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Dallas Women's Museum exhibit celebrates nuns

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During grade school, high school and again in college, one is forced to undergo the exhaustive and sometimes tedious course of American History and thereby invariably learns about the feminist movement in America (well, perhaps not at UD) three or four times. While all this time is spent dwelling on those courageous women who demanded the vote or entered the workplace, little to no recognition is given to another group of women who, from the founding of the country, have played a significant role in shaping our social and cultural landscape without picket lines but with prayer books.

These are the Catholic religious sisters of America who have worked tirelessly and ceaselessly throughout this country's history, without the support of the Constitution or the allowance of the vote, to build a Christian society.

This past week at the Women's Museum in downtown Dallas, an exhibit opened entitled "Women and Spirit: The Catholic Sisters of America," which chronicles the history as well as the untold stories of the first Catholic sisters in America. The exhibit, through letters, artifacts, pictures and videos, thoroughly documents and captures the work ethic, spirit and absolute faith of these women, who faced both the challenges of a pioneer society and the drawbacks of acting as independent women in early America.

Through determination, prayer and sheer work, they not only established their own homes and convents but built up the communities through schools, hospitals, homeless shelters and orphanages. As teachers, nurses and the nation's earliest social workers, sisters entered the professional world long before the feminist movement. Essentially they worked to build the country we have today by the social institutions they established as well as their zealous activism for justice for all people. From nursing soldiers in the Civil War to establishing Alcoholics Anonymous, the sisters have greatly affected the change and growth of this country.

From the letters and journals, one can discover these women who corresponded with President Thomas Jefferson, talked down bandits and roughnecks, lugged pianos into the wilderness and provided the nation's first health insurance to Midwestern loggers. These sisters' courage extends throughout some of our country's most trying times, including Civil War, the San Francisco Earthquake, the Influenza

Epidemic, the Civil Rights Movement and Hurricane Katrina.

The exhibit is historically informative, spiritually moving and, through its depiction of sisters' examples, demands greater action from the women of today for continual vigilance against the neglect of the poor and the general disintegration of morality in this country.

"Women and Spirit" is free and open to the public at the Women's Museum: An Institution for the Future, until Dec. 13, when it will move to the Smithsonian.

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