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Sisterhood and Power: 
Class, Culture, and Ethnicity in the American Convent
by MARGARET SUSAN THOMPSON

BEFORE the renewal of religious life that has occupied much of the last quarter-century, many congregations of Catholic sisters incorporated “shrouding” into their profession ceremonies. After taking the traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, newly-professed nuns would prostrate themselves before the altar, where they would be fully covered by a black pall, or shroud. There, arms outstretched in cruciform, surrounded by others chanting the Litany of the Saints, they symbolically “died to the world” and were “born anew into Christ.” It was the culmination of a formation process that had begun when they entered the convent as postulants and which had intensified as they became novices and were clothed in the religious habit and given new names. From the day of arrival, would-be sisters were told to abandon all vestiges of their old identities. So, for instance, most constitutions and customaries explicitly forbade retention of memorabilia from—or even verbal references to—members’ former lives; even contact and communication with families and friends were severely restricted or prohibited. The objectives of this “stripping away” were many, but at least one of them presumably was to foster creation of a Christian communal ideal that traced its roots to scripture: a society in which “there does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; all are one in Christ Jesus” [Galatians 3:28].

Rarely, however, did that ideal achieve complete fruition. Instead, both unintentionally and by design, religious orders generally mirrored the

This paper was originally delivered at the 1988 meeting of the Social Science History Association.

1. Prior to 1983 designations such as “order,” “congregation,” “institute,” “society,” and “community” had precise and distinct canonically legal meanings—as did the titles of “religious,” “nun,” and “sister.” In this study, however, the terms will be used interchangeably (except when their technical significance is intended and explicitly noted), as they are in most of the primary and secondary literature, in past and present common usage, and in the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law.

2. Descriptions of shroudings can be found in countless 19th-century (or earlier) biographies and histories of religious life. For two 20th-century autobiographical accounts, see Mother Catherine Thomas, My Beloved: The Story of a Carmelite Nun (New York, 1955), pp. 101-02; and Karen Armstrong, Through the Narrow Gate (New York, 1981), pp. 179-80.

3. “Constitutions” are the formal sets of general regulations that govern religious congregations; they must be based on one of four or five approved religious Rules (Ignatian, Franciscan, Augustinian, Benedictine, etc.), must conform to canon law, and must be approved by ecclesiastical authorities. “Customaries” (also called “directories”) are collections of more specific rubrics that delineate the order of the day (horarium), expected modes of behavior, relationships among persons, etc., and are more easily changed. In the 19th century, however, the distinction between these was not always maintained, and many constitutions also contained the minutiae more properly placed in customaries. In the course of my research, I have read at least 50 constitutions and 25-30 customaries.

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secular world in which they functioned and from which their all-too-human membership was drawn. In the 19th- and early 20th-century United States, this “mirroring” took several forms, including many that were humanizing and constructive. But it also brought dissension and conflict into religious life. Among other things, it reflected the class and ethnic tension that characterized American society, including immigrant Catholicism, in the years before 1917.

This paper represents a preliminary examination of some of the causes, manifestations, and consequences of ethnic, cultural, and/or class conflict—or reasons for the absence thereof—within Catholic religious orders of women during the period prior to World War I. Drawing upon extensive research in archival and published sources for over 100 American congregations, it will delineate some of the principal factors that led various communities to precipitate, exacerbate, or avoid such tensions and, through more detailed discussion of specific cases, will suggest reasons for the sorts of resolutions, or outcomes, that various situations produced.

Problems of culture, ethnicity, and class in American convents had roots in Europe, where religious life for women had existed for centuries before it was transplanted to the New World. Thus, at least some background, however rudimentary, is essential if one is to understand what would occur in the United States, where the likelihood of conflict would be enhanced by the very different circumstances that prevailed on this side of the Atlantic.

Ethno-cultural tensions essentially can be traced to a combination of European geopolitical circumstances and localized patterns of Catholic piety that together produced profound differences among various linguistic and cultural groups. Stated simply, Old World peoples brought their traditions, religious practices, and languages, as well as their antipathies, with them when they emigrated to America. And because real or perceived threats to national or ethno-cultural survival were often prime reasons behind decisions to leave their homelands in the first place, the desire to preserve distinctive identities persisted long after settlement in the United States. Here, however, traditionally antagonistic (or merely dissimilar) groups frequently found themselves forced to live and worship in closer proximity than had ever been the case in Europe. The result was


5. Material contained here eventually will be incorporated into a book-length study, now in progress, entitled The Yoke of Grace: American Nuns and Social Change, 1808–1917, to be published by Oxford University Press.

likely to be conflict, even when that proximity occurred within the theoretically universal embrace of the “Catholic” church—or within the presumably even more charitable bonds of religious sisterhoods.

The presence of diverse ethno-cultural groups, and unavoidable proximity among them, was just one of many phenomena that would challenge Catholics—including sisters—as they attempted to adapt to the American environment. Another was that which many 19th-century European observers found most remarkable about the United States: what French economist Michael Chevalier called a society “infused” with an egalitarian spirit that was “essentially and radically a democracy.” All evidence of actual inequality aside, it is fair to say that most Americans, including immigrant Catholics, believed, along with Massachusetts reformer Robert Rantoul, Jr., that “We [Americans] have a right to all the RESPECT which we deserve, and . . . the cause of respect is the conduct and the character, and not any adventitious circumstances of birth, fortune, or situation. . . . We have a right to advancement in life.”7 In such a context, stratification within convents, particularly the sharp juridical lines of demarcation between Choir and Lay status, clearly appeared anachronistic.

These class distinctions must be appreciated as integral parts of the traditional structure of religious congregations, whose fundamental design had remained relatively unaltered for over 1000 years. As late as the 19th century, apostolic communities of women—that is, those whose members left their convents to engage in teaching, nursing, or other active works—were still a Catholic novelty and considered something of an aberration; until 1900, when Pope Leo XIII extended formal recognition to active orders in Conditae a Christo, the “norm” for women continued to be the enclosed contemplative cloister.

Within such monasteries, status distinctions were legally enforced through the division of members into two, three, or even more classes. At the top were Choir nuns—those who could afford to bring a dowry with them and who could read the Latin necessary for recitation of the Divine Office (Liturgy of the Hours). As an explicitly-designated elite, only they could vote or hold office within their congregations. Under them were the Lay sisters, traditionally drawn from the peasantry; in medieval times they typically were the servants of well-to-do women who joined the Choir. These women did not have to bring dowries and usually were illiterate; they did the domestic and other physical labor of the convent and prayed litanies and rosaries instead of the Office. Finally there often were Externs, who lived outside the enclosure, came in contact with “the world,” and conducted the community’s business and commercial affairs.

Unlike Lay sisters, their employment required at least rudimentary refinement and literacy; like them, however, they generally could not hold office. Each class wore a distinctive habit, ate and recreated separately, and functioned within clearly-defined patterns of obedience and deference to one another.

Because members of active orders were not strictly confined to their cloisters, the Extern category soon proved unnecessary and fell into disuse among them. But the Choir-Lay dichotomy proved much more persistent; actually, it was not universally abolished until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

Thus, as Catholicism and its religious orders strove throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries to become rooted in their new American setting, they would have to do so amid conditions that almost always induced tensions along class and cultural lines. As we shall see, some congregations suffered profoundly, with results that ranged from uneasy truces to deliberate ethnic separatism to schism within communities that were unable to resolve their internal differences. Yet others were able to adjust with relative ease and success: incorporating members from a large spectrum of backgrounds, eliminating both de jure and de facto distinctions of rank, and serving diverse elements of the U.S. population, Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

What factors account for those vastly different experiences? Why were some orders able to adapt to the demands of a pluralistic society that repudiated formal class distinctions, while others defiantly persisted in swimming against the tide? Examination of certain general developmental trends, as well as more detailed attention to a few particular cases, should help to provide answers to these questions. Most of the discussion will consist of separate looks at class, culture, and ethnicity, although the final example will be of an instance where tensions were compounded by the explicit use of national origin as the basis for status differentiation. As this paper represents part of a larger work in progress, it should not be regarded as either complete or definitive. But the variety of experiences included here should at least suggest the range and complexity of the issues that nuns had to face in 19th- and 20th-century America.

