

# WOMEN & *spirit* CATHOLIC

A new traveling exhibit tells the story of how Catholic sisters helped shape a nation, and how, in turn, the nation shaped them.

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PHOTO BY MARK LYONS



**I**n 1727, 12 Ursuline Sisters arrived in New Orleans, the first women religious to come to what is today the United States. Seventy-six years later, when the Louisiana Territory was purchased from France, the sisters feared the loss of their properties and their ministries under the U.S. government.

So, on March 21, 1804, the superior of the Ursulines, Sister Marie Therese Farjon de St. Xavier, wrote directly to Thomas Jefferson. She asked the president to assure her sisters of “the continued enjoyment of their present property” under U.S. law. Then she politely, but firmly, requested that Jefferson confirm his assurance “officially

# SISTERS IN AMERICA



in writing.” She ended her letter by saying: “With the most profound respect, *Monsieur le President*, we have the honor of being your very humble and very obedient servants, The Ursulines of New Orleans.”

Two months later President Jefferson responded to Sister Marie Therese. In a remarkable letter dated May 15,

1804, the author of the Declaration of Independence wrote, “...it will be preserved to you sacred and inviolate...that your institution will be permitted to govern itself...without interference from civil authority.”

He then guaranteed the Ursulines “all the protection which my office can give,” and concluded with these words:

“I salute you, holy sisters, with friendship & respect.”

The original handwritten letter of Thomas Jefferson is one of many rare artifacts featured in *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America*. The traveling exhibit opened on May 16, 2009, at the Cincinnati Museum Center and will be there through August 30. For other dates and locations, see sidebar on p. xx. *Women & Spirit* tells the story of how Catholic sisters helped shape a nation, and how, in turn, the nation shaped them.

## Stories Behind the Artifacts

Since the arrival of the Ursulines in 1727, Sister Mary Ewens, O.P., in a chapter in *American Catholic Women: A Historical Exploration*, has estimated, based on limited records, that over 220,000 women religious have ministered in the United States between that date and 1964. Most came as immigrants, some as refugees and a few as descendants of slaves. They crossed the Atlantic in steamships, bounced west in Conestoga wagons and sailed paddle wheelers down the Mississippi. They opened schools, hospitals and orphanages, sometimes with blazing speed and typically with little or no money.

As they responded to the unique needs of a growing nation, they showed savvy entrepreneurship and witty innovation. A community of Benedictines in Minnesota sold tickets for a few dollars to lumberjacks working in the area, guaranteeing the men medical care for a year at the Benedictines’ hospital. Some of these “lumberjack tickets”—precursors of today’s health-care insurance—are highlighted in the exhibit.

In 1938 Pulcheria Wuellner, a Franciscan sister from Illinois working with newborns, developed a prototype for

the infant incubator, using angle iron, canvas, wood, glass and a sponge from a cigar humidor to assemble it. A model of her primitive incubator is featured in the exhibit.

Many sisters nursed soldiers on both sides of the Civil War. One of them, Sister Anthony O'Connell, a Sister of Charity of Cincinnati, always carried a plug of tobacco in her medical bag for the wounded soldiers. Her field kit with a plug of tobacco is on display.

Over 70 artifacts, selected from approximately 1,500 items offered by communities of sisters across the country, bring the story of Catholic sisters in America to life. Most of the artifacts have never before been seen by the public.

There is a "fluting machine" belonging to the Marianites of the Holy Cross of New Orleans, used to pleat the starched caps once worn by the sisters as part of their habits. Other clothing items on display include handmade sandals from the Carmelite Nuns of Baltimore and slippers made of corn husks by the Adorers of the Blood of Christ.

St. Francis Cabrini's own cutlery set, used during her transatlantic voyage from Italy, is featured. Trunks, naturalization papers and passports place sisters within the great waves of migration from Europe to the United States.



(Above) A Cheyenne turtle amulet, made by artist Standing Elk in 1898, was given to the Ursuline Sisters of Great Falls, Montana.



