Roman Catholic Women Religious and Organizational Renewal: Telling Stories of Change

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My current research project is a study of organizational reform in three English-speaking Roman Catholic women's religious communities in the Diocese of London, Ontario, in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. For me, this project bridges my interests in women's history and the history of religion in the period, and I hope that it will offer a meaningful contribution to both disciplines. In recent decades, much has been written about the history of women religious in Quebec, yet, until recently, comparatively little scholarship has been undertaken on the topic in English-speaking Canada. Heidi MacDonald's recent work on the Sisters of St. Martha in the Maritimes,[1] and Elizabeth Smyth's studies of communities of teaching sisters in Ontario[2] are important ongoing projects which mark a recent interest in the history of women religious in English Canada. My own interest is in the communities themselves and their experiences of change - - how they moved from being large, cloistered, highly-regulated institutions of women with structured daily lives and traditional black habits to being much more egalitarian in their decision-making and much freer in their dress, daily living and spirituality.

When I began to look at how and why sisters' lives changed so dramatically in and around the 1960s, my first impulse was to research

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[1]Heidi MacDonald, "Doing More With Less: The Sisters of St. Martha Diminish the Impact of the Great Depression *Acadiensis* XXXIII, 1, Fall, 2003, pp. 21-46; "The Sisters of St. Martha and the Prince Edward Island Social Institutions, 1916-1982." Ph.D. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 2000.

[2]Elizabeth Smyth, "Professionalization among the Professed: The Case of Roman Catholic Women Religious," in *Challenging Professions: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Women's Professional Work*, ed. E. Smyth, S. Acker, P. Bourne, A. Prentice (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); 'Writing Teaches Us Our Mysteries': Women Religious Recording and Writing History," in *Creating Historical Memory: English Canadian Women and the Work of History.* B. Boutilier and A. Prentice, eds. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997); . "The Lessons of Religion and Science: The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph and St. Joseph's Academy, Toronto, 1854-1911." Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1989.

the Church history of the period. After all, the reforms initiated by women's religious communities coincided with broader ecclesial reform. In somewhat abridged form, here is a standard summary of institutional change.

When Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, in 1962, he initiated unprecedented change in the institutional Roman Catholic Church. Bishops, priests, religious and laity gathered over a four year period to review such topics as the role of the Church in the modern world, reforms to liturgy, the Church's commitment to ecumenism, the role of religious men and women, and the role of the laity. Their discussions led to doctrinal statements on each topic urging changes in the understanding and practice of Roman Catholicism.

Most important to an understanding of reform in women's religious communities is the document *"Perfectae Caritatis*, the Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life" which encouraged religious communities to implement reforms in the areas of dress, daily life, and organizational structure. It called for religious to return to the "spirit of founders" and the "particular goals and wholesome traditions which constitute the heritage of each community."[3] The processes of change which occurred within women's religious communities were guided in large part, therefore, by the orders' re-acquaintances with their own histories. Often, when women religious began to look carefully at the histories of their own communities, they discovered that their communities were not initially intended to be cloistered societies. Rather, many women's religious communities were founded on the premises of shared mission, common faith, and collegiality, and the women intended to be active agents for social service within their towns and cities. For example, the Ursuline order had been founded in Italy in the early sixteenth century by Angela Merici, whose intention it was to bring together a group of women dedicated to works of charity. The original followers of Angela, who came to call themselves the Company of St. Ursula, were unmarried women who dressed in simple fashions of the time, lived in their own homes and came together to pray and to do charitable works. In less than a century the Ursulines had grown in

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[3] "*Perfectae Caritatis*" http://www.christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/v25.htmIn *Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M., and Joseph Gallagher, eds. (New York: America Press, 1966), 468.

popularity in both Italy and France and they numbered in the thousands. In the mid-sixteenth century the Council of Trent imposed strict regulations on religious communities. All women's communities, including the Ursulines, were to be cloistered, were forced to adopt a strict monastic Rule, were required to wear a severe clerical habit, and they were to be subject to the jurisdiction of a bishop who acted as their ecclesiastical superior.[4] These practices continued, virtually unchanged, for four centuries.