Stratification and Class

Class distinctions were issues in both intra-community and cross-community contexts. And while most of what follows will concentrate on the former, a full appreciation of this topic requires at least some mention of the latter as well. To put it bluntly, certain congregations traditionally have been regarded as more “prestigious” or “important” than others, 8. A fourth possible class, most common among Benedictines, was Oblates, frequently older women or widows who did not take the strict vows that bound the others but who lived temporarily or permanently among the sisters.
either nationally or within a specific locale. This fact was brought home bluntly to Katharine Drexel of Philadelphia, heir to the fortune of a father who had been J. P. Morgan’s partner, when she decided in the 1880s that she had a vocation to religious life. Initially attracted to the Franciscans by their emphasis on radical poverty, she was dissuaded by her spiritual director from joining the foundation of that order that had its Motherhouse in nearby Glen Riddle because, as he put it, “they are not ladies. There is not one of them that would have a much stronger claim to be considered such than your maid Johanna. . . . For a lady of your antecedents, position, and habits, to be able to pass her whole life in the most intimate daily and hourly intercourse with women of the peasant class would require a fortitude that is vouchsafed to few indeed.” Eventually Drexel founded her own congregation, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People; significantly, it was one of the few communities founded in the United States that contained both Choir and Lay members.

Perceptions of orders’ relative status were grounded in more than prejudice, of course, particularly if one measures prestige in material terms. Groups that required substantial dowries, for instance, rendered themselves accessible principally to the affluent. Similarly, since most communities attracted members primarily from those they served, teaching sisters who concentrated their efforts in private academies rather than parochial schools were more likely to attract young women from families capable of paying higher tuition. Indeed, the widely-recognized relationship between academies and “quality” vocations influenced even those orders that ministered chiefly to the poor. Thus, almost all of the numerous foundations of the Sisters of Mercy tried to maintain at least one “select” school as a means of attracting “suitable” candidates. In contrast, older members of the Adrian (Michigan) Dominicans, a congregation long restricted by their bishop to teaching in relatively poor

9. Most notable in this regard are the so-called “Madames” of the Sacred Heart, whose official title is the “Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.” Their popular designation may be traceable to the fact that, at the time of the order’s founding in Revolutionary France, it was dangerous to use the titles “Sister” or “Mother” (Choir sisters in this order were formally called by the latter), so “Madame” was used instead (this is one of the few groups whose members did not take new names and whose Choir nuns were known by their last, rather than first, names). However, its retention in popular and even quasi-official usage up to the present owes at least as much to the fact that their academies were among the most select in the United States, patronized by America’s “best” Catholic families (such as the Kennedys, who sent their sons to Protestant prep schools — and then Harvard).

10. Bishop James O’Connor (of Omaha, formerly a priest of Philadelphia) to Katharine Drexel, 21 December 1888, Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament Archives, Philadelphia. O’Connor went on to say: “It is recognized by the church in every age, and hence her prudence in establishing orders in which the cultured and the refined, as well as the coarse and the unlettered will find congenial association. The order of grace, should, as far as possible harmonize with the order of nature. . . . no one should do life-long violence to her natural or acquired instincts and habits.” In an earlier letter (30 November 1888), he suggested that she consider the Religious of the Sacred Heart (see note above), the Sisters of Mercy, or the Brown County (Ohio) Ursulines.

11. The best single source of information on respective dowry sizes is H. Bohn, Vocations: Conditions of Admission, Etc., into the Convents . . . According to Authentical Information and the Latest Regulations (London and New York, 1912); although this is a British compendium, it was also available in the United States and contains entries on dozens of orders that had foundations here.

rural parishes and prohibited by him from opening an academy at their Motherhouse, still express resentment at having been “blue-lined” for so many of their early years—a reference derived from the azure habits of the more highly-favored Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters. Even the black communities, of which there were only two prior to 1917, were not exempt from these sorts of comparisons. As late as the 1940s, the current archivist and historian of New Orleans’ Holy Family Sisters remembers that well-meaning relatives urged her to join the “higher class” Oblate Sisters of Providence instead—although that would have meant her having to move away from them to Baltimore.

But while differentiation among communities might affect public opinion, and perhaps collective self-esteem, the impact of status distinction within what were supposed to be single religious “families” was unquestionably more intense for a larger number of nuns—and especially to those of “inferior” rank. Most of what follows in this section, therefore, will be concerned with such divisions, particularly as they were manifest in congregations that maintained formal classes of Choir and Lay members. For it was in such orders that the tensions were most obvious, and in which they were likely to become most aggravated.

Nonetheless, it must be stated here, if only in passing, that internal dissension and stress were by no means confined solely to those sisterhoods. Thousands of nuns in communities that rejected juridical ranks nonetheless spent their entire lives as “House” or “Domestic” sisters—perpetually denied the training or opportunity that would have enabled them to teach, nurse, etc.; routinely overlooked when decision-making roles were elected or assigned; and actually, if not officially, relegated to what in other orders would have been designated as Lay. In addition, thousands of other women, who may have taught and nursed, remained permanently outside the “inner circles” that held the real power in their communities—a situation that could foster serious resentments. Consider, for instance, the comments of Sister Aegidia Seibert of the Dubuque Franciscans, who took advantage of a questionnaire (soliciting feedback on proposed changes in the congregation’s constitution) to air some obviously long-held complaints:

There is something wrong in our elections. . . . some few domineer the elections by their influence. Experience has taught us that the will of a few domineer this community. Cir-

13. Interview with Sister Mary Philip Ryan, historian of the Adrian Dominicans (who entered the community in 1920), May 1986; see also Ryan, Amid the Alien Corn (Saint Charles, Ill., 1967).
15. Here the word “inferior” is used intentionally. It actually was applied in many constitutions and customaries to those members of an order who did not hold office (officeholders were called “Superiors”). See also The Little Book of Superiors; by the Author of “Golden Sands,” trans. from the French by Miss Ella McMahon (New York, 1889).
16. Explicit documentation of this assertion is difficult to do with brevity. I draw this conclusion primarily from two sources: repeated references to and reminders of the existence of de facto distinctions in dozens of interviews and informal conversations (the most recent of which occurred when I told several sisters from a variety of congregations that I was about to write this paper) and the Necrologies (obituary records) I read in at least three dozen communities’ archives. In addition, see the case of the School Sisters of St. Francis, below.
circulars have been sent out before, remarks made and ignored. I also heard that all revisions that were made were to give superiors more liberty, all for themselves & none for inferiors. . . . I am opposed to what I might call an autocratic circle. Those in office shove each other from one office to another & keep that circle going. This creates an autocratic rule & makes life hard continually for those whom they dislike. The Archbishop said some rulers are detrimental spiritually & financially & still we have the same old regime under another name.\footnote{17}

If pain of this sort could be induced informally, the potential for it was considerably greater in communities that had explicitly-defined, formal classes of sisters. A 1979 interview with Sister Anna Smyth of the Columbus (Ohio) Dominicans gives tangible evidence of the longevity of such scars. That congregation (of American origin) admitted Lay sisters for only a short time at the suggestion of a particular bishop, abolishing separate categories in 1924. Still, at the end of her life, the elderly Sister Anna could talk of little besides the disdain with which she remembered having been treated, even after her "elevation" to equality.\footnote{18} And memories from the Choir side can be similarly vital. Thus, Sister Gertrude Wemhoff, now Prioress of the Cottonwood (Iowa) Benedictines, which did not eliminate the Choir-Lay dichotomy until the 1960s, recalled in 1984 how "awkward" she felt when, as a novice, she "ranked" ahead of even the oldest of the Lay sisters in her order.\footnote{19}

Most communities in the United States that included two classes of sisters had their origins in Europe, where their evolutionary connection to the traditional cloister was more direct and where the existence of formal ranks in secular society made similar patterns among religious seem less incongruous. But once in America, the sisters quickly became aware of how strange the custom seemed to this country’s inhabitants. Take, for instance, the experience of the New Orleans Dominicans, who came from Ireland in 1860. As an anonymous annalist recorded: “With the coming of choir and lay Sisters from Cabra, in 1860, the distinctive habit of Dominican Lay Sisters—white habit and black scapular—had been replaced, except on great feasts, by an all black habit. Perhaps this was considered more practical attire for housework, yet strangers visiting the convents were puzzled at seeing the Sisters in the same community dressed in utterly different habits, and mortifying questions ensued.”\footnote{20}

