

## Convent Class Struggle: Lay Sisters and Choir Sisters in America

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### ABSTRACT

American Catholic sisterhoods of European origin usually featured a subgroup of servant nuns known as lay or coadjutrix sisters. Generally from poor backgrounds and with limited education, the coadjutrices did most of the physical labour in convents and were excluded from many of the privileges of choir sisters. Obligated to wear distinctive clothing that marked their inferior status, they were segregated from choir sisters during meals and recreation, denied opportunities for self-improvement, and excluded from singing the Divine Office and from governance of the community. Choir sisters, on the other hand, monopolized professional work, such as teaching, had access to higher education, and controlled all the leadership positions in the congregation. This paper examines the often difficult relations between lay and choir sisters and agitation by the former for better treatment and greater equality in the United States in the century prior to the Second Vatican Council.

### RÉSUMÉ

Les sororités catholiques américaines d'origine européenne comportaient en général un sous-groupe de sœurs connues sous le nom de sœurs converses ou coadjutrices. De milieux généralement modestes et peu éduqués, les coadjutrices effectuaient la plupart des travaux physiques et manuels dans les couvents et ne bénéficiaient pas des nombreux privilèges des sœurs de chœur. Contraintes de porter des habits distinctifs qui marquaient l'infériorité de leur statut, les coadjutrices étaient séparées du groupe des sœurs de chœur tant pour les repas que pour les périodes de loisir. Elles se voyaient refuser des possibilités de développement personnel et ne pouvaient chanter lors de l'Office divin ou s'occuper de la gouvernance de la communauté. Les sœurs de chœur, quant à elles, monopolisaient le travail professionnel, comme l'enseignement, avaient accès à l'éducation supérieure et exerçaient toutes les positions de pouvoir au sein de la congrégation. Cet article traite des relations souvent difficiles entre les sœurs converses et les sœurs de chœur; il examine l'agitation des premières aux États-Unis alors qu'elles souhaitaient obtenir un traitement qui soit meilleur et plus équitable au cours du siècle précédant le Deuxième Concile du Vatican.

As the Roman Catholic Church developed its network of institutions in America in conjunction with immigration and population growth, the teaching sister became its most visible figure. By 1965, when the convent system reached its pinnacle, there were almost 180,000 nuns in total, with 114,000 working in Catholic schools.<sup>1</sup> That they were the workhorses of the church's school system—the largest private system in the world—is not in dispute. Nuns were principals, teachers, fundraisers, and willing volunteers for any task requiring attention. Some took on the additional duty of teaching religion classes on Saturdays or after regular school hours to Catholic children enrolled in the public system.<sup>2</sup>

When parents sent their children to Catholic schools, they expected them to be taught by nuns, and this was usually the case, especially at the elementary level. The belief that nuns were the ideal teachers for girls—and for younger boys too—became an axiom of Catholic education. Since it was believed that she was called by God to an exalted way of life, the moral formation of youth was presumed to be safe in her hands. And her expertise in religious instruction—an essential part of the curriculum—was never in doubt. At times it was even claimed that her work in the classroom was inspired by divine guidance. Writing in 1952, Mother Marie Hélène, superior general of the Sisters of Providence (St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana), noted: “The ease with which a frail little sister can interest and gain the hearts of a group of children shows that God gives the tools to those who are willing to do his work.”<sup>3</sup> While the vast majority of nuns were involved in education, it should be acknowledged that they were also responsible for a broader variety of institutions, including elder-care facilities, hospitals, Magdalen asylums, and orphanages.<sup>4</sup>

Any discussion of the professional work of nuns needs an important caveat. Those so engaged were known as choir sisters, were educated, and came from families with the means to provide them with dowries. So that choir sisters might be able to focus their energies exclusively on their professional roles, most religious orders of European and Canadian origin featured a second category of women religious: lay or coadjutrix sisters. Known as *soeurs coadjutrices* or *soeurs auxiliaires* in French, lay sisters came from families of modest means and usually had had a limited education. They were in effect servant nuns, and they worked in convent kitchens, laundries, and gardens.

The literature on the history of women religious, whether in America or elsewhere, pays little attention to lay sisters. A notable exception is the work of Elizabeth Rapley who devotes an entire chapter to them in her superb account of convent life in pre-revolutionary France, *A Social History of the Cloister* (2001). Carmen Mangion's study of convents in nineteenth-century Britain, *Contested Identities* (2008), also gives them appropriate attention. As the title suggests, lay sisters are the subject of Christine Trimmingham Jack's “The Lay Sister in Educational History and Memory” (2000). The narrow focus on one convent school in Australia and the author's post-structuralist orientation limit the value of this piece. Lay sisters in North America remain more elusive, sometimes receiving a few passing references from historians, often none at all. A few brief examples will suffice. Marta Danylewycz mentions them briefly on four pages of *Taking the Veil* (1987), describing their lives as “an

unending drudgery broken only by the hours of prescribed prayer and attendance at Mass,” and quite unlike the satisfying careers she attributes to choir sisters. They are referred to on four pages of Anne M. Butler’s *Across God’s Frontiers: Catholic Sisters in the American West* (2012), itself a work containing 313 pages of text. In Margaret McGuinness’s *Called to Serve: A History of Nuns in America* (2013), lay sisters are nowhere to be found.<sup>5</sup>

The neglect of lay sisters may be partly attributed to a paucity of sources. Until the latter half of the nineteenth century, most of them would not have been literate, and what we know about them depends on records kept by choir sisters. Discovering anything about their lives in their own words remains a challenge. I was fortunate to discover transcripts of interviews with a number of lay sisters in the archives of the Sisters of the Holy Names in Lake Oswego, Oregon, that provided unique insights into their lives. And I was shown unclassified files in the archives of the Sisters of Providence, St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, that contained unusually frank and detailed obituaries of lay sisters and other interesting documentation about them.

