

Religious Women in American Catholic Schools, 1965-2018

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EDUC 702 Foundations of Education

April 15, 2018

## Prologue: Another day in the habit

“I want to thank you for wearing your garb,” an elderly Southern lady drawled charmingly as she leaned over the airplane armrest and took my arm on a summer afternoon in 2013. “We’re Baptist, but thank you. A lot of times you could be with one of them (meaning, Catholic nuns) and not even *know* it.” “You’re welcome,” I smiled. “I love wearing my habit.” Religious garb became a flashpoint of controversy in the years of adaptation following the Second Vatican Council. For some, it became a symbol of elitism and privilege which distanced religious and priests from the people to whom they were to minister. Others saw the habit as an irrelevant holdover from the past. Still others saw the habit as a symbol of patriarchal oppression of women by men, notwithstanding the fact that the Council and subsequent legislation urges all priests and religious men likewise to wear religious garb.<sup>1</sup> While it is not difficult to imagine that some persons may be put off by seeing priests or religious in distinctive dress, it is also the case that the habit elicits encounters that would not have otherwise taken place. These latter are much easier to measure than encounters that might have happened but never did.

Within two hours of typing into this paper the lines below regarding the religious habit from *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Second Vatican Council’s document on the renewal and adaptation of religious life, I found myself strolling along the National Mall in Washington, D.C. With me were three fellow Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist and many hundreds of

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<sup>1</sup> “Clerics are to wear suitable ecclesiastical garb according to the norms issued by the conference of bishops and according to legitimate local customs.” *Code of Canon Law* (1983, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_PY.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_PY.HTM)), Canon 284. *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965), the Second Vatican Council’s document on the renewal and adaptation of religious life, outlines the principles of adapting the religious habit to the “time, place, and needs of the ministry” and explicitly addresses the “habits of both men and women religious,” [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651028\\_perfectae-caritatis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html).

fellow-seekers of cherry blossom beauty. As we swished along in the full-length white and black habit of the Order of Preachers, the iPhones of our fellow-seekers travelled from the blossoms to the Sisters. A runner with a crucifix and miraculous medal around his neck stopped and asked if we were the Dominicans from Ann Arbor (yes), and he exclaimed that he was visiting from Detroit and was happy to see Sisters. We passed a little girl who asked her mother, “What are they?” to which the mother responded, “Those are Catholic nuns.” A young man approached me: “Are you a Dominican? I just graduated from (insert orthodox Catholic university name here) and I’m visiting D.C.” Having seen the beauties of the cherry blossoms and greeted Jefferson at his monument, we were joined by a retired police officer from Maryland on our walk back to the Smithsonian stop who talked about his Catholic faith and expressed his excitement for Divine Mercy Sunday, which was two days away. At the Metro station as we hurried to catch our train, we passed a girl of about five years sitting cross-legged on the ground who looked up at us and exclaimed, “Oooh, pretty!”

We made it aboard the train, and I ended up standing by a group of young twenty-somethings. This is when things got really interesting. One young man in the group looked at me and asked, “Which, um, group...do you belong to?” “I am a Dominican Sister,” I replied. We began talking and I discovered that they were interns on Capitol Hill; the others looked frankly mortified that their buddy was talking to a Sister on the train, but he did not appear to notice. Meanwhile, a gentleman in his late sixties or early seventies boarded the train, saw me, and asked, “Which community do you belong to?” “The Dominicans,” I said. “The Dominicans taught me how to read and write!” he exclaimed. “Are you visiting D.C.?” “No,” I answered. “I am a student at Catholic.” It turns out that he had studied physics at Catholic, and

was now a scientist designing satellites for NASA. But the Capitol Hill intern would not be deterred. “What denomination do you belong to?” he inquired. “I am Catholic,” I said. He responded, “My mom is Catholic and my dad is Mormon. They did not raise us either way because they wanted us to choose for ourselves.” I walked through the metaphorical door that he just opened to have the God conversation, and asked, “So how are you and God now?” He was somewhat taken aback, and after he asked me to repeat myself he walked in verbal circles for a couple minutes around the theme of: “I don’t know, I just want to be kind to people. I want to be a good person. I want to know the truth; I don’t want to choose what’s false.” I urged him to pray and ask God to lead him to the truth about Himself, that God loves him more than he can imagine and wants to fulfill the desire of his heart to know the truth. “Okay, maybe I’ll do that,” and then with some relief: “This is our stop!” The whole group of Capitol Hill interns, who had long stopped pretending that they were not riveted by the novel conversation going on beside them, smilingly saluted me with a “Bye, Sister!” and off they went. The NASA scientist and I conversed about satellites until we arrived at the Brookland/CUA stop, where I stepped off pondering the workings of divine providence in just another day in the religious habit.

## **Introduction**

The goal of this paper is to investigate the role of Sisters in Catholic Schools in the United States since Vatican II. Timothy Walsh tells with great care the story of the parochial school system from its beginnings in the colonial period and into the twenty-first century in his *Parish School: A History of American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial Times to the Present*, revised and expanded in 2016. Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Peter B. Holland

argue in *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* that educational reform has much to learn from how Catholic schools “manage simultaneously to achieve relatively high levels of student learning, distribute this learning more equitably with regard to race and class than in the public sector, and sustain high levels of teacher commitment and student engagement.”<sup>2</sup> Father Michael P. Caruso, S.J. presents the legacy of the growth of Sisters’ educational ministries into the 1960s and their subsequent large-scale departure following Vatican II through the lens of the personal reflections of those Sisters, clergy, and laypersons affected in *When the Sisters Said Farewell: The Transition of Leadership in Catholic Elementary Schools* (2012). Ann Carey’s *Sisters in Crisis: The Tragic Unravelling of Women’s Religious Communities* (1997) and her updated *Sisters in Crisis Revisited: From Unravelling to Reform and Renewal* (2013) traces the path of renewal and adaptation by numerous communities following the Second Vatican Council as the unravelling of religious life, leading to dropping vocations and dissatisfaction with the Church and with the educational apostolate. This paper seeks not to repeat their work but extend it to 2018, in particular by investigating the experiences of the religious institutes and Sisters who stayed in Catholic Schools. The documents of the Church’s magisterium will be the guiding light for a theology of religious life and Catholic education. The paper will end with a proposal of future directions for research in this area.

## **Catholic Schools in the United States Before Vatican II**

The rise and decline of the Catholic school system in the United States has been well-documented. The parochial school reached its heyday in the late 1950s and early 60s. The

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<sup>2</sup> Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 297

Catholic population of the U.S. nearly doubled from 24 million in 1940 to 42 million in 1960, with Catholic school enrollment more than doubling from just over 2 million in 1949 to 4.2 million and rising at the end of the 1950s to the “generation of crisis” from the 1960s to the 1980s. Immigrants to the United States, many of them Catholic, were educated in urban Catholic schools. In the mid-1960s there were 5.7 million children enrolled in Catholic schools, but this enrollment had dwindled to less than two million by 2010.<sup>3</sup> Despite school closings and mergers, new initiatives in Catholic education are thriving, such as the University of Notre Dame’s ACE program and the NativityMiguel and Christo Rey networks established by the Christian Brothers and the Jesuits, respectively.

What explains the radical growth and subsequent contraction of the parish school system in the United States? The population of the United States and the Catholic population within it rose with immigration and the Baby Boom, increasing the demand for seats in a Catholic school and a dramatic surge in young men and women entering the priesthood and embracing a vocation to the religious life. Jesuit Father James Caruso builds upon Walch’s work in his book *When the Sisters Said Farewell* which details the role of women religious in the U.S. parochial school system. Fr. Caruso’s account abounds in colorful firsthand accounts from Sisters and laypersons who lived through the changes in the landscape of Catholic schools-- from schools led and staffed by habited Sisters to a predominantly lay staff and leadership landscape of the 21st century. He notes initiative of bishops as well as the generosity of women religious in building and staffing the Catholic parish schools account in large measure for the growth and success of parish schools across the United States. American and European religious communities exhibited

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Walch, *Parish School: A History of American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial Times to the Present*, revised and expanded ed.(National Catholic Education Association, 2016), 189.

heroic generosity and sacrifice in providing the workforce of Sisters to build, staff, and administer Catholic schools. Caruso notes the “great sacrifices sisters made,” explaining that “By offering their services in return to for a minimal stipend, the sisters lived a frugal lifestyle with little security” in order to minister to the poorest and most vulnerable populations.<sup>4</sup>

Women religious in the apostolate of teaching and serving the poor and marginalized in American society were also the nation’s first canonized saints: St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, St. Katharine Drexel, and St. Rose Philippine Duchesne. Pope Benedict XVI pointed to the evangelizing impact of these heroically holy women in his address to Catholic educators at the Catholic University of America in 2008:

The Catholic community here has in fact made education one of its highest priorities. This undertaking has not come without great sacrifice. Towering figures, like Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton and other founders and foundresses, with great tenacity and foresight, laid the foundations of what is today a remarkable network of parochial schools contributing to the spiritual well-being of the Church and the nation. Some, like Saint Katharine Drexel, devoted their lives to educating those whom others had neglected – in her case, African Americans and Native Americans. Countless dedicated Religious Sisters, Brothers, and Priests together with selfless parents have, through Catholic schools, helped generations of immigrants to rise from poverty and take their place in mainstream society.<sup>5</sup>

Even at its apogee, however, all was not well in Catholic schools, and held within it the seeds of the collapse which was to come. Walch and Fr. Caruso detail how the needs of a growing population of Catholics, many of them the children of poor immigrants, led to an immense demand for teaching Sisters to staff Catholic schools, as many as possible and as soon as possible. Religious communities in Europe and in the United States made heroic sacrifices to answer the pleas of American bishops for Sisters to staff their schools. Many young Sisters were

