

## Women, Gender, and Religion

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### “The Wageless Work of Paradise”

#### Integrating Women into American Religious History

Kathleen Sprows Cummings, University of Notre Dame

#### Introduction

[1] Last fall, one of the students in my Women and American Catholicism class announced on the first day that she had enrolled in the course simply out of curiosity: “I am dying to know,” she said, “how a course on Women and Catholicism can last any longer than TWO WEEKS.” Given women’s exclusion from leadership structures within the Roman Catholic Church, she wondered, what could we possibly find to talk about for an entire semester? This student was a Catholic who had attended Catholic educational institutions all her life, including an academy run by a prominent order of women religious, and yet she had no resources to comprehend the rich, complicated history of American Catholic women in church and society.

[2] These and other similar stories point, I think, to a pressing pastoral problem: the perception that they have no past within the Church is one reason why many young Catholic women believe they have no future within it. This is not a subject I want to explore in any length, although I mention it now because I do think it raises vital questions for those of us who teach at places like Creighton University and the University of Notre Dame. My primary focus in this essay, however, is a scholarly one: to identify ways in which religious historians might make more room for female subjects in the stories they tell. While it is

certainly true that scholars pay much *more* attention to women today than was the case a few decades ago, I am not sure that my student, reading many contemporary publications in the field, would reach a different conclusion about the projected length of our class! As Catherine Brekus noted in her recent survey of American religious history, female subjects rarely figure prominently in the vast majority of monographs or synthetic histories. Most scholars, she pointed out, “assume that women’s stories are peripheral to their research topics, whether Puritan theology or church and state. They do not seem hostile to women’s history as much as they are dismissive of it, treating it a separate topic they can safely afford to ignore” (1). Brekus was echoing a claim made by Harvard historian Ann Braude more than a decade ago: because women’s stories do not easily fit into the frameworks that have traditionally structured the field of American religion, they are easily overlooked as historical actors.

[3] The lack of attention to female subjects is even more pronounced among historians of Catholicism. I realized this early in my career as a historian, when I was researching the founding of Trinity College in Washington, D.C., an institution founded by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. Trinity, which opened in 1900, was one of the first Catholic women’s colleges, and its founding was both prolonged and controversial. The Vatican even banned the Sisters from working at Trinity for about six months while Church officials investigated the nuns’ alleged – and unfounded – alliance with the Americanists at nearby Catholic University. A decade later, an unidentified Sister of Notre Dame was asked to discuss the superior’s efforts to open the college. Her response: “Sister Superior prayed and Trinity was started” (O’Mahoney: 127).

[4] When I visited the College archives I came to understand why this anonymous nun had provided such an astonishingly abbreviated account. I discovered a letter that the superior herself had written to her community shortly after the college opened. In it, she passed along the counsel she had received from Phillip Garrigan, vice-rector of Catholic University. According to the superior, Garrigan had reminded her:

. . . like the dear Blessed Mother, the Sisters were chosen to do great things and like her too, they should be satisfied that He alone be witness of their cooperation with His grace. The Blessed Virgin did not publish her history to the world; neither should we be concerned whether people know what we do or not (Sister Julia McGroarty, S.N.D., to the Sisters of Trinity, February 1901; TCA).

Ironically it would be Garrigan who proved to be the beneficiary of his own advice, as he and his fellow clerics at Catholic University are often described as the prime movers in the founding of Trinity College. This pattern is often replicated in other diocesan newspapers, parish histories, or congregational records, in which many of women’s services and achievements within the Church are credited to the “good father” or “dear bishop” who served as their spiritual advisers or local ordinaries. This is gender ideology at work: Catholic women were encouraged not “to publish their history to the world;” most Catholic men never had any compunction about doing so. This is the primary reason why, as one of my colleagues noted in her review of a recent synthetic history of American Catholicism, women continue to be “in short supply as shapers of history” (Kane: 905).