(Top right) A nursing field kit and tobacco plug belonged to a Sister of Charity. Medicine bottles were excavated from a Sisters of Mercy convent.



(Right) Shoes (replica) made of braided corn husks were crafted and worn by the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, late 1900s.

PHOTOS COURTESY SERUTO & CO.

The nationally known New York Foundling loaned *Women & Spirit* a white wicker bassinet where mothers once left their babies. The Foundling also loaned three handwritten notes that were left with the children.

In 1858, the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth traveled from Tennessee to Kansas. Despite the enormous challenges of transportation in mid-19th-century America, the sisters brought a harp and two pianos along with them to the Kansas prairie so they could pro-

vide music lessons to the settlers' children. The exhibit includes the original harp.

*Women & Spirit* tells the stories of some outstanding individuals. Five American sisters have been declared saints by the Catholic Church. The stories of Saints Frances Cabrini, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Katharine Drexel, Rose Philippine Duchesne and Theodore Guérin weave through the exhibit.

Nine sisters in recent memory have been martyred while working in other



COURTESY OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL, PROVINCE OF THE WEST, LOS ANGELES



COURTESY OF OBLATE SISTERS OF PROVIDENCE

(Left) A Daughter of Charity reading *Babar's Visit to Bird Island* to nursery school students, c. 1950.

(Above) Members of the first African American sisterhood, the Oblate Sisters of Providence, sit under a shade tree at their St. Frances Orphan Asylum in Normandy, Missouri, in the late 1800s.



PHOTO BY MARK LYONS



COURTESY OF THE SISTERS OF PROVIDENCE ARCHIVES, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

(Left) Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth brought this harp to Leavenworth, Kansas, via train and steamboat in 1858.

(Above) Two Sisters of Providence undertook a begging tour in British Columbia in the 1890s to raise funds for a school for Kootenay children.

(Right) Sister Mary Irene Fitzgibbon, a Sister of Charity of New York, was photographed with "her flock" at the New York Foundling in 1888.



COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

countries—El Salvador, Liberia and Brazil. They are remembered and honored in the display. Three communities were founded specifically for African-American women because they were not permitted to enter existing congregations. These communities—the Sisters of the Holy Family of New Orleans, the Oblates of Providence of Baltimore and the Franciscan Handmaids of Mary of New York—are all recognized.

Upon learning of the project, John Allen, senior Vatican analyst for CNN, wrote: "Like most Catholics, I've long been haunted by the sense that our sisters don't get anything like the credit they deserve. This is a story that must be told....Against all odds, these largely anonymous, unsung women changed the country. Be dazzled by this exhibit—and if you're Catholic—feel your heart swell with pride."

### A Visitor's Experience

Several small galleries featuring artifacts, photographs and films structure the exhibit's layout. As the visitor moves from area to area, the story of Catholic sisters in America unfolds both chronologically and thematically.

After an orientation film, museumgoers will travel through important periods of American history—the westward expansion, the Civil War, immi-

gration, the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement. One of the films contextualizes the Second Vatican Council within the enormous social and political shifts of the 1960s to illustrate why it so impacted the Church and women religious.

Thematically, the exhibit highlights the contributions of sisters to the nation particularly through health care, education and social service. It shows ways in which sisters' traditional ministries are evolving and changing.

Before leaving the exhibit, visitors will see a film in which a diverse cross section of contemporary women religious speak candidly about both the blessings and challenges of living consecrated life in the 21st century. The exterior wall surrounding the film viewing area is inscribed with a list of more than 650 communities that have served in the United States since 1727. It stands as a quiet testament to the thousands of women religious who have ministered in the country for nearly three centuries.

### An Idea Comes to Life

*Women & Spirit* was conceived in 2004 as a way to note the 50th anniversary of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). It was an ambitious undertaking for persons unfamiliar with the museum world. In

some sense it might have been just as well that the sisters who formed the project committee had no idea of the complexity of the task.

