

Catholic Sister-Nurses in the U.S. Civil War

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In 1924, the Monument to the Catholic Sisters who nursed during the Civil War was dedicated in Washington, D.C. A bronze bas relief titled “Nuns of the Battlefield” depicts the Sisters in the distinctive habits of their twelve religious Orders below the inscription “THEY COMFORTED THE DYING - NURSED THE WOUNDED-CARRIED HOPE TO THE IMPRISONED - GAVE IN HIS NAME A DRINK OF WATER TO THE THIRSTY.” All told, during the Civil War, over 600 Catholic Sisters representing 12 religious orders and 21 religious communities nursed the sick and wounded on both sides of the bloody conflict.¹ They are a significant portion of the twenty thousand women relief workers who labored for millions of hours for the sick and wounded, both Blue and Grey.²

The Catholic popular imagination and scholarly press tends to remember the Sisters’ wartime service as a heroic work which presented the charitable and patriotic face of the Church amid virulent anti-Catholic and anti-Irish prejudice in America, since the majority of these Sisters were Irish Catholics.³ American popular memory and Civil War scholarship manifest a

¹ Ellen Ryan Jolly, *Nuns of the Battlefield* (Providence, RI: Providence Visitor Press, 1927), vii. Jolly records the Orders and Communities of Sisters who served as follows: Sisters of Charity (Nazareth, Ky., New York City, Cincinnati, OH), Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul (Emmitsburg, MD), Sisters of St. Dominic (Springfield, KY, Memphis, TN), Sisters of the Poor of Saint Francis (Cincinnati), Sisters of the Holy Cross (Notre Dame, IN), Sisters of Saint Joseph (Philadelphia, PA, Wheeling, WV), Sisters of Mercy (Pittsburgh, PA, New York, NY, Chicago, IL; Baltimore, MD; Vicksburg, MS; Cincinnati, OH), Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy (Charleston, SC), Sisters of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (New Orleans, LA), Sisters of Providence [St. Mary-of-the-Woods, IN], and Sisters of Saint Ursula (Galveston, TX)

² Jane E. Schultz, *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2, 3.

³ Jolly lists the names and nationalities of the Sisters in each of the religious communities in *Nuns of the Battlefield*, including 320 Irish-born Sisters. Because this number does not include American-born Sisters of Irish parents or grandparents, the number of ethnically Irish Sisters is likely even higher than this number suggests. For the Catholic reaction, see Pat McNamara, “Catholic Sisters and the American Civil War,” Patheos (blog), May 30, 2011 <http://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/05/catholic-sisters-and-the-american-civil-war-pat-mcnamara-05-31-2011>. For the impact of the Sisters’ Civil War nursing on Irish Catholic memory and identity, see Randall Miller, “Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War,” in Randall Miller, Harry Stout, and Charles Wilson Reagan, eds., *Religion and the American Civil War* (Oxford UP, 1998). For the legacy of Catholic Sisters in U.S. health care with emphasis on their Irish ethnicity, see Mary Pat Kelly, “Hospital Nuns: From the Civil War to Today,” *Irish America*, August/September 2013, <https://irishamerica.com/2013/08/hospital-nuns-from-the-civil-war-to-today/>.

less vivid memory of the Sisters' involvement in nursing. Ken Burns' documentary highlights women in nursing, particularly Dorothea Dix, but the only mention of Catholic nuns is to point out that Dix occasionally refused to accept their services because they did not always meet her famous proscription that no woman under thirty and only plain women might serve in government hospitals, although they surely met Dix's last requirement: "Their dresses must be brown or black with no bows, no curls, no jewelry, and no hoop skirts."⁴ Similarly, Nina Silber devotes a chapter in her book-length study of the involvement of Northern women in the Union cause to the women who served as nurses but nods to the nursing Sisters' experience only through third-hand testimony, namely Mary Livermore's recollection that doctors preferred the Sisters to Protestant lay women because they eschewed politics and were more submissive to male authority.⁵ There are notable exceptions, however. Judith E. Harper's 2004 *Women During the Civil War: An Encyclopedia* has a substantial entry on "Catholic Nuns."⁶ Scholars of Catholic history, Civil War history, and of the history of religious life would do well to be in more frequent conversation on this topic.

This paper will examine the three book-length studies on the Catholic nursing Sisters: George Barton's *Angels of the Battlefield* (1898), Ellen Ryan Jolly's *Nuns of the Battlefield* (1927), and Sister Mary Denis Maher's *To Bind Up the Wounds: Catholic Sister Nurses in the*

⁴ In Sister Mary Denis Maher, *To Bind up the Wounds: Catholic Sister Nurses in the U.S. Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 53.

⁵ "Soon after the Battle of Shiloh, [Livermore] found everywhere...the greatest prejudice against Protestant women nurses,' as 'medical directors, surgeons, and even wardmasters' urged 'that only the "Sisters" of the Catholic Church' receive appointments. When she asked why this was so, Livermore was told that the nuns were properly subordinate: they 'never see anything they ought not to see, nor hear anything they ought not to hear, and they never write for the papers.' Catholic nuns, so many doctors believed, showed a greater willingness than Protestant women to accept male authority" (Nina Silber, *Daughters of the Union: Women Fight the Civil War* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005], 212-13).

⁶ Judith E. Harper, "Catholic Nuns" in *Women During the Civil War: An Encyclopedia* New York: Routledge, 2004.

