entrepreneurship. However, they took vows that committed them to anonymity. While aspects of convent life arguably helped them, nuns did not oppose the Catholic Church's sex hierarchy, nor did they question their position in that structure. Furthermore, although sisters had identities that were distinct from other women, the Catholic Church did not formally invest them with power as it did priests. Sacramental laws gave priests certain functions that distinguished them from others, but the degree to which nuns acquired sacramental power was through identity formation. The construction and maintenance of personal and collective religious identities provided the basis for them to shape their lives and work. It was central in understanding women's willingness to invest their time and energy in their work and, hence, was important for a religious order's growth.³ The religious congregation was the institution that gave meaning to a collective identity for women.

For sisters, the justification for religious life was to achieve spiritual perfection for themselves and others. These women followed a personal calling and believed they were doing God's will. Upon entrance into the novitiate, a Sister of the Holy Cross had to answer a questionnaire. Reasons for entering typically were "to save my soul" and "I loved its end [sanctification]."⁴ Rather than focusing on a life of prayer and contemplation, however, the sisters gave priority to their work.

In Europe and the United States, beliefs about gender limited women's choices and influenced their work, marriage patterns, and opportunities. Barbara Welter has provided a comprehensive description of how ministers and other moralists constructed an "ideology of true womanhood" for white middle-class women in the nineteenth century. Women were to be submissive and pious and to practice domesticity to perfection.⁵ While this cult was normative in many contexts, it was not observed in terms of actual behavior. Indeed, many women deviated markedly from this ideology, having neither the need nor the opportunity to stay at home.⁶

Roman Catholic writers promulgated a domestic ideology similar to that of middle-class white women. In his 1879 classic book on Catholic domesticity, *The Mirror of True Womanhood*, Bernard O'Reilly proclaimed the "true Catholic woman" to be pious, self-abnegating, and domestic. He particularly associated women with nursing.⁷ While liberal Catholic writers argued for wider options, others upheld traditional Christian beliefs that God's appointed domain for women was the home.⁸ Underpinning this tradition was the image of Mary, the mother of Jesus, embodied in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Both the ideology of "true womanhood" and the dogma of the Immaculate Conception idealized women

as social guardians and purifiers and stressed their roles as caretakers.⁹ In sermons and publications, ecclesiastical leaders and Catholic periodicals such as the *Ave Maria* and the *Catholic World* circulated this teaching.¹⁰ Furthermore, by the late nineteenth century, fallacious scientific theories about feminine psychology and intelligence had developed to explain differences between men and women, yet their most significant social impact was to "justify" the role of women as subordinate caretakers.¹¹ For Catholic women who did not wish to be wives and mothers, however, the convent was an available option.

BENEFITS OF A RELIGIOUS VOCATION

A convent could offer women opportunities for personal fulfillment that they might not otherwise have. While most European orders required large dowries, overseas "mission" orders such as those in the United States did not. Many Irish Catholic women viewed the decision to become a nun in the United States as choosing the "better part," an alternative to a life of hard work or poverty in Ireland.¹² In postfamine rural Ireland, changes in inheritance patterns produced a surplus of sons and daughters, and women had few social or economic benefits. Demographic trends revealed infrequent marriages, high celibacy rates, gender segregation, and a massive female exodus as the country held fewer and fewer opportunities for women. Many women preferred to enter a convent rather than experience the perils of childbearing or tedious and backbreaking work on the family farm. As increasing numbers of young Irish women joined religious congregations and took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, they voluntarily experienced conditions that, in all likelihood, they would have faced as nonreligious women. With few marriage prospects and a future of dependence on family and relatives, hundreds of thousands of women fled their homes and joined convents in Ireland or elsewhere. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Irish women dominated migration. This pattern was unique among European migrants.¹³

For other women, a convent could give occupational and educational options their families could not provide. For example, membership in a religious community could offer opportunities to rise to positions of influence.¹⁴ Capable young women could aspire to become principals of schools, superiors of congregations, or administrators of hospitals. Not only did Irish women predominate within the Holy Cross congregation, they also held the leadership positions. Sisters Perpetua Wilson and



FIGURE 2.1 Sister Lydia Clifford, CSC. (Courtesy Sisters of the Holy Cross Archives, Saint Mary's, Notre Dame, IN)

Annunciata McSheffery emigrated from Ireland as children and eventually became superiors of the Sisters of the Holy Cross.¹⁵ Another Irish immigrant, Sister Lydia Clifford (fig. 2.1), did housekeeping and other domestic work before she received training as a nurse. In addition to being “Chief Nurse” at Camp Hamilton during the Spanish–American War, she directed three different Holy Cross hospitals.¹⁶