LCWR invited Helen Maher Garvey, B.V.M., a former president of the conference, to chair the committee of eight. After approached the Smithsonian to present their idea, the institution assigned Dr. Katherine Ott from the National American History Museum as the project's curator. Dr. Ott has been invaluable in carrying forward *Women & Spirit* from an ambitious but unformed idea to a world-class exhibit.

Dr. Ott advised the LCWR committee to begin the project by hosting a *charrette*. A *charrette* is a gathering of experts from diverse but related disciplines who explore the feasibility of a project, and who begin to sketch out some broad designs.

In late October 2005, LCWR held its first *charrette* at a conference center outside Baltimore. The 25 participants included historians, artists, journalists, filmmakers and museum directors. The multidisciplinary gathering generated enormous energy and clarified what was essential to turn a concept into a reality.

Sensing the hesitation of the LCWR committee to embrace such a massive undertaking, one of the *charrette* participants challenged them by saying, "Sis-

ters, your ancestors built schools and hospitals with nothing. Surely you can do the same today.”

The *charrette* brought LCWR in touch with some treasured partners and friends. As visitors will see, their imagination and expertise are eminently evident in the final product. Curator Katherine Ott has consistently held the designers and writers to the gold standard of the museum world—that of the Smithsonian Institution itself.

Director Bob Weiss and filmmaker Mellissa Berry, both formerly of Design Island and Company of Orlando, Florida, and now working with the Disney Corporation, have brought their visionary skills to *Women & Spirit*.

The exhibit’s design and construction have been carried out under the auspices of Nancy Seruto, CEO of Seruto and Company of Pasadena, California. The Seruto Company has produced several notable traveling exhibits including *America I AM: The African American Inprint*, currently showing at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, as well as the acclaimed *Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs*.

### Linking the Past and Present

In some sense, the creation of the exhibit followed in the tradition of the first sisters to come to America. Like them, LCWR had nothing but a sense

## CURRENT SCHEDULE

- Cincinnati** Until August 30, 2009, Cincinnati Museum Center
- Dallas** September to December 2009, The Women’s Museum: An Institute for the Future
- Washington, D.C.** Opens in January 2010, S. Dillon Ripley International Gallery at the Smithsonian
- New York City** September to December 2010, Ellis Island Immigration Museum
- Dubuque** Early 2011, National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium

The exhibit in Cincinnati includes a locally-sponsored module featuring 23 women’s religious communities working in the area. Artifacts and fact sheets highlight the history and present work of each congregation. Some of the other exhibit sites may include similar local modules. All venues and dates are posted at [www.womenandspirit.org](http://www.womenandspirit.org).

of what needed to be done. The conference set out to do it, and along the way found the perfect partners and essential financing.

Donations both small and large have funded *Women & Spirit*. Three sections of the exhibit are named for three of the donors—the Conrad Hilton Fund for Sisters, the Catholic Health Association of the United States and Catholic Healthcare East. A recognition panel

at the entrance to the exhibit names 12 donors of \$100,000 or more. In all, LCWR raised over \$4 million to build the exhibit and to move it for three years.

No doubt, many of the women featured in this exhibit would be astonished to think that anything they did was noteworthy or special. That is the background story to the project. Looked at as a composite, the impact of Catholic sisters on the educational system, health care and social services cannot be overstated.

And it continues today as traditional ministries find new modalities—educating immigrants, providing health care to the underserved, giving homeless families food, shelter and hope. The exhibit is not simply about the past. It is also about an emerging future—one that may not look or feel familiar, but one whose authenticity comes from the same unchanging source as the Ursulines of 1727—the call of the gospel and a belief in the sacredness of each person. A



PHOTO BY MARK LYONS

The LCWR History Committee guided the exhibit. From left to right are: Jane Burke S.S.N.D., Mary Dacey S.S.J., Karen Kennelly C.S.J., Helen Garvey B.V.M., Annmarie Sanders I.H.M., Barbara Cervenka O.P., Mary Charlotte Chandler R.S.C.J., Carole Shinnick S.S.N.D., Constance Phelps S.C.L.

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