[5] But there are other explanations for the relative paucity of female subjects. Scholars who do write about Catholic women too often present women's stories as parallel rather than integral to the larger story of the American church; that is, they make little effort to connect them to larger developments already deemed important, and thus fail to answer critical questions of historical significance. With that in mind, my reflections here center on two people – a woman and a bishop – an approach that runs counter to a widespread assumption that characterizes my sub-field: interest in women's history and interest in episcopal biography are mutually exclusive! By sharing some of my research about teaching sisters in Catholic schools, I hope both to provide a model for integrating women more comprehensively into the larger story of U.S. Catholicism, and to address the “so-what?” question in the process.

### Teaching Sisters in the Church of Philadelphia

[6] In 1905, Mary Donahue, a student at Cathedral Girls High School Centre in Philadelphia, received a prize in an archdiocesan essay contest on the subject of Christian Doctrine. The contest itself was the brainchild of Rev. Philip McDevitt, superintendent of Philadelphia's Catholic schools, who had devised it as part of his attempt to make religious education the “predominating factor” of Catholic education in Philadelphia (an account of the competition is provided in Sister M. Stanislaus [Quigley], “The Most Reverend Philip R. McDevitt: Founder of High Schools,” Box 4, Folder 2, SEC, ASSJ). Donahue's teachers, the Sisters of St. Joseph, must have been particularly pleased to have their student so honored. The congregation took a proprietary interest in Christian doctrine: one of their own members, Sister Assisium McEvoy, was the author of the official archdiocesan textbook on the subject. Presumably the nuns were also proud of the essay's content: in her reflections on “A Home Art,” Donahue described the home as woman's true vocation, “unless she is called to one that is higher and holier . . . that of a lifework in God's own household – a vocation to religion.” A sister, she wrote, “appreciates the honor of her work, even [that] which the new woman, who is *no* woman, or which the women of the world scorn . . . the wageless work of paradise” (June 1905, “Prize Papers in Christian Doctrine,” Box 1, Folder 1, SAMC, ASSJ).

[7] Donahue's essay contained a number of themes that would have resonated with American Catholics in 1905: the idealization of the home, which was not unique to Catholicism but was especially embraced by the members of a rising middle-class; the description of religious life as a “higher and holier” vocation, which was emblematic of the two-tiered spirituality that characterized Catholicism until the Second Vatican Council; and, finally, the familiar juxtaposition of a daughter of the Old Faith and the New Woman, in this case in terms of work performed and remuneration received (for more on this juxtaposition, see Cummings). While teaching sisters may not be understood as “workers” in the conventional sense, it would be difficult to find a group of women whose labor was more closely linked to the Progressive-era conversation about American Catholic identity than the nuns who taught in parochial schools. We all know that it was nuns' willingness to undertake “the wageless work of paradise” that enabled American Catholics to build what one scholar described as “the largest private educational enterprise known to history” (Appleby, Byrne, and Portier: 55). Yet entire histories of American Catholicism, and even of Catholic education, have been written with only fleeting, and often condescending, reference to

sisters. Though historians routinely acknowledge that nuns' heavily subsidized labor underwrote the parochial school system, they give scant attention to the personalities or developments that shaped this process. We do not hear nuns' voices, and rarely do we learn their names. Indeed, I am perpetually struck by the contrast between the ubiquitousness of the teaching nun in popular culture and her near invisibility in historical narratives.

[8] Consider, for example, Sister Assisium McEvoy (1843-1939), the Sister of St. Joseph, who published the aforementioned textbook. As the Director of Sisters' Studies in a large teaching community in an archdiocese with a steadfast commitment to Catholic education, Sister Assisium offers a particularly revealing example of a woman religious who was both affected by the "school question" and figured prominently in its resolution. But she is unknown outside her community. By contrast, Rev. Philip McDevitt (1858-1935), who served as diocesan superintendent between 1899 and 1916 and bishop of Harrisburg from 1916-1935, surfaces in historical narratives as a talented administrator whose innovative "Philadelphia Plan" offered a model of consolidation for Catholic education in other dioceses (Burns 1912; Flick: 74-85).

