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Telling Sisters' Stories over the Last Quarter Century

KATHLEEN SPROWS CUMMINGS

I congratulate the editors of *American Catholic Studies* on this milestone anniversary, and thank them for the chance to reflect on the historical study of women religious over the last twenty-five years. This endeavor necessarily invites some musings on my own trajectory as scholar. I defended my dissertation, which explored the history of Irish American nuns in the Progressive Era, the year *American Catholic Studies* (ACS) was relaunched. I published several times in the new journal's first five years, starting with a 2003 book review of Diane Batts Morrow's stunning *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828–1860*. The first full-length article I published in ACS appeared in 2004: "We Owe it to Our Sex as Well as Our Religion': The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, the Ladies Auxiliary, and the Founding of Trinity College, 1898–1904." (I had such a penchant for overlong quotations in titles back then!)

The article evolved from a presentation I gave at the Sixth Triennial Meeting of the Conference on the History of Women Religious (CHWR) in Atchison, Kansas, in 2004. It marked the first time I presented publicly on the subject of women religious to an audience composed, as far as I could tell, chiefly of sisters themselves, including several from the congregation I had researched. Among them was Sister Mary Hayes, SNDdeN, the archivist at Trinity College in Washington, D.C. Sister Mary had never been anything but generous to me from the moment I arrived at the Trinity archives for the first time as a doctoral student in March 1997, graciously overlooking the fact that I basically had no idea what I was doing. I eventually found my way around the archives and, on one of my return trips, zeroed in on sources that pointed to tension in the college's early years between the sisters and the members of Trinity's

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ladies auxiliary. As the lay supporters had become more invested in Trinity's success—and, via their substantial fundraising efforts, more responsible for it—they expected to have more of a say in Trinity's operations. The sisters, while grateful for the labor of the lay women, bristled at the suggestion that women who were not vowed members of their community could make decisions at the institution they founded and led. It is an understandable reaction, and one that certainly resonates with people who have worked with sister-led institutions: it is one thing for Catholic sisters to invite lay partners to share their charism, and quite another to delegate authority to them.

In any case, my account of the conflict, while judicious, *could* have been interpreted as reflecting negatively on the sisters—and I was desperately uneasy that Sister Mary would perceive it as such. She was sitting in the front row and, as I read my paper, wore an inscrutable expression on her face. Sister Mary raised her hand at the beginning of the question-and-answer session, and when called on, stood up and turned around to face the audience. As I braced myself for a withering critique, of either my findings, my audacity, or both, Sister Mary paused dramatically, gestured back to me, and exclaimed: “And THIS is exactly why we need to welcome lay women into our archives!” She went on to say that as its longtime archivist she believed she had known everything there is to know about Trinity College. And yet the conflict of which I spoke had eluded her. My research had taught her something about her own institution. She gave me a great gift that day. Her advice to other sister-archivists was also very prudent, especially given demographics of the conference. Though sisters appeared to predominate, as they had since CHWR's inception, they actually represented a slight minority of presenters (46 percent) on the program in Atchison.

At that time I was the associate director of Notre Dame's Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism, and with the encouragement of director Timothy Matovina, I volunteered Cushwa as a site for the Seventh Triennial CHWR. That 2007 gathering represented a homecoming of sorts. Twenty years earlier, Cushwa's founding director, Jay Dolan, had convened a colloquium on the history of women religious at Notre Dame. The purpose was to bring together historians of women's religious communities as well as leading historians in US women's and religious history to discuss how Catholic sisters might be more integrated into larger narratives. Participants' concerns were intertwined, then as now, with fears about the future of women's religious life in America itself; by the 1980s, massive departures and decline in new vocations signaled a steadily rising median age of women religious and a dramatic drop in overall membership. Most participants were Catholic sisters who either archivists or historians of their own congregations. Many held academic positions at the colleges founded by their own



In this photo taken at CHWR 2022, the author (far left) and Carol Coburn (far right) flank three women who were at the original 1987 CHWR gathering: Mary Hayes, SND de N; Judith Sutura, OSB; and Mary Ewens, OP. Courtesy of the author.

religious communities. Joining the conversation were historians who were not themselves sisters: Margaret Susan Thompson and Kathryn Kish Sklar, two prominent scholars in the emerging field of US women's history. This gathering resulted in the establishment of CHWR. Overseen by Sister Karen Kennelly, CSJ, it met for the first time at the College of St. Catherine, in St. Paul, Minnesota, in June 1989 and has met every three years since.