U.S. Civil War (1989; reprinted 1999). Four main themes emerge from the first three works: (1) the commitment of the Sisters to nursing was religious, not political; (2) the Sisters were the preferred group of women to serve as nurses; (3) the Sisters served Union and Confederate wounded with equal dedication; (4) the Sisters encountered anti-Catholic prejudice and largely dispelled it by their skills, sacrifices, kindness, and forbearance. These works will be examined in the context of Civil War nursing as a whole, as analyzed by Jane E. Schultz in *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America*. For Schultz, the significance of women's hospital relief work lay in the fact that it impacted women's social and political status more than any other form of wartime labor. She is also looking to document the under-studied involvement of working-class women and African Americans in Civil War nursing. Barton and Jolly belong to an initial strain of scholarship that aims to fill the previous void in Civil historiography from which the Sisters were missing with praise of the Sisters. Maher sets the contributions of Sisters in the wider context of women's religious life in the United States and women in nursing during the Civil War, and Schultz reads the Sisters' service within the larger narrative of women's growing public involvement in the public sector during the conflict, including a discussion of the impact on the Sisters' nursing on the development of the nursing profession and hospital system in America after the war.

George Barton, *Angels of the Battlefield* (1898)

Written in 1898 while veteran nurses of the conflict were still living, *Angels of the Battlefield* celebrates the contributions of Catholic Sisters as nurses during the Civil War.⁷ Mary

⁷ George Barton, *Angels of the Battlefield: A History of the Labors of the Catholic Sisterhoods in the Late Civil War*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Catholic Art Publishing Company, 1898).

A. Garner Holland devoted a long chapter to Catholic Sisters in her 1897 second edition of the collection of women's remembrances of Civil War nursing of the long but self-explanatory title *Our Army Nurses: Interesting Sketches, Addresses, and Photographs of nearly One Hundred of the Noble Women who Served in Hospitals and on the Battlefields during our Civil War*. In contrast to the short sketches in Holland's work, Barton explained that "the object of this volume is to present in as consecutive and comprehensive form as possible the history of the Catholic Sisterhoods in the late Civil War."⁸ He interpreted everything the Sisters undertook in the key of charity: "They 'enlisted in the war' from motives of the highest patriotism--love of humanity and love of God. They had no purpose to accomplish, no axes to grind, no reward to receive, no pay to earn!...All that they did was from a pure and elevated sense of duty."⁹ Furthermore, the collection of the "necessary data for this work" was "very difficult," he explained, due to the relative scarcity of written documentation of the Sister-nurses' war experiences and their underrepresentation in histories of the war, including histories of women in the war. "Most of the stories embodied in the pages that follow have been gathered by personal interviews, through examinations of various archives and records, and by an extensive correspondence with Government officials, veterans of the war and the superiors of convents and communities."¹⁰ In addition, Barton scoured religious and secular newspapers and correspondence with the War Department for mentions of Sisters. He attributes the scarcity of records and published materials of the Sisters' service to their high motives and humility, and concludes with great warmth: "If

⁸ Barton, *Angels of the Battlefield*, iii

⁹ Barton, *Angels of the Battlefield*, 322.

¹⁰ Barton, *Angels of the Battlefield*, iii.

the perusal of these pages furnishes the reader one-tenth of the pleasure involved in their making, the writer will be well repaid for his labor.”¹¹

The different chapters of the book are devoted to an overview of the Orders that participated in nursing, the role of Sisters in particular battles, sketches of particular Sisters, particular communities, particular hospitals, labors in particular cities, correspondence between ecclesial and government leaders regarding the Sisters, and non-Catholic reactions to the Sisters. Barton devotes significant attention to anecdotes that relate how the Sisters transformed non-Catholics’ previously negative perceptions of Catholics and religious Sisters into admiration, such as:

“Sister, is it true that you belong to the Catholic Church?”

“Yes, sir, it's true. And that's the source of the greatest happiness I have in this life.?”

“Well, I declare. I'd never have suspected it. I've heard so many things . . . I thought Catholics were the worst people on earth.”

“I hope you don't think so now.”

“Well, Sister . . . I'll tell you. If you say you're a Catholic, I'll certainly have a better opinion of Catholics from now on.”

It remains difficult to extract from such anecdotes the degree to which the Sisters’ service mollified the prevailing anti-Catholic sentiment in America or attracted non-Catholics to the Catholic faith, but it is certain that in many concrete cases, the Sisters were the soldiers’ first and only contact with Catholics, much less Religious, and they were profoundly moved by their goodness. To determine the overall effect of the nursing Sisters’ service on American attitudes overall would require a much broader study of changes in American religious thought than would be possible in a work devoted solely to the Sisters’ wartime service.

