

# Where can we find her?



searching for  
women's  
identity  
in the  
new church

edited by  
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## Recovering a History of Partnership: American Sisters in the Nineteenth Century

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**T**he metaphor of partnership has not figured prominently in male views of relationship with women since it supports neither a hierarchical view of authority nor a patriarchal view of family or other structures which view women as subordinate to, dependent on, or even derived from males. Partnership implies mutuality, co-responsibility, reciprocity, and interdependence based on some actual balance of power. If this language is ever to describe the actual relationship of men and women, it needs to find some concrete grounding in social contexts. Where and how does this partnership exist in the church? Do we have any such concrete history of partnership in our experience that has begun to prepare both men and women for the expanded relationship of partnership proposed in this document?

I would like to propose that the experience of women religious in nineteenth century America is one such history of partnership, specifically partnership in the work of the church. By examining the particular nature of this ecclesial form of partnership, the structures which supported it, and its effects on both the women and men who participated, we can discover the historical roots in American Catholicism which are today leading us into a newly fashioned vision appropriate to our current theological self-understanding and our social context.

### The Work of the Sisterhoods

The work of Catholic sisterhoods in the nineteenth century laid the foundations for the establishment, growth, and acceptance of the church in America. Religious orders offered unprecedented opportunities for women to work in the public realm. Deeply motivated by the religious ideals of apostolic congregations, these women were able to unite creative, satisfying, and challenging work outside the home with the quest for union with God and holiness of life. Because religious orders offered a lifestyle which was esteemed, at least by Catholics, members in these orders gave needed and recognized service to church and society in education, health care, and social work. Further, the orders themselves offered their members the professional training needed to perform their work. Working class women, willing to forego marriage and motherhood for the sake of apostolic service, were able to improve their lot within communities of women. Ironically, these women received social support for a work choice that would have provoked sharp criticism unless done under the aegis of religious life. When women founded schools, hospitals, and other charitable institutions as sisters, they were able to do with relative ease and social acceptance what other single women could only do with great difficulty.

Some facts: Sisters were the first in this country to provide training and education for the deaf. Long before Prudence Crandall tried to open a school for blacks in Connecticut, sisters were making similar efforts in places like Baltimore, Louisville, and Charleston. Two communities of black sisters (Baltimore's Oblates of Providence and New Orleans' Sisters of the Holy Family) existed in the slave states before 1845. Nuns operated the only hospitals, orphanages, and schools in some locales. They often provided these services to all regardless of faith. Sisters' work in settlement houses preceded Jane Addams and others by several decades.<sup>1</sup> Becoming pioneers themselves, sisters made prominent contributions in the westward movement.<sup>2</sup>

Sisters were the most sizable group of nurses during all the wars fought by the United States prior to World War I. During the

Civil War, sisters frequently turned their convents into military hospitals. The work of sister-nurses during wartime and various cholera and yellow fever epidemics often won acceptance and tolerance for Catholics from a society largely hostile to Catholicism.<sup>3</sup>

Sisters helped ameliorate anti-Catholic bigotry in nineteenth century America because they were numerically significant and inclusive in their service. Primary sources from non-Catholics portray these women as effective, competent professionals who responded compassionately to human needs of Protestants and Catholics alike. Numerically, sisters grew from under forty to more than forty thousand during the nineteenth century. "They outnumbered male church workers in the last half of the century in almost every diocese for which we have records, and there were almost four times as many nuns as priests by the century's close. By 1900, there were 3,811 parochial schools and 663 girls' academies."<sup>4</sup>

Mary Ewens asserts that given the nineteenth century challenge facing Catholicism "of preserving and fostering its faith among millions of immigrant members and of establishing her credibility in an alien and often hostile society . . . it might well be shown that sisters' efforts were far more effective than those of bishops and priests in the church's attempts to meet these challenges."<sup>5</sup> According to Ewens, it is precisely because sisters were engaged with the people in education, nursing, or social work rather than in sacramental ministry that they were so influential and successful. They related to Catholics and non-Catholics alike, quietly won people over by their competence and compassion, provided valuable services, persevered in the face of attack and threat, and prepared people for the sacraments.

