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Understanding U.S. Catholic Sisters Today December 2015

A Report by Kathleen Sprows Cummings, Ph.D. for
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Today there are approximately the same number of Catholic sisters in the United States as there were a century ago—just under 50,000. Raw numbers hardly tell the whole story, and must be qualified by other statistics and observations, such as the relative median age of sisters or the size of the Catholic population. Still, recognition of this rough parity is a good way to open a conversation about women’s religious life in the United States today. At the very least, it provides a sense of perspective. Contrary to widespread assumptions, the crowded novitiates and overflowing convents of the mid-twentieth century represent an anomaly in the history of U.S. women’s religious life rather than a standard to which sisters could or should return. This perspective helps to diffuse the pessimism that often surrounds discussions of religious life. Sociologists Mary Johnson, SNDdeN, Patricia Wittberg, SC, and Mary Gautier, authors of a path-breaking study of generational diversity in religious life, warn that the pervasive rhetoric of decline and diminishment that often surrounds discussions of religious life can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹ Indeed, a recent report from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) on recent entrants to religious life has found that new entrants are most attracted to religious institutes that are hopeful about their future and often disheartened by the apathy and fatalism they see in some of the members.² Reversing this culture of negativity must be a priority if a vibrant future for women’s religious life is to be assured. Pope Francis affirmed this in his recent *Apostolic Letter on Consecrated Life*, urging sisters, brothers, and priests to discover “perfect joy” in their service. The consecrated life, he pointed out, will flourish not because of “brilliant vocation programs” but because young men and women will “see us as men and women who are happy!”³

The most encouraging conclusion drawn from recent studies of U.S. Catholic sisters is that excessive pessimism is unwarranted. Many U.S. Catholic women are still drawn to religious life. There are approximately 1,200 women in formation at the present time, a number that includes 150 women in contemplative monasteries and roughly 1,050 women preparing to be sisters. Moreover, a recent CARA study found that 8 percent of never-married millennial women (born after 1981) have considered a vocation at least a little seriously. The same study found that 2 percent of women indicate they have “very seriously” considered becoming a religious sister; this translates to more than 250,000 never-married women.⁴

Recent research testifies that, while there is a great deal of concern about the future of individual communities and ministries, the majority of sisters remain optimistic about

religious life. A 2009 CARA study, conducted for the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC), concludes that while numbers may decline and religious institutes may be different in the future, “religious life will persevere and the Spirit can and will move in that diminishment. Some already see signs of hope, especially in a younger generation that they believe is bringing a new energy and optimism to religious life.”⁵ This study and others echo Pope Francis’ call to young consecrated Catholics to become “actively engaged in dialogue with the previous generation” while “inspiring them, by your own energy and enthusiasm, to recapture their original idealism.”⁶

Written in the spirit of hope, this report relies on historic comparison to highlight the major findings of recent sociological studies of U.S. women religious. Identifying “grateful remembrance of the past” as the first objective of the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis noted that “recounting our history is essential for preserving our identity, for strengthening our unity as a family and our common sense of belonging. . . . We come to see how the charism has been lived over the years, the creativity it has sparked, the difficulties it encountered and the concrete ways those difficulties were surmounted.”⁷ In the United States the wisdom of the Pope’s observations was clear from the recent success of the traveling exhibit *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America*, which has certainly acted as a catalyst for the revitalization of women’s religious life. Sponsored by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in recognition of its fiftieth anniversary, *Women & Spirit* examined how Catholic sisters contributed to the development of the Church and nation from 1727 to the present. Captivating visitors to the Smithsonian, Ellis Island, and other museums throughout the country, the exhibit helped cultivate a sense of gratitude for the work and witness of Catholic sisters throughout the history of the United States. *Women & Spirit* also galvanized sisters themselves. After visiting the exhibit at The Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage in Ohio in 2010, sisters from northeastern Ohio developed “Women With Spirit. . . NOW,” an initiative that eventually allowed more than 200 sisters to examine issues of mutual interest, to form new ministries, and to reinforce present collaborations.⁸ This kind of inter-congregational collaboration is a hallmark of contemporary women’s religious life and is essential for its future.

Unlike *Women and Spirit*, which admirably captured women’s religious life in its astonishing diversity over three centuries, this report singles out only one of the 50,000 sisters who was working in the United States a century ago: Sister Assisium McEvoy, SSJ. In

1848, at the age of 5, Catherine (Kate) McEvoy arrived with her Irish immigrant parents in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her family's parish, St. Patrick's, did not have a school, so she began her studies at a local public school. When St. Patrick's did open a school, she studied there and was taught by the diocesan-based Sisters of St. Joseph, a congregation with roots in France that had been in Philadelphia since 1847. Kate entered the congregation in 1859, and remained until her death in 1939 at the age of 96.

U.S. Catholic women's religious life is not now, and has never been, monolithic. In foregrounding Sister Assisium this study does not intend to oversimplify the complex history of Catholic sisters in the United States—nor does it imply that she represents all women who have been a part of that history. As a member of a diocesan community, for example, Sister Assisium is of limited usefulness in illuminating the international dimension of religious life, especially as represented in large religious families that share a common charism such as the Dominicans or Franciscans. As an active sister, moreover, she does not provide an avenue to discuss contemplative religious life, though that has not been an explicit focus of the studies under consideration (this may represent a potentially fruitful topic for future studies, as there is recent evidence of increased interest in contemplative sisters in the United States).⁹

Despite these limitations, there are many aspects of Sister Assisium's eighty years of religious life that highlight general patterns of the past and present. As a narrative device, her story functions particularly well as a tool for interpreting the most significant findings of recent studies, all of which help illuminate present realities of U.S. women's religious life and point toward priorities that will help ensure a vibrant future.

CONTINUITY

Today's Catholic sisters would find much in common with Sister Assisium. Sensing that God was calling her to live the gospel in a special way, she entered religious life out of a desire to deepen her life of prayer and to live in community with women who shared her sense of spirit and mission. A woman of abiding faith and fierce intelligence, Sister Assisium was passionately committed to striving for religious perfection, for herself

and for the people she served. After a period of religious formation, she began teaching in Philadelphia's parochial schools, and her spiritual notes and diaries from this period testify that she was indefatigable in her efforts not only to instruct her pupils well but also to love them unconditionally. As such, Sister Assisium is one of countless sisters who offer a powerful corrective to the caricatured representations that have long dominated U.S. popular culture. Stereotypes may have some basis in reality. But for every story about a ruler-wielding, angry nun, there were literally thousands of U.S. sisters who spent their entire adult lives serving patiently and faithfully in overflowing classrooms, modeling leadership and Christian charity for generations of children who came mostly from immigrant and working class families. The care these sisters showed their students echoes across the centuries, surfacing poignantly in the recent "Harvest of Ministry" study. Sisters responding to the study consistently emphasized care for people as a defining quality of their work: "Sisters uniformly expressed their commitment to equality with those they serve, even—or especially—when society does not protect this equality. This translates into a client's feeling of being cared for, rather than being helped or served."¹⁰

Caricatures of ruler-wielding nuns compete with another widespread—and equally misguided—stereotype associated with Catholic sisters: namely, that convents have historically housed docile and timid women out of touch with the world's wider concerns. Sisters' increased public presence in recent decades has caused many to assume that sisters have only recently been willing to take risks and challenge the status quo. On the contrary, congregational annals are full of stories that testify to the longstanding willingness on the part of sisters to advocate for their own communities and especially for the people they served, even when it meant risking their own security and comfort. In Sister Assisium's community, for example, she and other leaders often challenged pastors who were reluctant to provide adequate resources for teachers or students in Philadelphia's parish schools.¹¹

Sister Assisium quickly assumed leadership roles in her congregation—perhaps sooner than she would have preferred. Like that of so many other U.S. sisters, her story thus calls to mind the "holy recklessness" that Sister Marlene Weisenbeck, FSPA described during FADICA's 2010 conference on Leadership and Philanthropy. Recalling her own election as General Councilor of her congregation, Weisenbeck observed, "It was a risky business to let someone so unprepared act in an advisory role for such sophisticated levels of service;

or perhaps it was simply the holy recklessness with which women religious work together and live their resolve to reach those who are challenged in accessing the channels of social assistance.”¹² Weisenbeck’s use of the term “holy recklessness” invokes the prophetic dimension of religious life, recently described by Pope Francis as the distinctive sign of consecrated life: “Prophets receive from God the ability to scrutinize the times in which they live and to interpret events....Prophets know God and they know the men and women who are their brothers and sisters. They are able to discern and denounce the evil of sin and injustice. Because they are free, they are beholden to no one but God, and they have no interest other than God. Prophets tend to be on the side of the poor and the powerless, for they know that God himself is on their side.”¹³

Sister Assisium embraced this prophetic dimension of religious life through her appointment as director of sisters’ studies, a position that she held from the 1890s until the 1920s. Like other women religious of the period, Sister Assisium was deeply concerned that the dizzying transformations of early twentieth century—technological advances, territorial expansion, urbanization, immigration, changing gender roles, emerging professions—would have a detrimental effect on her own religious life and that of the young women she guided. Would increasing standards for teacher training, for example, encroach too much upon the time allotted to spiritual formation of young sisters? Would her daunting administrative responsibilities disrupt her own prayer life? “You cannot be admirable Marthas unless you are first ardent Marys,” she told future sister-teachers. “The fecundity of your works depends on your spiritual life.”¹⁴ But rising professional standards and increased demand meant it was growing ever more difficult to reserve time for prayer and reflection.