Barton gives sustained attention to the work of whole communities and of particular nursing Sisters. Of the latter, he writes of Sister Anthony O’Connell (of the Sisters of Charity)

¹¹ Barton, *Angels of the Battlefield*, 322-3 Barton 323.

that “Sister Anthony and her colleagues frequently picked their way through the files of the dead and wounded, and on many occasions assisted in carrying the sufferers to the boats...[the] floating hospitals.”¹² Before the war, the Irish-born Sister was hospital manager at St. John’s hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio; previously she had established an orphans’ asylum. She relinquished both institutions and offered her services and those of her community in response to Governor David Tod’s call for volunteer nurses. Sister Anthony served mainly in the South and cared for Union and Confederate soldiers alike, assisting in surgery, administering “cordial,” dressing wounds, bringing food and drink to the sick and wounded, helping family members find their wounded sons and brothers, whispering words of comfort and religious consolation into the ears of the dying. Sister Anthony relates the appalling nature of daily conditions: “Day often dawned on us only to renew the work of the preceding day, without a moment’s rest. Often the decks of the vessels resembled a slaughter house, filled as they were with the dead and dying.”¹³ In one episode, the Sisters were ordered to leave the hospital boat, as the river upon which it was travelling was under heavy fire. The Sisters preferred to “remain with the ‘wounded boys’ until the end and to share their fate, whatever it might be. Such heroism melted the hearts of hardened men.” The Sisters knelt in prayer and the boat arrived safely to its destination, steered by “two brave pilots.”¹⁴ This episode reveals not only the steely resolve undergirding these Sisters’ compassion, as well as their great courage, but also their dependence upon God’s providence and the recognition that this providence can take a very human form, in this case the form of two competent and brave pilots.

¹² Barton, *Angels of the Battlefield*, 76

¹³ Barton, *Angels of the Battlefield*, 74.

¹⁴ Barton, *Angels of the Battlefield*, 75-76.

Barton succeeds in painting a heroic portrait of the wartime services of the Sisters, of the veneration accorded them by their patients, and the respect they earned of medical and military officials, from army surgeons to generals to Abraham Lincoln. Not famously realistic about the realities of manpower, General McClellan may nevertheless have been on to something when he remarked to the Sisters at one Union hospital that they needed fifty more of their number to keep up with the needs of the wounded. Grant said to Mother Angela of the Sisters of the Holy Cross: “I am glad to have you with us, very glad. If there is anything at all I can do for you I will be glad to do it. I thoroughly appreciate the value of your services, and I will give orders to see that you do not want for anything.”¹⁵

Barton is single-minded in his purpose to extol the nursing Sisters, and his account does not include incidents that would cast the Sisters in an unfavorable light. The Sisters appear superhuman in their serenity, patience, humility, and devotion to duty; indeed they are not just heroic women but “*angels of the battlefield.*” While it is understandable that he would focus on the most renowned and heroic incidents in the work of the Sisters, he does leave the reader wondering if there is not much more to the story. Is it credible that any group of people could have thought or acted from the highest motives for four long, bloody, brutal years under the physical, mental, and emotional duress of the conflict? Barton’s treatment of the Sisters borders on apotheosis: there are no references to sharp words from the Sisters, no giving-in to temptations to self-indulgence, self-pity, or doubts, no smirks at being preferred to lay Protestant women as nurses, no thoughts whatsoever about political questions, no complaining about poor accommodations, and no infidelity to duty. As Sister Mary de Sales Brennan wrote at the time, “I

¹⁵ Barton, *Angels of the Battlefield*, 271.

have been trying very hard to be powerful ‘nice.’”¹⁶ One does not get the impression from Barton that the Sisters had to try very hard to be “powerful ‘nice,’” but it is surely not less heroic to emerge with scars from the battle than not to have one’s humanity tested “very hard.”

Jolly, Ellen Ryan. *Nuns of the Battlefield*. Providence: Providence Visitor Press, 1927.

As she relates in her Author’s Note to this work, Ellen Ryan Jolly grew up under the wing of teaching Sisters, and the heroic stories told of veteran Sister-nurses of the Civil War fascinated and imbued her with reverence for the “nearly forgotten heroism of the brave and saintly women, the ‘Nuns of the Battlefield.’”¹⁷ Starting in 1914, she led the effort of the Ladies’ Auxiliary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians to commission a monument honoring the Catholic Sister-Nurses of the Civil War. Told that the War Department would need proof of the services rendered by the Sisters, Jolly gathered the required data and submitted them to the War Department. The following year, Congress approved the monument, which was completed in 1924. *Nuns of the Battlefield*, published three years after the monument’s dedication, compiles in narrative form that data recording the Sisters’ wartime nursing services. She includes the names and countries of origin of each of the Sisters as having worked as a nurse, although how all of the names were compiled for the Confederacy and Union is not explained.

Each chapter narrates the involvement of one of the different religious Communities who served as nurses during the conflict. Jolly tends to ramble in the flowery style of a good Irish yarn, and she fairly gushes with admiration for the Sisters’ humble heroism, ending many a

¹⁶ In E. Moore Quinn, 2010, “‘I Have Been Trying Very Hard to Be Powerful “Nice” ...’: The Correspondence of Sister M. De Sales (Brennan) during the American Civil War,” *Irish Studies Review* 18 (2): 213–33. doi:10.1080/09670881003725929.

¹⁷ Jolly, *Nuns of the Battlefield*, viii.

chapter with a few poetic verses in celebration of the Sisters. The work is part historical narrative, part panegyric and part hagiography. Jolly does not include an index, and while she has an impressive array of primary sources in her bibliography, including correspondence between Sisters within the community and with government officials, annals of the various religious communities, diaries kept by the Sisters, newspapers, as noted in her bibliography, it is more often than not unclear in the body of the work which particular sources she has consulted at any given time for the details of a conversation or set of events. Notable exceptions to this trend include the texts of newspaper articles, letters and reports between the Sisters, religious superiors and army officials, including letters of Abraham Lincoln to the War Department giving the Sisters a carte blanche for commissary supplies, and personal interviews. The abovementioned gaps may be explained by the fact that Jolly was aiming as much or more to delight and inspire the ordinary reader as much as to contribute to the field of Civil War history; in other words, *Nuns of the Battlefield* seems to aim for the man on the street more than the scholar.