The remarkable accomplishments of these women have been largely ignored in histories of American Catholicism. Until recently these studies were governed by a clerical consciousness which equated the history of the church with the history of bishops, important clergy, or institutions. This bias rendered women religious invisible, nameless, and voiceless within a church to which thousands of dedicated women actively contributed their energies, vision, and financial resources. This strange amnesia on

the part of the American church is a result of the structural factors which governed the partnership between sisters and clerics almost up to the present time.

### Nineteenth Century Partnerships

The prevailing nineteenth century theology of religious life imbued Catholic sisters with a sense of apostolic mission rooted in the example of Christ. They knew themselves to be the presence of Christ to the poor, the suffering, and the uneducated. They expected to endure suffering and hardship for the sake of this mission. They viewed their work almost solely in relationship to the needs of Catholics to practice their faith and to better their lot in a harsh and unfriendly climate. The primary focus was the salvation of souls within the practice of Catholic faith and life. These women identified themselves with an ecclesial mission although in practice they rarely excluded non-Catholics from their ministrations.

Because a sister lived and worked within her sisterhood, the first partnerships formed were with other women. Women bonded together less for the sake of a shared affective life (although this occurred in friendships) than for the sake of the work of the order. Within sisterhoods women worked together side by side in a shared mission.<sup>6</sup>

Sisters also formed a women's network that included the capacity of more established groups to support the beginning foundations of newcomers. Thus, houses of one order supported other houses of their own group as well as offered *ad hoc* assistance to members of other orders. For example, Cornelia Connelly made her novitiate with the Religious of the Sacred Heart.<sup>7</sup> The Sisters of Providence founding group headed by Mother Theodore Guerin were received by the Sisters of Charity in Philadelphia and Vincennes. Mother Theodore's journals attest to the story-telling and mutual encouragement among these leaders which resulted from such meetings.<sup>8</sup> Sisters of one order gladly relinquished an institution or work to another order when it was incompatible with their primary charism or more properly fit another group. For instance, the Daughters of Charity who were "more especially

devoted to serving the sick and caring for the orphan and foundling" had been compelled to open the first parochial school in Boston in 1847. They withdrew two years later when the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur sent sisters for that work.<sup>9</sup> Hence sisters tended to mutually support one another's endeavors and work things out for mutual benefit although the relationship was formal and periodic.

Catholic sisterhoods also developed partnerships which included men as well as women. Because their work required building institutions and working with the civic community, these women became skilled at institutional collaboration. They negotiated their own business contracts, developed the grass roots support they needed to finance their work, and developed contracts with non-church entities when needed. For instance, San Francisco Sisters of Mercy actually ran the county hospital for the city until the city failed to meet its financial obligations.<sup>10</sup> Within orders of sisters, some women became highly skilled at these broader forms of partnerships with the business, medical, or philanthropic communities which supported their work. It was not so very large a step to expand on this experience into fully collaborative projects and partnerships with laity in the post-Vatican era.

### Parallel Systems

The partnership relationship with bishops was somewhat different. Because of the congregational ownership and sponsorship of the sisters' works, sisters had one role and realm of activity while clerics had another—the explicit ministry of sacramental life, preaching, and ecclesiastical administration. These two groups needed each other. The sisters were the primary source of pastoral workers available to the clergy. The sisters needed ecclesiastical approval and cooperation in order to work in a given location. However, these spheres of activity tended to remain distinct. Parallel institutions developed side-by-side to serve the needs of the growing American church.

The primary allegiance of sisters was to the church through their sisterhood. It was within this group that women were educated, mentored, missioned, and cared for in old age. The author-



ity to assign sisters to ministries lay with women superiors. Within this group bonds of affection and friendship developed within the context of the shared work. Women religious risked their own resources in opening new institutions. Frequently, they were expected to raise the capital required to build their schools and charitable institutions, meet their debt payments, and cover ongoing expenses.