Some communities tried to respond with compromise, retaining the

\footnote{17. Comments made in 1921 by Sr. M. Aegidia Seibert (italics in the original), stored in “Comments on Con­stitutional Revisions” file, Archives of the Franciscan Sisters of Dubuque, Iowa. Sr. Aegidia was born in 1863, entered the Franciscans in 1879 (four years after they came to the United States), and died in 1947. The archivist at the time of my visit (June 1986), Sr. Rita Clare Becker, who knew Sr. Aegidia personally, described her as a “crusty old lady, but down-to-earth and full of faith.”}

\footnote{18. Interview with Sister Anna Smyth, conducted by Sister Mary McCaffrey, 26 October 1979; tape and transcript in the archives of the Dominican Sisters of St. Mary of the Springs, Columbus, Ohio. What is most striking about this interview is that, regardless of the questions she was asked, Sister Anna wanted to talk of nothing except her memories of discrimination. As the archivist, Sister Mary, said to me, “I guess this is what she felt it was most important for history to remember about her . . . .”}

\footnote{19. Interview with Sister Gertrude Wemhoff, May 1984.}

\footnote{20. Unpublished handwritten annals (with typescript copy in a folder labeled “Lay Sisters”), archives of the Dominican Sisters, New Orleans, La.}
separate categories but eliminating the distinctive habit that called attention to it.21 This did not always work, however. Members of orders that were subject to (male) Master Generals in Europe found that these superiors had the power to prohibit such reforms. So, after repeated petitions that her order be allowed to change, Mother Pia Backes, founder of the Mission San José (California) Dominicans, noted in her diary in March 1899 that she had received "a letter from Father Dominicus Scheer, O.P., in which he says decidedly that the Lay Sisters are to wear a black scapular and a white veil." While she temporarily accepted this as "God's will," her frustrations did not disappear; two months later she wrote: "We are passing through bitter dark hours because of our correspondence with European prelates. Why can't we be under the Archbishop? Why do I refer matters to distant priests...?"22

Even more importantly, cosmetic change did not satisfy the grievances of Lay sisters themselves who initiated long and aggressive campaigns in several communities to put an end to separate ranks. Thus, Lay members of the Mission San José Dominicans agitated for over thirty years, beginning in 1890, as Mother Pia repeatedly recorded in her diary; the final integration of ranks did not occur until 1922.23 And consider this petition of 1897 from two members of another Dominican congregation to their bishop, reproduced here, unaltered, in its entirety:

I beg leave of your Grace's kind consideration in wishing each Poor Lay Sister to be happy in the change of the Constitutions. Some of us are working for the last thirty years under very humiliatings from morning until night but we were looking to God for the reward. So now as the new change takes place I humbley ask your Grace's kind assistance in what you think fair I am not asking anything out of the way. My humble Pettions are a few Words in the Chapter for Lay Sisters is changed that we may work as Servant of Gods not as Worldlings [worldlings] and Put on the habit of the Ordor in the copy of the afore said it Say our dress is black vail and Scaplar habit same as the others in Cabra the changed the habit for the work in this country it is different the made a may a change with us which is in no other comunity Such as Short Prayers Choir Sisters not Speaking to us not Seeing your Grace's when you Visit except you asked for us and many other things which causes great uncarablens[sic] in the couminity the will be so far apart choir Sister only as servants the Priross nor Sub Priross to have nothing to do with him only a Misters [Mistress?]. I hope I have not gone to far on your Grace's kindness nor out steped my humble Position if the Mothers had Spoken to me I and say wht the were going to do but no the Sub Priross never Spoke to any of the Lay Sisters since the did not agree some of them are allreaedy sick of heart and the are a fraud to say out what the want and this is the only thing the few Prayers the few words chaned about Servants and the habit of the order. So we did not acept of the change only on the conditions I have named the few word changed and the habit of the order and the few Prayers and all is willing to labour and obey in all things els untill death I humby ask your Grace's not to say I wrote this little note when you come to the Convent it would have been changed.

21. So, for instance, by the time Sister Anna (above) joined her order in the late 1910s, it had repealed the regulation that required Lay sisters to wear a black scapular and white veil (Dominican Choir nuns wore the reverse). As she put it, regardless of how bitter she felt, "the ones before us would feel worse because they had to wear the black scapular" [interview]. Similarly, the New Orleans Dominicans abolished the distinction in garb at the time of the Golden Jubilee of their arrival in America (1910) [annals].
cause great disturbance the told us when we did nto agree at once only for your Grace's kind­
ness we would not be accaquanted about the matter at all unill it would have been Settled
and then we would all be unhappy for life. 24

As these episodes suggest, adaptation to American conditions—in this case, repugnance toward different classes of members—was particularly compicated for those nuns who retained official ties to congregational superiors in the Old World. These were not always male; equally intense pressures could be brought to bear by distantly situated Mothers General. Communities such as the (originally French and Belgian) Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and the Bavarian School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSNDs) endured repeated difficulties in trying to persuade the European women who led their communities that conditions were simply different in the New World. 25 In both these cases, as we shall see below, adjustments eventually were agreed to that permitted those in the United States to remain comfortably a part of their international orders. But ultimate success did not occur without struggle. Mother Caroline Friess, for instance, first Commissary General for the SSNDs in America, worked ceaselessly to obtain each concession from those in Germany. The response from there was not infrequently critical; on one occasion the Americans were warned by Mother General Theresa Gerhardinger that they “should work zealously and in the spirit of the Church, etc., etc., and not follow the American freethinking,” and on another that “a vicariate [semiautonomous government] in America would destroy the unity of the Congregation, and would sooner or later bring on the danger of a schism.” 26 Nonetheless, several modifications in SSND practices were secured: a later hour for rising in the morning (5 a.m. instead of 4:30), permission to teach boys, modification of cloister restrictions, etc. But these did not include the question of Lay sisters; not until 1950, over half a century after Mother Caroline's death (but before a similar change was extended to Europe), was a special appendix added to their Constitution, which read: “Equal Status of Teachers and House Sisters: In the North American Provinces all Sisters have equal privileges.” 27

In contrast, examples from two other groups—European in origin but autonomous in government after establishment in the United States—

24. Petition dated 6 May 1897, original in the archives of the archdiocese in which the Motherhouse is located; copy in the Motherhouse archives. In accord with the wishes of the community concerned, I have agreed to keep its identity anonymous. It should be noted, however, that the change in its Constitution that finally abolished separate ranks was not approved by Rome until 1924.

25. For the Notre Dame de Namur community, see especially Sr. Angela Elizabeth Keenan, *Three Against the Wind: The Founding of Trinity College, Washington, D.C.* (Westminster, Md., 1973); Sr. Helen Louise Nugent, *Sister Louise, American Foundress* (New York, 1931), and *Sister Julia* [first American-born Provincial Superior] (New York, 1928). The first chronicles the difficulties undergone by Sr. Julia in obtaining permission from Europe to found their college; the others detail the ongoing problems which ensued from a provision in their Constitution that prohibited the sisters from teaching boys.


27. Note pasted in the back of a copy of the 1925 Constitution but cited as a decision of the congregation's 1950 General Chapter, SSND provincial archives, Milwaukee, Wis.
suggest that the American setting provided some nuns with the opportunity to alter what they regarded as inappropriate classifications or traditions. In one case only the status of individual sisters was at stake. Thus two siblings named O'Brien, who entered the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland in the Lay ranks, were soon discovered to have “potentialities for leadership.” Consequently, at the time they were selected to pioneer new foundations—Sister Margaret O’Brien became one of the first six Mercies to arrive in the United States, while Ellen was chosen soon after—they were elevated to the Choir. In the case of the Sisters of St. Joseph, however, practices of entire communities were changed. When one of the original members of the order to come to this country (to St. Louis, in 1836), Sister Delphine Fontbonne, was later missioned to found a Motherhouse in Toronto, she was able to prevent the division of that group into classes. 

And in 1889, when another band of Josephites went to Nazareth, Michigan, from the Watertown, New York, foundation, they immediately and permanently put an end to the Choir-Lay distinction that had existed in their former home. The bishop endorsed the decision; as he said on a 10 October 1889 visit to their convent: “I would earnestly desire that from this date all Sisters of the Order of St. Joseph in the Diocese of Detroit should be recognized on perfect equality. The present lay Sisters will be regarded on equality from date.”