Sister Assisium was also very worried that the Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia would not be able to sustain their ministries in the future. Catholic schools under their care were expanding in number and enrollment each year, and new vocations were simply not keeping pace with increased demand. “From every school there comes a cry for help,” she lamented in 1911, “and there are no sisters to send.”¹⁵ Throughout the country other educators and church leaders echoed Sister Assisium: A vocation crisis was at hand. “The harvest is great, but the laborers are few,” was a ubiquitous refrain in discussions of religious life.

Sisters today resonate with Sister Assisium's concerns and anxieties. Some of her challenges persist in essence, if not in particulars. The need to adapt religious life to a changing culture, for example, exists across time and place. It has historically presented a special problem in the United States, where sisters, like all U.S. Catholics, belong at once to a culture that adapts quickly and easily, and to a Church that measures change in centuries. This tension manifests itself most clearly during periods of rapid cultural transformation, which often correlate with increased need. If the early twentieth century was one such time, so, too, is our present day, as many of the recent studies make clear. Sisters in northeast Ohio, for instance, report sharp increases in the varieties, sites, and sizes of their ministries in recent years. In "Women Religious in a Changing Urban Landscape," a 2010 study of how over 300 women religious in Cleveland adapted to the shuttering of urban parishes, the sisters surveyed reported that low-income families increasingly constitute a high percentage of the population served by their ministries—even in cases where low-income families were not the ministry's primary target population. This increased demand created by economic hardship makes it difficult for sisters to anticipate needs and creates challenges when it comes to meeting the needs of the target population.¹⁶ Another perennial challenge for sisters in apostolic ministry is that an increase in service to others often translates into a decrease in the amount of time sisters can devote to their prayer lives. Recent research suggests that the Martha/Mary tension Sister Assisium felt so keenly is shared by sisters today.¹⁷

The vocation crisis is another obvious link between Sister Assisium and today's sisters. In this instance, however, the shortage of yesteryear differs substantially from the present one. What Sister Assisium could not have known, but we can see in retrospect, is that the Church was then on the verge of a veritable vocation explosion. Between 1900 and 1960, the population of U.S. sisters increased by 265 percent. In 1965 the number of women religious in the United States reached its peak at 181,421 sisters. This increase derived from a combination of factors, many of which were distinctive to the era: a pronounced emphasis on religious life as a higher and holier calling, the rising educational and social aspirations of the children and grandchildren of Euro-Catholic immigrants, the relatively large size of Catholic families, and the creation of a dense U.S. Catholic institutional subculture in the years leading up to and immediately following the Second World War.

By contrast, women's religious life is presently completing a fifth consecutive decade of decline. The number of U.S. sisters has decreased by 72.5 percent in the last 49 years, and while there are recent signs that the pace of decline has slowed, there is nothing suggesting that is likely to be reversed. As pointed out above, this should not be reason for fatalistic thinking. In their 2014 study, "Population Trends Among Religious Institutes of Women," Erick Berrelleza, SJ, Mary Gautier, and Mark Gray emphasize that "decline alone does not capture the whole picture." They analyzed the "signs of life" embedded in the data, taking into account discrepancies in reporting, and identifying congregations that did experience sustained periods of growth since 1970.¹⁸

Still, the sharp decline in numbers is without a doubt the central consideration of all the recent studies. Across the board, the studies show that Catholic women religious in the United States are concerned with the future of their congregations and their ministries. As the number of women religious over the age of 70 increases, the number of older sisters retiring or dying far outpaces the number of women entering or interested in consecrated life. More than nine in ten (91 percent) of finally professed women were age 60 and over in 2009. Only 9 percent of religious sisters are younger than 60; more than two-thirds of women and men vowed religious are older than 65.¹⁹

Lest these and other statistics permit the gloom-and-doom prognosticators to carry the day, it is worth remembering that increasing the number of Catholic sisters is not an end in and of itself. Indeed, as Pope Francis recently exhorted, "do not yield to the temptation to see things in terms of numbers and efficiency." Instead, he urged consecrated religious to "embrace the future with [a] hope" that is not based on "statistics" but on "the One in whom we have put our trust."²⁰

Comparisons with the past also provide reason for U.S. sisters to embrace the future with hope. A century ago, it was theologically unsound even to intimate that one was attempting to "recruit" to religious life. God alone was the recruiting agent. Priests and sisters were compelled to tiptoe around the question of recruitment, speaking of the need to "nurture," "foster," "cultivate," or "awaken" vocations.²¹ There is now no such ambiguity; the call may indeed come first of all from God, but it is the faithful who often create the conditions that will enable more women to answer it. Today's Catholics have another, even more powerful,

advantage over the “recruiters” of the early twentieth century. In the past, the project was entrusted exclusively to priests and religious. By contrast, recent research suggests that recruitment to women’s religious life is a project that engages not only sisters themselves, or even the Church leaders who depend on them, but also the benefactors who will support them, the laity who work with them, the generations of Catholics who are indebted to them, and all people, Catholic or not, who are wise enough to recognize that U.S. society would be much poorer without them.

If those invested in the future of U.S. women’s religious life are to create the most favorable conditions for a richer vocation culture, they must first appreciate the contemporary landscape of U.S. women’s religious life—a landscape that can be more easily explained through an analysis of change rather than continuity. Before examining particular changes in religious life, the report offers a brief overview of broader changes in church and culture that have influenced them.

VATICAN II AND WOMEN’S RELIGIOUS LIFE

Women’s religious life today cannot be understood apart from the transformations that followed the Second Vatican Council. The meaning of these transformations is still subject to interpretation and debate. Most recent studies of U.S. women religious engage, at least implicitly, the directives of the Second Vatican Council. The Council, which met in four sessions between 1962 and 1965, represented a significant turning point in the history of the Catholic Church. Its documents shifted Catholics’ understanding of themselves, both as men and women within the Church and in relation to the larger society. Theologian Sandra Schneiders, IHM, suggests that Catholic sisters embraced more thoroughly and more creatively than any other group or institution within the Church the Council’s three-pronged agenda’’: *ressourcement* (return to the sources); development (real change in substantive community); and *aggiornamento* (adaptation to the changed conditions of the contemporary world). *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Council’s Decree on the Adaptation of Religious Life, was the only Council document to mention explicitly these three categories.²²

Perfectae Caritatis urged congregations to seek renewal by examining the original charism of their founders and by subjecting their lives and ministry to prayerful scrutiny. Communities were directed to convene a special general chapter meeting (or legislative assembly) within three years, to engage in designated periods of experimentation, and to rewrite their constitutions to permit them to respond to the call of the gospel in the contemporary world. In a dramatic departure from past practice, all members of the community were to be consulted in preparation for this. The search for renewal prompted most communities to implement a variety of structural changes. The strict rules that governed convent life became much less rigid, and community members were permitted more latitude in choice of ministry, living arrangements, and dress. On the latter, many congregations modified their traditional habits, which were often based on modes of women's dress from the founding period. Other congregations traded them for more portable symbols of identity, such as a simple cross, a common color, or another distinguishing feature.