On the one hand, a bishop was thus often indebted to an order for the service rendered to his diocese by a flourishing institution for which he held no financial liability but over which he exercised jurisdiction. On the other hand, the women needed a workable relationship with the ordinary. They had to agree with the bishop on the project, secure approval to raise the money locally, and have some assurance they would not have to abandon a work into which they had poured time, labor, and capital.<sup>11</sup> Out of this situation developed what can be called partnership, sometimes splendid and productive, at other times uneasy and even hostile. How this partnership was perceived and experienced depends on the point of view of the sources. Some men feared and resented the independence of women's orders. Other men actively sought sisters for their pastoral projects, especially for the schools. Women experienced both the power to negotiate and their dependence on the male system.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most successful forms of male-female partnerships occurred between a cleric and a foundress. Often the cleric befriended the foundress, welcomed her initiatives, supplied canonical advice, and helped the group secure ecclesiastical approval for its rule. Sometimes the cleric functioned as co-founder. In most instances there was a remarkable mutuality in this partnership which included mutual respect for competence and leadership. Each person functioned within separate realms. The foundress exercised her authority freely in relationship to the community. The cleric used his influence in clerical circles to support the foundress personally and the foundation generally. Rarely did this type of mutual collaboration for the sake of a common project extend beyond the two leaders.

Once a community was initiated, the next issue was the determination of episcopal or pontifical status. During the nineteenth century, women clearly preferred pontifical status. Sources show

that foundresses helped one another successfully conduct these negotiations. Mother Cabrini was legendary for securing the needed "Roman connections" for American women.<sup>13</sup> Achieving pontifical status often resulted in freeing a sisterhood from either excessive dependence on a local bishop or the need to submit to tyrannical demands. They were protected from internal interference in congregational matters and from external constraints. Constitutional specifications delineated the works and nature of the group which a local bishop could not contradict. Traditionally, bishops preferred to exercise local jurisdiction over a congregation, giving them much more control over a group of sisters.

The annals of most congregations as well as papers left by bishops attest to the uneasiness at times in this partnership. If women were protected by pontifical status, they were free to have houses in more than one diocese. Personnel decisions were often made from a central motherhouse sometimes located outside a diocese. Records portray lengthy and often difficult negotiations with individual bishops over the nature of works to be undertaken and the specifics of particular projects. Many superiors were discovered to be formidable negotiators by the clerics who attempted to manipulate them.<sup>14</sup> Successful negotiations, however, with the local ordinary or pastor were desirable from the point of view of the women. It was often emotionally painful as well as financially disadvantageous to prematurely withdraw from a project. Nonetheless, when necessary, the women voted with their feet, and the men knew them to be capable of holding out for what they deemed important.

Partnerships between sisterhoods and clergy were frequently successful. Negotiations initiated a project. Once begun, the sisters carried out the work without much further engagement until school systems began to be centralized in the early twentieth century. Although in the case of parish schools a pastor might be the nominal principal, the sister-in-charge often functioned as the principal to whom the others related.

There are within the oral and written traditions of most congregations' stories of women who were extremely successful at amicably conducting the needed negotiations for initiating and sustaining a given apostolic work. Once concluded, the form of partnership shifted back into the women's world in which women

collaborated with one another within the shelter of a women's institution.

Very few Catholic sisters in the nineteenth century questioned this separation between male and female institutions. Sisters had a distinct role to fill in church and society which was meaningful and often exciting. They approached it as an extension of the natural sphere of women to new functions outside the home. Thus, they often failed to reflect on how novel their lives as women actually were.

Gradually, the work women religious did came to be viewed as women's work although they were often the first women to do it. Because they created a separate system within the church but outside the clerical ranks, they became the first women to be CEOs administering their own congregations as well as their hospitals and schools. They were among the first woman presidents of the colleges which they founded to assure professional training of their sisters as well as to meet the educational needs of lay women. They frequently attended secular institutions for internships and advanced education when they were excluded from all-male Catholic institutions.<sup>15</sup>

The remarkable achievements of these women as active agents in both the mission of the church and the advancement of women has tended to be overlooked by contemporary feminists until only recently. Sisters failed to critique the male domination in the church in which they labored largely because they also found scope and opportunity for their gifts.<sup>16</sup> From their perspective, opportunity may have outweighed domination. If skillful alliances with key clergy were made, there was abundant opportunity in the rapidly expanding American church.