[9] Yet it is impossible to understand the contours of Catholic education without attention to the collaboration between women like Sister Assisium and men like the future bishop McDevitt. Early in his term, McDevitt enlisted Sister Assisium in his quest to vivify the teaching of Christian Doctrine, which culminated in the publication of her textbook, though characteristically he and other diocesan priests persuaded her to publish it anonymously, holding out the promise of a heavenly reward as compensation for the lack of an earthly one. More significant, McDevitt recognized that the cooperation of Sister Assisium and other women religious was absolutely central to his goals of expanding and consolidating Catholic education in Philadelphia. Above all, he needed them to staff the schools, which doubled in size and number during his term.

[10] The perpetual need for more religious teachers was a topic Father McDevitt and Sister Assisium discussed, with escalating levels of concern, as the twentieth century progressed. "From every school there comes a cry for help," Sister Assisium lamented at one point, "and there are no sisters to send" (in a letter to McDevitt, Oct. 6 1925, Box 2, Folder 36, PRMC/ND). This problem was not unique to Philadelphia. In 1905, the Catholic Educational Association (CEA) had resolved that "the fast developing system of Catholic education makes imperative the fostering of the religious vocation among our men and women" (33). By 1911 several bishops were claiming that the shortage of vocations had reached crisis proportions. A year later, Rev. James Burns, C.S.C., the reigning expert on Catholic education in the early twentieth century, urged Catholics to be more deliberate in recruiting men and women to religious life, estimating that the novitiates of the teaching orders "ought to contain twice as many candidates as they have at present" if the demand was to be met (Burns 1915: 213-14; 1917: 72, 75). (It goes without saying that the actual numbers would have turned any modern day vocation director green with envy).

[11] The apparent dearth of vocations raised a thorny theological question: because the call to religious life came from God, was it possible that God was not sending enough vocations? To even intimate this, as one priest noted, came "dangerously near the borderline of impiety" (Hayes: 226). Bishop Herman Alerding of Fort Wayne addressed the

question squarely: “Is it a fact, as some seem to think, that there is a lack of vocations to the Brotherhood and Sisterhood? . . . I cannot believe it. The vocations exist, they must exist” (quoted in Br. A. O’Reilly: 34). Many other Catholic bishops and educational leaders concurred: the vocation shortage was owed “not to the absence of divine providence, but to the lack of man’s cooperation” (Hayes: 226).

[12] Or, more specifically, to *woman’s* cooperation. Like other Church leaders, McDevitt assumed that women religious, as the group who had the most extended contact with Catholic children, would be the foot soldiers in the crusade to secure more vocations to religious life. Sister Assisium and other nuns accepted this charge with eagerness, especially since many of them attributed their own decision to enter religious life to the model of beloved teachers. In her counsel to future sister-teachers, Sister Assisium admonished them to “Remember [that] in the classroom the children are watching you, and you may repel or you may attract” (“Meditation on Vocation,” and “Mediation on the Vows,” Instructions to Tertiaries, Boxes 1 and 2, SAMC, ASSJ).

[13] Ideally, a sufficient number of students *would* be attracted to religious life solely by their teachers’ example. But, recognizing that “vocations do not always present themselves spontaneously,” Catholic educators urged nuns to give their students a nudge. Vocations could not be created, of course, but they could be “stimulated,” “awakened,” or “interpreted” (Hayes: 226). One teaching sister suggested that they be “discovered” and “directed” (Sister of the Holy Cross: 486). Father McDevitt urged that vocations be “encouraged” or “cultivated” (Br. A. O’Reilly: 35). However they described it, Church leaders concurred: recruitment must be undertaken more consciously and more assertively.

[14] From the start it was clear, though, some vocations were prized above others. Most religious educators had no qualms about their initial preference for more vocations to the teaching *brotherhoods*. McDevitt’s predecessor as superintendent had lamented in 1895 that “men constitute only a small portion of the teaching force employed in our schools” (*Annual Reports* 1895: 1.10-11). Leaders on a national level expressed similar misgivings about placing so important a work in the hands of women. As Bishop John Lancaster Spalding noted, “The teachers in our schools are nearly all religious women, just as the teachers in public schools are mostly women. What the effect of this teaching by women is likely to be on our national character, I shall not here inquire” (95).

