



Exhibit Review

Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America

Pirates. This may not be the first thing that jumps to mind when you think of the history of American women religious, yet in my first five minutes in the touring exhibit *Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America*, I had already come across two references to them. On the opening wall of the exhibit, we read that “12 Catholic sisters — muddy, mosquito-bitten, but bursting with hope for the promise of the New World — arrived in New Orleans in 1727, having narrowly escaped pirates during their transatlantic crossing.” The next panel introduces us to Carmelite Sister Clare Joseph Dickinson, whose journal entries, we are told, “made light of stormy seas, encounters with pirates, and the attentions of a would-be suitor.” These two references to pirates so early in the exhibit are not, I think, coincidental, and they indicate quite early that this history presented in words, images, and material culture will give us a new perspective on America’s women religious.

The exhibit itself is quite large, 6,000 square feet and consists of a series of themed panels in rough chronological order making heavy use of primary source texts and artifacts. Also featured are three short videos used primarily to include the voices and experiences of present day sisters. The panels are handsomely, and lovingly, constructed. After many years of viewing dusty displays of habits in dark, subterranean academic and congregational

archives I was delighted to see American women religious getting their due in this beautifully and professionally designed showcase. The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which sponsored the exhibit, and the exhibit’s creators and consultants, are to be commended for their fine work.

The people who put this history together clearly set out with a purpose in mind, which helps explain the many references to intrepid nuns facing the dangers of piracy (and small pox, and cannon, and outlaws). In addition to describing the tumultuous voyage of the first 12 sisters to arrive, the opening panel invites us to “Meet the spirited women who helped build this country. These are the characters with whom we’ll be spending the next hour: courageous, bold, American women.” The theme



is carried throughout the exhibit from the 18th century to the present. We see sisters as pioneers, institution-builders, and outspoken advocates for justice, as battlefield nurses, inventors, and organic farmers. We are told almost wherever you turn in the exhibit that these women were and are leaders.

I do not think the exhibit allows itself to get too carried away with this theme. The creators try to balance their obvious relish for bold, adventurous sisters with two other themes. The first is also present on the opening panel. “Over the next 300 years,” it tells us, “successive generations of Catholic sisters quietly contributed to American life.” We also read a

quote from a 19th century sister of the Daughters of the Cross: “Need brings out our talent.” So we are presented with another side of the sisters. They are women of enormous talent in many fields, who worked — hard, but with humility — to serve the needs of their fellow Americans. The other theme tempers the obvious pride over these women’s accomplishments by outlining past errors, including slave ownership and attempts to assimilate Native Americans, and the sisters’ efforts to redress them.

I will talk about both of these threads, but first I must address the overarching theme of the entire exhibit; sisters’ Americanness. The historians who worked on the exhibit have done an admirable job of weaving sisters into the well-known narrative of American history. Small insights, like the effort to situate sisters as immigrants, as opposed to simply those who served immigrants, are very helpful reminders that sisters were part of the great trends and events of American history, and not just witnesses to them.

A focus early in the exhibit on the theme of adaptation is also useful for situating these women in the American experience. We learn about sister pioneers adjusting their work, their rules, and the patterns of their daily lives to fit the unique circumstances of their particular times and places in the United States.

Great care has been taken to show that the transplantation of sisters was not always successful, an under-explored theme in the history of American immigration. Under a panel on adaptation a wicker travelling trunk is displayed, along with a German sister’s immigration documents. We are told that Sister Engelharda (Clementine) Wilmes arrived in the United States in 1938 at the age of 47. But this is no cheerful story of a plucky sister founding a community or building a net-

work of hospitals. "Sister Engelharda had difficulty adjusting to her new life in the United States," we read. "Prior to her death in 1974, she worked for several decades as a kitchen assistant at academies run by her community." I spent a long moment standing before this display, contemplating this sister who left Nazi Germany only to find that she never really fit in the United States, or found fulfilling work.

Other panels repeat the theme of sisters' essential Americanness, showing sisters responding to several centuries' worth of America's natural and manmade disasters, and sisters' enormous contribution to America's healthcare network. A silent, but insistent, "We were here too!" hangs over all, and rightly so. However, the theme can border on parody at times, as when visitors stand before a panel on sister pioneers amid swells of what I'll call generic patriotic "Westward Ho!" music.