A further cause of neglect may lie in the conventional interpretation of the history of women religious. “Great white nun” biographies and heroic institution-building narratives dominate the field, leaving little room for those who laboured away in kitchens and laundries. In literature produced by religious orders themselves, lay sisters are variously described as “our dear little helpers,” “silent heroines,” or those fortunate few who were granted the “Nazareth vocation”—a term used to connect their work to that of the Virgin Mary in the holy household in Galilee.<sup>6</sup> The following excerpt from the constitution of the Society of the Sacred Heart illustrates this view: “Their state is all the more to be prized as removing them more effectually from the occasions and danger of self-love, vain self-esteem and dissipation of the mind, to which those are exposed who are engaged in study; and it would be more dear to them because as it is humble, laborious and obscure, it renders them more like Jesus Christ their Spouse, Who chose to pass the first thirty years of this earthly life in obscurity and labour.”<sup>7</sup>

In writing lay sisters into the history of education, I will avoid discussion of their “contribution” to the church. I will suggest instead that the social class distinctions represented by the lay/choir divide were a source of conflict in religious life rather than a convenient division of labour that facilitated institutional aims. This was a conflict that was recognized by St. Alfonso di Liguori, himself a great champion of monasticism, in eighteenth-century Italy.<sup>8</sup> And I will suggest that the persistence of the convent caste system contradicts common assumptions found in traditional histories of women religious.

The most successful religious sisterhoods that established themselves in the United States during the nineteenth century came from France, Ireland, and the Canadian province of Quebec. It was common practice for these congregations to be divided into lay and choir sisters. Since the rule codifying this distinction was similar in most communities, a brief examination of one of them will serve as a representative example.

The Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary was a religious order founded in Longueuil, Quebec, in 1843 by Eulalie Durocher. In 1859, twelve of the sisters

(ten choir and two lay) travelled to the Pacific Northwest via the Isthmus of Panama, where they established a significant presence.<sup>9</sup> The constitution, as revised in 1926, had much to say about choir and lay sisters—the latter were known as *soeurs auxiliaires*—and how they differed from one another. While both categories of sister ate in the same refectory and received the same food, if at separate tables, just about everything else about them was different.

Young women entering the community as choir sisters were obliged to provide a dowry of \$500. *Auxiliaire* entrants were free of this obligation. It was assumed that the latter came from families without such resources and that they were “devoid of sufficient knowledge for the education of youth, and the talents requisite to acquire it....” Their novitiate was separate from that of the choir sisters. They were “carefully instructed” in Christian doctrine and the principles of the interior life, but there were no “profane studies” and they were forbidden from seeking “to improve or to perfect the education they may have already received.” At the completion of the novitiate, the vow ceremony for both categories of sister was identical. Even so, the *auxiliaires* were the last to take their vows—another reminder of their place in the convent hierarchy. Their distinctive habits came with a coloured apron to signal the role they were to play. Aprons were a common feature of lay sister habits in other communities and the habits themselves usually resembled the garb of European peasant women of centuries gone by. Holy Names lay sisters received silver rather than gold rings to be worn on their fingers and small brass crucifixes to hang around their necks so as not to impede their labours.

*Auxiliaires* were excluded from governance of the community and from instructing the young “as these functions belong exclusively to the choir sisters.” They were also forbidden from chanting the Little Office of the Virgin Mary. But they did have their own prayer schedule—Ave, Credo, Gloria, Pater—to be recited while the choir sisters were doing the office—provided their labouring duties permitted. The constitution made it clear that they were in the convent to work. Their duties were defined as “manual labour, cooking, laundering,” and attending to “the order and cleanliness of the house.” It was said that their work, if completed diligently, would “afford the choir sisters more ample time and freedom for the education of children.” And then came this admonition: “Let them rejoice at the thought that they have been admitted to the Congregation, and strive to become more and more worthy of this favour by their humility, their zeal in the observance of the Constitutions, their love of work, their prompt obedience and their respectful submission towards the Choir Sisters, especially the superiors.”<sup>10</sup>

In a general sense, distinctions in dress, work assignment, educational attainment, and opportunities for advancement defined the relations between choir and lay sisters. The often harsh treatment of the latter by the former is also noteworthy as the following examples indicate. The Sisters of St. Joseph came from France in 1836 to settle in frontier Missouri. Once they were established, a local priest, Father Edmond Sournier, observed that their lay sisters were being treated “like negro women.”<sup>11</sup> The Sisters of Charity of Providence is a congregation of French-Canadian origin that established a major presence in what is now Washington State beginning in the

1850s.<sup>12</sup> Relations between choir and lay sisters in the congregation were not always easy. An 1898 circular from the superior general warned: "In some houses the tertiary [lay] sisters are not treated with enough charity; they are spoken to in a harsh manner; we fail in delicacy towards them."<sup>13</sup> Around 1904, a pastoral visitation report on the Ursulines in San Antonio, Texas, advised the mother superior to "treat the lay sisters with more kindness" and to lessen their exhausting work schedule.<sup>14</sup>