The effect of what might be called "institutional partnerships" on women in orders was generally experienced as liberating rather than oppressive. During the nineteenth century the economic role of women in society was gradually shifting from that of a producer to that of a consumer. Reliance on home-produced goods was shifting to reliance on goods produced outside the home. Women were being stripped of part of their work life in the home and excluded from work outside the home. This shift dra-

matically limited opportunity for women and gave rise to an ideology of an exalted domesticity and motherhood for women which lasted up until World War I.<sup>17</sup>

Since all women identified themselves with the ideology of domesticity, sisters, too, viewed their work as an expression of spiritual maternity rather than as an alternative to a maternal role. As a result they engaged in often novel and pioneering work without feeling they were in any way unfeminine. Added to this culturally constructed sense of self,<sup>18</sup> sisters also had the heroic models of female saints to support their self-image. If the work was for the sake of Christ, no suffering was too much to bear, no price too much to pay. Thus sisters were supported by the theology of religious life, the tradition of female saints, and the assimilation of the prevailing role of women to the sphere of their activities.

Within the sisterhoods, these women developed partnerships and friendships with one another. They enjoyed the challenge of participating in the growth and expansion of Catholicism in the novel situations of rapidly growing urban centers, the relentless westward movement, the California gold rush, and emergencies created by war and epidemics.

Life in a female institution provided a social milieu in which some effects of women's subordinated position were mitigated while offering enhanced professional opportunities. Sisters did not experience themselves ultimately dependent on any particular male for basic necessities, they were spared the physical burden and dangers of successive pregnancies and births, and they were freed of the responsibility of child-raising. Psychologically, these women experienced the capacity to initiate, create, and act without having to overcome personal pressure from the males in their environment except when their social reality intersected with the more powerful male system. Although they may have adopted the language of spiritual marriage to Christ and of spiritual maternity, they nonetheless had an experience which supported their agency and contribution to church and society within the partnerships they developed with one another, with sympathetic clergy, and with civic officials. All of this is an important part of the history of women as co-workers with men in the church.

### Contemporary Self-Understanding of Women

Just as nineteenth century American sisters were affected by the prevailing cultural notions of women's self-understanding and social roles, so, too, women religious along with their married and single sisters are affected by the contemporary women's movement. Secular feminism has unmasked "sexism" as a pervasive and limiting social evil which negatively affects women. As a result, a profound shift in the understanding of female personhood and of women's role in church and society is underway. Catholic sisters do critique the male-domination they experience in the church today and at times find greater acceptance of their contributions and gifts outside the ecclesial structures governed by male clerics.

If women are to be partners in personhood, relationship, church, and society, the structures and attitudes which arbitrarily limit the agency and self-understanding of women must be altered. The church will, indeed, need to be engaged in an ongoing process of conversion. Partnership implies mutuality, not identical gifts, but reciprocity. Genuine reciprocity which ends in friendship, that form of relationship which is not gender specific, requires an equivalency of status and power of men and women in church as well as society.<sup>19</sup>

In order to build on a long history of developed but limited partnerships, the reality of collegialship, partnership, and friendship must take place within a *koinonia* of persons no longer given a relative equivalency of power through an institutional system which separated genders into separate systems of life, power, and activity.

Already, the post-Vatican era finds men and women functioning in a changed pattern of social organization. Men and women, women and women, lay and religious, clerics and laity are now working side by side on common projects. No longer are the spheres of activity carefully segregated. As the Whiteheads so carefully argue, "In Catholic ministry today . . . gender differences are also status differences. This means discussion of man-woman partnership in ministry is always and necessarily a discussion of power."<sup>20</sup> As they further point out, the rhetoric of partnership has yet to be embodied in the structures necessary to support it.