Yet autonomy from European communities alone did not necessarily guarantee that a community would be able to avoid the tensions that stratification could induce. In fact, the two most traumatic class-based crises I have discovered took place in orders that were founded in the United States. One, which affected the School Sisters of St. Francis, will be discussed later, as the precipitant there was as much a matter of ethnicity as of class. The other occurred within the community that is known today as the Sparkill (New York) Dominicans, after the location of its

28. Neither the Sisters of Mercy (originally Irish) or the Sisters of St. Joseph (originally French) had a central Motherhouse or generalate; although all communities in each order followed essentially the same rule, each was juridically independent—and therefore free to amend its particular constitution as it saw fit.


30. “Mother Delphine was very much opposed to giving [the Lay habit]. . . . On one occasion when the subject was mentioned to her. . . , she was much annoyed and declared her opposition and dislike of the idea so strongly that the matter was dropped.” After her death, however, it should be noted that Lay sisters were admitted in Toronto. Typescript history of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto (anonymous and undated), archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Louis (Mo) Province.


32. The Houston, Texas, Dominicans, for instance, a strictly American foundation with only the flimsiest of “spiritual” ties to their Order’s European Master General, nonetheless struggled with the Lay sister question for decades after they split off from the Columbus congregation in 1884. [Columbus, meanwhile, had been founded from St. Catharine’s, Kentucky, and so it, too, was American. But the Houston break-off occurred during the interlude when, because of temporary clerical influence, Lay sisters were being admitted in Ohio.] Few native-born women could be persuaded to join the inferior rank, however, and their membership registry reveals a much higher defection rate among Lay sisters than there was from the Choir. See the Book of Receptions, Houston Dominican archives, for birthplaces and persistence of members; the successive Constitutions, also in the archives, chronicle juridical attempts to resolve the struggle. See also Sr. Sheila Hackett, Dominican Women in Texas: From Ohio to Galveston and Beyond (Houston, 1986), pp. 200-08.
present Motherhouse, but which at the time had its headquarters in Manhattan.

Alice Mary Thorpe (Mother Catherine Antoninus) was a British convert who—accompanied by a similarly inclined sibling—left her homeland at the age of twenty-eight because her parents opposed her becoming a nun. Four years after arriving in America, in 1876, she founded her own congregation. Almost from the beginning, however, her health was poor and, encouraged by her community, she made a trip to Lourdes in 1878. On her way home she stayed for a while with the Dominican Sisters at Stone, England; there, she observed a way of life and organization that included the Choir-Lay rankings and obtained copies of their Constitution and Customary which she brought back with her to New York. A few months later, in March 1879, Mother Catherine Antoninus died, and her sister Lucy, now Sister Mary Agnes, was elected to replace the foundress.

Within a year the new leader’s unsuitability for office was evident to all, including Mary Agnes herself. So a new election was called, on 9 April 1880, presided over by the archdiocesan Vicar-General, Monsignor William Quinn.33 After several inconclusive ballots, the frustrated Quinn asked the whereabouts of Sister Dominic (Margaret Dowling). She, apparently, was in the kitchen; when she arrived in the meeting room, the Vicar-General promptly appointed her to a three-year term as Prioress (through repeated re-elections she would remain in office until 1896). That action precipitated the crisis—because Sister (now Mother) Dominic was a Lay sister. In response to her selection, fourteen of the twenty-two members of the community left, including Mother Mary Agnes.

A fire in 1899 destroyed almost all early records for the order so no concrete evidence exists to identify the individual status of all twenty-two of those women.34 Nonetheless, consensual oral tradition in Sparkill has it that most of those who left were of the Choir—and that their departure was at least partially motivated by the fact that an “inferior” had been chosen to govern. Meanwhile, since nearly all the remaining eight were still alive at the time of the fire, after which records were partially reconstructed, it is virtually certain that all of them had been Lay. They were, moreover, Irish or American-born and unimpressed by the customs imposed by their British convert-founder under the influence of Stone, England. Thus while they continued to venerate her memory, they hardly

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33. Until the reforms of Vatican II, virtually all elections among nuns had to be conducted in the presence of the Bishop or his representative; these clerics were also authorized to appoint superiors in case the sisters’ choice was in any way deemed unsatisfactory or in cases where a majority of voting members could not agree. Stephen Quinn, Relations of the Local Ordinary [Bishop] to Religious of Diocesan Approval: A Historical Synopsis and a Commentary, Catholic Univ. of America Canon Law Studies No. 283 (Washington, 1949); Benjamin F. Farrell, The Rights and Duties of the Local Ordinary Regarding Congregations of Women Religious of Pontifical Approval, Catholic Univ. of America Canon Law Studies No. 128 (Washington, 1941).
34. Based upon my examination of membership records in dozens of communities, however, it is by no means certain that—even without a fire—this information would have been kept. Biographical data for 19th-century nuns generally is often quite sketchy; the problem is compounded by the fact that about half the orders I visited seem to have deliberately weeded out all records for women who left before death.
felt compelled to retain her structure; under Mother Dominic’s leadership, the former “inferiors” immediately and permanently abolished all juridical distinctions in rank.\(^{35}\)

From the material presented thus far, it should be obvious that formal class distinctions were widespread in 19th- and early 20th-century American convents—and that the dissatisfaction they inspired proved extremely troublesome to the orders’ members. It is not surprising, then, that over time many congregations found it more and more difficult to attract women to serve in the lay ranks; sick of the struggle, most allowed the designation to fall into disuse long before it was officially abolished. Meanwhile, those determined to preserve it increasingly found themselves forced to recruit outside the United States.\(^{36}\) As Abbot Innocent Wolf explained to the Benedictine Abbot Primate in 1910, “The institution of lay sisters dies out in America when they cannot get foreign girls any more.”\(^{37}\)

**Culture and Ethnicity**

Taken together, cross-cultural differences and ethnicity were, if anything, the cause of more—and more persistent—tension than formal or informal stratification into ranks. In new manifestations it remains a problem today as congregations struggle with the cultural challenges presented to them by Black, Hispanic, and Asian candidates.\(^{38}\) But old prejudices die hard as well. In a 1985 essay a Brooklyn Sister of Mercy recalled the awkwardness she had felt when she entered in 1952 as only the fourth Italian-American member of her branch of this overwhelmingly Irish order. And the Vocation Director of the Buffalo Province of the Felicians, a traditionally Polish group, in describing the reaction in 1987 of her community to the application of an “alien” (Irish-American) woman, declared: “It bothered them less that she was divorced than that she wasn’t Polish!”\(^{39}\)

\(^{35}\) Events of the crisis itself are chronicled in Sr. M. Loyola Reynolds, Fifty Years in Retrospect: Which relates the progress made by the Dominican Congregation of Our Lady of the Rosary whose Motherhouse is at Sparkill, New York (Sparkill, 1926), pp. 34–37; and Sr. Mary Lucille Collins, The Vision Is Tremendous (Sparkill, 1975), pp. 53–58. Details on earlier events are in preceding pages of these books.

\(^{36}\) Thus until the Vatican abolished the Choir-Lay distinction in the 1960s, congregations like the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary either established candidatures or took recruiting trips to other countries—generally to Ireland at first and later to Latin America—in order to find women willing to serve as Lay sisters. Profession Records in Archives of the Sacred Heart, Grand Coteau, La.; interviews with Mother Odeide Mouton, RSCJ, Grand Coteau, February 1986, and Ms. Joan Ross, former member of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, August 1984.


\(^{38}\) Both the 1986 convocation of the National Sisters Vocation Conference and the 1988 meeting of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (composed of superiors of congregations), for instance, had cultural racism and pluralism as their principal themes. In addition, articles on these subjects appear very frequently in the official publications of such organizations, as well as in periodicals aimed at nuns, such as Sisters Today.

Contemporary stories may sound anachronistic, if not humorous. But virtually every order now in the United States had to confront culture and ethnicity directly at some point in its history—and many did so continuously. These were, of course, dilemmas that all Catholics (and all immigrants) here had to deal with: the validity, or viability, of cultural distinctiveness in a pluralistic society (and church) that had its own ambivalence about assimilation.\(^40\) Was ethnic identity an obstacle to life in this country—or a basis for survival? How did persons want to be defined: as Catholic, or American, or German, Polish, Irish, Lithuanian, etc.—or as some hyphenated combination of these? What was the relationship to be between immigrants and those they left behind? Almost every conceivable response was demonstrated by one or another women’s religious order; a sampling of examples will illustrate the kinds of problems, and resolutions, that ensued. The discussion that follows does not pretend to be exhaustive. Rather, it is intended to indicate most of the principal ways that religious orders responded to internal and external cultural and ethnic pressures.