Schneiders also suggests that Vatican II may have exercised its most profound influence on religious life not through its explicit statements on the subject, but on its broader message about the whole Church. In *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the Council affirmed the invitation to universal holiness, and undermined the two-tiered spirituality that had placed vowed Catholics on a plane above lay ones. Given its emphasis on the call of all the baptized, "religious life could no longer be understood as an elite vocation to a 'life of perfection' that made its members superior to other Christians."²³ The strong social content of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, was also influential, prompting many U.S. sisters to choose new forms of ministry and inspiring them toward a commitment to social justice.²⁴

These transformations generated tension and disagreement within and among religious congregations and between religious and their clerical superiors. In the aftermath of the Council, many men and women left religious life because they felt the changes had gone too far; others left because they believed the changes had not gone far enough. Even those who remained in religious life disagreed about how the Council mandates were to be interpreted. Among U.S. sisters, this dissension resulted in a major split in their representative body, the Conference of Major Superiors of Women, which had been founded in 1956. In 1971 this organization renamed itself the Leadership Conference of Women Religious

(LCWR). Dissenting members, who believed the organization's new direction reflected a misinterpretation of the documents of the Council, formed a parallel organization, Consortium Perfectae Caritatis, shortly thereafter in 1971. Organized as the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR), this organization received Vatican approval in 1992. The majority of American sisters (80 percent) belong to LCWR. If institutes, rather than individual sisters, are used as the unit of analysis, 65 percent of U.S. institutes belong to LCWR, 14 percent belong to CMSWR, and one percent belong to both. Twenty percent of U.S. institutes belong to neither; many of these are contemplative monasteries, which, due to Vatican stipulations, are not eligible for membership in either conference.²⁵

CHANGES IN U.S. CULTURE

Vatican II coincided with a decade of turmoil in the United States, marked by the Civil Rights Movement, the rise of feminism, and anti-war and other social protests. U.S. sisters, like all U.S. Catholics, felt the impact of this upheaval. From the perspective of U.S. Catholicism, the 1960 election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency was another decisive event, marking the symbolic end to a long history of prejudice against Catholics. To appreciate the intensity of anti-Catholicism, consider a few snapshots from the life of Sister Assisium McEvoy. When Kate was eight years old, she and a group of classmates were suspended from their public school. Their infraction? They had missed afternoon classes to rehearse for a weekend May procession at St. Patrick's. This episode was symptomatic of a widespread bias against and suspicion of Catholics that was expressed vehemently in the nation's fledgling public schools. After the incident, outraged parents and parishioners at St. Patrick's accelerated the campaign for a parish school, and it opened several years later.

Anti-Catholicism would shape Sister Assisium's life. As one of Philadelphia's leading Catholic educators in the early 20th century, she had to contend with repeated threats to Catholic schools. In 1910, for example, the superintendent of Philadelphia's public schools proposed that education at state-sponsored schools be made a condition of citizenship. Once again, this was not an isolated incident. In Oregon, a similar proposal actually became law in 1922. The United States Supreme Court eventually overturned the law in a decision that, for

the first time in U.S. history, guaranteed private schools a constitutional right to exist (*Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 1925). Three years after the *Pierce* decision, New York governor Alfred Smith became the first Catholic to run on a major ticket for president. While factors other than religious background contributed to his defeat, he had to contend with accusations that the pope would take up residence in the White House should he be elected. These kinds of stories are unheard of today. Catholics are no longer perceived to be members of a feared and “foreign” religion, and they now occupy positions of power and influence at all levels of U.S. society to a degree that Sister Assisium McEvoy could never have imagined.

Despite the elements of continuity, there are many aspects of Catholic women’s religious life today that Sister Assisium would not have been able to predict or imagine a century ago. Using her life as a foil, this report identifies a “Top 10 list” of areas that point, in varying degrees, to change over time and highlight the significant conclusions of recent research on U.S. Catholic sisters.

TEN KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING U.S. SISTERS TODAY

1. Path to Vocation

Throughout Sister Assisium’s lifetime, most ordinary Catholics would have been more likely to encounter a sister than a priest. Catholic sisters began to outnumber priests in this country by 1820; by the twentieth century, in many places sisters outnumbered priests by factors of five and six to one.²⁶ Kate McEvoy chose to enter the Sisters of St. Joseph because she had been inspired by the humble example of one of her teachers at St. Patrick’s. Though her mother attempted to persuade her to enter another congregation, young Kate held firm. She entered along with four of her classmates from St. Patrick’s. As a sister herself, committed to attracting new members to her congregation, Sister Assisium would counsel future sister-teachers to be conscious of their example in the classroom. “Remember,” she told them, “in the classroom the children are watching you, and you may repel or you may attract.”²⁷

Present Reality: While attendance at Catholic schools is still a factor in encouraging vocations, fewer schools and fewer sister-teachers mean that it is not as significant a factor

as it once was. Generational differences in this regard are increasingly pronounced. The example of religious sisters remains a powerful factor—“joy” is most commonly identified as the most attractive trait—but invitations are increasingly more important. So too, is the role of priests; newly professed members consistently rank them among the top encouragers of vocations. Parents also play a significant role, though respondents often report that they discourage vocations. Recent research suggests that congregations should develop clear and compelling strategies for vocation recruitment. Studies also recommend that other Catholic organizations—dioceses, offices of campus ministry, Newman Centers—advance these efforts by having readily accessible information about religious life at their disposal.

Relevant Findings:

Explaining generational cohorts: The most comprehensive recent study of U.S. Catholic sisters, *New Generations*, relies on data from a 1999 and a 2009 study to map the preferences of four distinct generational cohorts: the pre-Vatican II generation, born before 1943; the Vatican II generation, born between 1943 and 1960; post-Vatican II, born between 1961 and 1981; and millennial, born after 1981.²⁸ As we will see throughout this study, using generations as the unit of analysis is illuminating.

On pre-entrance contact with sisters: Members of the two oldest generational cohorts, pre-Vatican and Vatican II, had ample contact with sisters prior to entering their institutes, while post-Vatican II and millennials were less likely to have much contact with sisters before entering themselves. Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier cite a 1999 survey that shows a steady decrease between 1965 and 1980 in the percentage of respondents who said they had entered their institutes because they had relatives who were sisters there or because they had been acquainted with sisters from their institute in their childhood parish or school.²⁹ Decreased contact with sisters not only reduces the number of women entering religious life, but also may make adjusting to religious life more difficult for those who *do* enter. Increasing sisters’ contact with non-members should be a priority.

On correlation between Catholic education and entrance into religious life: According to studies of the professing classes of women from 2010-2014, 45 percent attended a Catholic grade school or elementary school; 32 percent attended a Catholic high school; and 27 percent attended

a Catholic college. The 2009 CARA/NVRC study states that about nine in ten were raised Catholic and most (73 percent) attended a Catholic school for at least part of their education. About half attended parish-based religious education. One in seven (14 percent) new members from the millennial generation (born since 1982) was home-schooled for at least some of their education.³⁰

On encouragement from priests: The 2009 Vocations study showed that younger members of the profession class found encouragement from priests to be more important to their discernment process than older members did. Young women religious also continue to receive significant encouragement from priests in their lives and current ministries. Averages from the profession classes from 2010-2013 show that over 40 percent of the entering class of women religious received encouragement from a parish priest as they considered a vocation to religious life. Approximately one quarter of respondents reported that they became acquainted with a religious institute through a priest or advisor.³¹ The influence of priests on encouraging new vocations underscores the need to educate diocesan priests about religious life, from their seminary training onward.

On discouragement: Studies of the last four professing classes reveal that between two-thirds and three-fourths of new entrants were discouraged in their vocation. In 2014, entrants were most likely to be discouraged by family members other than a parent (36 percent) or by friends or classmates (24 percent).³²

On the importance of invitations: A recent CARA survey reports that fewer than one-tenth of never-married millennial women were encouraged to consider a vocation by a sister. Citing this survey, Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier state the case very strongly: “Active invitational efforts are absolutely necessary....concerted efforts...will require conducting research: focus groups, surveys, and an extensive review of how other denominations and religious groups... extend such invitations and with what success.”³³ The CARA/NRVC 2009 study identified “best practices in vocation ministry,” including: “instilling a ‘culture of vocations’ and involving membership and leadership in concerted vocation promotion efforts; having a full-time vocation director who is supported by a team and resources; using new media, especially websites and other online presence; offering discernment programs and other opportunities for potential candidates to meet members and learn about the institute; and targeting college

students and young adults as well as elementary and high school students to expose them to the possibility of religious life and inform them about the institute.”³⁴

Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier begin each chapter of *New Generations* with a short anecdote about a fictional young woman, Maria, who is considering a vocation. She encounters a number of roadblocks as she attempts to identify viable communities, including a lack of readily accessible information. A communications strategy using online media could provide a database of all religious institutes and their contact information, along with a glossary with definitions explaining various terms of religious life.³⁵

It would also be helpful for parishes and dioceses to create more space and support for discernment to all forms of consecrated life, including emerging ones. For example, Blessed Sacrament Parish in the Archdiocese of New York recently welcomed members of the newly-formed Benincasa community of lay Catholics associated with the Dominican Sisters of the Northeast. Named after Catherine de Benincasa, the community identifies themselves as “a shoot from the branch of traditional religious life; re-planted, we hope, to bear new fruit. In our community are young adults working in various professions toward peace and justice (lawyers, teachers, artists) and Dominican Volunteers serving with the Sisters without pay for one year. We have adopted the ‘four pillars of Dominican Life’: prayer, study, community and ministry.”³⁶

2. Ethnicity, Race, Region

Sister Assisium McEvoy entered a congregation made up of Euro-American Catholics. Many, like her, were daughters of Irish immigrants. Though the Sisters of St. Joseph sponsored missions in rural areas within a day’s travel, the congregation’s motherhouse, and the majority of its missions, were located in Philadelphia.