Many religious congregations were either teaching or nursing before the war, and while some schools, for example, closed during the conflict as parents withdrew their children, other religious sacrificed their institutions in order to serve as nurses. One theme that emerges in Jolly's account is that when the Sisters took charge of an institution, orderliness, cleanliness, good food, kindness, and medical competence reigned. In a passage quoted by Barton, Jolly, and Maher, Mary Livermore noted of the hospital in Mound City that it was the "best military hospital in the United States." Here

the Sisters of the Holy Cross were employed as nurses, and by their skill, quietness, gentleness and tenderness were invaluable in the sick wards. Every patient gave hearty testimony to the skill and kindness of the Sisters...If I had ever felt prejudiced against these Sisters as nurses, my experience with them during the war would have dissipated it

entirely. The world has known no nobler and more heroic women than those found in the ranks of the Catholic Sisterhoods.¹⁸ Jolly address the anti-Catholic prejudice of the day and indicates through anecdotes instances where the nuns' service dispelled such prejudice and attracted people to the Catholic faith, but it is not possible to determine from these anecdotes the degree to which these effects spread into the wider American consciousness. The Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy in Charleston, SC lost many of their buildings and institutions during the bombardment of the city, including an orphan asylum. After the war, Congress initially denied their request for aid to rebuild but it was eventually granted after a plea from Robert K. Scott, Governor of South Carolina, who wrote to Congress of their "charitable office being freely dealt out to all who needed them, without reference to class, condition, or nationality," including "many a sick and wounded Federal prisoner," requesting the rebuilding of the charitable institution "as a slight recognition of their unselfish devotion to the alleviation of human suffering." This episode reveals not only the very real sacrifices made by the Sisters in their pre-war apostolates, and their desire to return to the form of ministry they left during wartime, but also the lingering prejudice or indifference which their wartime labors never fully overcame, manifested by the initial unwillingness to rebuild their institution.

Both Barton and Jolly are concerned with the perception of immigrant Catholics, of whom the Catholic Church in America was receiving a major influx, and their panegyric of the Sisters thus serves as an *apologia* for the Catholic Church of their day. Barton's 1897 work came within the wave of late-19th century immigrants from Europe, a significant percentage of them Italian and Irish Catholics. Jolly's 1927 work came on the heels of a burst of growth and activity

¹⁸ Mary Livermore, in Barton, *Angels of the Battlefield*, 298-9.

for the Ku Klux Klan, directed against immigrants, Jews, and Catholics; Irish Catholics were prominent members of the beginning of organized opposition to the KKK in 1920-21.¹⁹ The loyal, skilled, and tender service of Catholic Sisters to both sides in the conflict proved that Irish Catholic women were benevolent and courageous patriots. It was in her role as President of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Order of Ancient Hibernians, an Irish heritage group, that Jolly led the charge to establish the national monument to the Sisters; she is careful to note the national origin of each recorded nursing Sister in *Nuns of the Battlefield* and makes frequent reference to the Irishness of so many of the Irish Sisters combined with their American patriotism and Catholic devotion. For example, Jolly notes that Ellen MacKenna (the future Sister Mary Augustine, who kept a diary of during her community's Civil War nursing activities) was born on Christmas Eve in the "'Land of Saints and Scholars' who, in every city, town, and village were, in observance of one of the sweetest customs of their race, 'on their way to Midnight Mass in their own parish chapel.'" After her family moved to America, she entered the Sisters of Mercy in New York, and "To America, the land of her adoption, this gentlewoman, of superior attainments, gave her heart's warmest devotion."²⁰

Like Barton, Jolly's concern is to celebrate the Sisters whom she presents as too humble and concerned with serving others to celebrate themselves. She frequently repeats that the Sisters were not interested in politics, but in saving lives and souls. An army officer reportedly asked "faithful Negress, a domestic in Paducah's hospital," whether the Sisters were for the

¹⁹ David J. Goldberg, 1996, "Unmasking the Ku Klux Klan: The Northern Movement against the KKK, 1920-1925." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 15 (4): 32.
<http://proxycu.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9608224746&site=ehost-live>.

²⁰ Jolly, *Nuns of the Battlefield*, 206-7.

Confederacy or for the Union, and received the reply: “De Sister dey ain’t for the de Noff nuh de Souf; dey’s for God.”²¹ There is no indication in Barton, Jolly or Maher that the Sisters ever tipped their hand to reveal their personal political musings or convictions; some episodes suggest that the Sisters did not think about politics at all, a rather incredible proposition given the monumental mental gymnastics this would require. Given the Church’s position of neutrality in the conflict, further given that many of the Sisters had members of their own Order serving in Union and Confederate hospitals, and still further given that most of the nursing Sisters were Irish or German immigrants who may have been less personally invested in the ideologies of the sectional conflict than their American-born confreres, there were compelling human as well as spiritual motives for remaining aloof from politics.

Sister Mary Denis, *To Bind Up the Wounds: Catholic Sister Nurses in the U.S. Civil War* (1989; reprinted 1999)

To Bind Up the Wounds: Catholic Sister Nurses in the U.S. Civil War is a careful and balanced account of the Sisters’ nursing activities within a comprehensive context, making this book perhaps the best of its kind in contributing toward a scholarship of this subject. The first half of the book treats women’s religious life, Catholic nursing, and the lay female role within medical care, respectively, in their mid-nineteenth century American setting. The second half of the book examines how Catholic Sisters responded to the many requests for nurses, their experience during the war and contemporary attitudes about the Sisters. One of the great helps of Maher’s account is her thorough and conscientious use of sources and notes; she is careful to

²¹ Jolly, *Nuns of the Battlefield*, 7.

indicate the sources of her quotes and other details, and her notes reveal a steady closeness to primary sources of community annals, correspondence, and the like.