To begin with, the very process of trying to respond to American circumstances brought into play issues of culture—and often had very serious consequences. Officials of many congregations headquartered in Europe found it hard to understand why missionaries they sent to the New World had difficulty adhering rigidly to long-established norms and practices. Nuns here who tried to introduce changes that would allow them to serve people more effectively were likely to find themselves accused of “laxity,” “worldliness,” “betrayal of the community’s spirit (or the founder’s vision),” etc. Given the slowness of transatlantic communication, pioneer sisters became frustrated as they awaited permissions from distant superiors; over time many began to act without waiting for approval—or acted even when approval was denied.

In most cases orders were able to survive these tensions—albeit usually at the cost of extensive suffering in the meanwhile. Correspondence between American Vicar Mother Caroline Friess and Bavarian Mother General Theresa Gerhardinger of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, for instance, reveals repeated disputes and misunderstandings over maintaining cloister, the teaching of boys, alterations in the daily schedule, and so on. Only intense mutual desire for unity—and the rare interpersonal skills—of both these women enabled the SSNDs to stay together; “North American exceptions” to their Constitutions were agreed to with ever-increasing frequency, but union prevailed.\(^41\)

For other communities, difficulties—ranging from the unsuitability of

\(^{40}\) Again see, among others, sources cited in note 6, above.

\(^{41}\) Mother Mary Caroline Friess: Correspondence and Other Documents, ed. Barbara Brumleve and Marjorie Myers (SSND Heritage Research, privately published, 1985); Letters of Mother M. Theresa Gerhardinger, School Sister of Notre Dame, ed. Sr. Mary Hester Valentine (Winona, Minn., 1977), 111 (“The North American Foundation”); and various Constitutions and General Chapter Decisions in the SSND Archives, Milwaukee.
a religious habit to a new climate to the necessity for teaching boys, engaging in unprecedented ministries, abandoning certain penitential practices or parochial customs, and opening a local novitiate—were resolved when "Mothers" from Europe, or their delegates, crossed the ocean and observed for themselves why demands for such changes were far from frivolous. Thus, after years of misunderstanding, visits by General Superiors of communities like the Franciscan Sisters of Penance and Christian Charity, the Sisters of the Divine Savior, the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor, the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, and the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother resulted in reassurances that those in America were indeed "faithful daughters," whose judgment on matters within their purview not only could be trusted but had to be. In each of these cases, and many similar ones, New World sisters found it possible to stay within their international orders.

Yet others could not resolve their differences—and chose autonomy rather than argument. The Sisters of the Holy Cross, who came to Indiana from France in 1843, quickly and enthusiastically introduced a variety of changes that by the 1860s resulted in the dissolution of bonds with their Motherhouse in LeMans. Within six years, for instance, all of their local records were being kept in English, most of the new members they attracted were Irish or American-born, and their involvement in teaching and nursing contrasted sharply with the domestic service to priests for which they had originally been founded. Continual calls for "fidelity" from the Motherhouse in LeMans were regarded as increasingly irrelevant to circumstances in the Midwest. So it should come as no surprise that just twenty years after arrival of the first missionaries, the women at Notre Dame established themselves as an independent foundation.43

The most revealing example of intercultural conflict, however, exhibits a peculiar irony and represents a reversal of the more typical pattern reflected in the case of Holy Cross. For it involved the campaign of some


43. For the Holy Cross story, see Kuhn, "Americanization"; Anna Shannon McAllister, Flame in the Wilderness: Life and letters of Mother Angela Gillespie, C.S.C (Notre Dame, Ind., 1944); [anon.] A Story of Fifty Years: From the Annals of the Sisters of the Holy Cross (Notre Dame, 1905); and Sr. M. Eleanore, On the King's Highway: A History of the Sisters of the Holy Cross (Notre Dame, 1931). This branch became independent of France in the 1860s, in contrast to that established in New Orleans just a few years after that in Indiana— which remained French-speaking through the 19th century and which today is still part of the original international congregation. See various unpublished chronicles and other records in the Mariavites of Holy Cross Archives, New Orleans; see also Circular Letters of Mother Mary of the Seven Dolors: First Superior General of The Mariavites of Holy Cross, trans. Sr. Marie Henri Lutton, RSHM (privately printed, 1977); and Circular Letters of The Very Reverend Basil Anthony Mary Moreau, Founder of the Religious of Holy Cross, trans. Edward L. Heston, CSC (privately printed, 1944), Vol. II.
European-born clerics to unite a congregation founded in the United States (Elizabeth Seton's Sisters of Charity, begun in 1809 in Emmitsburg, Maryland) to a well-established European one (the French Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul). Although the Constitution of the American group was based upon that of the French Daughters, Mother Seton had felt it necessary to introduce several modifications; these included allowing her sisters to take care of male orphans and teach boys over the age of six and (in the absence of wealthy benefactors in this country) permitting the acceptance of money in return for certain ministrations. Meanwhile, a number of French priests who operated a seminary in Emmitsburg and served as spiritual directors for the sisters opposed these changes; from the outset, they wanted the Maryland community to be joined to the French Daughters—something that Mother Seton clearly opposed. Upon the founder's death in 1821, however, the clerics intensified their efforts. And after three decades, without the sisters' involvement (or even knowledge), they succeeded; in 1850 the Emmitsburg Charities became part of the French Daughters and remain so to this day.44

But many of the women whose lives would be affected by this development refused to go along with it—explicitly because it would force them to give up their distinctly American spirit and forms of ministry. By 1846, as rumors of the plan became known, the majority of those working in New York City decided to declare themselves independent; two years after the union similar action was taken by those stationed in Cincinnati. And the same result occurred in Bardstown, Kentucky, where one of the original French clerics from Emmitsburg was now a bishop; he had founded the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth there in 1812, using Mother Seton's Constitution but never giving up the plan of eventual merger with the order in France. In repudiating such an amalgamation, every one of the Kentucky sisters signed a letter written by their superior, Mother Catherine Spalding, expressing sentiments which could just as easily have come from either of the other two independent groups: "It was much better for both our happiness and spiritual good that we should exist always as . . . a separate and distinct body. . . . Surely religion in Kentucky can more extensively and effectually be served by us as we now exist." By refusing to adopt European norms and restrictions, all three congregations showed appreciation of the distinctive character and needs of American Catholicism and were able to respond more appropriately to them.45

44. As evidence of the orchestration of this merger by the clerics and of the sisters' lack of involvement in or awareness of what was going on, see Bishop Joseph Rosati of St. Louis, Mo. (writing from Paris), to Fr. John Timon, Emmitsburg, 8 July 1840 and 9 July 1842; Fr. L. R. Deluel, document presented to Fathers of the Sixth Provincial Council of Baltimore, May 1846; and "CIRCULAR" by L. R. Deluel to the "Sisters of the Baltimore Province" [i.e., Emmitsburg], 7 September 1849, all in the Daughters of Charity Archives, Emmitsburg, Md.

45. Mother Spalding's letter (undated) is in the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Archives, Nazareth, Ky.; see also Ellin M. Kelly, "The Rule of St. Vincent DePaul and American Women's Religious Communities," paper presented at the November 1982 Cushwa Center Conference on Perspectives on American Catholic life. This conference was sponsored by the Center for Catholic Studies, Indiana University.
In any event, given the struggles that so many transplanted communities experienced, one can appreciate the decisions of some American bishops to organize communities without ties to the Old World, even if they did so with women who were brought over from Europe. Thus Bishop C. M. Dubuis, in France seeking workers for his new diocese of Galveston, persuaded three women to secure their initial training in a convent there, but with the express intention of organizing themselves into a new body once they got to the United States. Two indigenous communities, the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word of Houston (1866) and of San Antonio (1869), resulted from this initiative. Similarly, the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine came into existence when two French Augustinian nuns and two candidates for religious life arrived in the Diocese of Cleveland in 1850 to establish a new order; in a matter of months, however, the two professed nuns returned to Europe and, with the help of an American Ursuline novice who had been persuaded to join (and lead) them, the two candidates became the first members of what from the outset was an independent congregation.46