Present Reality: Recent studies show that women’s religious life is far more ethnically and racially diverse than in the past. The ethnic composition of the youngest Catholic sisters reflects that of the new generations within the Catholic population at large. Women’s religious institutes are also attracting increasing numbers from outside the United States. While international entrants and a more ethnically diverse generation has the potential to

infuse a new vitality into U.S. religious life, there are significant challenges to overcome in accommodating this increased cultural diversity within congregations. Catholic sisters also mirror the general Catholic population in terms of increased regional diversity; they are more disbursed throughout the nation now than in the past, when the Northeast and upper Midwest were population strongholds.

Relevant Findings:

On increasing ethnic and racial diversity: According to the most recent study on diversity in religious life, nine in ten religious institutes report that the dominant racial/ethnic culture of the institute is white. On average, nine in ten full members of religious institutes are Caucasian/White/Anglo, 6 percent are Hispanic/Latino(a), 3 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1 percent are African-American/Black/African. Institutes of men are slightly more racially/ethnically diverse than are institutes of women. Those who have entered religious institutes in the past ten years are more diverse. Among those entering in the last ten years, 57 percent are Caucasian/White/Anglo, 17 percent are Hispanic/Latino(a), 16 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, 8 percent are African-American/Black/African, and 2 percent are Native American or other race/ethnicity.³⁷

On international entrants: According to the 2010 survey of newly professed, 71 percent of women religious were born in the United States and 29 percent were born outside of the U.S. (7 percent in Mexico, 4 percent in Philippines, 3 percent in Nigeria, and 15 percent in other countries).³⁸ The mean age at entry to the United States was 27 years old; the median age at entry to the United States was 26 years old. According to the 2013 survey, 77 percent of women religious were born in the United States and 23 percent of women religious were born outside of the United States (12 percent in Asia, 4 percent in Europe, 3 percent in Latin America, 4 percent in Canada).³⁹ The study on Incorporating Religious Diversity shows that 57 percent of women's institutes have at least one entrant in the past ten years born outside of the United States, and 53 percent of the women's institutes of women have at least one person currently in initial formation.⁴⁰ In recognition that more research is needed on international entrants, the GHR Foundation recently awarded a grant to Trinity Washington University to study and map the presence of international women religious in the United States and their evolving ministries in response to Church and societal needs.⁴¹

On efforts to incorporate cultural diversity: Only about 10 percent of women's religious institutes pray bilingual or multilingual prayers, or celebrate the liturgy in a language other than or in addition to English. Units that are part of an international institute are more likely than those that are based in the United States to use multiple languages in prayer, to celebrate the holidays of different cultures, and to provide a mentor from the same culture for those in initial formation. Similarly, units that are part of a missionary institute or society are more likely to adopt these practices.⁴²

On challenges in incorporating cultural diversity: In seeking to incorporate new international members, age gaps between new vocations and established members of the institute often presents challenges. The older generations find it difficult to adapt to change, and the younger generations feel as though the older generations do not show initiative in seeking to understand them (as the next point shows, the age / generational divide is not specific to issues related to ethnic and racial diversity). Additional challenges included language barriers, cultural challenges, immigration laws (the money and time required to manage visas and other immigration documents create significant burdens) and infrequent vocations. Few congregations have the resources to appoint a full-time worker to welcome and assist international entrants. Yet the study emphasizes that having a person in such a position is essential in helping these new entrants simultaneously adjust to life in a new country and a new congregation.⁴³

On regional diversity: In terms of Catholics' population distribution across the United States, *New Generations* highlights the significant loss of the Catholic population in the Northeast and Midwest between 1950 and 2010. In 1950, 46 percent of the general Catholic population resided in the Northeast, 30 percent in the Midwest, 12 percent in the South, and 12 percent in the West. The country has experienced a regional shift in the Catholic population. By 2010, there is an almost even split in the regional landscape, with 28 percent residing in the Northeast, 23 percent in the Midwest, 24 percent in the South, and 25 percent in the West.⁴⁴ Changes in congregational structures of governance often reflect the shift away from the Northeast and Midwest. The Daughters of Charity of North America offer a case in point. In 1910, the U.S. congregation was divided into two provinces: Eastern and St. Louis. In 1969, to accommodate the explosion in population, the congregation expanded into five provinces. In 2011, the congregation was reconfigured into two provinces: the Province of Los Altos Hills (California)

and the Province of St. Louise (St. Louis). The latter is under the patronage of St. Louise de Marillac.⁴⁵

Regional differences continue to matter. In fact, any effort to assist sisters must take region into account. One of the most illuminating recent studies compares sisters' ministry in the urban setting of northeastern Ohio and in the state of South Carolina.⁴⁶ Because only 4 percent of South Carolina is Catholic, the state is considered mission territory, with only 123 sisters in active ministry throughout 32 counties in the state. On the other hand, northeast Ohio has a larger population of Catholics (27 percent) with 2.8 million active Catholics as residents. Sisters in both urban Ohio and rural areas in South Carolina sought to enhance their capacity-building capabilities as well as strengthening the ministries themselves, but the forms of this support varied greatly between the two regions. Because of the large Catholic presence in Ohio and the larger number of sisters already in ministry, the main types of assistance they needed were organizational support, increased opportunities for education and networking, and collaborating more effectively for service to the poor. In South Carolina, by contrast, the few sisters in ministry were so scattered throughout the region that their primary need was to establish a network that would enhance their ministries, build relationships, and foster spiritual renewal. After these initial efforts at interaction, the sisters in South Carolina were able to address the extensive poverty in the state more effectively. Subsequent efforts to enhance ministry in South Carolina have been directed toward fundraising and grant writing, while the educational efforts in Ohio have turned more to creating awareness of the work of women religious in the region.

One gap across all the studies is the lack of attention paid to sisters in the southwestern United States. Though Catholic sisters have had a longstanding presence in the American southwest (to cite only one example, the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word have been ministering in Texas since 1866), the Catholic population in this region has increased dramatically in recent decades by migration across and within the national borders of the United States. More research is essential to determine whether patterns identified in recent studies hold true for sisters outside of the traditional population strongholds of the Northeast and upper Midwest.

3. Generations and Gender

When Sister Assisium McEvoy entered the congregation, the age and generational distribution of its members mirrored that of the Catholic population at large. This meant that for most of her life, Sister Assisium would be consistently engaged with women older and younger than her. The example of elder sisters allowed her to grow in holiness and wisdom, while the constant infusion of younger sisters renewed her energy. Intergenerational interaction also had positive effects outside of the spiritual realm. As a young sister, Sister Assisium apprenticed herself to congregational elders, finding rich opportunities to cultivate her intellect and abilities. As she aged, she would do the same for the young sisters she helped to train. It should be noted that, for the duration of Sister Assisium's lifetime and beyond, secular society offered U.S. Catholic women no comparable path to leadership.

Present Reality: The fact that many congregations are becoming increasingly mono-generational has dire implications for the future of religious life. As Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier observe, a religious institute composed of a single ethnic group can survive for centuries, while an institute composed of one generational cohort is not sustainable. Because the prospect of intergenerational living is a major factor in attracting new entrants to religious life, congregations must engage the millennials (and the generations that will follow them). Recruitment among millennials involves several challenges, including the disengagement of the millennial generation from religion in general, and a divergence in the practice and beliefs of a majority of young adult Catholics from Church teaching. There are gender implications to this as well, as young adult Catholic women diverge more strongly from Church teaching than their male counterparts.