Maher gives more attention than other sources on the structure and purpose of women's religious life and the sets women's religious life in America within its historical context. Maher herself, as a religious scholar of American Studies (Ph.D. Case Western University), is a member of the stream of both the history and the scholarship of the nursing Sisters belong. She is writing a quarter century after the Second Vatican Council with its calls for renewal, and her attention to the changes that occurred within the nursing Sisters' lived experience of religious life during the war mirrors many of the concerns that dogged the "period of experimentation" in women's religious habit that formally ended in the early 1980s.²² These concerns include: the need to adjust the structure of the common life, horarium, liturgical prayer in common, and the traditional apostolate to respond to current needs; her discussion of the relationship of authority and obedience; the implied disapproval of the Sisters' acceptance of traditional gender roles, pointed references to "the Church's often archaic view of women religious," and her agreement with the interpretation that the Sisters did not "challeng[e] their continued subordination to males within the church and society or criticiz[e] the male exclusiveness of the Catholic clergy and hierarchy."²³ These pointedness of these concerns seems most consistent with what Ann Carey in *Sisters in Crisis*, a study of post-Vatican II women's religious life in America, has referred to as the progressive perspective of renewal, emphasizing renewal as discontinuity with received structures, in contrast to the traditional perspective of

²² Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate* (1983).

²³ Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds* 18, 17-23

renewal, which emphasizes continuity.²⁴ With Schultz and Silber, Maher also belongs to the stream of women's scholarship which sees women's contributions in the Civil War not as overturning the ideal of women's domesticity, but rather extending the reach of women's domestic roles into the public sphere.²⁵

Maher points out that in the context of 19th century America, religious were special targets of suspicion and prejudice during the waves of virulent anti-Catholicism and nativism, which at times erupted into open violence. The first half of that century witnessed the publication of fabricated, salacious tales of graphic immorality among nuns and clergy in such works as Rebecca Reed's *Six Months in a Convent* (1835) and Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal*. The withdrawal from marriage and motherhood appeared as perversions of womanhood, either shirking the responsibilities of family life or cloaking sexual promiscuity. The austere practices of early rising, cloister, withdrawal from the society of friends and family, and the authority of the superior had some real basis in the rules and constitutions of religious congregations and could appear to make women unwillingly constrained. However, as Maher explains, the process of religious formation for women who entered a religious community were gradual and voluntary. The different stages of her time of probation, introduced her into the spirit and work of the institute during a time of probation that gradually assimilated her into the life of the community over a number of years; meanwhile, the sister could leave, be dismissed or encouraged to leave if she did not seem fitted for the life.

²⁴ Ann Carey, *Sisters in Crisis: The Tragic Unravelling of Women's Religious Communities* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997); *Sisters in Crisis Revisited: From Unraveling to Reform and Renewal* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2013).

²⁵ Cf. Jane E. Schultz, *Women at the Front* (2004), Nina Silber, *Daughters of the Union* (2005).

These very structures, and the motives which inspired them, are the great strength of women's religious Orders which prepared the Sisters more than anything else for hospital work in general and the rough-and-ready situations of war nursing. The Sisters had experience in living and working with other women for the Lord and the Lord's people, often engaging in teaching and nursing work at a time when the activity of most other respectable women occurred in the domestic sphere. Moreover, unlike lay Protestant women, they were accustomed to living within a system of hierarchical authority both within the religious community and with the Church's hierarchy. It would be a mistake to classify the structures of authority as simply the exercise of power of one person over others; rather, authority within the Church is in the first place an act of service. According to the *Rule of St. Augustine* followed by the Dominican and Augustinian Orders, among others, the superior should be the servant of all: "Your superiors, for their part, must think themselves fortunate not because they rule in virtue of their office, but because they serve in love," promoting both the individual growth of the Sisters in holiness of life and her service to others for love of God, and mindful of their human needs.²⁶ A great strength of Maher's account is her attention to the voluntary character of obedience within the context of community life and a shared mission in the apostolate. Out of the common life and recognition of apostolic need came a developed system of hospitals and hospital training for members of religious Orders. At the same time, women's religious life was undergoing a certain transformation as the model of women's religious life in canon law, with its specifications for the

²⁶ St. Augustine of Hippo, "Rule of St. Augustine," <https://www.midwestaugustinians.org/roots-of-augustinian-spirituality>.

practices of cloister, schedule, and solemn vows, did not always fit the different cultural setting and apostolic needs of the American missions, as they were assessed at the time.²⁷

In her chapter on the state of lay women and medical care during the Civil War, Maher notes the haphazard state of medical knowledge, training and praxis for surgeons and nurses at the beginning of the war, which gradually became consolidated and professionalized as the war progressed. She notes the contributions of Dorothea Dix in organizing the U.S. Sanitary Commission, which coordinated women's nursing efforts during the Civil War, and other lay Protestant women both North and South. She explains that women's presence and efforts in the medical field often triggered the annoyance and resentment of doctors and medical staff. Many of the would-be women volunteers were largely untrained and entered nursing for a variety of reasons and with a variety of ideas: patriotism, the aspiration to find a husband among the soldier-patients, a sense of maternal calling, the mission to bring feminine refinement and tenderness to an impersonal, male-dominated world. The latter motivation often brought them into open conflict with doctors and other male authorities, which further alienated the doctors' respect for their efforts.