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<sup>4</sup> Michael P. Caruso, *When the Sisters said farewell: The transition of leadership in Catholic Elementary Schools* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI Address to Catholic Educators at Conference Hall of the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC,” April 17, 2008 (Accessed April 6, 2018), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080417\\_cath-univ-washington.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080417_cath-univ-washington.html).

sent to the classroom right after their novitiate without professional training. Instead, they learned under an apprenticeship or mentor model with an older, more experienced teaching Sister acting as a guide, with formal training (if any) occurring on the weekends and during summers. This model was jokingly referred to as the “twenty-year plan” by many Sisters.<sup>6</sup>

Another factor enabling Catholic schools to educate as many children as they did were the enormous class sizes: 60 to 90 children in one classroom with one Sister to teach them was not uncommon. Furthermore, the Sisters were being paid subsistence wages, usually without medical insurance or retirement benefits, and at times their living conditions and healthcare were substandard. Caruso notes the example of a community of teaching Sisters who subsisted on dinners of a single slice of bologna, or a Sister who repaired her dental work with Elmer’s glue from her classroom because she could not afford to see a dentist.<sup>7</sup>

Of the religious congregations which took up the call to teach in the United States, some were apostolic religious communities founded for the purpose of education, some were apostolic communities with a different founding purpose. Some religious communities of contemplative nuns were dispensed from the observance of papal cloister and the rigors of penitential and monastic practices in order to serve as teachers in Catholic schools; other communities who were not founded for the work of education turned to education in light of the pressing needs of the day. In post-Vatican II hindsight, this departure from the founding charism sets off warning bells. Just as fundamentally, the sacrifice of contemplation to action (in the case of the contemplative nuns) always carries with it the concomitant danger of sacrificing of spiritual values for material values. In terms of the Church’s life, contemplation is to action what fuel is to a car trip:

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<sup>6</sup> Caruso, *When the Sisters Said Farewell*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Caruso, *When the Sisters Said Farewell*, 33.

sacrificing it gets the Church nowhere. Service to the poor becomes obscured and relativized when the servers lose sight of the Lord whom they serve in the “distressing disguise of the poor,” as St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta often repeated.

Finally, there was also the danger of seeing religious Sisters, brothers, and priests merely as a workforce, and the priesthood and religious life as a career rather than as a call to belong intimately and exclusively to God, and then to His Church in consequence. This mentality fails to see the religious and priest as a whole person and makes it easier to sacrifice his or her religious, human, and professional preparation in order to meet the true and urgent needs on the part of the Church, namely the education and formation of the young. The subordination of the person to work is an inversion of the project of evangelization, which works to be at the service of the full flourishing of the human person in Christ. The reversal of this order bears bitter fruit. Sister Beatrice Eichten declared at a 2006 meeting of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) that: “We religious have shifted from being ‘obedient daughters’ and a religious workforce to being adult educated women with a mature identity who believe we have something to say about our Church, its teaching and its practice. This shift has strained our relationship with the hierarchical church.”<sup>8</sup> Many mature, educated and adult religious women would surely take issue with Sister Beatrice’s implication that they cannot also be the thinking, obedient daughters of the hierarchical Church. However, the opposition to viewing religious and priests as a workforce to be used is understandable and just, considered in itself.

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<sup>8</sup> Sister Beatrice Eichten, “So Much is in Bud” (presidential address at LCWR 2006 assembly, August 20, 2006), quoted in Ann Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited: From Unraveling to Reform and Renewal* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2013), 128. The LCWR is one of two national conferences that represents American women religious to the Holy See.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that religious were mostly an unhappy, oppressed population. The lived experience of “Sister Immaculata” speaks for many. In a personal communication, Sister Immaculata recalled her first year of teaching in the 1950s, in which she had a class of 60+ first-graders, commenting: “We were so happy! This was just the way it was and we didn’t think anything of it.” She still receives outpourings of love and gratitude in the form of letters from the adult versions of the children she taught in such large numbers, which indicate that they were happy too. Of the years of summer studies spent in the company of religious from various communities, Sister Immaculata relates: “It was so much fun!” Father Caruso points out that in the lived experience of many young Sisters entering the teaching apostolate, the classroom and school were an extension of the Motherhouse and the formation received in the novitiate.<sup>9</sup> The young teaching Sister was placed in a school staffed by members of her community, imbued with the spirit of her religious community, with an experienced teaching Sister acting as mentor. The mentor Sister would pass on the teaching methods, “tips and tricks,” and most importantly the Order’s spirituality as expressed through teaching, to the new teacher. Congregations often had a Sister in the role of Director of Education who oversaw the preparation, teaching methods, and administration of the schools in which the Sisters served.<sup>10</sup> There was thus a natural connection between the teaching apostolate, the community life, and the religious life of the Sisters. The large number of vocations that swelled novitiates in the middle of the 20th century were doubtless attracted in large part by the joy of the religious in their classrooms and the beauty of their life; it is difficult to imagine that they would have been so drawn by the dour misery or stoic resignation of the oppressed.

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<sup>9</sup> Caruso, “From the Motherhouse to the Classroom,” in *When the Sisters Said Farewell*, 35-42.

<sup>10</sup> Caruso, *When the Sisters Said Farewell*, 27-30.

## Reform and Renewal

While trust in divine providence is indeed a necessary condition for anyone who shares the mission of Christ's church, the inadequacies of this model were not lost on American Sisters nor on the hierarchy. In 1941, Sister Bertrande Meyers, Ph.D. published her study *The Education of Sisters: A Plan for Integrating the Religious, Social, Cultural and Professional Training of Sisters*. She surveyed 60 teaching communities with a total of 46,585 religious teachers in 1941 and noted an "urgent need" for an educational program that "made adequate synthesis of the religious and social, the cultural and the professional ideals of the Community administering it."

<sup>11</sup> Sister Madaleva Wolff, president of St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana, stressed the pressing need to educate teaching Sisters in a paper presented to the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) in 1949. Ann Carey describes Sister Madaleva's pivotal role in the development of the Sister's Formation Conference, which was originally conceived as a way of promoting the initial formation and education of Sisters before they were sent into their various apostolates. In this paper, later titled "The Education of Sister Lucy," Sister Madaleva

suggested [...] that young sisters who were going to be teachers should receive their baccalaureate and teacher certification prior to final profession of vows and being assigned to full-time teaching. She acknowledged the problems in trying to attain this ideal--the expense involved in educating a sister before she made a decision to stay in the community and take her final vows, and the growing pressure for sisters to staff parochial schools--but she insisted that "if we cannot afford to prepare our young sisters for the work of our communities, we should not accept them at all. We should direct them to communities that will prepare them." Sister Madaleva's paper proved to be a major impetus for establishing the Sister Formation Conference as a committee within the NCEA.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bertrande Meyers, *The Education of Sisters: A Plan for Integrating the Religious, Social, Cultural and Professional Training of Sisters* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1941), xxx.

<sup>12</sup> Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 190-91

Carey further notes that following these calls for improved formation for young Sisters, a number of institutes of formation and training, including colleges, grew in number, size, and enrollment during the 1950s. In his 1950 Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi* (“The Spouse of Christ”), Pope Pius XII indicated that prudent adaptations of external observances to present day conditions should be made in monasteries of nuns in order to promote the full beauty and effectiveness of their form of life.<sup>13</sup> Thus the calls for renewal and reform had already been sounding in the air both in the universal Church and in the local American Church when, on January 25, 1959, Pope John XXIII announced his intention to call the Second Vatican Council.

When he opened the Vatican II in 1962, Pope John XXIII memorably disagreed with those “who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. In these modern times they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin.”<sup>14</sup> He declared his own trust that divine Providence was working in the human ups and downs of the present. On the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Council, Pope Benedict XVI opened a Year of Faith, quoting John XXIII’s inaugural address to explain the purpose for which the Council was called:

What above all concerns the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine be safeguarded and taught more effectively [...] Therefore, the principal purpose of this Council is not the discussion of this or that doctrinal theme... a Council is not required for that... [but] this certain and immutable doctrine, which is to be faithfully respected, needs to be explored and presented in a way which responds to the needs of our time.

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<sup>13</sup> “Porro, firmis prorsus omnibus nativis ac potissimum venerandi Monialium Instituti elementis, quoad elementa alia, quae externa et adventicia censentur, illas caute prudenterque ad hodierna adjuncta accomodationes inducere decrevimus, quae Instituto eidem non modo maiorem decorum, sed pleniorum etiam efficacitatem tribuere poterunt.” Pius XII, *Sponsa Christi*, (1950, accessed April 14, 2018), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/la/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_apc\\_19501121\\_sponsa-christi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/la/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501121_sponsa-christi.html).

<sup>14</sup> Pope John XXIII, “Gaudet Mater Ecclesia,” Opening Speech of the Second Vatican Council, October 11, 1962. Accessed April 6, 2018.

[https://www.saint-mike.org/library/papal\\_library/johnxxiii/opening\\_speech\\_vaticanii.html](https://www.saint-mike.org/library/papal_library/johnxxiii/opening_speech_vaticanii.html)

Thus, the purpose of the Council was to explore the certain and immutable doctrine of faith and to propose it anew to contemporary men and women.

From its opening in 1962 to its close in 1965, the Council Fathers promulgated four Constitutions, three Declarations, and nine Decrees. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964) was particularly notable for its emphasis on the “universal call to holiness,” devoting its fifth chapter to the Gospel call to all the baptized to become saints: “Your light must shine before others...Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”<sup>15</sup> The fifth chapter, “The Universal Call to Holiness,” repeats with insistence that this Gospel call to holiness is not limited to pastors and religious, but to each of the baptized: “all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.”<sup>16</sup> In every era of the Church’s life, from the New Testament to the present, there have been saints, pastors, religious, and lay men and women who exhorted pastors, religious, and the faithful by the witness of their words and lives, to become saints. St. Augustine, St. Gregory the Great, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Charles Borromeo, Mother Teresa, are shining witnesses to the fact that the work of genuine reform in the Church and society begins and ends with the call to holiness. Many more examples, too numerous to count and from every century of the Church’s life, could be multiplied of the work of renewing the clergy, the laity, religious, and social structures, in Gospel living; indeed, even as far back as the New Testament itself. Reform and renewal in the Church are nothing new. Nevertheless, the surprise which met this reaffirmation of a basic Gospel truth after the Council underlined the evident need to bring this truth again to the foreground of Christian

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<sup>15</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter V “The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church.”