Lack of formal education and access to it generally kept lay sisters in their place. Inadequate knowledge of English was a further impediment for those who came from continental Europe, French Canada, or Latin America. In 1882, thirty years after the School Sisters of Notre Dame had come to America from Germany, the superior, Mother Caroline Friess, admitted that her congregation had in its ranks poorly educated lay sisters who could barely speak English.<sup>15</sup> Soon afterwards, the community received an influx of Polish recruits who were assigned preponderantly to manual work. The Poles resented their inferior status, and in 1901, they defected *en masse* to create their own congregation, the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St Francis.<sup>16</sup>

While differences in social class, educational attainment, ethnicity, and language marked off choir sisters from lay sisters in various degrees and combinations, race could also play a role. Katherine Drexel was a Philadelphia banking heiress who decided to spend her fortune on Catholic mission work. In 1891, she established a new religious order, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Coloured People. Mother Drexel decided that her nuns would be exclusively white, and that the "Indians and Coloured People" for whom they operated schools would not be permitted to join the order. In association with the Benedictine fathers, the sisters formed the teaching staff at St. Paul's Mission School on the Yankton Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. In 1935, in response to requests from some of their former students to enter religious life, Mother Drexel and a local missionary, Father Sylvester Eisenman, decided to create an affiliate religious community—the Oblate Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. Membership in the Oblate Sisters was open exclusively to Indigenous Americans, and they did most of the physical labour around the missions. The roles they were assigned meant effectively that they were a racially segregated body of lay sisters, although not formally constituted as such. In 1953, non-Indigenous women were admitted to the Oblate Sisters.<sup>17</sup>

The distinction between choir and lay sister was a monastic convention dating back to medieval Europe. Did the American context modify it in any respect? The stories of some Irish women who emigrated as nuns or were intending to take religious vows suggest that the convent system in the new world could be a bit more flexible and adaptable on the matter than in the old. Two siblings, Margaret and Ellen O'Brien, joined the Mercy congregation in Ireland as lay sisters and were among the first to come to America in the 1840s. Once they had crossed the Atlantic, it was discovered that they had leadership potential, and they were elevated to the choir rank.<sup>18</sup> The Sisters of St. Joseph built a convent in Wheeling, West Virginia, in 1858. A decade later, Irish immigrant Julia Quill entered the community as a lay sister. Within two years, her ability was reassessed, and she was placed among the choir sisters. In 1878, she was elected superior at Wheeling.<sup>19</sup>

It didn't always work out that way, however. In fact, social advancement tended to be quite rare. Much depended on the religious order, the challenges it faced, and its openness to change. When the Sisters of Providence congregation arrived in Indiana from France in the 1840s, establishing a convent at St. Mary-of-the-Woods, it assigned its new members to manual and intellectual work based on suitability, and there was no constitutional difference between lay and choir sisters. When the Vatican approved the new rule in 1887, the lay/choir distinction was instituted, much to the disadvantage of the lay sisters. They were now assigned a fairly standard catalogue of disadvantages that were strongly resented. And when English-speaking women joined the community, it added an ethnic, linguistic dimension to the lay/choir divide.

Irish-born Johanna O'Connor entered the community at St. Mary-of-the-Woods in July 1881. She took her vows on August 15, 1884, and became Sister Mary Assisi. Although educated, an interesting conversationalist, and "blessed with a bright mind," she was assigned to the kitchen rather than the classroom. And why was that? "Her rich Irish brogue that she never lost prevented her being used as a teacher." A few years later, when the constitution divided the community into lay and choir, Sister Mary accepted her place in the inferior rank: "Her strong Irish faith and spirit of prayer came to the fore and saved the day for her." She died on March 18, 1940, one day before her eighty-fourth birthday.<sup>20</sup>

But lay sisters of French origin were not much better treated. When the original six Sisters of St. Joseph arrived in Missouri, one among them was a lay sister. Sister Philomène Vilaine detested the black taffeta cap she was obliged to wear rather than the veil of her choir companions. Bishop Joseph Rosati of St. Louis, under whose jurisdiction the congregation settled, advised that American Catholics would object to the lay habit as a visible mark of inferior social status. As a consequence, the distinctive lay dress was abandoned, but only temporarily. In 1853, it was reintroduced by Mother St. John Fournier, who felt it was necessary in order to attract more nuns from France where superiors viewed American innovation with suspicion. This move was so disturbing to some of the lay sisters that they left the community.<sup>21</sup>

American-born Sister Febronie Boyer was one of the lay sisters who decided to stay. If she did not have a problem with attire, she soon found other reasons for disappointment. A native of Old Mines, Missouri, she was raised by her father, who provided her with no formal schooling. She joined the Sisters of St. Joseph in Corondolet in 1848 at the age of fifteen and was put to work in the kitchen. Some years later, she was sent to the congregation's mission in Cahokia, Illinois. She understood that she would receive instruction in basic literacy at the end of her day's work in this new setting, but the choir sisters denied her this opportunity.<sup>22</sup>

