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Nuns in American Public Life

Margaret Susan Thompson

Professor of History and Political Science, Syracuse University

IN CONVERSATION WITH ERIK OWENS

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

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Owens: I'd like to begin by giving our readers an understanding of when American nuns came to be active in American public life. What were their origins and how did their different orders flourish? We can talk about this in many different ways, but perhaps you have a starting point.

Thompson: One place to start is with the first sisters who came to what is now New Orleans in 1727. They were a group of Ursuline nuns who had been cloistered teaching sisters in France, but were brought to New Orleans to run a hospital. Within six months of their arrival, Sister Stanislaus, a novice whose letters are really a remarkable source, wrote to her father and said, "Here we do the work of four orders: the Hospitallers, the Sisters of St. Joseph, the Good Shepherd Sisters who work with fallen women, and our own Ursulines who teach." So from the very beginning, sisters started to innovate; they started to go outside of the lines that had defined their lives in Europe. I think that this first community is a good starting point.

This first community also got caught up in tensions among the Jesuits, the Franciscans and the bishops who were involved in that part of the world, and had to really defend their way of life, the integrity of their rule, and their charism. Controversy and innovation among American nuns started back in 1727 and I think that is worth remembering.

Owens: Is that Ursuline monastery the same one in Jackson Square now?

Thompson: Yes, it is.

Owens: I walked by there a few years ago; what a fascinating history.

Thompson: I think if you look back at some of the early stories about a lot of communities, they're very similar. The sisters who came to this country had to be flexible. Among other things, many of them had to learn other languages. But the communities of the other speakers on this panel [the Dominican Sisters and the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary] were founded—in the Dominican's case—in New York. Theirs are truly American foundations. I think it is very interesting how many indigenous American foundations there were.

Owens: One of the issues that is not widely known, even among Catholic lay people is the various kinds of orders. Could you speak a bit about charism, about what sisters intend to do? Then we can speak about their engagement in the wider world.

Thompson: Most communities were founded to meet the needs of the times. I'm not sure that that is charism. I think a lot of communities were founded for fairly instrumental reasons rather than for charismatic reasons, though not everybody would agree with me. However, I think over time even some of the most instrumental communities have developed a charism. I don't tend to think of charism as something that is a gift given to just one person. I think of it as something that a community and a group of women not only originate but also continue to revitalize over time. It's a living thing.

Even communities that might have been founded specifically to teach Lithuanian immigrants, for example, end up developing a spiritual integrity that is uniquely theirs. This is what a charism or a deep story is all about.

Owens: Could you give some examples of the works you mentioned, such as serving immigrants or teaching?

Thompson: Sure. A lot of communities were founded to work with particular ethnic groups because the Catholic Church was incredibly diverse, unlike in Europe where most countries were ethnically monolithic. It was important for people ministering to them to speak their languages and to understand, respect and help them preserve their traditions.

There was always this tension. On the one hand, Lithuanians or Poles or Italians or whoever wanted to maintain the traditions that they brought with them, but on the other hand, they wanted to Americanize. They wanted to be accepted. The sisters often helped them negotiate that tension even as they were negotiating it themselves.

I'm just polishing an article right now in which I conclude by saying that the first students of the teaching sisters were themselves. They had to learn what it meant to live in a culturally diverse society where Catholics were a minority, and to change the ways they had been doing things in Europe. Of course, the communities that were founded here were almost all diverse from the very outset.

Owens: Would you say that there's a predominant public presence among women religious in teaching or healthcare professions or toward some other form of activity?

Thompson: The most common ministry was teaching, because education was the way to be successful; it was the way to Americanize. Most public schools were explicitly Protestant and evangelical in their orientation, and Catholics didn't want to send their kids there, so schools were a very important ministry for these sisters.

It was also very important at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in the 1880s when the bishops declared that every parish should have a Catholic school. This was an acknowledgement of what the sisters had already accomplished, that in order to maintain the Catholicity of immigrants, every parish should aim to have a school. It wasn't the beginning of something, it was the acknowledgement of something that was already embedded in the American Catholic Church.

Let's not forget that ever since the first decade or two of the 19th century, there have always been more sisters in this country than priests. The majority of full time professional Catholic ministers have always been women. I'm not in any way trying to undervalue or dismiss the importance of sacramental ministry. But the service that these sisters provided defined what it meant to be Catholic on a day-to-day basis for so many people, and kept them in the Church.

Owens: Could you say a bit more about the historical relationship between the women religious and the hierarchy? This is obviously at the forefront of the conversation today, but we need a lot more historical grounding to understand how this works, especially in the American context.

Thompson: First of all, as I said with the Ursulines, tension is nothing new and you can find it in the history of almost every congregation, not necessarily consistently, but at some particular point in their history.

I also want to emphasize the fact that there was extraordinary cooperation between many clerics and sisters. I think almost every community of sisters would say that, especially in their early years, they might not have survived if it hadn't been for helpful bishops and priests.

However, their priorities were not always the same. Sisters were, to put it bluntly, a cheap labor force, and a very valuable one. Oftentimes, bishops wanted to use them in ways that were most beneficial to their objectives and not necessarily to preserve the integrity of religious congregations and their way of life.