Relevant Findings:

On importance of engaging millennials: Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier point out that, historically, “new religious institutes were *youth movements*, founded precisely to enable the Church to meet the emerging strains and hungers of their day.” The vitality of young people attracts new generations to religious life. If the Church is to survive, young generations from one century to the next must invigorate each successive generation in order to attract them to religious life.⁴⁷

On preference for intergenerational living: The 2009 CARA / NRVC study of new vocations shows that consistently high percentages of respondents across the generations “very much prefer” to live with members of different ages, with the millennials reporting the highest percentage (74 percent).⁴⁸

On disengagement of young adult Catholics: Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier rely on recent sociological studies to show that younger generational cohorts do not attend Mass weekly or participate in parish life to a great degree. Sixteen percent of post-Vatican II and millennial Catholics are “highly committed” to the Church.⁴⁹ Less than 25 percent of Catholics in this generation in the United States “accept the Church’s teaching authority on moral issues such as divorce, contraception, abortion, homosexuality, and nonmarital sex.”⁵⁰ Eleven percent believe that having a celibate male clergy is important (compared to 38 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics), and 26 percent say that the teaching authority of the Vatican is important (compared to 52 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics).⁵¹

On gender implications: According to Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier, young Catholic women show a greater disaffection than males within their generational cohort. This represents a historic reversal. In the past, women of every U.S. Christian denomination have prayed and attended religious services more often and held more orthodox beliefs than their male counterparts. While millennial Protestant women remain more devout and orthodox than Protestant males their age, the *New Generations* authors found that the youngest generation of Catholic women are slightly more likely than men their age to say they never attend Mass and significantly more likely to disagree about Church teaching on issues such as papal infallibility and homosexual activity. The authors cite a recent CARA study that found that, within the millennial generation, a higher percentage of men than women had ever considered a vocation.⁵²

Citing Phyllis Zagano, the authors acknowledge an obvious lacuna of theirs and other vocation studies: they “necessarily reflect the interests and preferences of those currently entering LCWR and CMSWR institutes.”⁵³ Recent studies have not, in other words, tracked the interests of women who have *not* chosen to enter religious life. It would be helpful to survey the many young Catholic people who are studying theology and ministry in universities, or choosing non-Catholic ordained Christian ministry. Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier quote Zagano:

“Proportionally, there are probably no fewer women seeking to serve the church, but they are seeking to serve in a manner free from the constraints of traditional religious life for women.”⁵⁴

An interesting, if conceptually challenging, project would be to poll the voices necessarily absent from the studies under consideration: what reasons do U.S. Catholic women give for *not* entering religious life today? Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier speculate that one factor affecting women’s discernment to religious life may be women’s ambivalence about Church teachings on women, though survey data reveals that this, too, may be generationally specific.⁵⁵ Another possible factor, though less easily quantified, derives from a second gender-related historic reversal: From the 1840s until the late 1960s, the average Catholic woman in the United States found, through religious life, far more opportunities for education, leadership, and meaningful work within Church structures than outside of them. Since the late 1960s, many of the women who would have been attracted to religious life in earlier generations are finding alternative ways to live their vocational call, both within the Church and in secular society.

On engaging millennials: Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier recommend that religious institutes should create as many opportunities for intergenerational interaction as possible, both in group settings (social, service, or spiritual events) and in one-on-one encounters (mentoring, oral history projects, spiritual direction). One way congregations might engage more millennial women is to focus on aspects of their founders’ charism that are less about ministry (which may not influence younger generations’ choice of institute as much as it did that of older generations) and more on spiritual practices that have become increasingly attractive to millennials.

4. Characteristics of Religious Life

Upon her entry into the Sisters of St. Joseph, Kate McEvoy received a new name, donned a habit, and committed herself to lifelong communal living and prayer. These were not matters that she, or any other woman religious, would have debated.

Present Reality: Reflecting Vatican II’s emphasis on the baptismal call, women who entered religious life typically retained (or, in the case of women already in religious life, reverted to) their baptismal name. As part of the renewal process, congregations and

individual sisters are now permitted more latitude in choice of dress, living situations, and other elements of religious life that had once been subject to strict regulation. Sisters' choices in such matters have emerged as points of contention and debate, especially in the context of polarization within the wider Church and culture. Outside observers often assign a meaning to those choices that does not correspond to sisters' own reasons for making them. Wearing of the habit, for example, may be interpreted by outsiders as a sign of an individual sister's or a congregation's fidelity to the Church, or as a marker of her or its "traditional" understanding of religious life. These observations often reveal more about the cultural and ecclesial assumptions of the interpreter than they do about the complex ecclesial, cultural, political, and economic factors that shape religious life today. Recent research points to generational differences over ideological perspectives as the most important factor influencing the adoption of certain religious practices. Many members of the millennial generation, for example, are more likely to prefer wearing a traditional religious habit, though it may represent something different to them than it did to earlier generations.

Relevant Findings⁵⁶:

On use of the habit: Citing data from the 2009 survey, Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier find notable distinctions both among the generational cohorts and between members of LCWR and CMSWR congregations. Across all generations, CMSWR respondents were uniformly likely to attach a great importance to the habit; over 90 percent of the sisters said their institute's practices regarding the habit had "very much" influenced their decision. By contrast, LCWR sisters from the pre-Vatican II, Vatican II, and post-Vatican II generations attached less importance to their institute's practice regarding the habit (between 24 to 30 percent responded "very much") than the millennial cohort (56 percent). One-third of CMSWR sisters of all generations except the oldest were attracted to their institute because its members wore a full, traditional habit. There was a more striking generational pattern among the LCWR respondents. Almost all of the millennial and post-Vatican II sisters in LCWR institutes were attracted to their community *because* the sisters wore habits, while half of the Vatican II and pre-Vatican II sisters said they entered their institute because the sisters did *not* wear habits. The older a respondent was in the LCWR, the more negative she considered the habit as a sign of religious identity. Younger respondents typically had more positive view of the habit.⁵⁷

It is important to note that while “the habit” may, for most Catholics, connote a full, traditional garb, what actually constitutes a habit can vary widely across women’s institutes. Furthermore, while existing survey data may reveal how important the habit is to a respondent, it does not necessarily convey the *meaning* that sisters attach to it—a meaning that may vary widely across generations.⁵⁸

On effects of polarization: Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier show that divisions between these groups are often overstated: “Some commentators, for ideological purposes, attempt to create generalized typologies that mask the complexity of the religious reality, arguing that all new entrants go to traditionalist (CMSWR) institutes and few or none go to LCWR institutes.” Survey data contradicts these claims. The 1,050 non-contemplative women presently in formation are evenly divided among LCWR and CMSWR institutes, and an almost equal percentage of LCWR and CMSWR institutes have no one at all in formation at the present time (32 percent and 27 percent, respectively).⁵⁹ An institute’s reputation as “progressive” or “traditional” may be more important to outsiders than it is to entrants. Fewer than 5 percent of LCWR responses, across the generations, cited their institute’s progressive reputation as a factor in the decision to enter, while fewer than 8 percent of the CMSWR respondents cited their institute’s traditional reputation.⁶⁰ Attempts to group sisters into artificial and divisive categories distracts from what should be a unified effort. The future vitality of religious life depends, in large part, on the ability to attract women across broad spectrums.

On community life: Attitudes about the religious habit are typically afforded a great deal of attention as the most obvious markers of religious life, but concurrent shifts among the generations are also in evidence regarding other identity markers for women religious. Whereas the community life of a given religious institute was an important consideration for roughly half of women religious in the pre-Vatican II and Vatican II generations (56 percent and 52 percent, respectively), it has played a notably stronger role in attracting younger generations: 68 percent of post-Vatican II and 72 percent of millennial women note the determinative role of community life in their attraction to religious life.⁶¹

Further statistical findings confirm the premium that women religious—especially the young—find in community life. The youngest members of both LCWR and CMSWR institutes prefer living and interacting with other religious more consistently than those of

other generations. Living together (97 percent), sharing meals (97 percent), and socializing (93 percent) with other members of their institutes were very important to the millennial generation. Older LCWR entrants were less likely to put as high a value on these aspects of religious life. Still, almost three-fourths of the Pre-Vatican II and Vatican II respondents viewed living together (both 76 percent) and sharing meals together (78 percent and 72 percent, respectively) as “very” important aspects of religious life. Across the generational cohorts, 22 percent or less of LCWR respondents preferred living alone “very much,” and almost no CMSWR respondents preferred living alone.⁶²

Those surveyed also expressed preferences with respect to the size of the particular community in which they live: respondents belonging to LCWR institutes and/or the Vatican II generation tended to prefer living in smaller communities of four to seven sisters. Most CMSWR and/or young, millennial respondents preferred larger communities of eight or more members. Across both LCWR- and CMSWR-affiliated institutes, young women religious notably were almost all attracted to a communal life specifically within and among the members of their own institutes. The prospect of living with their institute’s lay associates or with other institutes’ members was attractive for almost none of these respondents.⁶³

A significant aspect of an institute’s shared life is its prayer practices. Post-Vatican II and millennial religious found the prayer life of their institutes significantly attractive for their discernment (70 and 80 percent, respectively), more so than pre-Vatican II (63 percent) and Vatican II (57 percent) generations. In terms of their ongoing experience, moreover, the post-Vatican II and especially millennial generations tend to positively evaluate the communal prayer of their institution (60 and 75 percent, respectively) much more than older generations (less than half). This trend is mirrored in comparing the conferences: 40 percent of LCWR respondents register positive evaluations of communal prayer, compared to 75 percent of those in CMSWR institutes.⁶⁴ Overall, then, the data suggests preferences among young women religious toward a more traditional habit and a distinctive community life constituted by the full members of their own institute.