[15] The feminization of teaching, as Spalding noted, affected public schools as well as Catholic ones.<sup>1</sup> The overriding concern in both venues involved the perceived impact of feminine influence on the “manliness” of young boys (Tyack: 59-65; Brown). Quoting educator G. Stanley Hall at a CEA meeting, Rev. Bede Horsa, O.S.F., described the preponderance of women teachers as the “patent and material defect” of the parochial school system in the United States (286-88). Given how readily Horsa expressed his manifest disdain for female teachers, the fact that one of the commentators complimented him for

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<sup>1</sup> Tyack provides the approximate statistics: the percentages of women teachers increased from 59 percent in 1870 to 70 percent in 1900, to 86 percent in 1920. The percentage of female teachers was higher in elementary schools. By 1905, only 2 percent of teachers in elementary schools were men, whereas 38 percent of elementary school principals were men (61).

using a “great deal of tact” is illustrative of the consensus on the subject. McDevitt, also present at the meeting, had kinder words for the sisters, observing that nothing would be gained by “minimizing the strength of women teachers and emphasizing their weakness.” Nonetheless, McDevitt, like most Catholic educators, accepted that boys of “a certain age” should be taught by men, though the precise age was subject to debate (Horsa: 295).<sup>2</sup> By 1908, the Catholic Educational Association defined the need for teaching brothers as the “the most pressing want of the Church in America” (Bishop Bernard McQuaid, quoted in Br. A. O’Reilly: 36).

[16] Although pleas for male vocations would continue, the gap between teaching sisters and brothers continued to widen in favor of the former. In Philadelphia, sisters outnumbered brothers by a ratio of seventeen to one in 1904, and by 1919 there were thirty-six teaching sisters for every teaching brother in the archdiocese.<sup>3</sup> This imbalance did not go unexamined, and the most commonly cited explanation for the shortage of vocations to brotherhoods was Catholic boys’ aspirations for ordination to the priesthood. Whereas girls who entered the convent would reach “the limit of their ambition,” boys with a vocation could always choose to become priests rather than brothers (see the response in B. O’Reilly: 274). In an effort to encourage more boys to consider the latter option, some recommended that Catholics should distribute more literature that emphasized the uniqueness and advantages of the life of a brother. Among the latter was the avoidance of the “heavy responsibility” attached to the priesthood (see Br. A. O’Reilly: 2, 17).

[17] Though lay male teachers would have presented a satisfying substitute for teaching brothers, most recognized that the salary paid by parochial schools would be insufficient to raise families (see comments in Horsa: 291, 294). In 1912, James Burns conceded, “the few remaining male teachers in both public and parochial schools will be replaced in time by teachers of the other sex.” For good measure, he noted that “in neither case was this movement foreseen or desired” (1917: 118). Burns was heartened, however, by nuns’ affordability, cheerfully noting that “the salary of Sisters teaching in the parochial schools rarely rise above 250 dollars per annum . . . more commonly it is from 150 to 200 dollars per annum,” whereas teaching brothers earned twice to three times as much (1904: 19-21).

[18] Having grudgingly accepted nuns’ dominant presence in classrooms as the price for the rapid expansion of Catholic schools, Church leaders continued to press nuns to secure the permanency of the system by persuading enough of their pupils to follow in their footsteps.<sup>4</sup> Catholic educators exhorted nuns to devote the daily period of religious instruction to “conscious propaganda,” and advised them not to confine their “watchful eye” to the

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<sup>2</sup> As for the age, Shanahan specified that Sisters would “labor under serious disadvantages” if teaching boys older than 12. Others placed the age at 13 or 14 (Horsa: 292).

<sup>3</sup> In his *Annual Report* for 1904-1905, McDevitt lists 46 teaching brothers and 812 teaching sisters in the archdiocese. The 1907-1908 report shows 43 teaching brothers and 914 teaching sisters. The *Annual Report* for 1919 shows 43 teaching brothers and 1571 teaching sisters. Oates discusses the dwindling supply of teaching brothers (1980: 151-52). On the dearth of vocations to the teaching brotherhoods at the national level for a period that extends beyond that covered by this chapter, see the citations in Kreidler.