Generalizations, however, cannot easily be made, since many women in convents did not rise in status. By 1910, the Sisters of St. Joseph, Sisters of the Holy Cross, and Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word had eliminated official internal class distinctions, such as lay sisters (who did domestic work in the convent) and those in the choir ranks (sisters who carried on teaching and administration tasks). Indeed, the Incarnate Word Sisters never distinguished among ranks. But the efficient running of a hospital relied not only on nurses and administrators but also on cooks and cleaners. Sister Aubin Shea did laundry and housework for seventeen years at Holy Cross Hospital before she had the opportunity to nurse the sick, a position she held for nine more years. That the convent could provide opportunities for entrepreneurship for some sisters is evident when one examines their work histories in more detail (table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Selected Work Histories

Name, Place of Birth, Year of Entry in Congregation	Dates, Places of Service
Madeleine Chollet, CCVI, France, 1867	1869–72: Administrator and Superior, Santa Rosa Infirmary ? Years: In charge of St. Joseph's Orphanage 1892–94: Assistant Superior General of Congregation 1894–1900: Superior General and Administrator, Santa Rosa
Robert O'Dea, CCVI, Ireland, 1896	1903: Organized School of Nursing, Santa Rosa Infirmary, San Antonio Superintendent of Nurses, Santa Rosa 1910–14: Superintendent, St. John's Hospital, San Angelo, TX 1915–18: Superintendent, St. Joseph's Infirmary, Paris, TX 1919–25: Administrator, Santa Rosa 1926–28: Administrator, St. Joseph's Infirmary, Fort Worth 1928–39: Administrator, Santa Rosa
Esperance Finn, CSJ, New York, 1884	20 years: Music Teacher, St. Agatha's Conservatory, St. Paul; and Director of two boarding schools, Hastings and Fulda, MN 1906–18: Administrator, St. Mary's Hospital, Minneapolis
Jane Frances Bouchet, CSJ, France, 1861	1872–74: Mistress of Novices and Asst. Provincial, St. Paul 1874–76: Trustee, Board of Directors, St. Joseph's Academy 1876–79: Superior and Administrator, St. Joseph's, St. Paul 1879–82: Provincial Superior, St. Paul Province 1882–88: Superior, teacher, various schools 1888–90: Administrator, St. John's Hospital, Winona, MN 1890–1906: Administrator, St. Mary's Hospital, Minneapolis 1906–18: Superior, St. Joseph's Convent and School, Marshall, MN 1918–21: Superior, Our Lady of Lourdes, Minneapolis

Table 2.1 continued

Name, Place of Birth, Year of Entry in Congregation	Dates, Places of Service
Augusta Anderson, CSC, Virginia, 1854	1856–61: Teacher and director of various schools 1861–65: Military Service, Civil War, Cairo and Memphis 1865–67: Administrator, Overton Hospital, Memphis 1867–70: Administrator, St. Mary's Infirmary, Cairo 1870–78: General Sect., Saint Mary's; founder St. Mary's Academy and Holy Cross Hospital, Salt Lake City 1878–82: Director of various academies 1882–95: Superior General of Congregation 1895–1903: Superior of academy, Washington, DC
Lydia Clifford, CSC, Ireland, 1859	1862–74: Teacher, clothes keeper, care of orphans 1863–65: Military Service, Civil War, Mound City, IL 1874–86: Director of various academies 1886–90: Administrator, Mt. Carmel Hosp., Columbus, OH 1892–96: Director of various academies 1896–98: Administrator, Our Savior Hospital, Jacksonville, IL 1898: Military Service, Spanish-American War, Chief Nurse, Camp Hamilton, Lexington, KY 1898–1901: Administrator, St. John's Hospital, Anderson, IN

Nuns, however, were not completely unique among women administering organizations and money. Lori Ginzburg notes the ubiquity of upper-class Protestant women administering large finances as well.¹⁷

In addition to social advantages, a convent could offer women political advantages. Some have linked the growth in religious vocations in postfamine Ireland to a rising Irish nationalism. The evangelical age of the nineteenth century saw a polarization and conflict between Catholics and Protestants that cemented each group's separate identity.¹⁸ Furthermore, the Irish had been gradually losing their identity and language for nearly a hundred years before the famine. "Education, business, politics, and communication were all increasingly geared away from Gaelic to English

as the Irish were being effectively Anglicized," Emmet Larkin writes. After the famine, the Catholic Church became a growing influence and authority. An Irish spirituality evolved that emphasized the authority of priests, the Mass and sacraments, a strong Eucharistic piety, and veneration of the Blessed Virgin and the saints. This devotional revolution offered a new cultural heritage with which Irish people could identify.¹⁹ Afterward, the terms *Irish* and *Catholic* became interchangeable. These social, demographic, and religious factors combined to promote the adoption of Roman Catholicism as an essential part of Irish nationality.