<sup>16</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, n. 40.

consciousness. As one Sister-Principal who lived through this period remarked in a private conversation with the author, “A lot of Sisters entered the convent because they wanted to serve the Church. Then they discovered that they did not have to be Sisters in order to serve the Church.” This comment reveals one of the many complex factors undergirding the massive exodus from the priesthood and religious life following the Council.

The following chapter in *Lumen Gentium* titled “Religious” affirms that the consecrated life, marked by the radical commitment to God and the Church through the free profession of the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience in imitation of Christ’s words and deeds “undeniably belong[s] to the Church’s] life and holiness.”<sup>17</sup> This chapter became a springboard for the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life (October 28, 1965). Similarly, the Council decree *Presbyterum Ordinis* (December 7, 1965) on the ministry and life of priests elaborated on Chapter II of *Lumen Gentium* on the Hierarchical Structure of the Church, and Chapter IV on the Laity bore fruit in the Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (November 18, 1965) on the Apostolate of the laity. Again, lest the lay faithful neglect their mission of sanctifying the world from within, this latter text reminded them that the laity exercise the apostolate in fact by their activity directed to the evangelization and sanctification of men and to the penetrating and perfecting of the temporal order through the spirit of the Gospel. In this way, their temporal activity openly bears witness to Christ and promotes the salvation of men. Since the laity, in accordance with their state of life, live in the midst of the world and its concerns, they are called by God to exercise their apostolate in the world like leaven, with the ardor of the spirit of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

The universal call to holiness and the call to the lay faithful to exercise their apostolate of bringing Christ to the world, is accomplished precisely by living the Gospel *in the world*, in the

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<sup>17</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, n. 44.

<sup>18</sup> *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity), November 18, 1965 (accessed April 6, 2018), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651118\\_apostolicam-actuositatem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html).

“temporal society” of politics, culture, the marketplace, the media, entertainment, healthcare, law, etc. This idea will become important in the decades following the Council when lay persons assume more roles in ministries within the Church, including Catholic education.

*Perfectae Caritatis*, Latin for “perfect charity,” opens with a reference to *Lumen Gentium*’s affirmation of the the universal call to holiness as applied to religious. This opening line succinctly states the nature and purpose of the religious life: “The pursuit of perfect charity through the evangelical counsels draws its origin from the doctrine and example of the Divine Master and reveals itself as a splendid sign of the heavenly kingdom.”<sup>19</sup> The quest for perfect charity in union with Christ is thus the directing principle of the document on the renewal and adaptation of religious life, and the measure of fidelity in the implementation of the prescriptions that will follow. Key themes in the renewal and adaptation is *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*: that is, returning to the sources and updating. The former is the basis on which the latter is measured: renewal consists in “constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of their institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our times,” namely “the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels” and the “founders’ spirit and special aims they set before them, as well as their sound traditions.”<sup>20</sup> The legislation, governance, and works of institutes, as well as the religious habit, should be examined in light of the Gospel, the spirit of the founder, and in light of the needs of the contemporary world: “Therefore let constitutions, directories, custom books, books of prayers and ceremonies and such like be

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<sup>19</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis* (PC) (Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life) October 28, 1965, (accessed April 6, 2018), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651028\\_perfectae-caritatis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html).

<sup>20</sup> PC 3

suitably re-edited and, obsolete laws being suppressed, be adapted to the decrees of this sacred synod.”<sup>21</sup>

The Council presumed the continued use of the religious habit itself while mandating modification to suit present-day realities.

The religious habit, an outward mark of consecration to God, should be simple and modest, poor and at the same time becoming. In addition it must meet the requirements of health and be suited to the circumstances of time and place and to the needs of the ministry involved. The habits of both men and women religious which do not conform to these norms must be changed.<sup>22</sup>

A heavy wool habit designed for life in a cool, damp European monastery is unsuited for healthcare work a modern hospital in Phoenix, Arizona; an elaborate headpiece adopted by the founder because it matched the headgear of the French peasants to whom the Sisters would be sent would not afford the Sisters solidarity among the people in inner-city Chicago.

*Perfectae Caritatis* further examines: the importance of the life of prayer and contemplation for all religious above all else, especially the liturgy and the holy sacrifice of the Mass<sup>23</sup>, affirms that purely contemplative monks and nuns “retain at all times, no matter how pressing the needs of the active apostolate may be, an honorable place in the Mystical Body of Christ,”<sup>24</sup> commends the continued witness of monastic life<sup>25</sup>; and describes the content of the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience.<sup>26</sup> The next sections treat the common life centered around the liturgy as a sign of Christ’s presence and a “source of great apostolic energy”<sup>27</sup>; the importance of religious, human, and professional education and formation of young religious<sup>28</sup>;

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<sup>21</sup> PC 3

<sup>22</sup> PC 17

<sup>23</sup> PC 5, 6

<sup>24</sup> PC 7

<sup>25</sup> PC 9

<sup>26</sup> PC 12, 13, 14

<sup>27</sup> PC 15

<sup>28</sup> PC 18

and recommends that formation of federations or conferences of nuns and of major superiors of religious institutes be formed in union with the Holy See.<sup>29</sup> Secular institutes, which like religious institutes involve “true and full profession of the evangelical counsels in the world,” are distinguished from religious institutes in that members of secular institutes live in the world and have their own “proper, i.e., secular character, so that they may be able to carry out effectively everywhere in and, as it were, from the world the apostolate for which they were founded.”<sup>30</sup>

Religious are reminded of their vital relationship with the Church no less than 33 times in the document. “The Church gladly welcomed and approved by her authority”<sup>31</sup> the Holy Spirit’s inspirations of hermits and founders of religious families. Authentic renewal will be carried out “under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Church”<sup>32</sup>; the life and work of religious belong to the life, essence, upbuilding, and richness of the Church; “since the Church has accepted their surrender of self,” i.e. in the profession of vows in a stable form of life approved by the Church, individual religious “should realize they are also dedicated to its service.”<sup>33</sup> Their apostolate is a “glory of the Church,” in whose name they minister.<sup>34</sup> The life, vows, and apostolic labors of religious are thus intimately tied not only to the spiritual but also to the institutional and structural life of the Church.

The tension of the unchanging eternal meeting the changing today was felt throughout the Church as the task of implementing the Council’s texts began.<sup>35</sup> In a Christmas address to the

<sup>29</sup> PC 22, 23

<sup>30</sup> PC 11

<sup>31</sup> PC 1

<sup>32</sup> PC 2

<sup>33</sup> PC 5

<sup>34</sup> PC 7, 8

<sup>35</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily for at the Holy Mass opening the Year of Faith, October 11, 2012 (Accessed April 6, 2018),

[http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20121011\\_anno-fede.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20121011_anno-fede.html).

Curia in the first year of his pontificate, Benedict XVI described two main hermeneutics of interpreting the Council: the “hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture” in contrast to the “hermeneutic of reform, of renewal in continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us...a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same.”<sup>36</sup> The hermeneutic of discontinuity, on the other hand, “has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of modern theology,” and unfortunately “risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church. It asserts that the texts of the Council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the Council,” and that “it would be necessary not to follow the texts of the Council but its spirit” in order to be faithful to the impulses toward innovation that are the “deepest intention Council.” The hermeneutic of discontinuity left open a “vast margin” for “the question on how this spirit should subsequently be defined and room was consequently made for every whim.” There is no change without some discontinuity. The hermeneutic of continuity, however, takes adaptation as a development of a single subject, rather than a rupture which makes a break with the past in order to bring a new being into existence. “It is precisely in this combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels that the very nature of true reform consists.”<sup>37</sup>

The hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture gained the upper hand in public consciousness following the Council, including many in the American Church. Walch gave expression to this hermeneutic in *Parish School* when he claimed that “through Vatican II, the Church radically revised its teaching on religious and theological issues and created a modern

<sup>36</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2005 (Accessed April 6, 2018), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_2005\\_1222\\_roman-curia.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_2005_1222_roman-curia.html).

<sup>37</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2005.

liturgy in the vernacular.” It should be clear by this point that the Council sought not to radically revise its teaching, nor primarily to make superficial liturgical changes, but rather to return to the essentials of the Gospel and to make that Gospel heard afresh in the contemporary world, including returning the liturgy and the celebration of Holy Mass to its rightful place as the “source and summit” of the Christian life.<sup>38</sup>

More strident and radical examples of the discontinuity-rupture of the Council emerged even before the Council ended in 1965. This includes responses by many religious and priests to the Council’s call for the renewal and adaptation of religious life, which in turn had profound effects on the Catholic school system in America. Ann Carey subjected Church documents and the records of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious to rigorous scrutiny in her 1997 *Sisters in Crisis* and in updated 2013 edition. She asks:

“Why, then, did many well-intentioned sisters sincerely believe that they were following the teaching of the Council by living alone in apartments, wearing secular clothing, interacting only rarely with members of their community, and engaging in occupations totally unrelated to the Catholic Church? Why did those sisters who began stressing missions to serve ‘marginalized people’ also begin ignoring Church authority?...[T]he content of the Council documents was misinterpreted, transposed, and even disregarded by religious and their advisers. Thus, the renewal of religious institutes foreseen by the Council fathers did not resemble what really happened in many American convents.”<sup>39</sup>

The Second Vatican Council took place against the backdrop of the tumultuous “Sixties”: the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, President Johnson’s War on Poverty, the second wave of the feminist movement, liberation theology, the sexual revolution, and, later, the Equal Rights Amendment. The prevailing cultural atmosphere of social and political activism, as well as disillusionment with authority and the past, made its way into the adaptations in religious life. The call to work for social justice led many communities to leave traditional apostolates such as

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<sup>38</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 42-3

teaching and nursing for the justice issues of the times, such as racial justice, peace, and ecology. The universal call to perfect holiness was interpreted by some as a call away from privilege and elitism to a radical solidarity with all people, and led to a rejection of many of the distinctive elements of religious life, including a distinctive habit; ascetical or penitential practices; devotional practices; common life conceived as living under one roof under the direction of a local superior; having parts of the daily horarium in common; and self-chosen, open-placement ministry. Carey and Caruso cite the research of sociologist Roger Finke to the effect that “the decline in communal living, the loss of distinctive dress, and the increase in individual autonomy all increase nongroup activity.”<sup>40</sup> One of the unintended consequences of the renewal project thus conceived was the mass exodus of priests and religious from formerly burgeoning communities.