<sup>4</sup> As Mary Oates notes, this feminization of the teaching profession paralleled trends in secular education fifty years earlier (1980: 152).

classroom alone” (B. O’Reilly: 267; Anselm: 10). Careful observance of children during the Mass might reveal an incipient vocation. Sacramental preparation was also declared a “good time to work upon the souls of the young and point out to them the advantages of religious life” (Schrembs: 113; B. O’Reilly: 266; Br. Justin in commentary in B. O’Reilly: 272). Sisters were also encouraged to increase personal contact. In Massachusetts, Church leaders encouraged them to “ask at least four or five girls, especially high school or normal school pupils, to visit them during the year at the convent and urge them to join the community” (Thomas Magennis to Archbishop William O’Connell, January 10, 1908, quoted in Oates 1984: 61).

[19] Sisters responded enthusiastically to these and other suggestions, and they had good reason to do so. The most obvious inducement for attracting more young women to religious life involved self-perpetuation. Most congregations attracted the largest number of candidates from among their own pupils.<sup>5</sup> In one of the Sisters of St. Joseph’s parish schools, fifty-six graduates entered women’s religious communities over a thirty-five-year period. Thirty-seven girls had chosen the Sisters of St. Joseph, while the other nineteen had entered other congregations. Reflecting on these nineteen, Sister Assisium conceded, “the garment of the Spouse is woven of many colors” (pamphlet commemorating anniversary of St. Mary’s Bayonne, NJ, typescript August 1915, SAMC, ASSJ). Evidently not all nuns were as forgiving. One superior complained that sisters often attempted to stifle their students’ admiration for other congregations in hopes of persuading them to enter their own. This tactic, the superior argued, was counterproductive to the larger goal of securing more teaching vocations: “What matters in what portion of the vineyard she selects, so long as she works in the vineyard” (Anselm: 8). In practical terms, of course, it mattered a great deal to communities.

[20] Congregations had other incentives to step up their recruitment efforts. Occasionally, sisters could use the increased numbers as leverage in petitioning local ordinaries for financial assistance to enlarge their novitiates. In 1914, Sister Assisium’s community petitioned Philadelphia’s Archbishop for financial assistance to enlarge the novitiate: “If we do not build,” the superior warned, “we shall soon have to refuse postulants.” Another congregation in Philadelphia, the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, also asked the archbishop to purchase property for them to enlarge the novitiate (M. Bonaventure to Rev. Ar. Prendergast, September 21, 1914, and Sister M. of St. Bernadina, O.L.C.G.S. to Prendergast, 21 June 1915, in Box 9, EPC, PAHRC).

[21] Competition for vocations was used to justify an unprecedented arrangement at Catholic Girls’ High School in Philadelphia (renamed John Hallahan High School in 1926). The institution opened in 1912, making Philadelphia the first U.S. diocese to offer Catholic girls a free high school education. The precursors to the high school had actually been

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<sup>5</sup> Although this is widely assumed, it is little documented. Research for a period later than this one shows that a majority of women religious first began to consider religious life because of the influence of another sister (Hoedl: 91-92). According to one estimate, between fifty to ninety percent of candidates for religious life had been educated by religious teachers, often those from the same order (B. O’Reilly: 256). That an area contained “good prospects for vocations” was often a carrot to open schools (see, for example, Rev. F. Borman, Diocese of Sioux Falls, S. Dakota to Mother Superior, I.H.Ms., March 10, 1920, Box 23, Folder 43a, MMJP, ASIHM).

established twelve years before, when four congregations opened “Senior Centres” attached to selected parish schools (recall that the prizewinning essayist, Mary Donahue, had attended one of these). While McDevitt had recognized that each Centre was “in absolute control of the community teaching it,” he divided teaching responsibilities at Girls High among several different congregations (McDevitt to Rev. William Cunningham, March 27, 1911, Box 2, PRMC/PA, PAHRC). The institution of the “union faculty” ensured that authority in the school would be vested with McDevitt rather than with any one community superior, a decision that he defended by appealing to a sense of fairness: with a union faculty in place, he insisted, “[t]he opportunity of getting vocations would be enjoyed by several communities instead of one” (McDevitt to Fr. Joseph McClancy, December 14, 1925, CMCD, Box 3, Folder 1, PRMC/ND). This carrot, in other words, softened the impact of what was actually a considerable transfer of power from community motherhouses to the chancery.