Entering a religious order also could be a means of obtaining spiritual power for women. Despite subordination to men in the Catholic Church, nuns could balance the increasing power of the clergy through an alternative source of spiritual equality.²⁰ This brought them increased respect and status within their church and can partly explain the growth of women's religious communities. The belief that some men and women could achieve greater spiritual perfection than others by joining a religious community was a significant factor for them. A priest told the Sisters of the Holy Cross in 1896: "A few men and women are called by God . . . to rise to a higher sphere than that which reason can reach or Faith can indicate. We give them the name of religious persons." He continued, stating the Catholic Church, and the Catholic community from which they came, treated them as "a privileged class entitled to special favors . . . a pearl of inestimable worth and value."²¹ Indeed, differential expectations about salvation were instrumental in recruitment of women for religious congregations.

Sisters' constitutions, prescriptions of religious superiors and founders, sermons, and manuals reflected Catholic teachings and influenced nuns' self-perceptions, their conceptions of nursing, and their worldviews. While these sources may reveal attitudes rather than actual practices, examination reveals a composite picture of what was expected of nuns. They were supposed to model the quintessence of feminine traits: to humble themselves, even to nothingness; and to be silent, submissive, self-sacrificing, serious-minded, reserved, docile, and obedient. A woman professing a religious vocation was to practice the virtues of self-abnegation, charity, modesty, and meekness. Bishops and priests publicly praised women religious but had their own views of the ideal nun. One bishop wrote, "The sister hides her name and work from the rough, loud world. . . . They never preach. . . . They belong to the great empire of silence."²² Sisters' constitutions reflected similar views, exhorting nuns to remain "hidden." It must be acknowledged here, however, that monastic orders of men as well as women were founded on obedience and submission of the

will. Utter obedience to the superior was essential to the development of a religious identity.

The Catholic Church elevated virginity as the holiest path women could take.²³ Through virginity, a woman could achieve fuller union with Christ. Founders of women's active communities in the seventeenth century upheld its ideal, as did nineteenth-century Catholics. In 1897, Father William Stang instructed priests to respect "the *consecrated virgins* of the Church. The priest who looks upon them merely as troublesome women . . . has lost sight of the supernatural in them" (italics in original).²⁴

On the other hand, underlying the virginity ideal was a theology that did not favor women.²⁵ For example, a priest counseled the Sisters of the Holy Cross that man should have dominion over woman. According to his view, woman was the first to sin and therefore should be the first to suffer, and she should expect a frightening punishment.²⁶ Particularly influential were Pauline interpretations of scripture and writings of church leaders such as Augustine, who assumed biological differences between women and men and beliefs in the supremacy of man. Furthermore, historians have argued that sexual morality was more central for women than men. Clerical apprehensions sometimes occurred over women's competing influences in the church, and writings degenerated into obsessive concerns for the nuns' purity. Male contact became a threat to that purity. Thus, constitutions and sermons frequently warned sisters of sexual temptations.²⁷

Nuns did not verbally dispute Catholic theology. However, they defined their womanhood differently and created new identities that challenged prescribed gender roles. The vow of chastity became the chief defining behavior for women religious. Persisting through key growth periods during the Middle Ages, in seventeenth-century France, and in nineteenth-century Ireland and the United States, Catholics viewed chastity as superior to marriage and as the primary source of spiritual power for women.²⁸ In the late nineteenth century, a priest superior told the Sisters of the Holy Cross that sexual abstinence marked persons as being exceptionally close to the Spirit of God. Through chastity, their hearts were "more closely united to [Jesus'] Sacred Heart."²⁹ Indeed, one of the many attractions to a religious life for women was the opportunity to create positive new identities grounded in chastity that transcended the gender system.³⁰