All of the cases above involved communities that either acquired or sought to preserve an “American” identity. When it came to ethnicity, however, the question was somewhat different and concerned the extent to which various groups of nuns should or could retain the cultural distinctiveness of a particular European heritage. Such a heritage, of course, embraced many dimensions, including customs, pious practices and spirituality, behavioral norms, etc. None is inconsequential,47 but for most late 19th- and early 20th-century Catholics in America, language proved to be the most durable and significant sign of ethnicity—and the focal point around which most ethnically-rooted conflict occurred. The main reason for this is simple. Communicants demanded pastors and other ministers who could converse with and preach to them in their native


47. The significance of issues other than language is suggested by the history of the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity, founded in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, in 1869. All of its original members were of German heritage and, at the outset, defined themselves as a German community. Still, most had been born in the United States—a fact that they came to realize was very significant when a small community of Franciscans from Gieboldehousen, Germany, sought sanctuary with them from Bismarck’s Kulturkampf in 1875. Although the two congregations were officially amalgamated that year, tensions between them persisted for decades and were not fully resolved until the deaths of most of the members who had been alive at the time of the merger; clearly other factors took precedence over that of language. See Sr. M. Teresita Kittell, Refining His Silver: Pioneer Days of the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity of Manitowoc, Wisconsin, 1866-1911 (Manitowoc, 1979), chap. 6 (“Cultures in Conflict”).
tongues; as concentrations of non-English speakers settled in particular locales, their top religious priority was to obtain the services of clerics with appropriate fluency. Once that need was met, the place inevitably attracted other residents who sought similar spiritual comfort. Thus, long before the designation of so-called “national” parishes became an explicit policy of the American bishops, most areas with heterogeneous populations already had them on a *de facto* basis.

And because of the high priority given to education by American Catholics from the mid-19th century onward, language became a principal reason that dozens of religious congregations were established in the United States in the first place. With some justification, public educational institutions were regarded as at best secular and at worst bastions of Protestantism; parochial schools were promoted, therefore, both as means to prevent “leakage” from the faith and as agencies to promote adaptation, if not outright Americanization, within a denomination composed of a largely “alien” faithful. By 1884 it was the express objective of the U.S. hierarchy to have one in every parish in the country; while complete compliance with that mandate was never achieved, thousands of schools were founded—staffed almost entirely by members of women’s religious orders. Meanwhile, as the Catholic population came increasingly to consist of non-English speakers, it was necessary for their teachers to be able to communicate with them in their native tongues. Thus dozens of diverse communities either migrated from Europe or were organized here (as original foundations or as independent offshoots of extant ones) specifically to teach in schools attached to ethnic, or “national,” parishes.48

Many of these orders, especially from among those devoted to serving Eastern European nationalities, deliberately retained their ethnic orientation for decades (with some continuing to do so today): working almost exclusively in schools connected with national parishes, attracting new members (as all communities did) primarily from among their students, and maintaining use of the original language within their convents. The result, to be sure, was almost complete avoidance of internal ethnic conflict. But by remaining so narrowly focused, groups like these inevitably became insular and less open than others to all sorts of change, social as well as ecclesial.

Whether by design or by force of circumstance, however, most congregations—including a number established initially to serve particular populations—did not remain so circumscribed. In much of the U.S.

territory that previously had belonged to France, for instance, the majority of the early sisters were from French orders that were persuaded to send missionaries to the New World. But with the exception of Louisiana, these areas soon attracted mainly English-speaking settlers. Sisters who hoped to serve them, therefore—and to attract new members—had to become fluent in the dominant tongue.

Fortunately for their own survival, nearly all of the originally French communities in the antebellum era were quick to realize the need to adapt, and did so with remarkable speed—as the case of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, given above, has demonstrated already. But that community was not alone. Profession records for the Sisters of St. Joseph, for example, who arrived in St. Louis in 1836, reveal that only two nuns, both members of the first mission band, took their vows in French; after that all professions were made in English. Moreover, all the immigrant Josephites began to study English as soon as they got settled; their teacher (Anne Eliza Dillon) became their first American candidate, entering in 1836. The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, meanwhile, had an added incentive: their Constitution required them to speak the language of the place in which they resided. Thus, although only one of the original missionaries knew English when the group left Belgium, all began “in great good humor” to speak it as soon as they got to Cincinnati in 1840. Within weeks they were writing home about the entertainment this inspired at recreation, the laughable struggles of Sister Xavier (who served as Portress [doorkeeper])—and the admission of their first postulant, who “is Irish but nevertheless speaks English very well.”

Communities like these, because of deliberate decisions to “Americanize,” experienced relatively few ethnicity-related tensions. Nonetheless, there were consequences that should not be overlooked; in almost every case where adaptation was so complete, membership became overwhelmingly Irish and native-born, all vestiges of French identity were lost, and independence from the European Motherhouse—whether intentionally, as with the Josephites, or by default, as with Holy Cross—was likely to ensue. The same pattern would be true of other congregations in the future: ready and rapid adaptation, particularly when it came to language, both minimized cross-cultural tensions and led to the loss of distinctiveness.

49. Profession records, Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet Archives, St. Louis, and Sisters of the Holy Cross Archives, Notre Dame, Indiana; Kuhn, “The Americanization of the Sisters of the Holy Cross”; and Sr. Helen Louise Nugent, *Sister Louise (Josephine Van Der Schrieck) (1813-1886), American Foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur* (New York, 1931), pp. 77–84. Also, given the discussion above, it is significant that the SNDdeNs’ Irish candidate “chose our Institute because there are no lay Sisters among us” (p. 77).

50. As has already been suggested, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur were an exception to this pattern as they have remained international. However, their ability to do so was no doubt facilitated by a Constitution that required members to adapt to indigenous conditions, something that was by no means common.

What, though, of orders that attempted to maintain their ethnic heritage, even after transplantation to the New World? Among those most likely to do so were the ones from Germany. Retention of a German identity was encouraged by a number of factors: support for such a course from German bishops and priests, the involuntary emigration of many congregations during the 1870s in the wake of Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* (along with an expectation, albeit rarely realized, of eventual return), the presence of a large German-speaking Catholic population in America among whom they could work, etc. Nevertheless, unlike the Polish and other Eastern European groups, over time the Germans almost invariably found themselves adopting English and becoming more inclusive, although they took a variety of paths to that result.

Many followed a path similar to that of the Franciscans of the Holy Family, all of whom left Bavaria at the height of the *Kulturkampf* in 1875 and settled in Iowa. Although none of the refugees expected ever to return to Europe, they aggressively sought to maintain their identity as Germans. Language was the clearest manifestation of this identity, but as time passed, many of those who entered the congregation—albeit of German heritage—had been born in the United States and spoke only English. By “deliberately chosen policy,” however, German continued to be the language of community discourse and prayer. Mother M. Xavier Termehr, for instance, the American founder, never felt the need to learn more than rudimentary English; a number of the original immigrant nuns did not even do that. Only after the election of Mother M. Coletta Rohret as Superior General in 1902—who, in 1896, had become the first U.S.-born member to sit on the governing Council—did adaptation make any significant progress. Still, a sizeable share of the pioneers continued to oppose her initiatives; “trying difficulties” and even “insubordination” repeatedly greeted her efforts to encourage the use of English. Finally, in 1912, Mother Coletta was able to replace the adamantly Germanic director of the convent school with her own appointee. This marked “something of a revolution. . . Under [Sister M. Cortona Gloden’s] direction, the study of German was no longer forced on the young Sisters.” That same year the nuns were offered an optional English retreat for the first time. By 1914 vocal prayers were recited in English and German during alternate weeks (a change that required replacement of the German prayer manual they had published 14 years after coming to the United States). Nevertheless, complete abandonment of German did not occur until 1918 when, because of World War I, Dubuque's Archbishop James Keane pressed strongly for it as well as for the last of the order's foreign-born members to become American citizens. The community had been in this country for 43 years,

52. These factors are documented in the histories of literally dozens of German congregations that came to the United States in the 19th century and particularly of those that arrived in the wake of the *Kulturkampf* in the 1870s. The list of publications is too lengthy to cite here, but, for a general overview, see Colman J. Barry, *The Catholic Church and German Americans*.

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but only at this point, as its historian has recorded, did it become "fully American, not merely in its outlook and functioning, but in all its outward manifestations." And the Holy Family Franciscans were far from the last German congregation to abandon its native tongue completely. The Dominicans of Racine, Wisconsin, for example, founded in 1862 by two nuns from Ratisbon, Germany, were still offering its members the option of making retreats in German as late as 1930.