This emphasis on sisters as Americans is hugely important not only for understanding sisters' experiences, but for getting Americanists to embed sisters into the history that is taught in the classroom. Since the history of American women religious is rarely taught at any level, the only people who keep it alive are either Catholic historians or the women religious

themselves. Too often, both groups create a parallel track for this history, bound up tightly in the narratives of American and global Catholicism, and congregational histories. It's easy to do this, mainly because the lives of women religious are so hard to explain without background knowledge of Catholic history and religious practice. The exhibit's creators explore how to tell these stories of women religious as Americans without getting bogged down in Catholic minutia.

An example is the running vocabulary lesson embedded into the top of each panel. Enough basic terms ("nun," "religious," "habit," and "horarium" — a new word for me, I confess) are defined throughout without having to spend too

much time on the details; therefore the designers avoid constantly emphasizing sisters' essential otherness. They acknowledge that otherness from the outset, at the very beginning of the video at the opening of the exhibit. A sister talks about how odd these women must seem, wearing habits and not choosing marriage or a home of their own. But they follow this with a young sister who says that she became a woman religious when she realized that they were real people, just like everyone else. The message for visitors is clear: Nuns are normal; nuns are "us."

As I said, I welcome this approach, but it creates the most curious history of women religious I have ever encountered, a narrative that is extremely disorienting for a Catholic historian. What's apparent from the first is the church's absence (I use this term to mean both the hierarchical church and the larger Catholic community outside of congregations of women religious). This might seem like an odd claim about an exhibit full of Catholic artifacts, but it's

true nonetheless. Congregations of women religious come across as entities in and of themselves, self-supporting and self-led. Foundresses are emphasized, as are sisters' efforts to raise funds and support for their own enterprises.

Sisters are shown working in their own endeavors, and not as part of a larger church body. I could easily imagine a non-Catholic visitor with little knowledge of Catholicism walking away from the exhibit believing that sisters made all of the most important decisions that governed their lives on their own.

The hierarchy is almost completely, shockingly, absent. Being a feminist historian, I am not one to insist on giving the church's male leadership equal time. My difficulty with this omission is that it creates a giant hole in the history of women religious in this country by ignoring both the partnerships, and more commonly, the conflicts that existed between women religious and the men that were appointed to

supervise and control them. I find the decision to exclude this part of the story really curious, since including it does not necessitate changing the larger narrative. You could still portray sisters as strong leaders by explaining that they often chafed against the reality that ultimate authority over their own lives did not rest with them. As I will explain later, the exhibit does briefly mention sisters challenging male authority, but not until the 1960s. Where are the wonderful, rich stories of 19th century superiors battling with their local bishops, or successfully appealing to the Vatican for control?

The absence of the larger church goes beyond ignoring the hierarchy, however. We also get little sense of sisters' relationships with lay Catholics. In this exhibit lay Catholics exist for two purposes: to be served, and to praise sisters' service. Again, women religious often worked in partnership with laypeople, both men and women. We get a glimpse of this in the story of the sisters who invited a family of doctors to join them in founding a new hospital, an enterprise that would become the Mayo Clinic. Of course this exhibit represents the sisters' story, but as in the case of the hierarchy, we do not get a full sense of the work of women religious without understanding their relationships with people outside of their communities.

The section on education is a case in point. It presents us with more praise for sisters' leadership, a slideshow of sister teachers and their smiling pupils through the years, and a glowing testimonial from Maria Shriver. It does little to explain the complex relationships between sisters and those they served as part of a larger church community. The exhibit mentions in passing that some Americans have bad memories of nuns from Catholic school, but it never really delves into the roots of those memories. I'm not talking about bruised knuckles here but about long-standing conflicts between sisters and laypeople (particularly lay women) over questions of authority, status, and, yes, leadership. The second half of the 20th century revealed simmering resentment on the part of laywomen who were forced to defer to nuns' authority, work in Catholic schools at starvation wages, or be passed over for leadership because they did not wear a

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habit. The flipside of leadership is the exercise of authority; how lay Catholics might have reacted to that authority is altogether missing here.