The vows, furthermore, were at times radically redefined and emptied of their essential content. At her 2008 address at the Symposium on Apostolic Religious Life at Stonehill College in Massachusetts, Sr. Sara Butler, M.S.B.T noted that according to some, chastity became “loving generously” or “relatedness,” poverty became “living simply” for “mutual sustainability” and “justice-making,” and obedience became “listening attentively for indications of God’s will,” “mutual collaboration,” or dialogue.<sup>41</sup> She pointed out the problem with these redefinitions: “But one cannot vow to do what is already required!”<sup>42</sup> The practice of the virtues are required for all; a vow is a “deliberate and free promise made to God about a possible and better good [which]

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<sup>40</sup> Roger Finke and Ann Carey, cited in Caruso, *When the Sisters Said Farewell*, 55

<sup>41</sup> Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M. and Diarmuid O’Murch, M.S.C., quoted in Sara Butler, M.S.B.T., “Apostolic religious life: A public, ecclesial vocation,” in R. Gribble (Ed.), *Apostolic religious life in America today: A response to the crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 47.

<sup>42</sup> Butler, “Apostolic Religious Life,” 47

must be fulfilled by reason of the virtue of religion.”<sup>43</sup> Citing the canonical definitions of the three vows, Sr. Sara continued:

While it is true that the ‘perfection’ of the vows lies in the practice of the virtues, the vows themselves commit the religious to very specific obligations that, taken together, give distinctive shape to their way of life. By the vow of chastity they oblige themselves to observe perfect continence in celibacy. By poverty, they promise to be dependent upon their religious institutes and to follow their laws about the use and disposition of goods. By obedience religious submit their wills to lawful superiors when they command in keeping with the constitutions. Religious freely choose to do this out of a desire to return love for love by making a total gift of themselves to Christ. They make a serious, public commitment, on the order of marriage, and the Church, by accepting their vows, consecrates them--sets them apart--as public witnesses to the transcendent value of belonging wholly to the Lord and seeking first the coming of his kingdom.<sup>44</sup>

This reshaping of the vows, therefore, emptied them of their essential content. The religious life thus conceived became indistinguishable from that of a generous and dedicated layperson, or perhaps that of another form of consecrated life such as a secular institute. In this climate, religious vocations slowed dramatically and religious and priests left in large numbers.

Another powerful factor contributing to the ferment in religious life was a “crisis of faith with respect to the origin, structure, and authority of the Church that has affected the relations between apostolic religious and the hierarchy--the so-called institutional hierarchy.”<sup>45</sup> These “different ecclesiologies” are manifested by the phenomena of public dissent from Church teachings as manifested by Father Charles Curran and the priests and religious who signed the abortion ad in the New York Times; the backlash against Humanae Vitae; perseveration on women’s ordination; protests against teachings on divorce and remarriage; differing approaches to ministry to persons with homosexual inclinations; and, finally, a crisis of authority. Those who proposed a “discipleship of equals” ecclesiology set the hierarchical Church against the Church

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<sup>43</sup> Canon 1191§1 [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_P4E.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_P4E.HTM)

<sup>44</sup> Butler p. 47, citing Canons 599-601

<sup>45</sup> Butler p. 44

as People of God, conceived of as an unstructured community.<sup>46</sup> This latter is not the Church of the Gospels, however. Ultimately, the Church's teaching and governing authority derive from Christ, who said to the apostles, the nucleus of the hierarchical structure of the Church: "Whoever hears you, hears me" (Luke 10:16). As the hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture artificially sets the post-Vatican II Church against the pre-Vatican II Church, so does an anti-hierarchical Church oppose the hierarchical Church to the Church as the People of God. Both dichotomies are false. In reality, there is only one Mystical Body of Christ, one People of God, and one bride of Christ, of whom religious are public witnesses.

One reason for some more extreme interpretations of the Council is the often indirect manner in which the Council texts reached many individual religious. Rather than reading the texts themselves, conciliar texts often trickled to American Sisters through the filter of "experts" or the media. "I think it would be safe to say that all communities have suffered greatly during this post-Conciliar period. Sufficient time was not taken to read and absorb the documents," wrote Sister M. Claudia Honsberger, I.H.M.<sup>47</sup> Carey notes that a group of Sisters attending a meeting in Grailville, Ohio in 1964 to study preliminary drafts of Vatican II documents published a book called *The Changing Sister* the next year, which in turn influenced the "Sisters' Survey" sent to almost all American religious women in 1967. Thus, non-definitive versions of Council texts in were filtered through many layers of personal interpretation before they reached many Sisters. Most Sisters also lacked ready access to the prescriptions of Canon Law because of the paucity of English translations and because women were not permitted to study in canon-law

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<sup>46</sup> Butler p. 59

<sup>47</sup> Sister M. Claudia Honsberger, I.H.M., "Women Religious and Church Authority," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (December 1984), 21, quoted in Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 42.

departments until after the Council, and so depended on the assistance of so-called experts in interpreting and applying ecclesiastical legislation to the task of renewal and adaptation.

Another explanation for the rapid changes was the varied reception and implementation of Paul VI's motu proprio *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, issued in 1966. This directive explicitly allowed religious communities to experiment with changes to their constitutions and customs books while the revisions to the Code of Canon Law were underway. These experiments were to be proposed in a community's General Chapter in 1968, tested by experienced and then evaluated at the next Chapter, with helpful changes being incorporated into institutes' constitutions and unhelpful experiments being discontinued. While the period of experimentation was underway, deviations from the Code of Canon law of 1917 required Vatican permission but Sisters did not always have direct or reliable access to the text of canon law. Hence, radical deviations from canon law were not always detected nor proper permissions sought. In 1983, John Paul II issued the updated Code and the Congregation for Religious issued *Essential Elements on Church Teaching in Religious Life*. The latter document announced the end of the period of experimentation and listed characteristics considered to be indispensable and irreplaceable for the nature and purpose of religious life to be realized:

The Church regards certain elements as essential to religious life: the call of God and consecration to him through profession of the evangelical counsels by public vows; a stable form of community life; for institutes dedicated to apostolic works, a sharing in Christ's mission by a corporate apostolate faithful to a specific founding gift and sound tradition; personal and community prayer; asceticism; public witness; a specific relation to the Church; a life-long formation; and a form of government calling for religious authority based on faith.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate*, May 31, 1983. Accessed April 6, 2018.

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccsrlife\\_doc\\_31051983\\_magisterium-on-religious-life\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_31051983_magisterium-on-religious-life_en.html).

Carey summarizes the reaction of American religious to *Essential Elements* by pointing out that “most change-oriented orders did not apply *Essential Elements* to their lifestyle and governance, but rather they continued to define religious life in their own terms.”<sup>49</sup>

A deep crisis of authority permeated religious life as it permeated much of the Church and world in the turbulent 1960s and 70s. In 1970, superiors of American religious men and women circulated the “Statement on American Religious Life in the Seventies,” exhorting American religious to determine their own course of renewal and to function democratically.<sup>50</sup> Tensions moving toward rejection of the authority of the Church became more and more explicit. When Paul VI issued the apostolic exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio* with observations on the positive and negative renewal movements in religious life, the LCWR responded with a critique of the document titled *Widening the Dialogue*. Throughout this period, religious life in the U.S. tended to become polarized as the gap between what Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh described as “tradition-oriented” and “change-oriented” religious and communities widened.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 63.

<sup>50</sup> The democratic sensibilities characteristic of the post-Enlightenment Western world perceived some measure of validation in the Council’s use of the biblical image of the People of God for the Church. While the biblical image of the Church as the People of God gained prominence at Vatican II, it cannot be maintained that this image superseded or replaced the image of the Kingdom of God. The primary, most frequently used image of the Church in all four Gospels is the Kingdom of God; the Church as God’s people appears explicitly only in 1 Peter 2:9-12. It would be difficult to make a convincing argument on the basis of either the New Testament or the Council texts themselves that Vatican II replaced the image of the Church as kingdom with the image of the Church as People of God. Both images are prevalent in the conciliar texts. In *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), a word study reveals that “King” or “kingdom” is used 6 and 38 times, respectively. The phrase “People of God” or related expressions are used 72 times in the same document.” *Gaudium et Spes*, the 1965 pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, has 14 uses of the word “people” in reference “the people of God,” and 9 uses of the “Kingdom of God” and related phrases. The Church, in other words, while she is both “human and divine,” is emphatically not a democracy. Her power and authority does not derive from the consent of the governed, but from God. *Lumen Gentium* affirms the divinely instituted source of the hierarchical and structured dimensions of the Church’s life no less than fifteen times, including but not limited to the chapter titled “On the Hierarchical Structure of the Church and in Particular on the Episcopate.”