Furthermore, because nursing brought married and unmarried women into physical and intimate contact with strange young men, it often raised suspicions of impropriety and immodesty. Dr. Samuel Howe expresses the latter attitude. He had previously encouraged Florence Nightingale to pursue nursing but forbid his wife to do so during the war, stating that it was Nightingale's unmarried status that made the difference: "if he had been engaged to Florence Nightingale, and had loved her ever so dearly, he would have given her up as soon as she

²⁷ Cf. Nona McGreal, OP(Ed). *Dominicans at Home in a Young Nation 1786 – 1865*, vol. 1, Strasbourg: Editions du Signe Publisher, 2001.

commenced her career as a ‘public woman.’”²⁸ Thus, according to Maher, despite the initial prejudices against Sisters and female nurses in general, Sisters filled an important niche. “Unlike other female nurses, however, their services were in demand because they offered nursing skills, hospital experience, and predictable, orderly service arising from their religious commitment and community purposes. Against a background of weak medical staffs, confusion of nursing efforts, and the often negative attitudes of doctors about women, the multitude of requests for sisters to serve in the war can be readily comprehended.”²⁹

The latter half of the book details the extraordinary quantity of requests for nursing Sisters from medical personnel ranging from Union Surgeon General Hammond to ordinary doctors and then illustrates the Sister-Nurses’ wartime service and experiences, claiming that “the key to understanding why military and medical authorities so desired the values brought by the sisters to the Civil War health-care needs lies in the very nature of religious life with its emphasis on community life and charitable service to others as expressed by public, lifelong vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity.”³⁰ With the Sisters’ arrival at the hospitals and hospital boats often came a commitment to cleanliness, concern for proper preparation of food, and a degree of organization hitherto unknown. These qualities, combined with the Sisters’ religious motives, relatively greater training and the doctors’ clashes with Dorothea Dix, made many Union doctors prefer them to Dix’s corps of lay nurses. Dix was notoriously difficult to work with, and her antagonism toward Sisters is well-known.³¹

²⁸ In Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds*, p. 58

²⁹ Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds*, 64

³⁰ Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds*, 98

³¹ Judith E. Harper, “Catholic Nuns,” *Women During the Civil War: An Encyclopedia*, New York : Routledge, 2004.

The final chapter explores the attitudes toward or about Catholic Sisters at the time of the conflict. Maher includes many illustrative anecdotes of soldiers who comforted by the Sisters' words of comfort and religious consolation, who were baptized by them, converted to a living faith, or whose prejudices against Catholics and nuns melted in the face of the Sisters' skill, kindness, and forbearance. Many of these anecdotes come from the perspective of the soldiers and officers themselves, not only of the Sisters. It is difficult to assess from these many anecdotes the degree to which the Sisters' services overcame anti-Catholic prejudice and extended the influence of the Catholic religion across America in a lasting way at the time, but that their influence was positive and profound on the individuals who encountered them is clear. Soldiers often stopped swearing when the Sisters were near, and were heard to remark: "Surely these ladies are working for God. Money is not the motive here!" "Write to my mother and tell her I was cared for in my suffering by a band of ladies who were as tender to me as mothers"; "I have not been of your religion, but wish to become what you are. The religion of the sisters must be the true one."³²

In the last chapter, Maher examines the reasons for the tensions that prevailed at times between Catholic Sisters and Protestant laywomen seeking to serve as nurses, and concludes that the preference of the male medical staff for Sisters as nurses was due to a combination of factors: their prior training, organization, self-abnegation, commitment, ability to serve a variety of social needs, and willingness to obey legitimate authority, but also the inevitable annoyance caused by so many repeated appeals made to Protestant women to emulate the Sisters of Charity. Maher makes no sweeping claims about the effects of the nursing Sisters on dispelling anti-Catholicism

³² Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds*, 138-9

or drawing Americans to the Catholic faith on a large scale, but it is clear that the service of the Sisters during the Civil War exposed broad swaths of the population that would have had no contact with Catholicism to positive examples of lived Catholic faith. Her account has no shortage of the quaint and edifying vignettes that make Barton and Jolly's accounts so delightful and vivacious, but she applies them more judiciously. Often, soldiers who were initially uncomfortable, wary, or downright contemptuous of the strangely-garbed Sisters were won over by the Sisters' relentless kindness, forbearance, and skill. In a few instances, recovering soldiers returned disappointed to the hospital after a trip to town; they explained that desiring to do something for the Sisters, they had scoured local shops for the Sisters' white bonnets and long dresses to purchase for them, but to no avail.³³

Overall, Maher appears much more clear-sighted about the humanness and the spiritual stature of the Sisters than Barton and Jolly. She is no less concerned than they to illustrate the heroic service, dedication and skill of the nursing Sisters, but she also includes stories and the impressions of non-Catholics that do not always portray the nursing Sisters in the best light, as in the case of one Sister who left the order to marry a Union soldier. She also takes the prejudice against women as nurses into account, but does not conclude that it was simply the Sisters' apolitical willingness to embrace a subordinate status that most endeared them to doctors. Jolly, Barton, and Maher note that the Sisters served Union and Confederate wounded with equal care and avoided taking political sides in the sectional conflict, being motivated by religious rather than political motives.