The case of Jeannine Turgeon shows that some lay sisters, upon moving to the United States, were allowed opportunities for personal advancement while remaining in the lower rank. Turgeon was born in Montreal in 1925 to a devout working-class family. The eldest of eleven children, she quit school after grade 8 to help out at home. In 1944, following a religious retreat, she became a lay sister with the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. She disliked the kitchen work to which she

was assigned, but disliked even more the condescension with which the *soeurs auxiliaires* were treated. Even novices who were much younger looked down upon them. After five years at the Montreal mother house, she was sent to Albany, New York, where she found the milieu much more to her liking. She didn't speak English upon arrival, but some of the choir sisters decided to teach it to her and she learned quickly. Impressed by her abilities, the Albany community encouraged her to finish high school and train as a practical nurse—work that she loved. Although she never advanced to the choir, most of the community treated her as an equal. But there were a few older nuns who resisted the egalitarianism and would remind her on occasion of where she had come from. And when she returned from time to time to the motherhouse in Montreal, she observed that the old attitude of disdain remained much more firmly in place there than in Albany.<sup>23</sup>

But the attitude of disdain was by no means completely absent in America. Consider the following case. Bridgit Burns was born in Ireland on August 6, 1831, and never attended school. She was a teenager when the Great Famine struck her country, and she was among the fortunate ones who made it to America. She entered the Sisters of Providence (St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana) in the late 1840s, taking her vows on August 15, 1853. Sister Helena, as she was now known, was employed as a cook at several missions, and when the distinction between lay and choir sister was imposed in 1887, she became resentful. The bitterness never left her, and she remained “critical and self-willed” until the end of her life. Two or three days before her death on December 22, 1913, she attempted a change of heart, but those who penned her *nécrologie* were never sure that she had done quite enough: “We hope during her last hours special graces were given to crown her long life in religion.”<sup>24</sup>

The story of Rita D'Astous illustrates another layer of complexity in the choir/lay divide. Johanna O'Connor, it will be recalled, had had the educational qualifications for the choir but was rejected; D'Astous was also qualified, but she preferred the lower rank. D'Astous was born in 1927 in Saint-Damase, Quebec, to a devout working-class family that migrated to Huntington, Massachusetts, in 1931. Although she graduated from high school, she disliked studying and books and chose instead to work as a welder with her father. When she was in her early twenties, a family friend introduced her to the Sisters of the Holy Names, and she decided to join the order. The nuns wanted her to become a choir sister and teacher, but she voluntarily took the veil as a lay sister in order to work with her hands.<sup>25</sup>

There is certainly evidence that some lay sisters were appreciated and were satisfied with their lives. Sarah Gagnier was born in 1920 in rural Quebec to a large and devoutly religious family. She attended Catholic schools until she was thirteen, when the family moved to Windsor, Ontario, where her father found work with Chrysler. School had never been to her liking and she found employment as a domestic servant in the city and across the river in Detroit. At the age of twenty, she entered the Sisters of the Holy Names and, in keeping with her limited education, became a lay sister. Until she retired at the age of seventy-eight, she worked in kitchens and infirmaries in convents in Windsor, Florida, and New York. In reflecting on her life, she observed that choir sisters and lay sisters had had good relations, and that the former had

appreciated the labours of the latter. She also recalled the great camaraderie among the lay sisters, and that they had enjoyed each other's company. This had been noted by the choir sisters, who often seemed tense with one another and constrained by convent protocols.<sup>26</sup>

These stories illustrate the complexity of the convent caste system. Sometimes rigid, sometimes flexible, its operations were strongly influenced by the circumstances and traditions of individual religious orders. And it is well to remember that some communities never featured the distinction between the two classes of sister. This was the case, for example, with the Maryknoll Sisters, founded in New York early in the twentieth century. The Maryknolls were focused on missionary work in developing countries and prided themselves on their modern spirit.<sup>27</sup>

The recruitment of coadjutrix sisters in America was always challenging, a fact noted by the Sisters of St. Joseph as early as the 1860s.<sup>28</sup> Congregations determined to maintain the distinction between lay and choir were compelled to make recruiting drives to Europe, Canada, and later, to Latin America.<sup>29</sup> Once the Sisters of Charity of Providence was established in the Pacific Northwest, they began to recruit local English-speaking women to the ranks of their choir sisters, a practice that eroded the French-Canadian character of the community over time. But they continued to rely on Quebec to supply them with lay sisters.<sup>30</sup> It is another example in which status based on social class and education was accentuated by ethnicity and language. Sister Rosemary Dillman, in recalling these differences, admitted that the choir sisters looked down on the lay sisters, who were usually poor farm girls who spoke little English upon their arrival in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>31</sup>

It was a similar story with the Sisters of the Holy Names in Oregon. During their extensive history in the Pacific Northwest, the order recruited a total of twenty-eight lay sisters locally. In fact, the last of these to enter, Sister Mary Hermina, did so in 1930, when recruitment to the lower rank had become increasingly challenging. But no less than forty *auxiliaires* were provided by Quebec, which kept the caste system in operation.<sup>32</sup>

The realities of frontier life presented the system with another challenge. Small communities in isolated settings could not always maintain the strict class-based division of labour. Choir sisters often found themselves assisting in manual tasks, while lay sisters might be put in charge of children, even leading them in prayer or lessons if they had the education to do so.<sup>33</sup>

The growing scarcity of coadjutrix recruits and the much higher defection rate among them in comparison with choir sisters encouraged reappraisal of the system of class distinction. In some cases, new branches of expanding congregations simply dropped the practice of seeking and admitting lay sisters. This was the case when the Sisters of St. Joseph in New York sent some of their members to open a mission in Michigan in 1889.<sup>34</sup>