For collaborative ministry, there must be an active awareness that initiative and influence are shared. And the awareness must be expressed in the roles and rules that shape the community of faith. The full participation of women in ministry cannot be allowed to depend simply on the ethical sensitivity of the men who are in charge. Partnership—the give and take of reciprocal influence and shared control—must be safeguarded by procedures that go beyond the good will of particular pastors. There must be a transformation of structures.

They go on to describe structures of partnership as: "Processes that expand dialogue, extend decision-making, and enlarge mutual accountability."<sup>21</sup> They assert that so far the American church has been more successful at sharing pastoral responsibility than in sharing organizational power. A fully realized partnership among women and men in the church cannot be achieved without a structural redistribution of power.

In addition to an analysis of the distribution of power which reveals the need for structural changes capable of implementing the new vision, it is important to connect this call for change with neglected themes in the New Testament witness. The most fundamental relationship among members in the Christian community is that of a common discipleship rooted in our experience of the indwelling Spirit of Jesus in each of us—women as well as men. This shared life of grace inaugurates *koinonia*—a changed form of relating which replaces relationships of domination with those of mutuality, equality, and friendship. This shift is dramatically exemplified in the footwashing pericope of John's gospel. If the language of partnership is to have any factual as well as rhetorical meaning, those who implement ecclesial documents might well look toward identifying the structural as well as attitudinal changes that need to be made in order to realize, expand, and develop the partnership of men and women in church and society.

In the nineteenth century, Catholic sisterhoods contributed energy, resources, and vision to the fledgling American church within the limited form of partnership available to them. Might Catholic sisters today hope for the changes needed in order for them to continue to effect the still unfinished agenda of the Sec-

ond Vatican Council in the context of a uniquely American Catholicism?

#### NOTES

1. Margaret Susan Thompson, "Discovering Foremothers: Sisters, Society, and the American Catholic Experience," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 5 (1986) 285.

2. Mary Ewens includes journal entries from Providence sister Mother Theodore Guerin's experience in Indiana as well as a Cincinnati Charity's experience on the Santa Fe Trail. See documents in "Leadership of Nuns in Immigrant Catholicism," in Rosemary R. Ruether and Rosemary Skinner, eds., *Women and Religion in America: The Nineteenth Century* (San Francisco: Harper, 1981) 101-149. Sister M. Aurelia (Rose) McArdle's *California's Pioneer Sister of Mercy: Mother M. Baptist Russell, 1829-1898* is a lively account of Mother Russell's experiences in and contributions to Gold Rush San Francisco (Fresno: Academy Library Guild, 1954).

3. According to Ewens, there were eighty-four official Catholic chaplains compared to six hundred and forty sister nurses in the Civil War. In the Spanish American War there were two hundred and eighty-two sister-nurses to thirteen Catholic chaplains. *Ibid.* 102.

4. *Ibid.* 101.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Janice G. Raymond develops this theme of women's work partnerships in religious life in *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (Boston: Beacon, 1986) 71ff.

7. Caritas McCarthy, *The Spirituality of Cornelia Connelly*, Studies of Women in Religion, No. 19 (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 1986) 62-64.

8. Ewens, 118.

9. Mary J. Oates, "The Good Sisters": The Work and Position of Catholic Churchwomen in Boston, 1870-1940," in Robert Sullivan and James O'Toole, eds., *Catholic Boston: Studies in Religion and Community, 1810-1970* (Boston, 1985) 180-181.

10. Sister M. Athanasius Sheridan, *And Some Fell on Good Ground: A History of the Sisters of Mercy of California and Arizona* (New York: Carlton Press, 1982) 74-77.

11. Gerald P. Fogarty discusses the way bishops viewed religious orders in their jurisdictions and how they worked to gain financial control over institutions funded by the diocesan faithful: "The Bishops ver-

sus Religious Orders: The Suppressed Decrees of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore," *The Jurist* 33 (1973) 384-398.

12. Edward Kantowicz, *Corporation Sole* (Notre Dame Press, 1983) 260-263. Kantowicz describes how Mundelein had to adjust his demands and policies in the face of the sisters' power to negotiate when he tried to reorganize the school system in Chicago.