### Parochial vs. Public Schools: Sisters Make the Difference

[22] The desire to stimulate more interest in religious life among a new generation of Catholics generated countless paeans to teaching nuns that appeared in Catholic sermons and devotional literature in the early twentieth century. One advocate for more aggressive recruitment declared “the grandeur of the religious calling” a “worthy theme for sermons,” and many clerics waxed eloquently about the “grand vocation” of teaching as “the special work of our Lord” (B. O’Reilly: 262; Oates 1984: 61).<sup>6</sup> Mary Donahue’s essay, with its flattering portrait of the teaching sister, was simply one sign that the colossal effort to sell religious life to a new generation was working.

[23] But Donahue’s word choice is also telling on another level. Sisters’ wageless work was not only valuable in a practical sense; it also served a useful symbolic function. Though less immediate and less tangible than the mandate to staff the schools, another need proved no less critical to Father McDevitt’s larger objective of sustaining and expanding Catholic education in Philadelphia: defining the city’s parochial schools in relation to state-sponsored ones. McDevitt frequently was called upon to defend Catholics’ right to educate their children in denominational schools, perhaps most dramatically in 1910 when Philadelphia’s public school superintendent proposed that attendance at state schools should be made a condition for citizenship (McDevitt to Rev. H. C. Boyle, January 3, 1910, Box 1, PRMC/PA).<sup>7</sup> This proposal, keep in mind, was not as outlandish as it may seem today. It was not until 1925, when the Supreme Court handed down the decision in *Pierce v. the Society of Sisters*, that U.S. citizens were guaranteed the right to educate their children in non-public schools.

[24] In response to these and other challenges, McDevitt argued that Catholic schools performed a great service to the state and pointed to the “double burden” borne by Catholic taxpayers (a summary of his arguments can be found in his speech, “The State of

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<sup>6</sup> Bishop Camillus Maes of Covington, Kentucky defined teaching as “a grand vocation,” adding that religious teachers should do everything in their power to encourage their pupils to enter religious life” (B. O’Reilly: 274).

<sup>7</sup> A similar controversy erupted when the Philadelphia Normal School announced it would only be accepting graduates of Philadelphia’s public schools. McDevitt responded with letters to the *Public Ledger*, many of which are available in Box 7, PRMC/PA.

Education”). Though McDevitt was a thoughtful spokesman for his cause, there was nothing particularly unique about his reasoning: he was simply repeating the arguments that John Hughes had made seventy years earlier, and rehearsing the ones that supporters of “school choice” would advance later in the twentieth century. McDevitt’s preoccupation with differentiation, on the other hand, reveals a much more distinctive and less examined aspect of Catholic school definition in the Progressive era. For Catholics in Philadelphia, as for Americans more generally, the state loomed larger in the first two decades of the twentieth century than it ever had before. During his first few years as superintendent of Catholic schools, McDevitt could justly claim, “the parish system has scarcely any relations with the civil authorities” (*Annual Reports* 1903: 9.9). That would not hold true for long. Increasingly, McDevitt aspired to meet standards set by the state, sought more benefits from the state, and watched schools become more subject to control of the state. Like other Catholics, he was deeply suspicious of the Progressive impulse to expand the reach of state and federal governments. In reaction to the state’s efforts “to extend its jurisdiction in matters educational,” McDevitt devoted more time and attention to highlighting the differences between Catholic and state-sponsored schools (82).