The path pursued by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, six of whom came to the United States from Bavaria in 1847, offers a decided contrast to those described above. True, until well into the 20th century, as was the case for the Dubuque and Racine sisters, German continued to be the SSNDs' general "house language"; all official records were kept in German, it prevailed in most correspondence, and while applications were welcomed from women of other nationalities, they were expected to learn the dominant tongue after their admission. In addition, the Commissary (overall American superior) and Provincial Superiors were appointed by the Mother General in Munich, who not surprisingly selected Germans to fill the positions. Nonetheless, almost from the beginning, sisters were encouraged to learn English, and many became U.S. citizens as a sign of fidelity to their "mission territory."

Further, the SSNDs consciously sought to attract—and retain—candidates from a variety of backgrounds. As early as 1851 the first Irishwoman entered, and the following year this congregation became one of the only ones in the 19th century to admit a Native American. By 1900 hundreds of non-Germans had swelled the membership, with Poles comprising the largest non-German category (followed closely by the Irish). All in all, a 1955 historical study revealed that 32 ethnic groups could be found among the SSNDs, and both published and archival records suggest that friction among them was rare. The primary reasons for this seem to have been the deliberate policy of assigning sisters who desired it to missions where their nationality predominated, the decision not to require anyone to teach in a language with which she did not feel comfortable, and the presence of all nationalities within the ranks of both Choir and Lay. So, for example, schools in Polish parishes were staffed by Polish sisters, almost always under the leadership of Polish superiors; in such a setting, of course, Polish became the local "house language," just as English or Slovak or German might be elsewhere. Meanwhile, should a Polish nun choose not to speak her native tongue, she could request that it be used in her mission. As these records make clear, such requests were granted as a matter of course.

55. Annals and records in the SSND Archives, Milwaukee.
to restrict herself to such an environment, she normally could be expected to be assigned to other places where she was competent to serve. Over the years such flexible practices naturally attracted additional women, from new as well as already represented nationalities, and enabled the congregation to expand the number and types of missions it was able to accept. Thus the SSND mode permitted ongoing adaptation to pluralism without fostering the sorts of tensions that heterogeneity could have engendered—and did elsewhere. And by the turn of the century they had grown to become the largest single order in the United States. 57

Much of the credit for the SSNDs' success is attributable to the astuteness of Mother Caroline Friess, head of her congregation in the United States from its arrival in 1847 until her death in 1892. 58 Experiences of other orders, such as that of Montreal's (French, not German) Sisters of Providence, suggest what could happen in the absence of such enlightened leadership. When Mother Joseph Pariseau led a band of five to Washington Territory in 1856, only one of them could speak English. Pressures of work, shorthandedness, and a scarcity of volunteers to teach them meant that—whether they wanted to or not—the original Providence nuns continued to use French among themselves and for a long time found it difficult to communicate with those around them. The situation was exacerbated when authorities in Montreal decided to suppress the Washington novitiate in 1863. Thus all additions to the territorial ranks came from Canada which, despite repeated pleas from Mother Joseph for reinforcements fluent in English, continued to send nearly all French speakers. The result was unnecessarily slow growth within the United States and inability to serve the population there as fully as the missionaries would have wished. 59

The Sisters of Providence later obtained permission to reopen their Seattle novitiate; eventually, once new leaders came into office in Montreal, tensions were sufficiently relaxed so as to enable the sisters in the United States to remain part of their original congregation. But this did not always happen; some communities found it necessary to become independent when ethnic differences became impossible to resolve. This was the case in California when Mother Pia Backes, head of a German-speaking Dominican mission that had been established there in 1876, began writing to her New York Motherhouse for permission to admit Irish candidates, the first of whom applied in 1882. Mother M. Seraphine

57. Overall, there were more Franciscans, Sisters of St. Joseph, Sisters of Mercy, and Sisters of Charity, among others; each of these, however, unlike the SSNDs (who maintained a central government with headquarters in Europe), were spread among several independently-governed congregations.
58. For information on Friess, see Flynn, *Mother Caroline; Mother Mary Caroline Friess: Correspondence and Other Documents; Mother Mary Caroline Friess, SSND: Correspondence Addressed to Her from Various Persons*, ed. Barbara Brumleve (SSND Heritage Research, privately published, 1986).
59. Conflict between Mother Joseph and Montreal is documented extensively in a 400+-page typescript of Mother Joseph Pariseau's translated correspondence (until her death in 1902 she remained uncomfortable with the English language and used it only when absolutely necessary), Sisters of Providence Archives, Seattle; see, especially, Mother Philomena to Mother Joseph, 4 June 1863, and Mother Joseph to Mother General, 10 February 1877.
Staimer replied with a reminder that “we sent you to San Francisco to be active in the schools for German children”; accordingly she felt justified in imposing higher standards for those of other backgrounds: “If the Irish nineteen-year-old girl is good and well educated, you can make a trial,” she wrote on one occasion. But “to take too many Irish girls is not advisable, and they should be told in advance that they will receive the holy habit [i.e., be admitted to the novitiate] only when they are able to make themselves understood in the German language.” Instead, she advised Mother Pia to “be more on the lookout for German girls,” for “in the future, only a fifth part of all should consist of Irish.” Such strictures soon became intolerable; by 1888 the Mission San José Dominicans had broken entirely and permanently with New York, after which they soon attracted large numbers of candidates of Irish and other non-German backgrounds.60

The New York Dominicans, founded in 1853 by a band of missionaries from Bavaria, apparently had repeated difficulties with members (mostly Irish) who were unwilling or unable to go along with German preeminence there. Consider the career of Irish-born Esther Sammon (Sister Mary Ann) who in 1865 became the first Irish candidate—at which time she was, of course, required to learn German. By 1878, the year the order’s Constitution was first translated into English, Sister Mary Ann was assigned to work in a newly-opened orphanage in the town of Blauvelt, where she would remain for the rest of her life. For within twelve years it became the Motherhouse of an independent foundation, with Mother Mary Ann at its head; as a later historian wrote: “divisions between German Catholics and others in the Archdiocese of New York . . . may now be shown as the real reason for the development of the separate motherhouse of the Dominican Sisters in Blauveltville in 1890.”61

Four of Mother Mary Ann’s companions at Blauvelt in 1890 had been Irish blood sisters named Madden. At the time of the separation, as was required by canon law, each nun was given the option of remaining where she was or of returning to the convent where she had entered. Three of the Maddens chose to go back to their former Motherhouse (now located at Newburgh)—but not all of them, as it turns out, intended to stay there. Sister Camilla Madden merely used the occasion to beg for reassignment to Michigan, where she had spent several earlier years, beginning in 1879. There she pushed for greater self-determination for a group that had become, by then, overwhelmingly Irish. Perhaps superiors in New York had learned something from previous experiences with Mission San José and Blauvelt; at any rate, Adrian, Michigan, became a semiautonomous province of Newburgh in 1892 with Mother Camilla as its first Provincial Superior. Even that, however, ultimately did not prove to be a sufficient

60. Mother Seraphine to Mother Pia, 10 and 26 June 1882, 8 May 1887. English translations from the German in the Mission San José, California, Dominican Archives; see also Backes, Her Days Unfolded.
61. Sr. Bernardita Gillis and Timothy Cunningham, co-editors, Here We Shall Be (Blauvelt, N.Y., 1977), p. 23 and passim.
solution; tensions would not disappear between the persistently German leadership in New York and the mostly Irish-American women in the Midwest. In 1923, therefore, just one year before Mother Camilla’s death, the Adrian Dominicans—like those in Blauvelt and California—also became an independent congregation with Mother Camilla as its first Superior General.62

Despite the frequency of conflict between Irish and German nuns, some orders managed to resolve it. Indeed, by the 1920s, nearly all of the originally German orders included sizeable numbers of Irish women and, over the years, managed to achieve complete assimilation. Even when groups split, however, the events leading to disunion rarely matched the difficulties, and even bitterness, which resulted from most attempts (the SSNDs were exceptional) to integrate Germans and Poles. The roots of this conflict are to be found in the partition of Poland, with much of its territory ending up under German governance; as the biography of one Polish-American nun put it: “the forcible Germanization [the Poles] had endured in Europe had strengthened their love and respect for their own [culture].” That loyalty crossed the Atlantic with them, and they were “determined to perpetuate the Polish language in future generations born on American soil.”63