By the time of the Notre Dame conference, our scholarly community was abuzz with news of an upcoming traveling Smithsonian exhibit spearheaded by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). As she liked to tell it, Sister Helen Garvey, BVM, the head of LCWR's History Project, had simply called the head of the Smithsonian Institution and told him she wanted to organize a national exhibit featuring Catholic sisters. (In retrospect Sister Helen marveled at her boldness, but really, does this story surprise anyone who knows how Catholic sisters get things done?) After years of hard work, consultations with historians, and collaboration across congregations, *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America* was launched. Underwritten by the Conrad Hilton Foundation, *Women & Spirit* featured artifacts and photographs from 400 women's religious communities that told the story of how Catholic sisters shaped America's social and cultural landscape from 1727 through the present.

After Mary Catherine Hilkert, OP, my colleague in Notre Dame's Theology Department, suggested that we bring the exhibit to Notre Dame, I called Sister Helen to find out if this was even feasible. She told me there were nine cities already scheduled, but that one open slot remained in fall 2011—and that it was ours, provided we secured a venue and covered the standard fee. That cost, while not exorbitant, exceeded Cushwa's annual programming budget, but I reasoned I could find funding easily enough from higher-ups at Notre Dame. Hosting a Smithsonian exhibit on this particular subject would enhance the university's research profile and highlight its Catholic character—two stated priorities—and, as a bonus, foreground women, something lamentably rare at Notre Dame. When I reached out to an administrator in the Golden Dome, I envisioned myself throwing the powers-that-be a fastball right across home plate—and I couldn't wait to watch it soar out of the park.

I can be a little naïve.

It would be more appropriate, I was told, to approach neighboring Saint Mary's College, an institution that “had been founded by Catholic sisters.” Dumbfounded, I managed to respond that *Women & Spirit* was being hosted by the Smithsonian Institution, the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Museum, the Dallas Women's Museum, and many other distinguished venues that had not been founded by women religious. Moreover, Notre Dame's sponsorship would underscore that the sisters' labor had built and sustained not merely a handful of currently operating Catholic women's colleges, but virtually the entire network of church institutions throughout the United States. My interlocutor conceded the point, but went on to say that it was moot, because there was not a space large enough on campus to accommodate an exhibit of that scale.

This indeed seemed to be an insurmountable barrier. I was sitting glumly in my office late in the afternoon the day before Thanksgiving 2009, ready to admit defeat, when it occurred to me that if Sister Helen Garvey could cold-call the head of the Smithsonian Institute, I might muster the energy to dial the director of South Bend's local history museum, introduce myself, and ask if they might be interested. The director not only answered the phone (we might have been the only people in town still at our desks that holiday eve) but was ecstatic at the possibility. In the end, *Women & Spirit* was co-sponsored by South Bend's Center for History, Saint Mary's College, and Notre Dame. The university covered the lion's share of the hosting fee, which, to my mind, went a long way in redeeming the initial rebuff.

The four months that *Women & Spirit* spent in South Bend were among the most exhilarating of my career. I gave private tours to dozens of grade school children, mothers groups, Notre Dame's president, John Jenkins, CSC, and the bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend. I visited with many of my students, as did colleagues at Notre Dame and Saint

Mary's. Throughout the semester more than a dozen events featuring the history of Catholic sisters were held at the three partnering institutions. Among the most memorable was a Cushwa Center roundtable that brought junior and senior scholars to discuss their research. I was struck by how many of the participants pitched themselves not as historians of Catholic sisters, but scholars of subjects such as French empire [Sarah Curtis], race [Diane Batts Morrow and Shannen Dee Williams], Latino Catholicism [Felicia Moralez], Nazi Germany [Martina Cucchiara], church and state [Theresa Keeley], and so on. I marveled at the progress made merging sisters into broader historiographies. I also could not help but notice that the composition of our roundtable—which included a single sister (Angelyn Dries, OSF)—suggested that the history of women religious was increasingly being written by scholars who were not themselves members of religious communities.