[25] It was against this backdrop that McDevitt set out, soon after becoming superintendent, to make religious education the “predominating factor, the informing element of our educational system” (*Annual Reports* 1904: 10.6).<sup>8</sup> This was the motive behind the inauguration of the aforementioned essay contest. It also prompted him to seek the help of Sister Assisium, who had designed a teaching methods course in Christian doctrine for the use of her community in 1899. Duly impressed with Sister Assisium’s methods, McDevitt encouraged the Sisters of St. Joseph to publish the curriculum so it could be made available to other archdiocesan teachers. *The Course of Christian Doctrine: A Handbook for Teachers* was released by Dolphin Press in 1904, and served as the official archdiocesan text until 1928.

[26] If sisters were practically integral to the work of differentiation through the subjects they taught, they were also symbolically important because of what they represented. Next to the teaching of Christian doctrine, McDevitt pointed to the “unqualified and unselfish consecration of our teachers to a calling they consider divine” as the most important factor distinguishing Catholic schools from state-sponsored ones. Declaring that Catholics’ dependence on teaching nuns did not “arise from economic necessity alone; it is of deliberate choice,” he insisted that while “some of our teachers have not a special professional training . . . there are elements of power in the work of religious of which the secular teacher has little acquaintance” (*Annual Reports* 1909: 15.19; 1906: 12.21-22).

[27] McDevitt and other Catholic educators latched on to three particular distinguishing characteristics that gave sisters a comparative edge over their secular counterparts. First was the relative longevity of a teaching sister’s “career.” According to McDevitt, sisters’ lifelong vows lent “a permanency to our teaching body, which is confessedly wanting in that of the Public Schools” (*Annual Reports* 1907: 13.21). James Burns agreed that while the “Catholic teacher takes up teaching as a life profession, and is, as a rule, a teacher for life,” public

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<sup>8</sup> The essay contest continued at least until McDevitt’s consecration as bishop (see sample essays in McDevitt’s papers, Box 2, Folder 46, PRMC/ND; for more information on the essay contest as well as the catechetical exhibit, see Sr. St. Anne, “Points Regarding His Excellency, SEC, ASSJ).

school teachers who served only a few years “can scarcely be said to be a body of professional teachers at all” (1904: 18, 20). Even one of the most vociferous opponents of female teachers conceded that the teaching nun who “devotes her life to the mastery of the difficult art of teaching” was at least preferable to women who taught in public schools, who, by viewing the teaching profession as a temporary stop on the path to marriage, represented an even “nearer and more prolific source of evil” (Horsa: 285-86).

[28] Nuns’ supposed seclusion gave them another advantage over public school teachers. According to Burns, sisters’ lives “centered on the school,” and their “conversations, recreations, and prayers” focused on their students. According to one Philadelphia teaching sister, “even non-Catholic school superintendents admit that herein lies the strength of the body of religious teachers – they have no distractions, no intercourse with the world. They live in community, and there is ample opportunity for an exchange of ideas on educational subjects, and each can learn from the experience of the other” (Sister Eberharda Jones, “Handwritten Notes to Young Teachers,” and “Training of the Teacher,” SEJC, ASSFP). Entering the classroom from “the quiet seclusion of their convent homes,” in other words, sisters turned to teaching with a singleness of purpose that set them apart from their preoccupied counterparts (Power: 339; Gibbons: 172-73).

[29] But sisters’ lifelong commitment and singular devotion to teaching, while worthy of praise, paled in comparison to their most admirable qualification: their acceptance of “no other compensation than that which is barely sufficient to clothe and shelter them” (Philip McDevitt, “Sermon, Diamond Jubilee of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (1921),” Box 6, Folder 27, PRMC/ND). Praising sisters “sacrifices, self-denial, the rigid economy, and the whole-souled consecration to a high calling,” McDevitt held up the teaching sister as a refreshing contrast with her mercenary public-school counterpart (*Annual Reports* 1904: 10.21). Burns noted that unlike public school teachers, for whom work was “a matter of bread and butter,” teaching sisters were “not bothered about salaries” (1904: 19). Another priest pointed out that “teachers in the non-Catholic institutions . . . have made no vow of poverty. They work for a salary. They wish to keep their positions, or even to obtain promotion.” Sisters’ aspirations for their own religious perfection, by contrast, offered a much loftier incentive for attaining pedagogical excellence (Power: 349).