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Carey (2012) p. 16

The aftermath of the “Sister’s Survey” could be a case study in the hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture followed to its logical, practical consequences. The starting point, the survey itself was a measurement instrument derived from non-authoritative personal interpretations of non-authoritative translations of the Council texts. Ann Carey convincingly shows how the closed-ended nature of questions on the survey have been criticized as slanted against the traditional understanding of religious life.<sup>52</sup> Sr. Marie Augusta Neal developed a “pre-Vatican II” and “post-Vatican II” rating scale to interpret the survey’s results, which she presented in an address to the superiors attending the Conference of Major Religious Superiors of Women’s Institutes (CMSW) national assembly in 1967. A Sister was “post-Vatican II” if she was “oriented to the thinking of Vatican II. A low score on this scale indicates the opposite.”<sup>53</sup> Respondents who affirmed that personal sanctification comes before the duties of the apostolate, and that prayer is the best contribution that Sisters can make to world problems were considered to be “pre-Vatican II” on Sr. Marie Augusta’s scale notwithstanding the Council’s insistence on the primacy of personal holiness for all, and the presentation in *Perfectae Caritatis* of prayer as the source that “energizes” religious in their love for God and neighbor, the faithful observance of the vows, and their apostolic activity.<sup>54</sup>

Religious obedience also came into question as some religious sought to change the essential meaning of the vows. Whereas *Lumen Gentium* and *Perfectae Caritatis* presented the evangelical counsel of obedience as a genuine self-emptying of will in imitation of Christ, who freely chose to submit to the will of the Father for the salvation of all, Sr. Marie Augusta seemed to characterize Sisters who endorsed obedience and hard work with “over-submissiveness to

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<sup>52</sup> Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 166ff.

<sup>53</sup> Neal quoted in Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 175.

<sup>54</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 6.

legitimate authority along with an aggression against defenseless people...a proneness for fascism that is an easy acceptance of arbitrary strong command.”<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, within four years, when a small enclave of change-oriented Sisters pushed through the thoroughgoing revision of the name, statutes, bylaws, and membership qualifications on the women superiors’ conference, it was many of the tradition-oriented Sisters who resisted these changes as a heavy-handed imposition, and it was many of the progressive-oriented Sisters who assented to the coup. Thus the re-named, re-organized, and re-philosophized Leadership Conference of Women Religious emerged out of the 1971 assembly of the Conference of Major Religious Superiors of Women’s Institutes (CMSW). Many tradition-oriented Sisters asserted their determination to be represented by a forum which upheld the teaching and authority of the Church, including the teachings of Vatican II on religious life, and founded the group Consortium Perfectae Caritatis. This group later reorganized into the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, which was recognized by the Vatican and received canonical status in 1992. Thus, it was the vocal tradition-oriented Sisters who demonstrated the *least* “easy acceptance of arbitrary strong command” at the 1971 assembly and its aftermath.

The trees of discontinuity on the one hand and of continuity on the other can both be known by their fruits. Following the path of reform outlined by the hermeneutic of discontinuity, vocations to religious life all but dried up as religious left and as new membership failed to meet the rate of those aging and infirmed. On the other hand, the 2009 study “Recent Vocations to Religious Life” by Georgetown’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) found that religious institutes whose members live in community, are hopeful about their future, have a

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<sup>55</sup> Sister Marie Augusta Neal quoted in Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 174.

strong Catholic identity, and have a structured prayer life, are most likely to attract new members.<sup>56</sup> While numbers do not tell the whole story, and while there are communities of tradition-oriented Sisters that have diminished and some that have disappeared, the numbers do seem to suggest that religious life lived according to the mind of the Church is attracting and retaining vocations, and in some cases experiencing remarkable growth. Some of these communities were founded after the Council, and some were founded before it and embarked upon the path of renewal in continuity with the Church's tradition. The Missionaries of Charity founded by Mother Teresa, the Sisters of Life founded by John Cardinal O'Connor, the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia, the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist, the Franciscan Friars and Sisters of the Renewal in New York, the Franciscan Sisters of the Martyr St. George, and the Dominican Friars in the United States: these examples are among the many Institutes living the “essential elements” religious life according to the mind of the Church and experiencing new vocations entering and persevering through perpetual profession.

Ann Carey paints a vivid picture of a rebellious mainstream in the LCWR which steadily opposed the authority of the hierarchical Church, in particular its teachings on issues related to sexuality and gender, and lent its support to voices at odds with Church teaching, continuing into the 21st century. Teachings by the magisterium and decisions of the Holy See or members of the hierarchy tended to be treated as patriarchal impositions with which to dialogue or reject, but not to obey. One of the more notorious examples of so-called “loyal dissent”<sup>57</sup> occurred on Respect Sunday in 1984, when a full-page *New York Times* ad ran claiming that the Catholic Church’s

<sup>56</sup> CARA, “Recent Vocations to the Religious Life,” 2009, cited in [https://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAREsearch/Vocation\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAREsearch/Vocation_Fact_Sheet.pdf) (Accessed April 12, 2018); Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 64, 225.

<sup>57</sup> Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 19.

condemnation of abortion was not the only “legitimate Catholic position on abortion,” including signatures of priests and twenty-six women religious. In 2007, Sister Laurie Brink, OP said that some groups of sisters are “no longer ecclesiastical” and “post-Christian”<sup>58</sup>: having “grown beyond the bounds of institutional religion...Who’s to say that the movement beyond Christ is not, in reality, a movement into the very heart of God?”<sup>59</sup> The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith doctrinal assessment of the LCWR found this address a “serious source of scandal...incompatible with religious life.” Thus the crisis of authority accompanied and was influenced by a crisis of faith in revealed truth and in the authority of the Church’s hierarchy to speak in the name of Christ. Doubts about faith and morals influenced the reception of authority and vice versa.

In January 2009, the Congregation for Religious announced an apostolic visitation of women religious to “look into the quality of life of religious women” in the United States.<sup>60</sup> Mother Clare Millea, ASCJ, the American Superior General of the Congregation of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart, was delegated as apostolic delegate to conduct the visitation. It might be expected that an apostolic visitation headed by a American woman religious with advanced degrees in psychology, education, and canon law would be hailed as good news by those who had been calling for the Vatican to listen to the lived experience of American women religious. The LCWR greeted the announcement with “surprise” and expressed uncertainty as to its purpose, in its public statement that “The board also seeks understanding of how the visitation will

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<sup>58</sup> Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, p. 21

<sup>59</sup> Sister Laurie Brink, OP, “A Martinal Life: Pursuing Holiness in the 21st century,” keynote address at LCWR assembly 2007,

[https://lcwr.org/sites/default/files/calendar/attachments/2007\\_Keynote\\_Address-Laurie\\_Brink-OP.pdf](https://lcwr.org/sites/default/files/calendar/attachments/2007_Keynote_Address-Laurie_Brink-OP.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> Apostolic visitation website, accessed April 14, 2018, <http://www.apostolicvisitation.org/en/index.html>.

augment the significant discernment and study processes already inherent in religious life.”<sup>61</sup> Sister Sandra Schneiders, IHM, a longtime supporter of the progressive project of renewal, suggested in an 2009 article that the visitation was an example of the Church’s “patriarchal control agenda,” “another spasm in this misogynistic agenda.”<sup>62</sup> Earlier that year, Sister Sandra allowed an e-mail to be published in the *National Catholic Reporter* entitled “We have given birth to a new form of Religious Life” in which she stated:

I do not put any credence at all in the claim that this is friendly, transparent, aimed to be helpful, etc. It is a hostile move and the conclusions are already in. It is meant to be intimidating...We cannot, of course, keep them from investigating. But we can receive them, politely and kindly, for what they are, uninvited guests who should be received in the parlor, not given the run of the house.<sup>63</sup>

Not all religious or congregations represented in the LCWR necessarily shared the views of the conference’s leadership, as the national board’s own statement acknowledged. The response from the CMSWR’s chairperson Mother Quentin Sheridan, RSM was positive: “The Council welcomes the visitation and we ask our membership to pray for this endeavor and to cooperate in whatever way necessary in order that the visitation will be a fruitful outcome for all women religious in the United States for the sake of the Church.”<sup>64</sup>

Ann Carey concluded her study of women’s religious life since Vatican II with the doctrinal assessment of the LCWR published in 2012, which called for reform of the organization and was affirmed by Pope Francis in 2013. While her revised book purports to continue the story “from unravelling to reform and renewal,” in reality the revised text continues

<sup>61</sup> LCWR National Board’s Statement on the Vatican’s Apostolic Visitation, February 20, 2009 (Accessed April 12, 2018),

<https://lcwr.org/media/february-20-2009-lcwr-national-boards-statement-vaticans-apostolic-visitation>.

<sup>62</sup> Sister Sara Schneiders, Discerning ministerial religious life today, September 22, 2009, (Accessed April 12, 2018), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/discriminating-ministerial-religious-life-today>.

<sup>63</sup> Sandra Schneiders, IHM, “We Have Given Birth to a New Form of Religious Life,” *National Catholic Reporter*, February 27, 2009, quoted in Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 345.