Sisters' celibate lives were the most significant departures from other women's gender roles. This mandated a "separate space" for nuns, and it was in this space that they created and ran their own institutions.³¹ Within this space, sisters' gender roles sometimes overlapped with secular

women and men. Nuns' vows, for example, bound them to exemplify womanly virtues. They tried to imitate Mary's humility, patience, modesty, and self-effacement. They spoke of their lives using female images, seeing themselves as "brides" of Christ. To indicate respect, they referred to each other as "sister" and to their leaders as "mother." Furthermore, their nursing fit in well with the developing role of woman as caretaker in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, to convey the message that they wished to relate to others on a deeper, more spiritual level, nuns consistently underscored their "asexual" identities, not merely by their vow of chastity but also through their religious dress, which concealed their physical bodies. They de-emphasized gender differences by taking on jobs such as hospital administration that men traditionally held. Some sisters took the names of male saints. They referred to the superior of the congregation as "Superior General," invoking the male military title. In these ways, they transcended the usual female stereotypes, and this had the potential of minimizing gender limitations.³²

At the same time, sisters insisted on their own social and sexual legitimacy and derived strength and support from their conceptions of their womanhood. They conflated their gender and religious roles into a single identity. As vowed, celibate women, they belonged to a sacred order and lived both in and beyond the secular world.³³ In the words of one sister, Christ "refreshed their weary souls with a grace and a freedom that the worldly-wise [could] never know."³⁴

While separation from the world defined their religious lives, sisters' vows gave them a public dimension. They were able to work in the community devoid of sexual connotations, and they could care for strangers in ways other women could not. Nuns' vows allowed them to walk through city streets unescorted when respectable women of almost any class could not. Sisters' elided sexuality protected them from scandal, and medical and military authorities showed them special respect. During the Spanish-American War, for example, Sister Liguori McNamara of the Sisters of St. Joseph wrote that two of the majors wanted nuns in every ward. Their "presence is a check to the trained nurses and doctors, as there [is] much of that kind of work going on here, particularly at night." Sisters' presence could "stop any scandal that takes place between the trained nurses and attendants."³⁵ Thus, sisters' gender and religious identities allowed nuns more space in the public domain of the hospital.

To Catholic sisters, then, a religious vocation clearly meant more than a forced submissiveness to an uncomfortable position in church and society. Some nuns on the receiving end of teachings often were self-critical of their failure to gain perfection and the spiritual purity that teachings

and constitutions espoused. For most sisters, however, an internalized notion of themselves as weak or evil was not their dominant conception of themselves. To them, God called most people to live in the world but reserved only a small number of privileged men and women for religious life, and this enhanced their self-images. Thus, Mother St. Pierre Cinquin could say to her sisters, "You have given yourself to the most legitimate, most holy and most glorious course."³⁶ This positive self-identity along with the added respect it brought partly explain why so many women joined religious orders in the nineteenth century. This would prove particularly advantageous as they established and administered hospitals.

FORMATION OF A RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

The Catholic Church was the center for the development of a religious identity and consciousness for nuns. The process of identity formation involved spending one or two years in a novitiate during which sisters had intense initiations into traditions of active service. Novices absorbed community ideals as other nuns educated them into their new identities. They developed a religious identity that focused on an intense piety, charity, obedience, mental toughness, hard work, and fortitude. The bonding process included rigorous discipline, foregoing of physical comfort, and yielding one's individuality to group needs. Women were taught to believe that God called them to a work of service. This empowered superiors to say no to a bishop regarding what works to do, or to a doctor who wanted them to go against their constitutions. A strong religious formation could provide the spiritual, social, and emotional support necessary for women to persevere in tense situations that their work often brought.³⁷

To develop a common purpose and group identity, each order had its own narrative of the foundress, the saintly bishop, and stories of the community's history. For example, the Holy Cross Sisters' experiences in the Civil War gave nursing a prominence in the congregation's identity. In fact, one congregational historian has noted that the Civil War experience became so all pervading for the sisters that, "in the consciousness of the Congregation, it has remained THE great response to emergency need made by the Sisters of the Holy Cross." No other activity has ever involved so many members. Until the congregation divided into provinces in 1931, the sisters from all over the country gathered at Saint Mary's in the summer to sing the Civil War song "Tenting Tonight" before going to their individual places of work.³⁸ Thus, memory of sisters' wartime nursing worked to keep a common mission alive in both old and new members. (See fig. 2.2.)