Most of the impetus for change, however, came from within the congregations and was a consequence of persistent agitation by coadjutrix sisters for greater equality over many years. The distinctive habit was almost universally resented and this outward symbol of inferiority was often abolished long before complete equality was



achieved. For example, the requirement that Dominican coadjutrices in Texas wear a black apron was dropped in 1877. But it was not until 1909 that the mother general and council ruled that they could take recreation in the company of the choir sisters.<sup>35</sup>

A Benedictine community in the west began to ease the distinctions between the two categories of sister in 1881 through a number of modest measures, including dress. All sisters could now wear identical black veils and gold rings. Prayer schedules were also modified: the Divine Office, which had previously been chanted exclusively by the choir sisters in Latin, was replaced by the Little Office of the Virgin Mary. The latter sequence of prayers and hymns was recited in English and by everyone together. In 1888, when the congregation adopted a new constitution, the lay sisters agitated in vain for complete equality. They had to wait until further changes were made in 1894 that abolished class distinctions.<sup>36</sup>

Agitation for change was sometimes successful, sometimes not. The Society of the Sacred Heart, a post-revolution French order noted for its *hauteur*, came to America in 1818. In 1926, an American coadjutrix with the society wrote to the vicar-general, Mother Mathilde von Loë, challenging the continuing existence of the lay/choir distinction in “the House of God.” The distinction was damaging to the society, she claimed, and was discouraging vocations to both ranks. When the lay sisters were treated kindly, she said, it was “like the kindness shown to servants and not as to members of the same family.” And when recreation was taken together, “we [lay sisters] are often treated as if we were not there or did not exist.” Moreover, choir sisters received vacations and opportunities to stimulate their minds, while lay sisters had nothing but “dirt and dust from one end of the year to the other.” She concluded with a more egalitarian vision for the society: “I do think that every one of the religious family should do a share of it [domestic work] and that our gifts and talents should be considered and developed just as other religious orders develop them in their subjects....”<sup>37</sup> The complaints of the coadjutrix sister were considered at the general congregation (chapter) of the society in 1928 and rejected. Nor was the society ready to accede to demands that a uniform habit be worn by both categories of sister: “That would foster people’s tendencies to rise above their condition: a tendency that cannot be placed at the basis of religious life and rather is harmful to it. One comes into religion to follow and imitate Jesus Christ, poor, humble, crucified.”<sup>38</sup>

One of the problems facing the survival of convent stratification was that working-class women did want to “rise above their condition.” Domestic service was considered no more appealing in a convent than in a wealthy household. And wealthy households were finding it difficult to get good help. Being a domestic in secular society entailed long hours of work, little freedom, close supervision, and low status. Moreover, early in the twentieth century, labour legislation was beginning to regulate many female-dominated occupations while domestic service remained untouched. By 1920 or thereabouts, working-class women had established an unofficial hierarchy of desirable employment that went in descending order as follows: office or secretarial work, department store sales, factory work, restaurant waitressing, and domestic service. In truth, domestic service bore a stigma that it could not shake.

Nobody wanted to be somebody else's servant, especially in America. It was work that "Yankee girls" simply would not do. Many European immigrants were initially willing to take on the role, especially if they arrived without families and needed a place to live—often true for the Irish, for example. But with the passing of time, domestic service became the domain of Hispanic and African-American women, adding new dimensions of stigma and stereotyping to the work.<sup>39</sup>

As the twentieth century progressed, many congregations persisted with the lay/choir distinction, although recruitment to the former category was increasingly challenging. It did not stop the recruiters from trying. *Convent Life*, a 1920 book by Father Martin J. Scott, SJ, encouraged poorly educated devout women to consider signing on as lay sisters. Scott assured such women that they would take religious vows and be sisters in every sense of the word. Moreover, by their manual labour they would accrue as much celestial credit as choir sisters.<sup>40</sup>

"Ursuline Coadjutrices: Hidden Heroines of Christ," a pamphlet published a decade or so later, made a similar, if more detailed, pitch. The pamphlet, illustrated with photographs of lay sisters hanging up washing, making soap, cleaning fish, and helping children, assured potential recruits that they would follow the same rule and be just as much spouses of Christ as choir sisters. A lay sister, it was said, undertook "humble manual labours such as Our Blessed Mother performed at Nazareth" in a "sweet and unassuming way," winning the respect, affection, and gratitude of all. Her work was described as heroic, akin to that of renowned missionaries and martyrs, all the more so because of its obscurity. It was a heroism rooted in an ardent desire to love and serve Jesus, in a wish to remain little and to follow the pathway of the lowly that led directly to heaven. And in a passage designed to inspire imitation, Soeur St. Laurent, an Ursuline lay sister in Quebec, was quoted as saying on her deathbed: "If I could have had all the crowns in the world I would have given them all to buy the rank of Coadjutrix Sister in a House of St. Ursula."<sup>41</sup>

Invoking the image of the household scene in Nazareth was a standard theme in literature that championed the continuing existence of the lay sister category. Father Daniel Lord, a prolific American Jesuit author and pamphleteer, maintained that domestic labour imitated the perfect life of the Virgin Mary who "never ceased to be a queen even when she handled a broom, washed the dishes, set a table, made a bed, cooked a meal."<sup>42</sup>