³³ Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds*, 136

Maher rightly points out that the Sisters “did challenge doctors and other authorities when they felt nursing care, nutrition, cleanliness, good order and their religious practices demanded it. In addition, they were often able to get supplies that doctors or military authorities were not able to procure.”³⁴ While she does not provide concrete examples of these instances, Barton and Jolly do. The latter relates how two Sisters of Mercy, having been denied provisions by “one high in authority in the War Department,” marched directly to Abraham Lincoln to request supplies for their soldiers; they were ushered into his presence in under an hour, and after listening to their report, he wrote a note authorizing them to be provided with whatever they asked for, at the War Department’s expense. In an especially remarkable case, doctors refused to intervene when patients openly plotted the murder of another patient, even after pleading from the Sisters to either do something or allow them to do something to protect the man; but when a Sister threatened to leave the hospital with all of her Sisters rather than remain in a place where murder would be permitted, the doctors relented and allowed her to personally stand by the man and face his would-be murderers. Sisters would also at times insist that they be allowed to tend a soldier’s wounds in order to save a limb which doctors had decided to amputate, and anecdotes abound of their success in doing so, much to the relief of the sufferer.

Schultz, *Women at the Front* (2004)

Jane Schultz begins her study of women’s wartime hospital relief work “with the premise that the most significant wartime labor in which women directly engaged military life was hospital and relief work.”³⁵ For Schultz, the significance of women’s hospital relief work lay in

³⁴ Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds*, 158.

³⁵ Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 3.

the fact that it “instituted greater change in public attitudes about women at work” than other forms of labor and service. She explains that

Wherever relief workers served--on the battlefield, in the immediate rear, or at general hospitals far removed from fighting--their presence created a front where gender, class, and racial identities became themselves sites of conflict. As a legitimate channel for patriotic ardor, relief work challenged some prescriptions for masculine and feminine behavior and buttressed others.³⁶

Male patients were in a position of relative helplessness and dependency, with nursing women caring for them. This public work was viewed at times as a deviation from women’s rightful work within the home but at times as an extension of the domestic sphere and woman’s nurturing role in the home, revealed by the images of “Mother” and “sister” frequently applied to the nurses and wartime images of feminine labor and tenderness celebrated in the public press.³⁷

Schultz is interested not only to investigate wartime nursing’s effect on women’s position in public life, but also to document those who had previously been left out of the scholarly narrative of Civil War nursing, namely working-class women and African Americans. These latter groups, unlike elite and middle-class women, received fewer appointments to nursing work and more appointments to custodial work; they did not qualify for postwar pensions until 1895, when eligibility expanded to include not only nurses but also cooks and laundresses.³⁸ Including these previously unrecognized groups under the general umbrella of hospital and relief work swells the number of women serving in these capacities to 20,000, according to Schultz’s estimate.

Elite women in the South faced greater social and familial objections to the propriety of hospital work, and they likely constituted a smaller percentage of nurses than in the North. A

³⁶ Schultz, *Women at the Front* 3.

³⁷ Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 54-55.

³⁸ Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 7

number of factors make estimating Confederate women's hospital service difficult: the burning of Richmond destroyed many of the Surgeon General's Office records, many Southerners nursed soldiers "unofficially" in homes or churches, and records may not include the many slaves and working-class women who performed the custodial labors of the hospitals. Union records are more precise and name 21,208 women among the nurses and custodial staff, with over 6,000 nurses and close to 11,000 matrons; these records include 260 "Sisters of Charity." This number would not include those who did not work for pay, and it is unclear whether this includes all Sisters or only Sisters belonging to the religious Order named; many referred to the Sisters indiscriminately as "Sisters of Charity" or "Sisters of Mercy," regardless of which of the 12 religious Orders the Sister belonged.³⁹ In another place she lists the number of Sisters in Union military hospitals as 450.⁴⁰ Schultz gives no numbers for the Sisters who served in Confederate hospitals, but supports the "much larger" overall number of Catholic Sisters proposed by Frank O'Brien and Sister Mary Denis Maher.⁴¹

Schultz divides her study into two parts: first, women "On Duty" during the war, and second, the legacy of women's war work after the war, including pensions and how women's nursing work has been remembered. Catholic Sisters appear in both parts of Schultz's work, more often in the first part than in the second. She notes that women who volunteered for nursing for both North and South ranged across ages, races, social classes, marital status, slave and free. Most women, including the Sisters, entered wartime nursing with little or no experience of nursing, but the Sisters tended to have more prewar experience than the average laywoman, since several of the Orders were actively engaged in administering and working in hospitals, some of

³⁹ Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds*, 70-71

⁴⁰ Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 22.

⁴¹ Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 21.

which they were themselves the founders, as was the case of Sr. Anthony at St. John's Hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Groups of newly volunteered nurses received on-the-job training and then received patient loads of hundreds or thousands, and women underwent a battle-toughening with respect to witnessing scenes of trauma, sickness, wounds and blood not unlike that of the soldiers. Catholic Sisters worked in nursing, cooking, laundering, and the other custodial domains; they cleaned and scrubbed, prepared food and drink, dressed wounds, assisted in surgery, interacted with family members coming to visit sick, wounded, dead or dying relatives, spoke with the patients about faith and gloried when a patient gave evidence of religious conversion. Like many other women nurses, the Sisters carried their commitment to the end, often shared the fate of the patients in their care. While some religious communities did accept pay, many received only the soldiers' rations and housing accommodations that a hospital could offer them. They succumbed to illness in the line of duty from caring for patients with smallpox and other contagious diseases.