When I first started studying communities of sisters, I kept running across phrases in a lot of constitutions which said things like, “The sisters may not lead choirs in the parish and may not count the collection.” I thought, isn’t this rigid? Isn’t this petty? But the reason was, if they didn’t put these things in the constitution, then priests and bishops could force sisters to do extra work—leading the choir, counting the money, cooking the meals, or doing the housework of the parish priest—for no money. And if it was specifically prohibited, then the sisters could say, “Sorry Father. We would love to help but our rules forbid it.” It was a very strategic step.

There were a lot of things that created tension. Oftentimes, sisters who came to run a ministry ended up running a hospital that was in extraordinary debt from its construction. They were expected to pay off the debt even though they thought they were just being brought in to nurse.

Frequently, bishops would try to discipline or control the sisters by depriving them of the sacraments. The bishop could say, “We won’t give you a chaplain unless you do what we want,” or could refuse to receive the novices’ vows.

I ran across a lot of cases like this, where the sisters struggled. But they had the ultimate weapon, especially in the early years: they could leave and go to another diocese, which a lot of communities did. Many newer foundations came about because sisters said, “If this bishop is not going to respect our integrity, we’ll find somebody who does.” There are lots of examples of this.

However, as they started to build big mother houses and big institutions, this became increasingly difficult to do because they had investments in a particular place. You can’t move a massive piece of property.

Owens: So how did Vatican II affect this relationship?

Thompson: By then, a lot of the tensions that marked the early years had been worked out. Frankly, the 1917-18 Code of Canon Law constrained the freedom of sisters. Active sisters were not officially recognized by the Vatican until 1900 with a papal bull called *Conditae a Christo*. Some warrants were issued which were incorporated into the 1917 code. But this meant that

rules were much more rigid. There was more flexibility when the sisters were outside of official structures.

So a lot of what we think of as tradition really only goes back to 1917. There were 1,900 years of Church before it, and there was about a fifty year period between then and the Second Vatican Council.

Ironically, a renewal in sister formation began about 10 years before the Council. I think Mary Ann Hinsdale is going to talk a lot about this. In 1951 Pope Pius XII told sisters that they needed to update their professional credentials and even their habits. When the sister formation started in the 1950s, sisters were becoming more educated not only in their professional engagements—teaching, nursing, whatever—but also in spirituality, psychology, sociology and theology. When the changes from the Second Vatican Council came to the United States, sisters were already familiar with many of the new ideas that the rest of the Church was just beginning to hear about. They were prepared.

Owens: One last question, and I guess it's a big one. Can you speak a bit about the particular public theology of women religious? Much of the past work that you mentioned was geared toward Church laity, and the nuns were teaching Catholic immigrants.

Thompson: I just want to qualify one thing. Going back to Mother Seton and the women in New Orleans, there have always been non-Catholics in these schools. Always. And there have always been non-Catholic patients in the hospitals. The sisters never confined their ministry solely to Catholics. I think this is really important to remember.

Owens: That's exactly what I'm hoping to get at here. Public theology defines or helps to shape the public presence of women religious, not their service inside of the Church but their service to American culture at large, which includes the Church.

Thompson: Let me give you one example. The only truly professionalized nurses who served during the Civil War were nuns. In Washington, D.C. there is a big statue in front of St. Matthew's Cathedral called Nuns of the Battlefield, which commemorates these wonderful nursing sisters. They came from about 20 different communities and served on many battlefields. They did not ask whether a person was Catholic, nor did they care whether the person was from the North or the South.

Interestingly, in the period immediately before the Civil War and again in the 1890s, there was great anti-Catholicism with the Know Nothing Movement and the American Protective Association. But what about the 25 years after the Civil War? I think one of the reasons we see a decline

in anti-Catholicism is precisely because so many Americans had been exposed to the ministry of these women.

The statue I referred to was constructed in 1924 with the authorization—not the funding—of Congress. That was the height of the second Ku Klux Klan. While the second Klan was inciting anti-Catholicism to a terrible degree, there was this big monument in the capital of the United States, supported by both parties, which honored the nuns of the battlefield.

In many ways, I think that's a wonderful example of the sisters' public ministry and their public presence. In many parts of this country, sisters ran the only hospitals available to people. If you wanted healthcare, you went to the nuns. The nuns were the first providers of health insurance in this country, which most people don't know.

Owens: First we're going to put a picture up of some sisters in the early 1900s in Minnesota who were doing health insurance.

Thompson: It started even before that. Nuns would go to mining, railroad, and logging camps in the Adirondacks to sell tickets to workers for roughly \$5 a year. If you showed up at one of the hospitals run by this community, you would get free care. That was your health insurance.

Owens: And not only for Catholic workers?

Thompson: Oh, anybody, anybody. This is how the nuns helped to raise money for their institutions. But it also meant that people could count on them. When we see sisters talking about the Affordable Care Act, for example—and I'm not going to get into the specifics of particular provisions—it is something they have been intimately involved in for over a century.

Simone Campbell is the head of NETWORK and the so-called Nuns on the Bus tour. Her founder, Margaret Slachta, who founded the Sisters of Social Service, was the first woman to serve in the Hungarian legislature. You talk about charism. You talk about the spirit of your founder. Margaret Slachta was a member of parliament.

So I think it's important to remember that sisters have been doing this for a long time and have been meeting needs that go well outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church.

I have a student who's doing a dissertation on a project called Life Adjustment Education, which was a program to teach people how to behave in public high schools during the '40s and '50s. It was sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education. One of the national board members for the program, even though it was fundamentally a public school program,

was a sister of St. Joseph. The expertise of this woman was recognized by the federal government. The examples are endless.