On February 4, 1920, Josefa Menéndez, a simple Spanish woman, turned up at the novitiate of the Society of the Sacred Heart in Poitiers, France, and was accepted as a lay sister. Shortly after her entry, she began to have visions in which Jesus urged her to be a victim of his love and mercy—to suffer in order to console his heart so wounded by the sins of the world. After some hesitation, she agreed and felt herself carrying his cross and wearing his crown of thorns around the convent. Sister Josefa's community was aware of her "special graces" and encouraged her to commit the words of Jesus to paper, and she did so. The outside world knew nothing of this until after her death on December 29, 1923, at the age of thirty-three. In 1938, once the church recognized her as a genuine mystic, her message from Jesus was published as *Un Appel à l'Amour* in Toulouse, and featured a brief letter of recommendation

by Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pope Pius XII.<sup>43</sup> In 1947, the Society of the Sacred Heart decided to put Sister Josefa forward as a candidate for canonization. The decision was partly motivated by a sense that success might increase vocations to the coadjutrix ranks, which were becoming increasingly scarce both in Europe and America. But the cause was controversial. Some Jesuits questioned the originality and authenticity of Josefa's revelations and in 1958 the society abandoned the cause.<sup>44</sup>

Father Godfrey Poage was a Passionist priest who achieved national prominence as a champion of aggressive recruitment to religious life. In August 1959, he was conducting a workshop for the Sisters of Mercy at their Vocational Institute in Oklahoma City. One of the concerns was the recruitment and retention of lay sisters, and the matter was addressed in a brainstorming session on "glorifying the menial tasks of the community." Two of the recruitment ideas that emerged from this session were: "Emphasize the fact that our housekeepers don't have to grade papers," and "It's fun to experiment with new recipes."<sup>45</sup>

Efforts to prop up the system went nowhere. The recruitment of lay sisters continued to decline. We can see the recruitment decline in the following figures on lay entrants to the Sisters of Providence (Indiana):

1910–1919: 36  
 1920–1929: 7  
 1930–1939: 9  
 1940–1949: 5

One of the lay sisters, Mary Alice Matthews, saw an opportunity to challenge the system as the numbers faded away. In 1954, she and her two siblings began an agitation for equal treatment. They were particularly aggrieved by their exclusion from the chapel where the blessed sacrament was exposed. Mother Gertrude Claire, superior of the congregation, was sympathetic and wrote successfully to Rome to have distinctions between lay and choir removed from the constitution.<sup>46</sup>

Between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, then, some congregations eliminated the lay sister as an inferior rank in response to internal pressure and declining vocations. Integration and equality meant that all sisters now wore identical habits, prayed together, took recreation together, and could participate in community governance. Even so, when the praying, voting, and so forth come to an end, somebody still had to do the dishes. Integration was more symbolic than practical in its effects. Thousands of nuns continued to be assigned to domestic duties and even denied educational opportunities that might have allowed them to aspire to professional work.<sup>47</sup>

When Zélia Auger entered the Missionary Oblate Sisters in 1926, she only had a grade 8 education and fully expected to become a lay sister. In 1929, just as she was completing her novitiate, the distinction between lay and choir sister—a source of constant difficulty in the congregation—was eliminated. While Sister Zélia was pleased with this development, her limited schooling meant that she was assigned to the kitchen. Her long days of labour interspersed with prayers were not that different from those experienced by lay sisters of previous generations.<sup>48</sup>

In 1943, the Dominicans in the diocese of Galveston, Texas, adopted a new constitution that signaled the existence of but one class of sister in the community “who perform the various works of the Congregation according to their abilities and the discretion of the superior.” While it seemed to be an improvement on past practice, in reality, one group of nuns continued to be assigned domestic duties. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, those so assigned agitated regularly for some relief from their exhausting workload but to little avail. Only in the summer of 1963 did some of the teaching sisters volunteer for the kitchen and laundry in order that the “domestics” could attend their retreat uninterrupted.<sup>49</sup>

The decline in lay sister vocations and the gradual abolition of the lay/choir divide took place as the total number of nuns was increasing steadily and especially so following the Second World War. The increase was largely a product of an aggressive recruitment campaign in Catholic schools designed to expand the force of teaching sisters in the system as it grew to accommodate the baby-boom generation. The expansion put the convent system under enormous pressure in its many dimensions, and this included getting the physical labour done. But it should be noted that novitiates were crowded in those years, and postulants and novices always did a fair share of the chores.<sup>50</sup>

As we have seen, the Society of the Sacred Heart was one of the congregations most resistant to modifying the lay/choir divide. Recognizing the difficulty in recruiting lay sisters both in Europe and the United States, Mother Sabine de Valon, appointed vicar-general in 1958, launched the society on the road to “slow assimilation.” Modifications to the *coutumier* or book of customs that year set the process in motion. The following privileges were granted gradually to the lay sisters, although the pace of implementation depended on the initiative of local vicars: saying morning prayers in the chapel, having a copy of the constitution in their library, having a pen for their personal use, and sitting at the same table as the choir sisters in the refectory.