13. Thompson, 288. Thompson makes the point that despite the real subordination of women in the church, sisters "exercised greater control over their lives than any other sizeable group of female contemporaries in this country."

14. Kantowicz describes how the impatient and authoritarian Mundelein was outmaneuvered by Dominican superior Mother Samuel. Mary Ewens documents Mother Theodore Guerin's struggle with Bishop de la Hailandiere of Vincennes who seriously and repeatedly interfered in the internal affairs of the Sisters of Providence by "reassigning sisters to different convents, closing and opening missions without consulting them, intercepting their mail, refusing them the sacraments, and forcing them to accept candidates they regarded as unsuitable" (128). Mother Guerin finally threatened to move all the sisters to Detroit in order to restore internal autonomy.

15. See Kantowicz, 94 for the exclusion of sisters from Catholic University of America. Thompson attributes the anomaly of sisters going "outside" the church for professional education to inconsistent church policies. "Thus, sisters were compelled to open their own colleges and to send prospective professors for graduate degrees (generally to state universities, until Catholic ones reluctantly opened their doors to women) in order to secure the necessary credentials" (284).

16. A notable exception was the foundress of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, Margaret Ann Cusack (Sister Francis Clare), who actually used the word "feminist" in her writings. Thompson, 282.

17. Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of American Culture* perceptively analyzes "Feminine Disestablishment" and its consequences for nineteenth century American women (New York: Avon Books, 1977) 50ff. Joseph G. Mannard defines "domesticity" and analyzes its religious life version in "Maternity . . . of the Spirit: Nuns and Domesticity in Antebellum America," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 5 (1986) 305-324. "Domesticity emphasized the central role of the nuclear family in transmitting cultural values and maintaining social order, and especially stressed the significant contribution of woman as the chief agent in this process. Woman as wife and mother represented a beacon of stability, a preserver of tradition, in a society undergoing unprecedented industrial development, urban growth, and geographical expansion. While a man was to be



preoccupied with the public sphere of business and politics, a woman's responsibilities lay fundamentally within the family circle where her main duties included instructing her children in religion, morality, and patriotism. Limiting in theory, domesticity could prove flexible in practice" (307).

18. Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach describe the psychological process of female development. For them and many other feminists, it is now recognized that femininity is itself a "construction" and not biologically innate in women. "The Construction of Femininity," in Joann Wolski Conn, ed., *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1986) 128-149.

19. Jane Redmont makes this point in her response to the pastoral. "Sexism, Sin, & Grace: Responses to the Bishops' Letter," *Commonweal* (June 17, 1988) 362.

20. Evelyn and James Whitehead, "Women and Men: Partners in Ministry," *Chicago Studies* 27 (August 1988) 170.

21. *Ibid.*

#### RECOMMENDED READING

Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon, 1977).

Douglas' work accounts not only for the restriction of women's "influence" to the private sphere in nineteenth century America but also for a similar restriction of religion in general. It provides an excellent analysis for the relationship between sentimentality and violence in American culture.

Ewens, Mary. *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth Century America* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1978).

This first major book-length work affected by feminist interests details the adaptation of Catholic sisters to the United States.

Raymond, Janice G. *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (Boston: Beacon, 1986).

Raymond utilizes her experience in religious life and the history of spiritual friendship as one of her case studies in this groundbreaking working on the primacy of women's bonds with one another which are deeper than mere emotional support.

Ruether, Rosemary R. and Rosemary Skinner, eds. *Women and Religion in America: The Nineteenth Century* (San Francisco: Harper, 1981).

The editors of this volume provide the reader with brief, readable essays on women's contributions and roles in a variety of American religious movements. Each essay is accompanied by photographs as well as by a careful selection of primary sources.

Thompson, Margaret Susan. *The Yoke of Grace: American Nuns and Social Change, 1808-1917* (New York: Oxford, forthcoming).

Thompson specifically developed a cross-community study of the role of American nuns with one another and within American society as well as in the church. She tells the story of strong, courageous and often controversial women who had to overcome enormous obstacles. She finds greater continuity than discontinuity between contemporary American religious life and the nineteenth century origins of most U.S. Catholic sisterhoods.