Millennial respondents from both conferences were more likely than older respondents to value common prayer, Eucharistic Adoration, the rosary, and devotion to Mary. Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier are careful to emphasize, however, that survey respondents were not

representative of all millennial Catholics, a majority of whom, as noted above, diverge from a number of Catholic teachings. This demographic reality has important implications for the future of religious life. If institutes only draw members from a subset-within-a-subset (in other words, the small and atypical minority of the youngest age cohort of U.S. Catholics) future priests and religious may become increasingly removed from the beliefs and interests of the majority of their generational cohort—which could make attracting new members even more difficult. The authors recommend that institutes also consider emphasizing aspects of spirituality that a greater percentage of millennials may value, such as discernment or centering prayer.⁶⁵

5. Age of Entry and Education

Kate McEvoy was 15 years old when she entered the Sisters of St. Joseph. She eventually became a highly educated woman. All of her advanced study, however, took place after her novitiate and religious formation in the Sisters of St. Joseph. Later in her life, Sister Assisium was instrumental in opening Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia, on the grounds of the SSJ Motherhouse. Like many other women's congregations, the SSJs saw this as the best practical solution for meeting new educational requirements, as it was much more financially viable than sending sisters to other Catholic or state-sponsored colleges.

Sister Assisium's experience was normative well into the twentieth century. The greatest challenge facing congregations was how to educate sisters without interfering with their religious formation. This challenge became ever more difficult for teaching congregations in the early twentieth century, as the number of schools expanded and as states began to require certification for all teachers. Whereas a small number of sisters were sent to male Catholic colleges or state-sponsored schools, this created a significant financial burden for most congregations. Many resolved the problem as the SSJs did, which explains the proliferation of Catholic women's colleges after 1918. In the long run, this option may not have been the most prudent one, as the majority of these colleges were not financially sustainable by the middle third of the twentieth century.

Present Reality: In 2015 the average age of entrance to women's religious institutes is 32, which is slightly younger than those who entered 10 years ago. Closely correlated with age

of entry is a higher educational level of new entrants. At the time of entering a community, 70 percent of the recently professed already had a college degree, including 19 percent with master's degrees and 5 percent with the equivalent of doctoral degrees. This highly educated group brings training, skills, and spirit that can advance the mission of the congregation and spares congregations the cost of college tuition. It creates another problem, however, as these members bring significant amounts of educational debt, which is often assumed by the congregation.

Relevant Findings:

On age at entrance: There is a 10-year gap in average and median entrance age between women in LCWR institutes and women in CMSWR institutes. More than half of the women in initial formation in LCWR institutes (56 percent) are age 40 and older, compared to 15 percent in CMSWR institutes.⁶⁶

On educational debt: At the time of initial contact with a congregation, one in three individuals has a student loan; the average debt load is \$28,000. By the time of formal application, one in three still has a loan; the average is \$21,000. Nine in 10 congregations with three or more serious inquiries asked at least one person to *delay* formal application due to educational debt, while seven in 10 congregations *turned at least one person away* from formal application due to educational debt. Only half of those with loans at the time of application were eventually accepted. The rest were turned away. While congregations do not want to turn away new members who offer vitality to a waning congregation, they must consider how much benefit a candidate brings to an institute compared to the burden of educational debt. Religious congregations do not want candidates' guilt about burdening a congregation with student loans to dissuade them from pursuing a vocation. At the same time, the institutes do not want to make educational debt a top or even exclusive consideration in debating whether or not to accept a candidate. Yet with other financial responsibilities, such as rising health care costs that are particularly formidable for the already-aging sister population, concern regarding educational debt is an increasingly significant aspect of the discernment process for both the institute and the individual.⁶⁷

6. Ministry

Sister Assisium chose the Sisters of St. Joseph in part because she wanted to be a teacher. She would devote her entire religious life to teaching or preparing teachers. In this she participated in what was, for U.S. sisters, the most common ministry for U.S. sisters, followed by nursing. As parochial schools grew in size and number in the early twentieth century, the number of teaching sisters grew at a much faster rate than that of teaching brothers. This did not sit well with priest-educators, who, like public school administrators, worried about the effects of feminization on male students. Church leaders often consoled themselves by recognizing that sisters presented a much more affordable option, given that their stipends were, on average, between one-third and one-half of what teaching brothers received. It was primarily sisters' heavily subsidized labor that enabled the parochial school system to grow and develop. As one high school student of the SSJs wrote in a 1904 essay, U.S. sisters truly performed "the wageless work of paradise." Sister Assisium was not only a talented teacher but a legendary teacher of teachers. She published a curriculum for teaching Christian doctrine that was adopted in Philadelphia and beyond; her instructions on how to teach about Christ's death contain the earliest plea to avoid anti-Semitism in U.S. catechetics.⁶⁸

Present Reality: While there are many sisters still working in education and health care, the diversity of sisters' ministries makes it impossible to generalize, and there has not been much contemporary research on sisters' ministries. Recent studies do suggest that many sisters engage in multiple ministries. Moreover, evidence suggests that ministry is now less of a factor than it was in the past in influencing applicants' choice of congregation.

Relevant Findings:

On the nature of sisters' ministry: The most recent study of sisters' ministries in the United States was conducted in 2002 by Anne Munley, IHM, under the auspices of the Leadership Council of Women Religious. This study, "Carriers of the Story: A Leadership Conference of Women Religious Ministry Study," was a follow-up to the 1991 LCWR ministry study, "Threads for the Loom," and should itself be updated. The studies under consideration for this report do not explicitly speak to this question, though several testify that a large percentage of sisters perform multiple ministries. The sisters in South Carolina are involved in an average of four ministries each, while the sisters in the Cleveland area are involved in an average of three ministries (with 38 percent involved in three or more ministries).⁶⁹ The extent

to which this high percentage reflects a nationwide reality is unknown.

On the role of ministry in shaping women's choice of religious institute: Citing the 2009 NRVC / CARA study, Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier observe that “the millennial respondents were the least likely to say they had been attracted to their institute by a desire to be of service, by the mission of the institute, or by the ministry the sisters performed – characteristics that pre-Vatican II and Vatican II respondents were more likely to emphasize, possibly because many millennials had already performed service.” The authors cite the following percentages, arranged by generational cohort, of attraction to a religious institute by types of ministry of its members: Pre-Vat. II, 49 percent; Vat II, 48 percent; Post-Vat II, 38 percent; Millennial, 31 percent. They observe that “the generational pattern shows that the millennial and post-Vatican II respondents “were more likely to search for institutes with a strong and evident prayer life, common living, and common ministry, and they were less likely to be attracted to an institute because of its mission or its focus on ministry. For the older Vatican II respondents who entered during the same period, the opposite was true.”⁷⁰

On sisters' compensation for ministry: This is not a subject considered by recent studies. While the gross inequities of the past presumably no longer pertain, it would be interesting to study the extent to which sisters continue to perform unpaid or underpaid labor, especially compared to priests or lay people.

7. Collaboration

In choosing to become a Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, Sister Assisium virtually ensured that she would have little contact with other religious sisters, even those who lived and worked very close to her home at the SSJ Motherhouse. The only way Sister Assisium encountered Catholics who were not members of religious communities was through her ministry to them (e.g., children she taught in school, or, in the early twentieth century, her occasional retreats for local women—a move that was considered unusual and pioneering).

U.S. sisters typically had little interaction with members of other religious congregations before the mid-twentieth century. In many cases, an exchange of Christmas or feast day greetings between superiors might have been the only regular contact between motherhouses

located a mile away from each other. A sense of competition—for vocations, for ministries, for diocesan resources—often precluded closer collaboration, as did the extensive religious formation within each community that emphasized its own unique charism or mission. This isolation eroded slowly over the twentieth century. In Philadelphia, it began when sisters from four different communities were selected to staff a new archdiocesan high school. This move was justified by the need to give the congregations equal access to potential vocations, but it obscured a considerable transfer in power from the congregational motherhouses to the archdiocesan chancery, as the principal of this school was a male religious. In transitioning to a model of male administration/female teaching staff, Catholic education paralleled its public counterpart in the early twentieth century. Initiatives such as the Catholic Sisters College, established at Catholic University in 1911, resulted in tentative but minimal cross-congregational interaction. By the 1950s, more substantial interaction occurred through the Sister Formation Movement and the Conference of Major Superiors of Women. The transformations of the Second Vatican Council era fostered intercongregational collaboration in a number of ways.

Present Reality: Collaboration across congregations is a hallmark of religious life, rooted not only in necessity, but also in a growing sense of solidarity. Sisters also have multiple points of contact with members of the laity; perhaps most significantly, sisters' ministry often depends on lay collaborators. Fewer sisters, constrained resources, and growing needs have prompted sisters to work more closely with laity in their missions. This closer collaboration with the laity enables the sisters to work more effectively, but it does create unprecedented challenges. One of them, infusing lay collaborators with the congregation's charism, is considered in the next point.