<sup>64</sup> CMSWR statement of Mother Quentin Sheridan, R.S.M., April 23, 2009, quoted in Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 344.

the same narrative of the clash of unravelling between the LCWR and the institutional Church and the polarization between the LCWR and CMSWR with minimal attention to the positive fruits of reform and renewal. The main exception Carey does point out is the 2009 CARA study “Recent Vocations to Religious Life” which found that religious institutes whose members live in community, are hopeful about their future, have a strong Catholic identity, and have a structured prayer life, are most likely to attract newer members.<sup>65</sup> The National Religious Vocation Conference, publishing the results of the 2009 CARA study, among others, noted that in 2012, approximately 160 women and men professed perpetual vows in religious life, of whom approximately 110 were sisters or nuns; furthermore, some religious institutes continue to attract and few are experiencing significant growth, with about 20 percent of religious institutes having more than five members in formation.<sup>66</sup>

### **Catholic education in the US after Vatican II**

In 1965, there were about 180,000 Sisters in America. When the Vatican Council ended, more than 104,000 Sisters were teaching in Catholic schools in that country. By 1970, the number of women religious in the country had declined by 19,000. By 2000, there were 81,000, and by 2012, there were 55,000, with the median age in the seventies.<sup>67</sup> By 1975, over half of the teaching Sisters left Catholic schools; by 1975 there were approximately 56,000 sisters teaching in Catholic schools and by 1985, the number of teaching Sisters dropped to little over 30,000; by

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<sup>65</sup> National Religious Vocations Vocation Conference, “Vocation Fact Sheet” (accessed April 12, 2018), [https://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAResearch/Vocation\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAResearch/Vocation_Fact_Sheet.pdf); Carey *Sisters in Crisis* 64, 225.

<sup>66</sup> National Religious Vocations Vocation Conference, “Vocations to Religious Life Fact Sheet” (accessed April 12, 2018), [https://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAResearch/Vocation\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAResearch/Vocation_Fact_Sheet.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 37-39

2012 only about 4,000 sisters were teaching in Catholic schools.<sup>68</sup> The National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) lists the professional staff as 97.4% laity and 2.6% religious/clergy in 2017.<sup>69</sup> In 1965 there were 10,5000 Catholic elementary schools serving approximately 4.5 million children. By 2012 the number was almost half, with 5,378 schools serving 1.3 children. Catholic high schools numbered 1,500 in 1965, enrolling around 698,000 students. By 2012, there were 327,345 students in 721 parochial high schools and private Catholic high schools declined from about 900 schools with 390,000 students in 1965 to 595 schools with approximately 296,268 students in 2012.<sup>70</sup> The NCEA lists nearly 1.9 million total students enrolled in Catholic school enrollment for Elementary/Middle and Secondary schools combined in 2017.<sup>71</sup> Between 1965-2012 the Catholic population grew by 20 million in the country, and during the same period Catholic institutions were closing at a rapid rate. Thus millions of Catholics were underserved by Church institutions.

Various factors underlie the decline in number of religious teaching in schools and the dwindling numbers of Catholic schools. Father Caruso explains that fewer young women were entering religious life, due in part to smaller average family sizes which often made parents less willing to embrace their child's religious or priestly vocation. The open placement system, furthermore, saw many Sisters leaving Catholic schools for other ministries for which they felt more personally called. Fewer Sisters staffing Catholic schools on low wages and consequent

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<sup>68</sup> Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 39-40.

<sup>69</sup> National Catholic Educational Association, "NCEA Fact Sheet" (accessed April 14, 2018), [http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catholic-education/k-12/upload/2017\\_infographic.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catholic-education/k-12/upload/2017_infographic.pdf).

<sup>70</sup> Carey, *Sisters in Crisis Revisited*, 40.

<sup>71</sup> National Catholic Educational Association, "NCEA Fact Sheet" (accessed April 14, 2018), [http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catholic-education/k-12/upload/2017\\_infographic.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catholic-education/k-12/upload/2017_infographic.pdf).

need to hire lay teachers and to pay them a living wage and provide benefits taxed the already-strained school coffers. Walch detailed how the shrinking, merging, and large-scale closure of urban parish schools and concomitant Catholic flight from large cities to suburban areas that was not matched by the building of suburban Catholic parishes and schools, into the first two decades of the twenty-first century. In addition, clergy, religious, and laity questioned whether Catholic schools still served a purpose in the Church from the 1960s to the 1980s, which further contributed to the closure, merging, and declining enrollment in Catholic schools during the period.<sup>72</sup>

During the same period, however, the Church consistently upheld the importance of Catholic education and the evangelical witness of consecrated men, women and priests working in Catholic schools alongside the laity. In addition to its documents addressing religious, the Council also reaffirmed the importance of Christian education as a ministry in the Church in the Declaration *Gravissimum Educationis* devoted to Christian education (October 28, 1965). This Declaration asserted a universal human right to education<sup>73</sup>, and a universal right for all Christians to receive a Christian education.<sup>74</sup> It also affirmed that parents are the “primary and principal educators” of their children. That specific sections in this document are devoted to schools in general, and Catholic schools in particular, implies a broad notion of education that includes but is not limited to the school institution, whether Catholic or public. This Declaration ends with a clarion call to young people to consider becoming educators to teach the youth of the future, and exhorts priests, religious, and laypeople involved in the work of education to persevere in the task they have generously begun:

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. Walch, *Parish School*, Chapter 12.

<sup>73</sup> *Gravissimum Educationis* n. 1.

<sup>74</sup> *Gravissimum Educationis* n. 2.

The sacred synod earnestly entreats young people themselves to become aware of the importance of the work of education and to prepare themselves to take it up, especially where because of a shortage of teachers the education of youth is in jeopardy. This same sacred synod, while professing its gratitude to priests, Religious men and women, and the laity who by their evangelical self-dedication are devoted to the noble work of education and of schools of every type and level, exhorts them to persevere generously in the work they have undertaken and, imbuing their students with the spirit of Christ, to strive to excel in pedagogy and the pursuit of knowledge in such a way that they not merely advance the internal renewal of the Church but preserve and enhance its beneficent influence upon today's world, especially the intellectual world.<sup>75</sup>

The Council thus reaffirmed the importance of Catholic education and Catholic schools as a ministry of evangelization and social justice. It exhorts priests, religious, and laity to persevere in the work of education.

Following the expression and praxis of the Catholic faith in the world at large and in the United States underwent significant *aggiornamento* (updating) in the decades following the Council. The dramatic decrease of women religious teaching in Catholic schools in the U.S. posed a serious challenge to the parochial system in which Sisters largely staffed and administered Catholic schools and brought a consequent rise in lay staffing and leadership for which Catholic schools were more or less prepared. When the number of teaching Sisters in communities were shrinking due to fewer vocations, alternate ministries, and retirement, teaching communities with a shrinking number of Sisters frequently, they tended to leave more affluent schools in the care of lay persons and devote the community's resources to their schools for the urban poor.

Different views of pedagogy in the faith also had major effects on how the Catholic faith was presented in Catholic schools. The Baltimore Catechism, an American mainstay of teaching the Church's faith since its publication following the Third Council of Baltimore in 1885, came

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<sup>75</sup> *Gravissimum Educationis*, Conclusion.

to be seen by many as an instrument of “indoctrination” out of step with Vatican II.<sup>76</sup> Personal assent, freedom from coercion, discussion and faith-sharing came to be prioritized over catechesis, that is, systematic teaching of the truths of the Catholic faith in light of a personal relationship with Christ. The dichotomy is unnecessary, however. While a living faith is not the same as rote memorization of questions and answers, it is true that God has revealed Himself the answers to mankind’s deepest questions in Christ in a way addressed not only to the heart of man but also to his mind. The faith must be learned before it can be freely embraced. What--and who--is not known cannot be loved, accepted, shared, or discussed. When living certainties of faith are replaced by vague theological and ethical affirmations in religion classrooms, then taken in combination with the crisis of faith and authority in the Church and the person of Christ discussed already, the result is a generation of Catholics who did not learn the faith in their Catholic schools. The experience of one woman who attended Catholic grade school with the School Sisters of Notre Dame in a small town in southeast Illinois during the 1960s unwittingly summarized the problem when she poignantly lamented in 2018, “I was never catechized. How do I get catechized?”

The crisis of authority was felt also in Catholic higher education. In 1967 Notre Dame’s Father Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., gathered his Catholic university administrator peers in Land O’ Lakes, Wisconsin to draft and sign the “Land O’ Lakes Statement,” which declared independence of Catholic universities from “authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself.”<sup>77</sup> In 1990, John Paul II’s charter for Catholic Universities, *Ex*

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<sup>76</sup> Anthony S.. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, Peter B. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993, 49.

<sup>77</sup> Patrick Reilly, “The Land O’ Lakes Statement Has Caused Devastation For 50 Years,” Cardinal Newman Society,” July 20, 2017 (Accessed April 13, 2018), <https://cardinalnewmansociety.org/land-o-lakes-statement-caused-devastation-50-years/>.

*Corde Ecclesiae*, would repudiate the notion that academic freedom can be separated from fidelity to the Church's authority in a Catholic school, but much of the damage had already been done in sacrificing Catholic identity and mission to relativistic values and academic prestige.

On the home front, American Bishops continued to emphasize the importance of Catholic education. National Conference of Catholic bishops in 1972 issued the pastoral message *To Teach as Jesus Did*, emphasizing the themes of community and service.<sup>78</sup> In their 1979 pastoral letter "Brothers and Sisters to Us" on racism, the US bishops presented Catholic schools as a social justice imperative for disadvantaged inner city youth:

Finally, we urgently recommend the continuation and expansion of Catholic schools in the inner cities and other disadvantaged areas. No other form of Christian ministry has been more widely acclaimed or desperately sought by leaders of various racial communities. For a century and a half the Church in the United States has been distinguished by its efforts to educate the poor and disadvantaged, many of whom are not of the Catholic faith. That tradition continues today in - among other places - Catholic schools, where so many blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asians receive a form of education and formation which constitutes a key to greater freedom and dignity. It would be tragic if today, in the face of acute need and even near despair, the Church, for centuries the teacher and the guardian of civilization, should withdraw from this work in our own society. No sacrifice can be so great, no price can be so high, no short-range goals can be so important as to warrant the lessening of our commitment to Catholic education in minority neighborhoods. More affluent parishes should be made aware of this need and of their opportunity to share resources with the poor and needy in a way that recognizes the dignity of both giver and receiver.<sup>79</sup>

The Vatican unwaveringly upheld the central importance of Catholic education in the years following the Council. Between 1977 and 2017, the Sacred Congregation for Education, the Vatican's education arm, published ten documents on Catholic schools in particular. The complementarity of the distinct contributions of the laity, religious, and priests within the educational communities of Catholic schools in the human, cultural, and religious formation of

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<sup>78</sup> US Catholic Bishops, *To Teach as Jesus Did: A Pastoral Message on Catholic Education*. Accessed April 12, 2018. <http://store.usccb.org/to-teach-as-jesus-did-p/063-x.htm>.