These weaknesses do not substantially detract from the truly compelling aspects of the exhibit. The majority of the exhibit is dedicated to describing sisters' work, shown mainly in the three distinct areas of nursing, education, and social service. These sections of the exhibit will be most intriguing for visitors. Here we see individual acts of courage, sacrifice, and determination. I left with a sense of sisters as faithful women with enormous energy, talents, and a seemingly unlimited capacity for risk-taking. The designers also want us to see that sisters contributed to the development of America through the work of serving those in greatest need. The designers get carried away in a few places while supporting this idea, as when a sister claims on a video that women religious set out to educate the poorest, neediest girls in this country. Let's not forget that many communities supported themselves by doing just the opposite, educating affluent girls who could afford to pay their tuition fees.

Continuing the theme of sisters as Americans, the exhibit goes out of its way to show how sisters were a product of American culture, and shared in Americans' worst prejudices and crimes against minorities and people of color. The exhibit claims that sisters "hold equality and justice in high esteem," but that "as ordinary people they have at times failed in practice." I particularly appreciated a panel on "Slavery and Prejudice," explaining the history of sisters and slave ownership. Here the story is told in a series of documents and images including a photograph of an elderly enslaved man who, we are told, was owned by a community of Ursulines in New Orleans (as were five generations of his family). The grouping also includes a liturgy handout from a 2000 reconciliation service held by three communities who wished to acknowledge and apologize for their history of slave ownership. An adjoining panel addresses "Segregation and Sisterhood: A Paradox." Here the history of the Oblate Sisters of

Providence is highlighted to show how women of color founded their own orders when excluded from white communities (although thankfully that order's history is not confined to this section alone). This section also boasts a wonderful and disturbing artifact, a miniature cotton bale.

The bale, sent to the 1893 Columbian Exposition by students of the Colored Industrial Institute (Pine Bluff, Arkansas), is a powerful reminder of how white sisters contributed to the segregation of African-Americans into vocational training in the Jim Crow era.

The exhibit's confessional tone continues across the way at a panel on Native American assimilation. The panel chronicles sisters' participation in "away schools" which aimed to eradicate native languages and cultures from the lives of young Native Americans. This section contains a quotation that you could spend a year parsing: "While being true to their own values, sisters took part in a system now seen as cruel and insensitive." Were their own values cruel and insensitive? Did they participate in this system despite their values? Are we supposed to admire them for being true to themselves even if it ended in cruelty?

The exhibit is historically grounded by these acknowledgements of past errors, but it really soars in its use of material culture. Because I am already familiar with the narratives presented here, it was the artifacts that really sucked me in (and I imagine this would be true for the casual visitor as well). The primary artifacts on display for Katherine Drexel are a couple of pencil stubs. A note explains that Drexel habitually gave brand new pencils to her students in exchange for their stubs, the ones shown here sharpened nearly



down to the eraser. These Drexel saved for her own use. What a simple, creative way to showcase Drexel's renunciation of her

own wealth and privilege and her love of those she served. Nearby is a fluting machine, an industrial looking gadget used to fold tiny pleats into the more

elaborate of sisters' habits. As this is really the only panel dedicated to habits, the contemporary quote that accompanies the displayed headdress and fluting machine is noteworthy: "The very little time that is daily left to them — time that should really be given to rest and relaxation — must be laboriously spent in buying, sewing, and especially in fluting their frills." It's easy to imagine sisters' frustration when you can see this piece of equipment sitting right in front of you.

My favorite artifacts by far can be found near the panel on the New York Foundling Hospital. I will admit being moved to tears by a collection of the notes written to accompany infants left at the hospital's doors. Who knew that mothers actually did leave half lockets or broken rings so they might eventually come back to claim their children? "I choose you, merciful sisters, as guardians to the child," one mother wrote. Others simply noted the child's name and requested that he or she be baptized. Equally moving is the beautiful wicker cradle that stood in the entrance of the hospital to receive the infants. Someone made an effort to show that these children were valued.

The exhibit does begin to stumble a bit as it moves into the latter half of the 20th century. Part of the problem is that it relies on a video to document the events of the 1960s and 1970s, and that video tries to accomplish far too much. It ends up being a muddle of overused (if iconic)

1960s imagery, followed by a rapid-fire recital of major events. There is little time to absorb, let alone reflect. The key theme that does emerge, if you can catch it, is that sisters were “deeply affected” by the tumultuous upheavals of this period, but ultimately embraced change. The video chooses to interpret this time as a period when sisters turned more toward social justice. It even suggests that social justice is a continuation of the pioneering spirit of the past.