[30] Catholic University professor Thomas Shields even seized upon nuns’ renunciation of temporal wealth to make his case that Catholic schools formed the basis for “true Americanization.” While the state was “obliged to use self-interest as the main motive in attracting her teachers and keeping them in her service,” the religious vow of poverty freed religious teachers from such crass motives, enabling them to devote their lives and services “unreservedly to the children who may come under [their] care, without thought of personal gain or benefit in return.” In teaching sisters, Catholic school students thus witnessed a powerful example of “disinterested citizenship” (Shields 1916: 61-62; 1921: 36). The truth of this statement is difficult to assess but, as is clear from Mary Donahue’s essay, nuns’ willingness to perform “the wageless work of paradise” was not lost on their students.

[31] By praising sisters for their underpaid work in Catholic classrooms, Donahue joined thousands of other early twentieth century Catholics who positively gloried in nuns’ lack of material compensation. Indeed it is striking how often the word “pittance” is used –

boastfully, not critically – in descriptions of their stipends (Guthrie: 548; Mullany: 97). There are a number of long-range consequences to this. Nuns' supposed lack of need for money severely compromised, to say the least, their ability to negotiate wages. In 1912, when Sister Assisium's congregation asked pastors to increase each teaching sister's stipend by fifty dollars per year (would have brought the total to \$250), at least one of them refused on the grounds that the people of his parish would be "indirectly taxed" to support the motherhouse (Stimson to Hand, Jan 27, 1912, SAMC).

[32] Low wages also thwarted congregational efforts to improve sisters' education, a task that became ever more crucial as standards rose for public school teachers in the early twentieth century. Supportive of sisters' education in the abstract, most bishops and priests were reluctant to allocate funds for it, and communities felt the pinch acutely. Sister Assisium's congregation, for example, had tripled its expenditures on training and education between 1907 and 1912 alone, and they received little from the institutional church in terms of either structural or material assistance. Even McDevitt, a self-defined champion of sisters' education, routinely resisted efforts to channel diocesan funds toward underwriting its cost.

[33] McDevitt's efforts on behalf of Philadelphia's school children earned him the title of bishop and a place in Catholic historical narratives. His name is also recognizable to generations of Catholics in Philadelphia and Harrisburg, where there are two Philip McDevitt high schools. There is, of course, no Sister Assisium McEvoy high school, nor are there many diocesan-sponsored institutions named for a woman religious, in Philadelphia or elsewhere. In terms of history, Sister Assisium and other teaching sisters are likely to surface only as nameless entities, if at all, in studies of Catholicism in the United States.

### **Significance for the Study of Gender and Religion**

[34] Sister Assisium's story has a number of implications for the broader study of gender and religion. First, it provides a model for scholars to evaluate the scope and significance of unpaid or underpaid labor, the kind of labor most often performed by women, and the kind of labor that has historically created and sustained the vast majority of American religious institutions. Second, the relationship between Sister Assisium and Father McDevitt complicates the current understanding of historical agency. Women are much more likely to be included in historical narratives if they challenge gender norms; as a result, historians who do study Catholic women tend to focus disproportionately on their subjects' oppositional relationships with members of the hierarchy. These often make great stories, and they are important to tell. But women are perhaps more likely to be accepted as *shapers of history* if we acknowledge a deceptively simple premise: many of the developments that we recognize as central to the development of U.S. Catholicism simply could not have happened without women's *consent*. Sister Assisium and other teaching nuns may have approached the school question from a different base of power than Father McDevitt did. But they shared the same fundamental assumptions about Catholic education and the centrality of sisters to it. By studying Sister Assisium and McDevitt side-by-side, it is possible to appreciate how deeply invested Catholic sisters were in the project of parochial education. It also makes it much more difficult – and less justifiable – to isolate their stories in separate chapters and books.

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