<sup>79</sup> US Catholic Bishops, "Brothers and Sisters to Us," 1979 (Accessed April 12, 2018). <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/brothers-and-sisters-to-us.cfm>.

young people was highlighted in *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (1982)<sup>80</sup>, “Consecrated Persons and their Mission in Schools: Reflections and Guidelines” (2002)<sup>81</sup>, and “Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful” (2007).<sup>82</sup> Common themes that emerge from these ten texts include the Catholic school as a privileged forum for the human, cultural, and Christian formation of young people; the right and duty of Catholic schools to transmit the Gospel; religious freedom not as a relativistic despair in the possibility of knowing the truth or a rejection of revealed truth, but rather faith in Christ as a free invitation or proposal rather than an imposition; and the Catholic school as an open community in often pluralistic societies.

For example, the Congregation for Catholic Education’s Declaration “The Catholic School” in 1977 followed *Gravissimum Educationis* in affirming the importance of the Catholic school in the Church’s evangelizing and humanizing mission:

The specific mission of the school, then, is a critical, systematic transmission of culture in the light of faith and the bringing forth of the power of Christian virtue by the integration of culture with faith and of faith with living. Consequently, the Catholic school is aware of the importance of the Gospel-teaching as transmitted through the Catholic Church. It is, indeed, the fundamental element in the educative process as it helps the pupil towards his conscious choice of living a responsible and coherent way of life...The fundamental difference between religious and other forms of education is that its aim is not simply

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<sup>80</sup> Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (1982, accessed April 12, 2018).

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_19821015\\_lay-catholics\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19821015_lay-catholics_en.html).

<sup>81</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *Consecrated Persons and their Mission in Schools: Reflections and Guidelines*, 2002 (accessed April 12, 2014),

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20021028\\_consecrated-persons\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20021028_consecrated-persons_en.html).

<sup>82</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful*, 2007 (accessed April 12, 2018),

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20070908\\_educare-insieme\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20070908_educare-insieme_en.html).

intellectual assent to religious truths but also a total commitment of one's whole being to the Person of Christ.<sup>83</sup>

The text also points to the vital witness of solidarity and community that the Catholic school can give to an individualistic society, of encountering what is true and noble in other cultures, offering the light of the Gospel in a pluralistic society. The declaration repeatedly calls upon religious to embrace the educational apostolate anew, particularly those in Institutes founded for this purpose.<sup>84</sup> The Congregation for Catholic Education published the document *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* in 1982. This text emphasizes the school as an “educational community,” and reaffirms the Council’s frequently-repeated teachings that the “call to personal holiness and to apostolic mission is common to all believers; but there are many cases in which the life of a lay person takes on specific characteristics which transform this life into a specific ‘wonderful’ vocation within the Church.”<sup>85</sup> The wonderful vocation of the human, spiritual, and cultural formation of young people calls for professional and religious formation of those who would educate them.<sup>86</sup> The Church confidently entrusts this mission to laypersons: “The Church puts its trust in them, entrusting them with the task of gradually bringing about an integration of temporal reality with the Gospel, so that the Gospel can thus reach into the lives of all men and women. More particularly, it has entrusted them with the integral human formation and the faith

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<sup>83</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School*, 1977 (accessed April 13, 2018), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_19770319\\_catholic-school\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19770319_catholic-school_en.html), nn. 49-50.

<sup>84</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School*, nn. 74-76, 89

<sup>85</sup> Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, “Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith,” October 15, 1982, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_19821015\\_lay-catholics\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19821015_lay-catholics_en.html), n. 7.

<sup>86</sup> “Lay Catholics in Schools,” Chapter III.

education of young people.”<sup>87</sup> In 2017, The Congregation for Catholic Education wrote that Catholic schools educate “to fraternal humanism” and are “building a civilization of love.”<sup>88</sup>

Perhaps the most stirring magisterial affirmation of the beauty of consecrated life and the necessity of consecrated persons in the field of education is found in *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul II’s 1996 apostolic exhortation “On the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World.” This paper will limit itself to examining those passages which concern education. John Paul II used some form of the word “education,” “educate,” or “educator” twenty-five times. Of these, one was directed to the need for *modern consecrated women* specifically to receive the human and spiritual formation to equip them for their religious life and apostolate:

Moreover, the formation of consecrated women, no less than that of men, should be adapted to modern needs and should provide sufficient time and suitable institutional opportunities for a systematic education, extending to all areas, from the theological-pastoral to the professional. Pastoral and catechetical formation, always important, is particularly relevant in view of the new evangelization, which calls for new forms of participation also on the part of women.<sup>89</sup>

This statement echoes Pius XII’s 1952 exhortation to religious in *Sponsa Christi* and agrees with Sister Madaleva’s “The Education of Sister Lucy” in that preparation for the life and mission of a religious community include professional training when necessary. In n. 66, John Paul II refers to the Blessed Trinity as the “educator *par excellence*” of consecrated persons (emphasis in the original). The other twenty-three references to education highlight the necessity of the work of education for the needs of the Church and the world in the modern day, indeed at all times. The

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<sup>87</sup> “Lay Catholics in Schools,” n. 81

<sup>88</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, “Educating to Fraternal Humanism: Building a ‘Civilization of Love’ 50 years after *Populorum Progressio*,” April 16, 2017, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20170416\\_educare-umanesimo-solidale\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20170416_educare-umanesimo-solidale_en.html)

<sup>89</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* (On the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World), March 25, 1996 (Accessed April 4, 2018), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_25031996\\_vita-consecrata.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html), 58.

educational activity of consecrated persons is “of great importance” in countries with a substantial presence of non-Christian religions (78). Consecrated chastity assists in educating others in the virtue of chastity corresponding to other states of life (88). Institutes devoted to education prepare “young people and those no longer young to become builders of their own future!” (emphasis in the original, 89). Consecrated persons train future educators and leaders in service of eliminating oppression and benefiting the poor (89). The witness of consecrated persons assists the Church in her duty to educate men and women to understand the media and use it wisely as “discerning listeners and expert communicators” (99).

In the section “Some New Fields of Mission,” the first section is devoted to “Presence in the world of education” (96) and the next is “Need for a renewed commitment in the field of education” (97). In n. 96, John Paul II recognizes that “education is an essential dimension” of the Church’s mission in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. The consecrated life in particular empowers consecrated men and women to bear “radical witness to the values of the Kingdom” to all, making them “especially effective in educational activities” and able to “offer a specific contribution to the work of other educators” in “the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity.” The second paragraph of this section is worth quoting in full for the beauty and succinctness of its description of the goal of education:

[C]onsecrated persons can give life to educational undertakings permeated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, in which young people are helped to mature humanly under the action of the Spirit. In this way a community of learning becomes an experience of grace, where the teaching programme contributes to uniting into a harmonious whole the human and the divine, the Gospel and culture, faith and life. The history of the Church, from antiquity down to our own day, is full of admirable examples of consecrated persons who have sought and continue to seek holiness through their involvement in education, while at the same time proposing holiness as the goal of education. Indeed, many of them have achieved the perfection of charity through teaching. This is one of the most precious gifts which consecrated persons today can offer to young people, instructing them in a way that is full of love, according to the wise counsel of Saint John Bosco: “Young people should not only be loved, but should also know that they are loved.”

In n. 97, John Paul II notes that faith in Christ “enlightens the whole enterprise of education” and strongly exhorts consecrated men and women to the work of education “in schools of every kind and level, and in Universities and Institutions of higher learning.” He especially focuses on members of Institutes whose founding charism included education, and again sets education within the context of service to the poor and underprivileged: “I warmly invite members of Institutes devoted to education to be faithful to their founding charism and to their traditions, knowing that the preferential love for the poor finds a special application in the choice of means capable of freeing people from that grave form of poverty which is the lack of cultural and religious training.” Here John Paul II wisely recalls the vital link of the Church’s preferential option for the poor and her mission of education, which agrees with the contemporary recognition that education is a potent factor for raising people out of poverty and into successful participation in the modern world. A tragic irony of the exodus of consecrated women from Catholic schools in the United States is that in order to serve the poor, religious women left the very institutions that were leading the way in serving and uplifting the urban poor, namely the urban Catholic schools.

John Paul II’s reverence and esteem for the unique dignity and “genius” of women, and the necessity of new forms of women’s involvement is in elegiac high relief as he continues: “Clearly, a more solid formation, while helping consecrated women to understand better their own gifts, cannot but encourage within the Church the reciprocity which is needed. In the field of theological, cultural and spiritual studies, much can be expected from the genius of women, not only in relation to specific aspects of feminine consecrated life, but also in understanding the faith in all its expressions. In this regard, the history of spirituality owes much to Saints like Teresa of Jesus and Catherine of Siena, the first two women to be given the title “Doctor of the Church”, and to so many other mystics for their exploration of the mystery of God and their analysis of his action in believers! The Church depends a great deal on consecrated women for new efforts in fostering Christian doctrine and morals, family and social life, and especially in everything that affects the dignity of women and respect for human life. In fact, ‘women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a “new

feminism” which rejects the temptation of imitating models of “male domination”, in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation.’ ... To consecrated women and their extraordinary capacity for dedication, I once again express the gratitude and admiration of the whole Church, which supports them so that they will live their vocation fully and joyfully.<sup>90</sup>

John Paul II emphasizes the gifts of women that have enriched the Church, pointing to the two great women Doctors of the Church of that time. (The following year he added another, St. Therese of Lisieux, and his successor Pope Benedict XVI added St. Hildegard of Bingen in 2012.) He ends this passage with the hope that consecrated women will feel called to “educate the woman of today,” which he calls a “great task.”<sup>91</sup>

Catholic schools in the second decade of the twenty-first century are in a far different place than they were one hundred years ago. The NCEA published its findings that in the 2015-16 school year, 14 new Catholic schools opened, and that 20.3% of students in Catholic elementary, middle, and high schools are racial minorities. When Catholic preschool students are included in the data for elementary, and secondary students, total enrollment is approximately 2 million.<sup>92</sup> The NCEA’s 2017 statistics list that 2.6% of the 152,883 total professional staff in Catholic elementary and secondary schools are religious or clergy, which is just under 4,000.<sup>93</sup> The same year, 96 schools consolidated or closed and 20 new schools opened.