Within this context the experience of the Franciscan Sisters of Sylvania, Ohio, was relatively amicable. Its first members had originally belonged to the Rochester, Minnesota, Franciscans, whose founder (in 1876) was the German-born Mother Alfred Moes. By the early 20th century the Minnesota were a heterogeneous bunch; in fact, its General Superior in 1916 was Irish. Nonetheless, a number of Poles still did not feel at home there. Some left the order entirely and affiliated with a Polish one in Wisconsin. But others, with the permission of their superiors, responded to an invitation from Toledo Bishop Joseph Schrembs to staff some Polish schools in his diocese. By 1916 these women received permission to form themselves into a semiautonomous province. But even this solution did not prove to be sufficient, and fifteen years later, in 1931, the sisters in Sylvania became independent.64

Things were not so simple for Mother Colette Hilbert, founder of the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph. As a young woman in Europe, she had joined a German congregation that worked extensively in her native Poland. A few years later, around 1890, she eagerly accepted assignment

62. Srs. Benedicta Marie Ledwidge and Augustine Walsh, The Life of Mother M. Camilla Madden, OP (Adrian, 1925); Sr. Mary Philip Ryan, Amid the Alien Corn (St. Charles, Ill., 1967).
to a mission in the United States to teach in a Polish-American parish in Pennsylvania. Within a short time several girls there expressed a desire to become sisters, and, as superior of the mission, she tentatively accepted them as postulants and took them with her when she moved to a school in New Jersey. Meanwhile, superiors back in Germany demanded that their missionaries return home; additionally, if the American candidates wanted to be professed, they would have to make their novitiate in the Motherhouse where, as a matter of policy, they would be required to learn German. Upon hearing this, the girls’ parents absolutely forbade them to leave; as they put it, such a move would fly in the face of the reason they had left German-occupied Poland in the first place. At that point, Mother Colette—alone among the missionaries with whom she had arrived—decided to stay in the United States and, with the handful of candidates, to establish a new community that would minister exclusively to Polish-Americans.

Even then, however, her autonomy from Germans was not complete. She had been supported in her decision to remain in this country by a Father Fudzinski who, while Polish himself, was superior of a largely German community of Franciscan Conventional Friars headquartered in Syracuse, New York. Although he applauded Mother Colette’s desire for independence from her original congregation, he thought it would be easier for her and the candidates to join an already-established congregation than to strike out on their own. His choice was the Syracuse Franciscan Sisters which, like his group, was composed almost entirely of Germans. And to foster the merger, he directed Mother Colette and those with her to make a retreat with the women in Syracuse in 1898. Not surprisingly, the experience was a difficult one; as one annalist has put it: “The reception given the Sisters was not at all friendly, mainly because of nationalistic differences. Not much can be said concretely about the matter because Mother Colette maintained a noble reticence which shrouded the subject in considerable obscurity.” At any rate, Father Fudzinski’s plan proved entirely unfeasible; the following year the independent Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph established themselves in Buffalo.65

Yet difficult as the FSSJ experience may have been, it pales in comparison with that of the similarly-titled, but quite distinct, Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis. Like the nuns in Sylvania, the original members of this community began their religious lives as members of a predominantly German order, the Milwaukee-based School Sisters of St. Francis. But if the Sylvania group departed gradually and in full compliance with both canon law and “polite” behavior, the SSJs’ exit was more comparable to open revolt or elopement. As far as it can be reconstructed—and most of the story emerges from a handful of official

documents prepared by priests and memoirs recorded over thirty years after the fact by several of the sisters involved—the story, briefly, is as follows. Although small numbers of Polish candidates had joined the School Sisters ever since its founding in 1874, their ranks expanded greatly in the 1890s, along with the growth in Wisconsin’s Polish population and the concomitant demand for national parishes and parochial schools. The increase exacerbated tensions between the two groups that had always simmered beneath the surface. For example, some of the Polish nuns later reported that their German superiors refused to allow them to speak Polish among themselves or—despite a recent papal edict that forbade superiors to interfere in such matters—to confess to a Polish priest. Others reported having received training inferior to that of the Germans and of having been both laughed at and yelled at by German sisters in authority.

In all of the recorded memoirs, questions of authority and other indicators of status (such as inferior education) were central to the expressed complaints. Even when they were assigned to Polish national parishes, these sisters recalled almost always being under German superiors (contrast this to the policy of the SSNDs, above). And while the SSSFs were not divided juridically into Choir and Lay categories, Polish sisters were disproportionately represented in the ranks of the perpetual housekeepers.

Matters finally reached a head in 1900. That year six Polish postulants entered from the town of Stevens Point, but returned home within a few months, allegedly because the SSSF Mother General refused to permit any of them to be trained as teachers, relegating them all to the ranks of “house” sisters confined to the performance of domestic service. The pastor of their local parish was outraged. Meeting with several other Polish-American priests from Illinois and Michigan as well as Wisconsin, all of whose schools were staffed by the Milwaukee community, it was decided that collectively they would call for the withdrawal of all the Polish sisters. They then would be formed into an autonomous congregation, the future of which would be assured by a guarantee that they could staff the Polish schools that had previously employed SSSFs.

After receiving approval from the Bishop of Green Bay, who agreed to sponsor the new foundation, the clerics covertly informed the nuns in their parishes about their plan. Forty-six women agreed to leave and, in the summer of 1901, secretly left their various convents and gathered in two separate groups in Chicago and Detroit. [It would be another year before all the sisters met together in Stevens Point, where they decided to locate their Motherhouse]. In 1907 they were joined by about two dozen other

66. Mission records for the period, in the SSSF Archives, Milwaukee, substantiate this claim.
67. These women were not to be actual Lay sisters, because the category no longer existed within the SSSFs. But that did not mean that they would not be assigned permanently to domestic service and inferior status. That attitudes changed less easily than juridical ranks, meanwhile, is suggested by the perhaps unintentionally ironic title of the SSSF’s published history. For although three women had originally come from Germany to found the order, one of them had been Lay; nonetheless, the book is called He Sent Two (by Sr. M. Francis Borgia Rothfuehner [Milwaukee, 1963]).
disgruntled SSSFs and, a few years later, by several Polish members of the Rochester Franciscans who were not involved in the Sylvania mission.

The new Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis grew rapidly and soon numbered several hundred members. But those who had had to "escape" illicitly in 1901 never recovered entirely from the pain and humiliation of their early experiences. Even in the late 1930s, when those who were still alive were asked to record their recollections, the trauma and bitterness came through with intensity in virtually every one of the accounts. It seems understandable and logical, therefore, that this community retained its distinct ethnic identity for half a century. Not until the 1940s did it profess its first member of a different background, and not until the fifties did it begin to recite vernacular prayers in English instead of Polish.

In 1987 Sister Patricia Flynn of Baltimore became international Superior General of the School Sisters of Notre Dame — the first person not of German extraction ever to hold that office. Examination of the membership roster of today's Leadership Conference of Women Religious (consisting of top elected officials in U.S. religious orders), or of the data on women's congregations in the back of any recent Official U. S. Catholic Directory, reveals that many congregations that originally had strong ethnic characters are now headed by persons who do not share that heritage; slowly in some cases, but relentlessly, the process of Americanization continues.

Meanwhile, most communities that used to be divided between Choir and Lay status now boast, along with nearly every order in the United States, about the fact that over 90% of their members are college graduates. It is no longer unusual for such congregations to be able to point to 65% or more of its women having a master's degree or better; among the formerly stratified Erie (Pa.) Benedictines the figure is over 95%.69

During the years before World War I, however, and to some extent even after, status differentials based upon nationality, family background and wealth, education, and so on were the norm among sisters in the United States, rather than the exception. And the presence of such patterns reflected not just persistent custom but also the means by which power was distributed and wielded. All protestations of adherence to "oneness in Christ," or "universality and uniformity within the Church"—indeed, of
sisterhood—cannot hide the reality of ongoing and often juridically maintained power relationships that relegated massive numbers of women to places of perpetual subservience and inferiority. As this essay has demonstrated, these relationships often continued for long periods after religious orders arrived in the presumably egalitarian American environment—and long after their debilitating effect upon the collective welfare of an order's members became obvious.

To put it another way, the particular tensions that resulted from matters of class, culture, and ethnicity were actually manifestations of the larger tension between sisterhood and power. And however "un-American" and "un-Christian" that tension might have been, it nonetheless was a reality of religious life for over a century after its introduction into the United States.