In 1960, de Valon proposed identical habits for all, since different clothing was often misinterpreted in a world that valued equality. She was also aware that some priests were directing girls with religious vocations away from the society to congregations that had abolished the distinction. In 1962, she decreed that lay sisters have one Sunday of relaxation per month, more time for prayer, and two weeks of vacation every year. As the Second Vatican Council progressed, she was informed that the Sacred Congregation of the Religious was receiving a growing volume of correspondence from lay sisters complaining of discrimination and poor treatment. In recognition that the old system of distinctions was no longer sustainable, in July 1964, she asked that local vicars no longer admit lay postulants to their novitiates. The “slow assimilation” approach made sense in view of entrenched snobbery, and it did encounter resistance. Some local vicars were reluctant to grant lay sisters the same cross and ring as “the mothers.” And there were uncooperative choir sisters who refused to sit with the coadjutrices or converse with them.<sup>51</sup>

Mother de Vilon had sensed that Rome was about to initiate reform, and she was right. Meeting between 1962 and 1965, the Second Vatican Council set in motion a modernization of many church practices and structures. *Perfectae Caritatis*, a document

issued on October 28, 1965, advised monastic institutions on how they might adapt “to the changed conditions of our time.” One of its recommendations was as follows: “Unless conditions really suggest something else, care should be taken that there be only one class of Sisters in communities of women. Only that distinction of persons should be retained which corresponds to the diversity of works for which the Sisters are destined, either by special vocation from God or by reason of special aptitude.”<sup>52</sup>

This was the signal to end the class system that still prevailed in many congregations. On July 2, 1966, the Sisters of Charity of Providence (Seattle) formally admitted the remaining twenty-three lay sisters to all the privileges of choir sisters.<sup>53</sup> On May 20, 1967, a similar ceremony marked the end of the distinction between choir and auxiliary among the Sisters of the Holy Names in Oregon. There were ten *auxiliaires* in the order at the time.<sup>54</sup> Vilma Seelaus entered the Carmelites of Newport, RI, in 1946 as a lay sister. In 1968, when the first general chapter was held following the abolition of the lay/choir distinction, she was elected prioress—something that could never have happened even three years previously.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

The lot of the lay sister was a humble one and if all the rhetoric lauding the virtue of humility were granted credence, her position would have been most enviable. Well-worn biblical platitudes proclaiming that those who humbled themselves would be exalted and that the last would be first might have convinced her that her heavenly reward would be commensurately greater than that of sisters in the choir. And constant paeans to the spiritual equality of all should have dispelled any resentment at her low status and endless days of unrelieved toil. But it was not so. In the American context, it was always difficult to recruit and retain lay sisters, all the more so as domestic service fell out of favour as an occupation. The coadjutrices who stayed the course were often unhappy with the restrictions attendant on their lowly place in the convent hierarchy, and they not only grumbled but agitated for change.

The agitators had no easy task. Lay sisters were a minority in every convent, were limited in their education, and sometimes even lacked an adequate command of the English language. The privileges of the choir sisters were founded on the unquestioned assumptions of middle-class snobbery with its disdain for those whom God had been pleased to place in a low station in life. Besides, the convent hierarchy bore many resemblances to a caste system. Boundaries were fixed and clearly defined, mobility was rare, and position in the hierarchy was determined by accident of birth rather than by effort or ability. The distinctions and separations that marked off lay sisters from choir sisters were much more than a matter of custom; they were entrenched in congregational constitutions and not easily dispensed with. The segregation of the coadjutrices during meals, prayer, and recreation, their exclusion from educational opportunities and from governance, and their required distinctive attire were all codified legally. The dominance of the choir sisters could only be modified with their consent and that was often slow in coming and even then granted grudgingly. In many cases, it never came until Rome intervened.

The distinction between lay and choir sisters not only reflected class prejudice, but also mirrored in an ironic way the gendered division of labour that devalued women's traditional domestic work. Those same choir sisters whose professional achievements have attracted the attention of so many Catholic historians were quite content to deny educational opportunities to members of their community who had been born into poverty and to assign a degraded status to household chores and those who performed them. The persistence of this system of distinction raises questions about the assumption, so often found in the literature, that nuns were feminists or proto-feminists.

## Notes

- 1 Brian Titley, *Into Silence and Servitude: How American Girls Became Nuns, 1945–1965* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 177, 198.
- 2 Carol K. Coborn and Martha Smith, *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 129–30, 144.
- 3 Mother Marie Hélene, "The Spiritual Possibilities of Teaching as a Vocation," in *Religious Community Life in the United State: Proceedings of the First National Congress of Religious of the United States* (New York: Paulist Press, 1952), 117–25.
- 4 See, for example, Coborn and Smith, *Spirited Lives*, chapter 7, "Succoring the Needy: Nursing, Hospitals, and Social Services," 189–220.
- 5 Anne M. Butler, *Across God's Frontiers: Catholic Sisters in the American West, 1850–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 37–38, 292–293; Marta Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood, and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840–1920* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), 76–77, 93, 108; Carmen M. Mangion, *Contested Identities: Catholic Women Religious in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 33, 84–85, 183–84, 192, 198, 203–09; Margaret McGuinness, *Called to Serve: A History of Nuns in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Elizabeth Rapley, *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 182–97; Christine Trimmingham Jack, "The Lay Sister in Educational History and Memory," *History of Education* 29, no. 3 (2000): 181–94. A number of authors whose works are cited here should be acknowledged for their attention to lay sisters: Byrne (note 11), Luirard (note 6), and Thompson (note 16).
- 6 Monique Luirard, *The Society of the Sacred Heart in the World of Its Times, 1865–2000* (St. Louis: Society of the Sacred Heart, 2016), 32.
- 7 *Society of the Sacred Heart*, 32.
- 8 Alfonso di Liguori, *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ*, rev. 2nd ed., trans. Rev. Eugene Grimm (New York: Redemptorist Fathers, 1929), 690–93.
- 9 "Lest We Forget," unpublished typescript by Sister Margaret Meyers, August 1995, Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary Archives, Lake Oswego, Oregon (hereafter SHNJMA).
- 10 Constitutions of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, 1926, SHNJMA.
- 11 Patricia Byrne, "The Sisters of St. Joseph: The Americanization of a French Tradition," *US Catholic Historian* 5, no. 3/4 (1986): 267.