Relevant Findings:

On collaboration in ministry: The "Support for Sister-Affiliated Ministries During Challenging Times" study shows that 72 percent of sisters in Ohio reported being engaged in collaboration of some kind, and 45 percent reported collaboration with sisters from other orders. A slightly higher percentage (48 percent) reported collaboration with diocesan organizations; 41 percent reported collaboration with nonprofit or government organizations, and 34 percent with faith-based organizations.⁷¹ The same study chronicles the growth

and development of the Collaboration for Ministry Initiative (CMI). In 2001 the Saint Ann Foundation (now the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland) conducted a research study on the ministries of women religious across Kentucky, Tennessee, and South Carolina. The study showed the challenges facing sisters and their ministries, and, in response to these challenges, the foundation formed the CMI to build collaborative capacity within and among ministries. Over time the initiative narrowed to focus on northeast Ohio. In 2004 the CMI expanded to South Carolina. The CMI launched a biannual newsletter to focus on the organization's activities and to bolster collaboration among sisters across the regions. The CMI also provides information regarding grant opportunities and events for sisters.⁷²

The success of the CMI suggests that it should be replicated in other regions. It is worth noting, however, that there are some indications that younger sisters may be less inclined to collaborate than older generations. According to *New Generations*, millennial women religious strongly prefer working in an institute-sponsored ministry with other members of their own institute (93 percent).⁷³

A factor that may make solidarity across congregations challenging is the existence of two national conferences for active women religious, especially when the differences between them are exaggerated for ideological purposes, as noted above. That said, research itself may inadvertently accentuate rather than minimize differences, in that recent surveys of Catholic sisters divide respondents at the outset into membership into either CMSWR or LCWR.

Studies suggest that sisters are increasingly committed to and confident in collaboration. "The Harvest of Ministry" study notes that sisters are very good at recognizing the gifts of individuals and building relationships at all levels. The sisters in this study envision collaboration as a way to expand their effectiveness, and they believe that increased collaboration can help them address systemic problems and conditions, particularly as peoples' needs increase.⁷⁴

8. Charism and Identity

Sister Assisium was deeply immersed in her congregation's charism, a particular spirit inherited by its founder. She spent many years forming new entrants into that charism. There is no evidence

that was she called upon to explain that charism to outsiders. While her spiritual writings testify to the myriad factors that constituted her sense of identity as a Sister of St. Joseph, there was no need for her to articulate them to people who were not members of her community. To outsiders, her identity was easily and visibly conveyed through her community's distinctive habit.

Present Reality: Sisters' continued vitality largely depends upon their ability to articulate their charism to outsiders—both potential applicants and lay collaborators. While Vatican documents regarding religious life discuss the importance of the charism or spirit of each institution, the meaning of “charism” remains ambiguous. Women religious themselves do not often articulate a way to make its meaning clear even within their congregation, let alone to non-members. Increased collaboration with the lay faithful—the people Pope Francis described as those “who feel called, precisely as lay persons to share in the same charismatic reality,” accentuates the need for sisters to articulate their charism clearly.⁷⁵ An institute's charism is fundamentally related to its identity. Unless religious institutes develop an identity that can be easily and clearly articulated to the outside world, both in Catholic settings and in the wider culture (i.e. portrayals in the media), they will not attract many new members. Furthermore, if women's religious institutes do not define themselves clearly, they risk letting themselves be defined by others, which may, in turn, increase polarization and further reduce the attractiveness of religious life among potential members.

Relevant Findings:

On vagueness of “charism”: Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier list a series of questions and problems that arise from a lack of specificity about the meaning of charism, noting that a charism can come to mean so many things to so many people that it risks becoming essentially meaningless. Among the surveys they considered, respondents who referred to the institute's charism usually did not specify what it was.⁷⁶ Other surveys suggest that an institute's charism is often a nebulous concept for even its own members. In “Harvest of Ministry,” for example, charism is explained both as a “conceptual understanding of Sisters' call to ministry and a description of what ministry looks like on the ground,” and notes that focus groups characterized charism as the “active ingredient,” “propelling energy,” “spiritual DNA,” and the thread that links sisters to one another and to the people they serve.⁷⁷ No matter how beautifully expressed, and no matter how deeply meaningful to a particular individual, these

diffuse definitions of charism can cause confusion among outsiders, including those who may be the most likely to enter a religious institute.

The full traditional religious habit may remain the most obvious identity marker for sisters. As was true in the past, however, attire is one of the many factors that shape an institute's identity. As noted above, the habit no longer functions as an identity marker for most American sisters. Its meaning has changed over time, particularly in the wake of Vatican II, however it is now attractive to an atypical group of millennial Catholic women. Though the renewal that Vatican II inspired among women religious is still unfolding, the fiftieth anniversary of the Council's closing represents an opportunity to develop a more comprehensive understanding of its implications for U.S. sisters. As the Council passes from living memory to historic memory, scholars and sisters should collaborate in interpreting how its directives transformed religious life in the United States and elsewhere.⁷⁸

On lay partners: "Harvest of Ministry" and other studies underscore sisters' awareness of the need to "infuse" the charism to lay partners, but there is little information on best practices for doing so. Future studies could examine how women's institutes use history classes, heritage tours, or pilgrimages to transmit the charism to lay partners, especially those who are potential leaders.

9. Leadership

Sister Assisium became a successful leader in her community by virtue of on-the-the job training. In turn, she prepared younger sisters who would be ready to succeed her when she could no longer work. It would have been inconceivable to her that a ministry sponsored by the Sisters of St. Joseph would be led by a person who was not a member of the community.

Present Reality: Sisters are now aware of the need to cultivate leadership, both in their younger members and in lay partners. The "holy recklessness" of the past, in which many sisters assumed leadership roles with little formal training or experience, has been supplanted by planned transitions.

Relevant Findings:

Respondents to the “Harvest of Ministry” study testify to sisters’ awareness that they must seek to develop leadership skills not only in other sisters, but also in lay people and those they serve. “The conscious engendering of leadership capacity in lay leaders also allows Sisters to extend the presence of ministry into greater scope and scale than would otherwise be possible.”⁷⁹ Lay partners must provide key leadership if the work of ministry is to continue in the future. By encouraging lay partners to take on leadership roles, Sisters can take on other “emergent roles” and work as advocates through greater involvement in direct service.⁸⁰

10. Sisters’ Visibility in U.S. Culture

If U.S. Catholic sisters were more visible in the Catholic world in the past than they are now, the reverse is true in terms of Catholic sisters’ visibility in U.S. culture. Throughout Sister Assisium’s lifetime, sisters often operated under a cloak of mystery and invisibility. Though sisters made immeasurable contributions to the nation—in education and health care, in scholarship and science, and through many kinds of social service—their achievements were known mostly to themselves, to the people they served—and, of course, to God. Sister Assisium, for example, compiled a distinguished record of achievement as a visionary educator and author, but she left little public trace. Even her path-breaking book was published anonymously. After death her name was remembered only in her community, and recovering her story has required a great deal of historical detective work.

Present Reality: A number of factors within the last fifteen years have converged to generate unprecedented interest in U.S. Catholic sisters. Sisters are now recognized for their leadership in the church and society. The wealth of research studies are one indication that there is broad interest in sustaining the historic vitality of U.S. women’s religious life in the United States.

U.S. Catholics’ growing appreciation of sisters’ contribution to Church and nation has cultivated in many Catholics a deep sense of gratitude to these remarkable women for their courage and for their work. The Apostolic Visitation of U.S. sisters, conducted by the Vatican’s Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life between 2009 and 2012, and the doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious

(under the auspices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) also generated a great deal of attention, as has public engagement such as the “Nuns on the Bus” tour. Media initiatives such as *Global Sisters Report* have also contributed to this wider interest, as have projects such as National Catholic Sisters Week. Thanks to this increased visibility, Americans appreciate that Catholic sisters do not fit the stereotypical categories to which they had so easily been assigned in the past. Indeed, Catholic sisters today are more broadly accepted for what they are: remarkable women whose gospel calling helps to keep the Church vibrant and vital, and whose selfless service continues to enrich U.S. society.

A parallel movement is taking place in the academy; sisters are becoming the focus of research studies in history and sociology in particular. Presently there is no place or mechanism that can coordinate this research. This “study of recent studies,” necessarily limited in its scope, suggests that there is much to be gained by instituting a broader project in which sociologists, theologians, historians, and other scholars explore at length and in greater detail the present state of research on Catholic sisters. Such a group, in conversation with leaders of women’s religious communities, would be pivotal in charting the “creative rearticulation” of U.S. culture that, in the words of Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier, is essential to evangelization of younger generations of U.S. Catholic women, on whom the future of religious life depends.

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ABOUT FADICA

FADICA is a network of over 50 private foundations and donors committed to supporting Catholic-sponsored programs and institutions. FADICA's mission is to enable its members to be informed, involved and effective in addressing church needs through their philanthropy.