FIGURE 2.2 Civil War nurse Sister Paula Casey (Holy Cross), in wheelchair, surrounded by, left to right: Sister Servatius (St. Francis); Sister Patricia (St. Joseph); Sister Miriam (Mercy); Ellen Ryan Jolly (national chairperson of the Civil War nuns' monument committee of the Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians); Sister Fidelis (Ursuline); Sister Electa (Charity); and Sister Manica (Providence), July 1922. (Courtesy Sisters of the Holy Cross Archives, Saint Mary's, Notre Dame, IN)

While an action-oriented spirituality guided the sisters in America, European ideas also informed their attitudes and practices. They performed daily, weekly, and monthly spiritual exercises and devoted several days every year to a retreat. Commitment mechanisms also involved self-abnegation and mortification activities. Women carried out rather debasing ritual practices of accusing themselves of faults. These de-individualizing mortification practices, while often humiliating, could be potent commitment mechanisms. They decreased one's sense of a separate ego and required appropriate behavior based on group membership.³⁹

Congregational documents instructed that through the mother superior, God manifested his will. To build a sense of community, superiors wrote annual newsletters to all sisters in each establishment, including not only news items but also exhortations to self-dedication and ways to enhance spiritual development. These letters, along with constitutions, sermons, and manuals, employed the rhetoric of group unification. This

language is one of reaffirmation and reassurance, and it explains to people who they are, why they are important, and what their mission is. In 1879, Father Sorin wrote the Sisters of the Holy Cross that they could look “to a richer inheritance” in the future. If they followed religious prescriptives, they would secure “the real ends of their creation. . . . a throne, a sceptre, and a crown, an endless bliss, an imperishable glory.”⁴⁰ Mother St. Pierre Cinquin conveyed her enthusiasm for religious life to her Incarnate Word Sisters through frequent letters that proclaimed how “grand and noble” a religious vocation was.⁴¹

This sense of *élan* extended to instructions about self-sacrifice and suffering. By the late nineteenth century, a complex Catholic theology of pain and suffering had evolved that asserted that personal pain involved a sharing in Christ’s pain and therefore could be redemptive.⁴² Mother St. Pierre wrote, “Suffering is the predecessor of our Good Master. He blesses only those who suffer,” and sisters were to be joyful in the struggle. Suffering was God’s gift and a way of following Christ, who had suffered and died on the cross. Thus, sisters’ suffering merged with Christ’s own anguish and therefore could be sanctifying. To Mother St. Pierre, suffering could be a great teacher, making the sister “more fit for practical life.”⁴³

As charitable works became the basis for their spirituality, sisters began to elevate hard and servile work into a holy apostolate. Nuns were to see the recipient of their services as Christ himself. It was through envisioning Christ and being reminded that he also had endured sufferings that made the repugnance and drudgery of hospital tasks bearable. The nun’s life also was to imitate Christ and exercise charity as he did, thereby making her work redemptive. Care of the sick thus had a heroic element that teaching and care of orphans lacked; nursing’s unpleasant and often dirty work could act as an ascetic practice.⁴⁴ Internal documents often reaffirmed sisters in this work. The Incarnate Word Sisters’ 1867 *Rule* stressed the need for unity, dedication, and adherence to community rules to sustain the nuns in overcoming the “natural repugnance” that accompanied care for the sick.⁴⁵

Hospital work provided an additional challenge: it involved matters of life and death for both patients and nurses. Two Sisters of the Holy Cross died from illness when they nursed during the Civil War. Nuns who nursed in wartime and epidemics wore a badge of honor, both literally and figuratively. For example, the US Army gave bronze “Comrades to Nurses” medals to Civil War nurses, and Mother de Chantal Keating, a St. Joseph sister-nurse, proudly wore hers throughout her life.⁴⁶

Although change was in the air by the early twentieth century, many of the concerns of the sister-nurses remained firmly rooted in the nine-

teenth century. An analysis of their suffering provides an example. Sisters' writings imply that their suffering reinforced boundaries between them and the outside world. It bestowed a unique strength and authority on them as well as a condition of sanctity. As an aspect of piety, it had more value if only a few people were victims. If all suffered equally, then it would lose its remarkable quality. Thus, nuns did not perceive their nursing commitment as costly but instead as beneficial. At the same time, through suffering, women could discharge their duties to the church as heroically as men. Most important, nuns' suffering could enhance their compassion and present them with opportunities of relieving the suffering of others.

Catholic sisters used their distinct gender and religious identities, formed in the religious congregation, to expand their public activities. As they competed in the hospital marketplace in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they emphasized their gender and religious roles to enhance the attractiveness of their hospitals over others. How they did this will be the focus of the next three chapters.