This is not to say that sisters themselves were becoming any less invested in telling their own stories. On the contrary, the national success of *Women & Spirit* galvanized sisters across congregations to teach all Americans, Catholic and non-Catholic, about how vital their service had been to the church and nation. They received an unexpected assist in this effort from the Holy See. Between 2009 and 2013 the Vatican conducted two separate investigations into women religious in the United States: an apostolic visitation conducted by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and a doctrinal assessment of LCWR by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Motivating both was the perception that the majority of Catholic sisters had been too influenced by “radical feminism” and had strayed too far from Catholic teaching. Both punitive measures ended quietly after the election of Pope Francis. One of their positive outcomes, surely unintended, was an outpouring of support for sisters from Americans, Catholic and non-Catholic. Aware of the myriad problems within the US church, especially clerical sexual abuse and its episcopal coverup, many were incredulous that the Vatican had targeted sisters as a problem.

The Conrad Hilton Foundation has continued to help Catholic sisters share their stories more widely, launching the National Catholic Sisters Project and (in collaboration with *National Catholic Reporter*), *Global Sisters Report*, an independent, non-profit source of news and information about Catholic sisters and the critical issues facing the people they serve. Though mainly focused on contemporary sisters, *Global Sisters Report* includes plenty of historical content.

Meanwhile, the academic study for sisters has continued to thrive and develop. In 2013, CHWR came face-to-face with the reality of an aging population of American sisters when Sister Karen Kennelly decided she no longer had the wherewithal to run the conference on her own. I was directing Cushwa by then, and when Sister Karen asked

me to absorb it into the Cushwa Center, I agreed to do so for at least the duration of my tenure. I am exceedingly grateful to the people who helped make Notre Dame a hospitable home for CHWR: Cushwa's assistant director Shane Ulbrich; Catherine R. Osborne, postdoctoral scholar from 2014 until 2017; Jean McManus of Hesburgh Libraries, and the entire staff of the university archives; and core advisors Margaret McGuinness, Carol Coburn, and Sister Mary Oates, CSJ. By the time I stepped down as director in 2023, we had hosted three triennial conferences under Cushwa auspices.

My hope was that CHWR's affiliation with Cushwa would extend beyond my directorship, and, thanks to Notre Dame's development and investment teams and several generous benefactors, we garnered enough resources to make this possible. I am delighted that my successors, co-directors Darren Dochuk and David Lantigua, have continued to make CHWR a priority. While neither of them specializes in the study of Catholic sisters, Cushwa will be hosting the thirteenth triennial conference in June 2025.

Notre Dame is not the only institution founded by male religious that has turned into a US hub for the study of Catholic sisters. Four Jesuit universities are leading the way in thinking with historians, archivists, and congregational leaders about how sources should be collected, preserved, and made widely accessible to researchers. Boston College's Catholic Religious Archives, launched in 2018, is poised to become the world's largest single repository for multiple communities of men and women religious. Saint Louis University's Catholic Archives Collective aims to link its Center for Global Catholicism with independent local Catholic archives to increase the visibility and accessibility of their collections. Along with Boston College, Santa Clara University in California has recently joined a consortium with two similar sister-led initiatives: the Women's Religious Archive Collaborative in Cleveland and the Heritage and Research Center at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana.

Christopher Allison, director of the McGreal Center for Dominican Historical Studies at Dominican University, is a founding member of the Chicago Collaborative Archive Center (CCAC), a project that aims to repurpose abandoned buildings as an ecumenical archival center, with significant space for Catholic collections. In a thoughtful essay published in the spring 2023 issue of the Cushwa Center's *American Catholic Studies Newsletter*, he captured the sense of urgency behind these initiatives, noting that the lack of resources in many women's communities, or the fact that many are coming to completion, places their archives in imminent danger of being lost. Allison identified collaboration—among congregations, scholars, archives, and universities—as the pre-eminent keyword in solving the ongoing archival crisis shaping the study of women religious, adding trust-building, dedicated philanthropy,

and creativity as other crucial concepts. He reiterated the principle that animated CHWR, *Women & Spirit*, and generations of scholars: the history of nuns is also the history of US education, health care, social work, women, immigration, urban life—and of America itself.

Looking back, Sister Mary Hayes's exhortation to other sisters that day in Atchison was not only meaningful for me personally, but prophetic for the field. Since that meeting sisters have gone from being a slight minority on the program to only a modest fraction. At the most recent CHWR in 2022, only 18 percent of the presenters were sisters. And yet, while sisters may be depleted in number, they have not diminished in influence, spirit, or wisdom. As I think about how scholars and archivists will continue to tell their stories—which are, after all, our stories—my hope is that we can continue to be inspired by the imagination, witness, and indomitability of Catholic sisters, past and present.