My difficulty with this section is that it both overreaches and underplays the reactions of women religious to the events of this period. It overreaches by suggesting that sisters were of one mind about change. The only dissenting voice on the video is a rather snippy 1960s-era laywoman who complained that nuns didn’t wear habits anymore. Certainly many women religious objected to the changes brought both by Vatican II and “the ‘60s” in general, and had no interest in being pioneers for social justice; their voices don’t seem to have a place in this narrative. Conflict among sisters is not mentioned anywhere in the exhibit.

It also underplays sisters’ involvement

in change by soft-pedaling sisters’ challenges to the hierarchy in this period. For example, the video shows Theresa Kane’s controversial welcome to Pope John Paul II in 1979. We see Kane asking that the pope treat women as “fully participating members” of the church. Strangely, however, it does not show her previous sentence, the one that made the speech so shocking in the first place: “Our contemplation leads us to state that the Church in its struggle to be faithful to its call for reverence and dignity of all persons must respond by providing the possibility of women as persons being included in all ministries of our Church.” Kane was calling for women priests, but you would never know it from watching this film.

The exhibit draws to a close with several thoughtful displays on present-day sisters. I particularly liked a film that showed seven sisters speaking about their current experiences as women religious. Equally powerful is a silent statement about sisters’ continuing presence in the United States: a massive round kiosk listing every active congregation of women religious in America. The last panels pick up the larger themes of the exhibit, show-

ing individual sisters notable for their leadership or pioneering spirit.

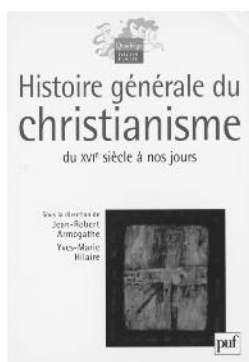
It must be acknowledged that the exhibit chose not to address the elephant in the room: it does not discuss the declining numbers of new women religious over the past 50 years, or the large exodus from congregations starting in the 1960s. Again, if I were a non-Catholic viewing the exhibit I would be left wondering where they all went. The exhibit also does not open a conversation about how the church has had to adapt to the loss of these dedicated women.

In the end I was content to let the exhibit be what it chose to be: a celebration of extraordinary American women, dedicated to their faith and the service of others. Even if you are steeped in the history of women religious, you will leave with a fresh perspective, one that sisters’ themselves want us to see. I, for one, will be contemplating the marvelous thought of sisters in habits staring down pirates.

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Recent publications of interest include:

Jean-Robert Armogathe and Yves-Marie Hilaire, eds., *Histoire générale du christianisme. 2 vols.* (Quadrige/Puf, 2010). These collected essays - from 80 collaborators from nine countries - argue that Christianity is a religion deeply embedded in specific contexts. The study goes



beyond the history of the Catholic Church, or of Christian churches and its institutions, to include a more general history of society and

Christianity’s role therein, beginning with the early church up until the 21st century. Of special interest for readers of this newsletter is Jay P. Dolan’s article,

“Religion et Société Américaine (1870-1914),” which examines the important changes that occurred in the United States during this significant 44 year period. Factors such as war, demographic growth, immigration, urbanization, industrialization, the introduction of electricity, the telegraph and telephone, and other scientific advances provoked a creative phase of American Christianity. Dolan argues that the era of industrialization profoundly changed Christianity in America. He examines how the immigrant Church was one of the most durable and important intuitions. Dolan concludes with an analysis of the social injustices that arose because of industrialization and how this climate, which led to *Rerum Novarum*, also produced a spirit of reform within American Christianity. He concludes with his thoughts on Christianity and modernism.

Michael Baxter, *All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day* (Marquette, 2010). Baxter presents a sequel to *The Duty of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day* (Marquette, 2008) by Robert Ellsberg. In *Selected Letters* Baxter continues to sort through Day’s private papers archived at Marquette University. He begins with “A Love Story,” publishing Day’s correspondence with her common-law husband Forster. The book also focuses on letters documenting the many trials and tribulations that Day experienced, especially in the early years she led the Catholic Worker. Baxter provides a unique glimpse into her spiritual journey through Fr. John J. Hugo, a secular priest of the Pittsburgh diocese who directed the eight-day “famous” silent retreats that Dorothy Day made throughout her life. He explores Day’s adamant pacifist stance through her correspondence to self-described “Christian-anarchist-pacifist” Ammon