In the mid-1960s, when Vatican II encouraged women religious to reform by returning to the intent of their foundresses, communities entered into processes of change that would drastically alter their ways of life. In less than a decade from the start of Vatican II, many women's religious communities had moved from top-down models of governance, wherein typically a Mother Superior and a small Council made all decisions, to much more participatory and egalitarian democratic processes. They formed committees, conducted extensive membership surveys, and experimented with new 'modified' habits and lay clothing. They read the works of liberal theologians and psychologists of the day, and they held meeting after meeting and discussed at length their roles in the world. By 1970, these women's communities had made numerous changes to the Constitutions that had guided their lives for centuries. They changed their daily living by moderating their rigid 'up-before-dawn-and-lights-out-at-nine-o'clock' schedules; they modified very structured community prayer lives to include new forms of spirituality; they eliminated protracted periods of silence, including silence at meals, and began to broaden their recreational and social lives; they began to choose their own reading material, which had previously been chosen for them by their Superiors, and they gave themselves the freedoms to read newspapers and watch television. Most noteworthy to people in the outside world, of course, was the relinquishing of the identifiable floor-length habit in favour of modern secular dress.

I read about these changes in the sisters' own committee meeting notes, in the official minutes of their General Chapters, and in their convent chronicles. Additionally, I examined Church documents - statements by the Vatican and by Canadian bishops - which sought to guide, shape, and

[4]Margaret Pray, *Pilgrims in Service: The Chatham Ursulines, Volume 1 - 1860-1896* (Chatham: Chamberlain Press,1991), 5.

support these changes. The 'official' history of this period of reform, it seemed, had a straight-forward, happy ending.

And I suppose that the story, as I initially set out to tell it, could have ended there. But I had a nagging sense that there was another story, an 'unofficial' story, begging to be told. As a young historian, I set out to probe further into these events, to try to get 'inside' the story of reform in women's religious communities, and I was eager to include oral history as part of my larger project. I realized, of course, that I would be dealing with communities of women whose average ages are over seventy years. There was no time to lose in collecting these oral histories. So, I set up the parameters of my study, devised a questionnaire, endured the bothersome process of gaining ethics clearance from my university, sent an invitation to a religious community, and began scheduling interviews. Before I knew it I had dozens of hours of audio-taped interviews, which, to my great surprise, translated into hundreds of painstakingly transcribed pages; I had the experience of having interviewed fascinating elderly sisters, many of whom had never before told the stories of their experiences in the convent in the 1930s, 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s; I had funding to continue my research and the cooperation of other communities of women willing to share their lives. Now I had to take a step back to think about the place of these oral narratives in the context of the 'larger' story.

I read the thoughtful work of oral historians. I read Canadian historian Joan Sangster, who cautions scholars against treating oral history "only as a panacea designed to fill in the blanks in women's . . . history."[5] Although this had been my original intention, I had already reached the point of understanding that this would not be enough, and that the sisters' narratives did more than simply augment the 'official' Church history of reform. In discussing her own theoretical orientation, Sangster argues for "an oral history enhanced by post-structuralist insights, but firmly situated in a materialist and feminist context." I began to seriously consider what this might look like in relation to my own work. While my own academic perspective had certainly been influenced by post-modern feminist thought, and while I knew that I would have to pay

[5]Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," in *Rethinking Canada*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 306.

close attention to both the text and the sub-text, the narratives and the meta-narratives of the story, I had a strong sense that my analysis of these women's oral narratives would have to remain firmly grounded in their lived experience.

At the same time I read theorists like American Michael Frisch, who urged me to make "memory itself the focus of attention in oral history"[6]. Frisch refers to memory as "living history, the remembered past that exists in the present." He argues that memory, accessed via oral history, can serve as an alternative to "officially sanctioned versions of historical reality."[7] I knew that I had to consider the relationship between the Church history I had come to know, the collective memory of the communities I studied, and the sometimes conflicting memories of individual women. The more I considered Frisch's advice, the more I realized that the 'official', orthodox version of the history I intended to tell was not necessarily the only version of the remembered past.

I was also influenced by sociologist Marilyn Porter's work on life course histories of families in Newfoundland, which exposes the ways in which women's narratives are sometimes marked by alternative and often unrecognized dating strategies.[8] Denyse Baillargeon's oral history work with women in Depression-era Montreal helped me to clarify the ways in which the events of daily life shape women's recollections of events and the way they construct their past experiences.[9] I entered into a new understanding of the place of the sisters' narratives in the story of Church reform, and I began to see that many of the events they recalled

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[6]Michael Frisch, "The Memory of History," *Radical History Review, 25 (1981),* 19.

[7]Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), xxiii.