- 12 Sister Mary James, *Providence: A Sketch of the Sisters of Charity of Providence in the Northwest, 1856–1931* (Seattle: Sisters of Charity of Providence, 1931), 42, 43.
- 13 Peter F. Schmid, "These Dear, Faithful Helpers: The Coadjutrix Sisters of Providence," *Past Forward* (archives newsletter) 15, no. 3 (2008): 5, Sisters of Charity of Providence Archives, Seattle, Washington (hereafter SCPA).
- 14 Butler, *Across God's Frontiers*, 292–93.
- 15 Butler, 38.
- 16 Margaret Susan Thompson, "Sisterhood and Power: Class, Culture, and Ethnicity in the American Convent," *Colby Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1989): 173.
- 17 Butler, *Across God's Frontiers*, 192–95, 216–25; McGuinness, *Called to Serve*, 129–31; "Obituary of Sr. Mary Francis Poitra," *Yankton Press and Dakotan*, April 26, 2005; "Oblate Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament," <https://martyrcatholic.wordpress.com/meet-the-oblate-sisters/>.
- 18 Thompson, "Sisterhood and Power," 158.
- 19 Byrne, "The Sisters of St. Joseph," 267.
- 20 Unclassified file on lay sisters shown to me by Sister Donna Butler, Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods Archives, Terre Haute, Indiana (hereafter SPSMWA).
- 21 Byrne, "The Sisters of St Joseph," 267; Coborn and Smith, *Spirited Lives*, 84–85.
- 22 Coborn and Smith, *Spirited Lives*, 85.
- 23 Transcript of an interview with Jeannine Turgeon by Karen Kinzey, Albany, NY, April 25, 2009, SHNJMA.
- 24 Unclassified file on lay sisters shown to me by Sister Donna Butler, SPSMWA.
- 25 Transcript of an interview with Rita D'Astous by Karen Kinzey, Albany, NY, April 10, 2010, SHNJMA.
- 26 Transcript of an interview with Sarah Gagnier by Karen Kinzey, Windsor, Ontario, May 26, 2010, SHNJMA.
- 27 Thomas P. McCarthy, *Guide to the Catholic Sisterhoods in the United States* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 290.
- 28 Byrne, "The Sisters of St. Joseph," 268.
- 29 Thompson, "Sisterhood and Power," 160.
- 30 Schmid, "These Dear, Faithful Helpers," 5, SCPA.
- 31 Conversation with Sister Rosemary Dillman, Seattle, December 3, 2013.
- 32 "Lest We Forget," unpublished typescript by Sister Margaret Meyers, August 1995, SHNJMA.
- 33 Coborn and Smith, *Spirited Lives*, 84–85.
- 34 Thompson, "Sisterhood and Power," 158.
- 35 Sheila Hackett, *Dominican Women in Texas: From Ohio to Galveston and Beyond* (Houston: Sacred Heart Convent, 1986), 201.
- 36 Butler, *Across God's Frontiers*, 292–93.
- 37 Luirard, *The Society of the Sacred Heart*, 275–76.
- 38 Luirard, 279.
- 39 Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 127, 134–35, 188, 270; Andrew Urban, "Irish Domestic Servants: 'Biddy' and Rebellion in the American Home, 1850–1900," *Gender and History* 21, no. 2 (2009): 264–66.
- 40 Martin J. Scott, *Convent Life: The Meaning of a Religious Vocation* (New York: P. J. Kennedy, 1920), 57–58.
- 41 "Ursuline Coadjutrices: Hidden Heroines of Christ," no date, Catholic University of America, Rare Books and Special Collections.
- 42 Daniel A. Lord, *Letters to a Nun* (St. Louis: The Queen's Work, 1947), 34.

- 43 Sister Josefa Menéndez, *The Way of Divine Love or the Message of the Sacred Heart to the World* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950), xv–xxvii, 162–66. The only other lay sister to acquire a modicum of fame, also because of her visions, was the nineteenth-century French woman, Marie Lataste. See Marie Lataste, Edward Healy Thompson, and Pascal Darbins, *The Life of Marie Lataste: Lay Sister of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart* (London: Burns and Oates, 1877).
- 44 Luirard, *The Society of the Sacred Heart*, 443, 448–50.
- 45 Godfrey Poage, *Secrets of Successful Recruiting: The Principles of Religious Vocational Guidance and Tested Techniques of America's Most Successful Religious Recruiters* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950), 27–29.
- 46 “Formation Notes,” in an unclassified file on lay sisters shown to me by Sister Donna Butler, SPSMWA.
- 47 Thompson, “Sisterhood and Power,” 154.
- 48 Rosa Bruno-Jofré, *The Missionary Oblate Sisters: Vision and Mission* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 97–100.
- 49 Hackett, *Dominican Women in Texas*, 205–06.
- 50 Titley, *Into Silence and Servitude*, 133–34, 155.
- 51 Luirard, *The Society of the Sacred Heart*, 484–94.
- 52 Pope Paul VI, *Perfectae Caritatis: Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life*, Rome, October 28, 1965, 7.
- 53 Schmid, “These Dear, Faithful Helpers,” 5, SCPA.
- 54 “Lest We Forget,” unpublished typescript by Sister Margaret Meyers, August 1995, SHNJMA.
- 55 Carol Garibaldi Rogers, *Habits of Change: An Oral History of American Nuns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 120–22.