FADICA has been involved in a variety of projects in support of Catholic sisters throughout the years. Several important initiatives launched by FADICA members have provided valuable assistance to religious congregations in the U.S., including SOAR! (Support Our Aging Religious) which has raised millions of dollars towards retirement funds for U.S. religious orders, and a multi-million dollar support campaign which helped congregations of sisters in New Orleans to rebuild their ministries in the aftermath of Katrina. FADICA members also supported the launch of the new U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking network, a collaborative ministry of sisters.

This report is the result of FADICA's Church Vitality member affinity group's interest in bringing current research on Catholic Sisters to bear in supporting their growth and vitality. It is FADICA's hope that the report spurs interest in the life of Catholic women religious, promotes joyful optimism and support for the vitality and vocations of Catholic sisters, and provides leaders and interested parties with easy-to-read, up-to-date information.

Endnotes

- ¹ *New Generations of Catholic Sisters: The Challenge of Diversity* (New York, NY: Oxford, 2014), 7.
- ² *Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2009), 14.
- ³ Pope Francis. *Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*. Vatican, 2014.
- ⁴ *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 138. See Mark M. Gray and Mary L. Gautier, *Consideration of Priesthood and Religious Life among Never-Married U.S. Catholics* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2012), 2,7.
- ⁵ *Recent Vocations to Religious Life*, 14.
- ⁶ *Apostolic Letter*.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Mark Small, et al. "Support for Sister-Affiliated Ministries During Challenging Times: Understanding a Foundation Initiative in Two Regions." *The Foundation Review* 5:4 (2013), 18.
- ⁹ See, for example, Abbie Reese, *Dedicated to God: An Oral History of Cloistered Nuns* (Oxford, 2012). Reese also curates a traveling photographic exhibit on this subject and is currently filming a documentary.
- ¹⁰ Robert Fischer, Ph.D., and Mary Ann Murphy, OSU, *The Harvest of Ministry: Exploring the Ministry of Women Religious in Cleveland* (Cleveland, OH: Center on Urban Poverty & Community Development, 2012), 7.
- ¹¹ Kathleen Sprows Cummings, *New Women of the Old Faith: Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 130.
- ¹² *The Leadership and Philanthropy of Women Religious: A Tradition Embraces the Future* (Washington, D.C.: Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, 2010), 2.
- ¹³ *Apostolic Letter*.
- ¹⁴ Qtd. in *New Women of the Old Faith*, 131.
- ¹⁵ Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 116.
- ¹⁶ Robert Fischer and Jenni Bartholomew, *Women Religious in a Changing Urban Landscape: The Work of Catholic Sisters in Metropolitan Cleveland* (Cleveland, OH: Center on Urban Poverty & Community Development, 2010), 4.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 108-9, 125.
- ¹⁸ Erick Berrelleza, S.J., Mary Gautier, Ph.D., and Mark M Gray. *Population Trends Among Religious Institutes of Women* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2014), 7.
- ¹⁹ *Recent Vocations to Religious Life*.
- ²⁰ *Apostolic Letter*.
- ²¹ *New Women of the Old Faith*, 121.
- ²² Sandra Schneiders, IHM, *Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission to the World* (Paulist, 2013), 599-600.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 603.
- ²⁴ For valuable perspectives on the intersection between social change and Council mandates in the lives of American sisters, see Ann Patrick Ware, ed., *Midwives of the Future: American Sisters Tell Their Story* (Leaven, 1985), especially essays by Mary Luke Tobin, SL, Margaret Ellen Traxler, and Jeannine Grammick.
- ²⁵ Johnson, et. al, *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 38-39.
- ²⁶ James O'Toole, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 104-105.
- ²⁷ Qtd. in *New Women of the Old Faith*, 115-6.
- ²⁸ For a detailed explanation of these studies see Appendix I, *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*.
- ²⁹ *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 70-71.
- ³⁰ *Recent Vocations to Religious Life*.
- ³¹ See Mary L. Gautier and Melissa A Cidade, *The Profession Class of 2010: Survey of Women Religious Professing Perpetual Vows* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, December 2010). Mary Gautier and the CARA repeated the study, with different co-authors, for each class from 2011-2014, and published under the same title respectively in December 2011, in January 2013 as *New Sisters and Brothers Professing Perpetual Vows in Religious Life*, in January 2014 as *New Sisters and Brothers Professing Perpetual Vows in Religious Life: The Profession Class of 2013*, and in January 2015 as *New Sisters and Brothers Professing Perpetual Vows in Religious Life: The Profession Class of 2014*.
- ³² *The Profession Class of 2014*, 4.
- ³³ *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 138.
- ³⁴ *Recent Vocations to Religious Life*.
- ³⁵ See, for example, "Appendix A: Background & Terms," *Harvest of Ministry*.
- ³⁶ Blessed Sacrament Parish, *Church of the Blessed Sacrament Manhattan* (New York: June 21, 2015). <http://blessedsacramentnyc.org/documents/2015/6/04-0288.June%2021%202015.pdf>.
- ³⁷ Mary Gautier, Johnathon L. Wiggins, and Jonathon C. Holland, *Incorporating Cultural Diversity in Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, August 2014), 2.

- ³⁸ *The Profession Class of 2010*, 2.
- ³⁹ *The Profession Class of 2013*, 9.
- ⁴⁰ *Incorporating Cultural Diversity in Religious Life*, 17, 21.
- ⁴¹ <http://www.trinitydc.edu/academic-affairs/2014/10/20/ghr-foundation-awards-grant/>
- ⁴² *Incorporating Cultural Diversity in Religious Life*, 36, 3.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁴⁴ *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 27.
- ⁴⁵ "Population Trends Among Religious Institutes of Women," 4. Note: This study identifies the Province of Los Altos as the Province of the West. I am grateful to Sr. Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., for the clarification.
- ⁴⁶ "Support for Sister-Affiliated Ministries During Challenging Times," 12-23.
- ⁴⁷ *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 69, 140.
- ⁴⁸ See table on *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 69.
- ⁴⁹ *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 67. See William V. D'Antonio, Michele Dillon, and Mary L. Gautier, *American Catholics in Transition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publications, 2013), 58.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.* See William V. D'Antonio and Anthony Pogorelc, SS. *Voices of the Faithful: Loyal Catholics Striving for Change* (New York: Herder & Herder, Crossroad Publishing, 2007), 98-101.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.* See also Mark M. Gray, *Young Adult Catholics Haven't Lost God's Number* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2012).
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 140. See Mark M. Gray and Mary L. Gautier, *Consideration of Priesthood and Religious Life among Never-Married U.S. Catholics* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2012), 2.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 77, Emphasis in original.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 91. They found that small percentages (4-8 percent) of the Vatican II and pre-Vatican II respondents in LCWR communities expressed dissatisfaction with the policies of the Church hierarchy regarding women, while few post-Vatican II LCWR respondents and no millennial LCWR respondents mentioned these concerns. They do point out that the data was collected prior to the Apostolic Visitation or U.S. religious (2009-2012) and the doctrinal assessment of the LCWR (2012). New survey data might yield different responses.
- ⁵⁶ In late 2015, CMSWR will publish a new study that will further inform the data in this section. Please visit www.cmswr.org.
- ⁵⁷ *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 84-86.
- ⁵⁸ For an interesting reflection on this question, see Sophia Park, SNJM, "Beyond Habits or No Habits: A Reflection on Religious Identity among Religious Women in the United States," *Global Sisters Report*, February 2, 2015, <http://globalsistersreport.org/column/trends/beyond-habits-and-no-habits-reflection-identity-religious-women-us-19061>
- ⁵⁹ *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 14, 20.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 73-74.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 114-5.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 115-6.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 71-72, 105.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 76, 109-10.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁶⁷ Kathleen A. Mahoney, ed. *A Handbook on Educational Debt and Vocations to Religious Life* (Chicago: National Religious Vocation Conference, 2013), 6-19.
- ⁶⁸ *New Women of the Old Faith*, 147.
- ⁶⁹ "Support for Sister-Affiliated Ministries During Challenging Times," 16.
- ⁷⁰ *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 71-74.
- ⁷¹ "Support for Sister-Affiliated Ministries During Challenging Times," 15.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, 12, 18-19.
- ⁷³ *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 73.
- ⁷⁴ *Harvest of Ministry*, 6-7.
- ⁷⁵ *Apostolic Letter*.
- ⁷⁶ *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, 49-50, 55-56, 84.
- ⁷⁷ *Harvest of Ministry*, 4.
- ⁷⁸ For an example of a recent attempt, see "The Nun in the World: Catholic Sisters and Vatican II," an international conference sponsored by the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism. http://cushwa.nd.edu/assets/159361/nitw_rlvp_conferenceschedule.pdf
- ⁷⁹ *Harvest of Ministry*, 13.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.



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