[8]Marilyn Porter, "Mothers and Daughters: Linking Women's Life Histories in Grand Bank, Newfoundland, Canada," in *Rethinking Canada, 2nd ed.*, (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1991), 403 ; also see "Time, the Life Course and Work in Women's Lives: Reflections from Newfoundland," *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 14, No. 1/2 (1991).

[9]Denyse Baillargeon, *Making Do: Women, Family and Home in Montreal during the Great Depression* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1999), 14.

that I had initially viewed as extraneous or tangential were, in fact, *central* to this story of change.

These scholars' work had shown me the context in which my collected interviews rested. I had yet to decide in a practical sense what to do with the overwhelmingly candid first-person narratives I had amassed.

As I sat at my desk trying to 'sort it all out', reading through the transcripts of interviews, hearing the voices of these wise women in my head, I came to an awareness that *their* stories *are* the yet unheard stories, and that they needed to move from the background to the foreground of my research. And as I began to look at them in this new light, I began to see shadings and colourations which had escaped my perception in the past. When I was trying to make the oral histories 'fit' into the official story of Church reform, I was discounting the centrality of some of the most important narratives, which were often relayed as asides or anecdotes. When I allowed these to come to the fore, however, they announced an entirely 'new' agenda. This is just what was needed. I began reconsidering the focus of my study.

The sisters whose oral histories I have collected over the past few years are members of the Ursuline Sisters, the Holy Names Sisters, and the Sisters of St. Joseph, and all were quite willing to tell the stories of their lives. When I asked these sisters about their experiences in the 1950s and '60s, many commented on the issues I discussed previously in the context of official Church reform - - changes in dress, reforms to leadership structures and decision-making models, and new-found freedoms in the areas of spirituality and recreation. And these were, no doubt, important issues. However, sisters also told stories that seemed somehow 'outside' of the official narrative - stories about personal dissension, circumventing official protocols, and covert, incipient changes that took place long before formal reforms were put in place.

I took another look at these oral narratives and it became clear that these stories belonged to two categories. First, sisters told stories about their *personal recognition of the need for change*. Many of them came to this realization long before their communities began even discussing certain reforms. The second type of stories told by the sisters were *disclosures in which they described bending or disregarding the rules*, unbeknownst to their Superiors, well in advance of official reforms.

With regard to the first group of stories, it seems that many of the women I have interviewed saw the need for changes to dress and deportment long before specific changes were considered by their communities. One of my favourite interviews was with a woman who entered the Ursuline community in the early 1940s. She had been a sister for more than a decade when, one day, as she was walking down the main street of a large city she saw two old order Mennonite women walking ahead of her in their traditional full length dark dresses and head coverings. In her words: "I thought to myself, 'How strange!' And then I saw my own reflection in the glass of one of the store windows and I thought 'Yes, how strange, that's right.'"[10] She recalled that for years she had valued the habit for the respect and reverence that it commanded - but her experience of seeing herself as others saw her led her to recognize a need for change that she might not otherwise have perceived.

Many women told similar stories regarding behavioural expectations, and sisters often spoke of their struggles with certain aspects of deportment. The expectation that sisters practice what was known as "modesty of the eyes" - that is, refraining from unnecessary eye-contact, especially with men - seemed to be a very difficult rule for some to follow. One woman who taught high school said, "Here we were teaching big boys, and we weren't supposed to look at men in the eyes, [but] to practice modesty of the eyes?.. . It just wasn't human!"[11] Along the same lines, many sisters recalled working and trying to contend with the rule that sisters were to be in the convent before nightfall. As a retired professor from Brescia University College at The University of Western Ontario put it: "Teachers all had to go to meetings at night - and then you were told you had to be home by the time the sun goes down. . . . . there was a lot of conflict that way . . . We hadn't adjusted really to what we were doing."[12] These are just a few examples of the ways in which sisters described their own recognitions of the need for changes before reform was initiated.

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[10]P.A. Turner, O.S.U., audio-taped interview, November 2001.

[11]G. Drouillard, S.N.J.M., audio-taped interview, December 2004

[12]D. Dietrich, O.S.U., audio-taped interview, November 2001.