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<sup>90</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 58.

<sup>91</sup> For more on the “new feminism” praised by John Paul II, see his earlier apostolic letter *Evangelium Vitae* (On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life, 1995). The background for this concept of the “new feminism” can also be seen in his 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women, 1988) together with his 1995 “Letter to Women.”

<sup>92</sup> NCEA, “Catholic School Education Infographic,”

<http://www.ncea.org/NCEA/Proclaim/Infographic.aspx?WebsiteKey=60819b28-9432-4c46-a76a-a2e20ac11cf0>. Summarized from *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2015-16: The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment, and Staffing*.

<sup>93</sup> NCEA, “Infographic 2017,”

[http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catholic-education/k-12/upload/2017\\_infographic.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catholic-education/k-12/upload/2017_infographic.pdf).

## Sisters in Catholic Schools Today

The just-under 4,000 are religious responding generously and enthusiastically to the call to teach in Catholic schools include religious belonging to Institutes represented by the LCWR and those represented by the CMSWR. In an interview titled “Holy Habits: What School Sisters Bring to the Classroom,” a number of Sisters representing a variety of teaching communities wearing the religious habit gave their perspectives of being a consecrated woman in Catholic schools. Sister Mary Cecilia, a School Sister of Christ the King (Lincoln, NE) said that Bishop Flavin, the founder of their Institute,

wanted to extend Christ’s reign in whatever place possible...and he realized what was so important to make that happen was Catholic education. Because if we can reach the young people in the diocese, we not only reach the young people but we also reach their parents and families. He realized that one of the best ways to really nurture their faith in the lives of these children is through the consecrated life, through having sisters present in the schools, the value of the witness of a religious - their life totally dedicated to God, their gift of self-sacrifice, being a spiritual mother to every single student in the school.<sup>94</sup>

Sister Mary Agnes of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Wichita, Kansas explained that “We do really similar things that other people do who are not sisters. So (the value of) religious life is not about doing, it’s about witness and the being of the person. Our vocation is to be a more radical, vivid sign of the presence of Christ in the world, and then hopefully through that witness draw people to an encounter with Christ.” The Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia in Nashville, TN and the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist in Ann Arbor, Michigan also have schools across the U.S. Sr. John Dominic Rasmussen, O.P. of the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist explained that “We belong to the Dominican Order and our charism is preaching and teaching...As Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist,

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<sup>94</sup> Mary Rezac, “Holy Habits: What School Sisters Bring to the Classroom,” Catholic News Agency, February 2, 2018, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/holy-habits-what-school-sisters-bring-to-the-classroom-75105>.

we seek to continue the tradition of educating generations of young people in their faith and most of all, to bring youth into a deeper relationship with Christ.” She continued, “Pope Saint John Paul II once described women religious as being a ‘sign of tenderness’ in the world. From my experience in working with Sisters in schools, this is precisely what many of them bring - tenderness and an intuitive heart.”

Many young people appear to be voting with their feet. New vocations steadily pour into these communities that are demonstrating the joy of belonging totally to Christ and of serving Him in His little (and bigger) ones as spiritual mothers in the classroom. The depth of prayer life, the sense of being called by the Lord to an intimate spousal relationship that bears fruit in a universal and tender love for all, the support and witness of a common life with fellow seekers of holiness, the urgency of shared mission to spread the Gospel in order to lead all souls to the source of truth, goodness, beauty, and everlasting joy: communities that offer young people the reality of sacrificial love in this way are attracting new and enthusiastic vocations, as the 2009 CARA study highlighted and its 2018 follow-up study confirmed.<sup>95</sup>

### **Conclusion: Limitations and Future Directions**

The present study has important limitations which should be frankly acknowledged. The first of these is the paucity of sources representing a broad swath of religious Institutes on both the change-oriented and tradition-oriented approaches. The references will be seen to be

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<sup>95</sup> CARA, “Recent Vocations to the Religious Life” (2009), [https://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAREsearch/Vocation\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAREsearch/Vocation_Fact_Sheet.pdf), “Women and Men Entering Religious Life: The Entrance Class of 2017” (February 2018), <https://cara.georgetown.edu/2017EntranceClass.pdf>.

representing a majority of sources which the hermeneutic of continuity and what is called the tradition-oriented approach. The reason for this is twofold. First, the scope of the present work demands that a great deal of highly relevant material not be included. Secondly, while some may take issue with her conclusions, Ann Carey's two editions of *Sisters in Crisis* already gave an extensive presentation of the voices of those representing the mainstream and the radical extremes of the change-oriented approach. This study makes no claim to be comprehensive in this regard, as that work has already been done by others.

Next, this paper presumes but does not argue for what are still highly contentious claims for some within the Church and within religious life: the organic connection between human freedom, maturity, obedience, revealed truth, and the authority of the Church, and finally the liberating beauty of a spousal relationship with Christ and spiritual motherhood. When religious life is lived according to the mind of the Church, it works. Admittedly, any person's perspective is both a window into reality and a lens through which that reality is seen. While not a limitation in and of itself, it is worth acknowledging that the author is a perpetually professed member of the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist, a religious community which belongs to the CMSWR and one of whose foundresses, Mother Assumpta Long, O.P., was among the first members of the Consortium Perfectae Caritatis and the CMSWR.

Directions for future research in the area of Catholic education and religious life are many. One major gap in the literature is an in-depth study of the renewal and adaptation efforts of the Consortium and CMSWR communities on the level of detail comparable to that done by Ann Carey's work on the LCWR. There has been a steady output of quantitative research by

CARA studying men's and women's religious life<sup>96</sup>, most recently in a study focusing on US men and women religious who have completed at least two years of initial formation, including a survey asking religious about their needs and challenges in regard to ministry work, and their interest in different forms of training and support programs.<sup>97</sup> Numbers, however, do not tell the whole story. Father Michael Caruso's work in presenting the lived experience of Sisters, clergy, and laity through personal testimonies in *When the Sisters Said Farewell* needs to be extended for the Sisters and Institutes who did not say farewell to Catholic schools. This qualitative research should include religious and Institutes from both the LCWR and the CMSWR, as well as Institutes which lived through Vatican II and those founded later. In addition to qualitative surveys with open-ended questions and personal interviews, the Institutes' own websites and social media presences could be a fruitful avenue of studying the self-understanding and lived experience of religious. The stories and resources on "Imagine Sisters," an organization with an online presence dedicated to "expose the beauty of the religious life to a world desperately in need" and "to share stories of discernment, transformation, and faith," is another potential source.<sup>98</sup>

In his homily on the World Day of Consecrated Life 2018, Pope Francis pointed to the example of the aged Simeon and Anna encountering the young couple, Mary and Joseph of Nazareth. He reflected that in this scene, "the old receive from the young, while the young draw

<sup>96</sup> CARA, "The Profession Class of 2010: Survey of Women Religious Professing Perpetual Vows" (December 2010), "Report on the Consideration of Priesthood and Religioius Life among Never-Married US Catholics (2012), "Study on Educational Debt and Vocations to Religious Life" (2012), "Report on New Sisters and Brothers Professing Final Vows in Religious Life" (2013), "Population Trends Among Religious Institutes of Women," (October 2014), <https://cara.georgetown.edu/services/religious-institutes/>. "Women and Men Entering Religious Life: The Entrance Class of 2017" (February 2018), <https://cara.georgetown.edu/2017EntranceClass.pdf>.

<sup>97</sup> CARA, e-mail received by author on April 6, 2018.

<sup>98</sup> <https://imaginesisters.org/>

upon the old.”<sup>99</sup> The young find the roots of their identity and faith; the old receive Jesus. “In this encounter, the young see their mission and the elderly realize their dreams. All because, at the centre of the encounter, is Jesus.” The task of renewal for Catholic Sisters, for Catholic schools, must return constantly to its center, which is Jesus Christ. The young and the old have much to learn from each other. Young and the old within the CMSWR have much to learn from the young and old in the LCWR; the young and old within the LCWR have much to learn from the young and old in the CMSWR. Finally, the Pope urged consecrated men and women to be open to the “surprises of God” and to allow themselves to be led by the “daily ‘havoc’ of grace.” May all consecrated men and women be renewed constantly in that docility to the daily “havoc” of grace which is their truest obedience.

Sr. Catherine: What a treat to read this paper and learn so much from it. I was looking forward to it all semester, as I knew you would treat the material with the utmost intellectual rigor and thoughtful care. Outstanding job; I will likely come back again and again to it when I am looking for explicit Church teachings and/or Papal documents. :) Likewise, your presentation of the material was probably the most creative and expertly executed as you could have possibly made it. Only regret--I wish I had videotaped it! Thanks for a great semester, and let's keep each other in our prayers.

Paper Grade: A+

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<sup>99</sup> Pope Francis, Homily for World Day of Consecrated Life, February 2, 2018  
[https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2018/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180202\\_omelia-vita-consacrata.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180202_omelia-vita-consacrata.html)



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