

## Messenger editorial

# What the Sisters did

What is it that connects the news from Clinton and Dubuque? Catholic schools and religious communities of women in the United States.

The National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium in Dubuque has housed a wonderful exhibit called "Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America." Catholics from younger generations especially should make a pilgrimage to Dubuque this weekend to see that exhibit before it closes on Sunday. Why? To understand how Catholic growth happened in the United States.

In Clinton, Prince of Peace Parish leaders have decided to try for "tuition-free" Catholic schooling in that city for parishioners. The term tuition-free is introduced here in quotes to highlight a certain reality: today it does not mean cost-free for users of the schools. In contrast, there was a day when Catholic schooling was practically free to users. How? Sisters subsidized the schools by teaching for practically nothing — room and board and a small stipend, and sometimes the board meant regular appeals to parishioners for gifts of food.

The "Women and Spirit" exhibit shows women religious in other ministry, too, especially their role in establishing Catholic health care in this country. But it was what they did in elementary and secondary education that built the Church, which sustained and nurtured the faith of immigrant waves from Europe until Catholicism was the largest religious body in the United States.

Because of them, children from working class and poor families could get an education infused with faith.

This has been a diminishing reality for the past half-century as economic conditions changed and opportunities for women expanded. Fewer young women were drawn to religious communities after the 1960s. The sound of Catholic school doors closing was a loud part of our story in the late years of that decade and into the '70s and '80s. Where a school remained open, the faculty quickly filled up with lay people, and they required much higher pay.

In the new economy of Catholic schooling, cost became a dominant filter. Clinton Catholics noted this in a survey taken last year. It was a concern of consultants who looked at Catholic education in our diocese a number of years ago. They worried about a trend toward schools becoming available only to an "elite" group who could pay the cost.

Hardly anyone wants to limit Catholic schools in that way. Pastors don't, which is why Father Ken Kuntz in Clinton has joined others trying a "covenant" concept to build up support in their parishes. This links parish financial support with faithful attendance at Mass and involvement in activities of the parish community. Prince of Peace Parish in Clinton is asking for 5 percent of family income as a sign of such a covenant which will make the parish school "free" for that family, beginning with kindergarten next year.

Will it work? It does as a way of drawing some families into a more conscious Catholic identity that values the faith-nurturing aspect of the schools. It keeps a cost burden on those families using the school, but if the full covenant emphasis is sustained, the cost can gradually be spread more equitably through the parish.

It still should be made clear that the Catholic community as a whole is responsible for the faith-formation of its children — all of its children. This is more difficult now that a smaller percentage of households contain children of school age. Appeals to self-interest, direct or subtle, have less impact. The common good of the parish, and the Church at large, is at stake: this needs to be made the focus of appeals.

Those women religious and their history memorialized in the "Women and Spirit" exhibit gave themselves up for the common good. It wasn't a 5 percent covenant, or even 10 or 20 percent. It was 100 percent. Their way of citizenship in the Church can't be followed fully by men and women who are parents, but it is a model for meditation.

A fraction of what they did, even a small imitation of their commitment, will mean a fresh vitality for our communities today. It could be remembered with the same kind of gratitude in the future that we should feel today for those Sisters who fed our faith in the past.

Frank Wessling

Barb Arland-Fye  
These photos depict Catholic Sisters serving in the Davenport Diocese and are part of the "Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America" exhibit.