The second category of stories I have identified, those of sisters who bent or simply ignored the rules, contributes even further to an argument that unofficial changes preceded official reforms. Not only do these narratives demonstrate that women's communities guided their own process of change, but it also shows that they had a particular approach to reform apart from the 'official' top-down model. These acts of defiance occurred most often at what we might call the 'middle-management' level of communities; that is, not by the Mother Superior or her immediate council, and not by the rank and file sisters, but by the women who acted as Superiors of smaller convents or who held lesser positions of authority. One such sister spoke of her years in the early '60s as Superior of a smaller convent located near a teachers' college. At the time, the community's constitutions explicitly forbade the sisters to carry money, yet this Superior could not in good conscience send the young sisters in her charge off each day empty-handed. She said,

> I made all the sisters who were going to teachers' college take some money with them - we weren't allowed to. . . That was a breakthrough - they all had to carry money so that they could at least buy a coffee or something when they were at school. This was in the '60s - not that long ago - and things were sort of 'opening up.' And I wasn't the only one who was doing those little things, because by this time many of the people were, you know, grown up, they had good jobs, they were . . . principals of schools. . . That's when changes were beginning to creep in.[13]

This sister, and women like her, describe many other deviant acts. For example, the regulation that Superiors of houses were to open the incoming and outgoing mail of the sisters in their charge was a responsibility that some Superiors simply refused to execute.[14] In addition, Superiors, particularly in smaller houses away from the large community Motherhouse, often neglected to enforce the 'lights-out' rules, thereby enabling sisters to mark papers or read late into the night.[15]

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[13]F. Ryan, O.S.U., audio-taped interview, October 2004.

[14]Ibid.

[15]G. Drouillard, S.N.J.M., audio-taped interview, December 2004.

Some women tell of Superiors who bent the rules around watching television. Typically, in the late 50s and 60s, sisters were allowed to watch religious or educational programs and the news, in very small doses. Some Superiors, however, could find *something* edifying in even the Ed Sullivan Show or Perry Como, and many sisters report having enjoyed these programs, despite violating what they knew to be the rules.

Some of these acts of defiance may seem trivial - even silly - to us in 2005. Yet, in the face of centuries old rules and regulations, such nascent, grassroots rebellion is significant. From these oral histories I was able to form some important conclusions about the 'unofficial' yet fundamental reform processes in women's religious communities.

First, the sisters' stories indicate that there was a readiness for change. In fact, there was a desire for change evident within the communities, sometimes even before communities were ready to talk about change, and before the institutional Church sanctioned official reforms. These sisters had come to believe that the emergence of a new social context in the post-war decades made it necessary to adapt and adopt different ways of going about their work or lives as they practiced the religious life.

Second, the sisters told stories of actions that indicate an awareness of the times; we see in these stories of dissent that women in the convent were, indeed, a microcosm of women in the larger society. Women's desires for independence, privacy, choice, and freedoms as embodied in the secular feminism of the '60s were sought even by women who lived within convent walls. Although these women would not have described their actions as 'feminist' at the time, many see them this way in retrospect. As Canadian scholars examine the women's history of the 1960s, it is imperative that we include stories of women whose lives are 'outside' of the traditionally defined public and private realms.

Third, the observation that much incipient change occurred at the 'middle-management' level is itself noteworthy. Many of the sisters who initiated 'unofficial' change were well- educated, professional women whose on-going academic studies and daily interactions with other educators and students informed their choices. Their actions in the '50s and '60s foreshadowed the leadership models which developed in the '70s and '80s. The Superiors who sidestepped the rules early on would later take on positions of greater authority, and their previous

experiences would prepare them to facilitate more egalitarian decision-making models.

In total, the sisters needed flexibility to be effective in the new, more spontaneous culture emerging in the 1960's. They found ways to be effective, called on their resourcefulness and quietly implemented imaginative changes.

As a historian of Canadian women, I see the importance of merging what I have referred to as the 'official' and the 'unofficial' stories of reform in women's religious communities. Surely, one is incomplete without the other, and the grassroots nature of change in religious life is essential to understanding the larger history of feminism in the period. External factors affecting change, such as Church reform, are only one aspect of community change in the 1960s. The 'inside stories', those told by the sisters themselves, are key to a much fuller understanding of community life, feminism and change in the 1960s.

As I work with these narratives, they remind me of the complexity and multi-layered nature of historical inquiry. They remind me that an examination of organizational reform in women's religious communities in the 1960s involves consideration of a global institutional Church within which an English-speaking Western society houses several forms of religious communities, numerous groups of women religious, and countless individual voices. These seemingly 'small' voices are perhaps the most valuable source for understanding key turning points in ordinary lives within changing communities. As I continue to listen to these voices, and to offer them a central place in my historical writing, my research becomes richer, and I build a deeper understanding of the complexity of the study of gender, community, and religious experience.

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