Schultz records the tension surrounding women entering the man's domain of the hospital and the exacerbation of the same when a double standard seemed to obtain for the Sisters in comparison with Protestant laywomen. Kate Cumming, an elite Alabaman serving in Confederate hospitals, wrote that "A lady's respectability must by a low ebb when it can be endangered by going into a hospital"; "It seems strange that [Sisters of Charity] can do with honor what is wrong for other Christian women to do."⁴² Some Protestant nurses characterized the Sisters as unfeeling and merely functional, others that the Sisters would refuse to dress wounds, and one recalled the case of a Sister of Mercy leaving the Order and marrying a former

⁴² Cummings, in Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 50.

patient. The negative or scandalous testimonies seem to be the outliers; they are few and the positive testimonies are overwhelmingly numerous. As U.S. Sanitary Commission luminary Mary Livermore recalled,

I am neither a Catholic, nor an advocate of the monastic institutions of that church. Similar organizations established on the basis of the Protestant religion, and in harmony with republican principles, might be made very helpful to modern society, and would furnish occupation and give position to large numbers of unmarried women, whose hearts go out to the world in charitable intent. But I can never forget my experience during the War of the Rebellion. Never did I meet these Catholic sisters in hospitals, on transports, or hospital steamers, without observing their devotion, faithfulness, and unobtrusiveness. They gave themselves no airs of superiority or holiness, shirked no duty, sought no easy place, bred no mischiefs. Sick and wounded men watched for their entrance into the wards at morning, and looked a regretful farewell when they departed at night. They broke down in exhaustion from overwork, as did the Protestant nurses: like them, they succumbed to the fatal prison-fever, which our exchanged prisoners brought from the fearful pens of the South.⁴³

The sharp view of the nursing Sisters by Protestant lay nurses is likely due also in part to the manifest preference of so many doctors for Sisters, which Schultz attributes to a variety of factors: their prior experience, the fact that they made a point of observing no political allegiances, that they were “known for their medical skill and silent obedience” to authorities (i.e. the doctors and hospital administrators) in contrast to the more intractable reputation of lay women, and the fact that they often refused compensation for their work.⁴⁴ She also points out that while some Sisters complied with a Union surgeon’s orders not to treat Rebel wounded, on other occasions they refused to compromise what they viewed as their Christian obligation to treat Confederate wounded in spite of orders of a commanding Union officer to the contrary.

After the war, the nursing Sisters “were in the vanguard of postwar hospital development.”⁴⁵ After the war, nursing became “professionalized” with an increased emphasis on

⁴³ Livermore, in Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds*, 39.

⁴⁴ Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 116, 43.

⁴⁵ Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 171.

training. Building upon the foundation of hospital establishment and nursing practice before the war, and acute care gained during the war, Sister Anthony O'Connell established two new hospitals with an emphasis on nursing education in the decade after the war. Two Indiana Orders, the Sisters of Providence of St.-Mary-of-the-Woods and The Sisters of the Holy Cross did not have a prewar tradition of hospital work, but after the war they, too, established hospitals.

Conclusion

Jolly, Barton, and Maher concur that the Sisters left their pre-war apostolates to nurse, and then resumed their prewar apostolates after the war for the same motives: to serve Christ and others for His sake. These authors concur that the nursing work of the Sisters had a lasting effect on the American sensibilities, but this effect was more religious and social than political or economic. Indeed, there is no indication in these accounts that the Sisters aspired to anything but to care for the souls and bodies of those in their charge, and to make the Catholic faith more known and loved. They rather appear in Jolly, Barton, and Maher to eschew politics and political questions altogether.

Regarding Schultz's interest in women pushing the boundaries of gender, class, and race sensibilities in their wartime hospital work, the nursing Sisters in Barton, Jolly, and Maher's accounts do not appear to manifest interest in a widening of the scope of women's activity outside the home, as their apostolic service during the war was a continuation of their pre-war service and was itself continued by a return to the pre-war apostolate; the common motivation was the service to those in need out of love for God, as the community recognized the need. For this reason, the Sisters do not fit comfortably within the traditional women's history narrative of

the struggle for women's rights, which likely explains the short shrift given them in Silber's account of women nurses during the Civil War. In short, the Sisters came to the aid of the wounded not to assert their own rights or to exercise authority, but they came to serve the needs of men in the name of God within the scope of their vows and community life, and they exercised substantial authority and remarkable skill in so doing. Perhaps the difference lies how one views authority and obedience. If authority is viewed less as a vehicle for wielding power over one's self and others, and more as a vehicle for serving others, then the Catholic Sisters wielded tremendous authority as nurses during the Civil War. If obedience is viewed less as the suppression of freedom and more as freely choosing to give one's self according to God's will as it becomes manifest, then the Sisters were liberated women indeed. Finally, as the public involvement of women religious in the administration and work in schools, hospitals, and other charitable institutions were an important precursor to their own and laywomen's public activity in hospitals, schools, and other parts of the public sector during and continued to be such after the Civil War, so the changing views of women's roles in the public and domestic spheres affected the self-understanding of women in religious life and of the institutions and people in their care. Insights from scholars of women's religious life, Civil War history, and women's history could go a long way in illuminating the extent to which these different strands of experience affected the others.

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