
History Of Women Religious

News and Notes

Volume 10 - Number 1

February 1997

CONFERENCE '98

A program committee composed of Florence Deacon, OSF, chair, and Ann Harrington, BVM; Barbara Speas Havira; Barbara Zajac; Elizabeth McGahan; and Linda Marie Bos, SSND, will shortly be issuing a call for papers in preparation for the next HWR Conference scheduled for June 21-14, 1998, at Loyola University, Chicago.

PUBLICATIONS, TALKS

Cynthia Glavac's *IN THE FULLNESS OF LIFE* (Dimension Books, 1996) recounts the story of Ursuline Dorothy Kazel, one of four churchwomen raped and murdered by El Salvador National guardsmen in 1980. The work is based on primary sources, interviews, and travel to places where the subject lived and worked, including El Salvador.

Ann Carey's *SISTERS IN CRISIS: THE TRAGIC UNRAVELING OF WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES* is forthcoming from Our Sunday Visitor press (March, 1997). As indicated by the title, the volume explores causes for and implications of declining vocation trends among women religious, in this case, in the United States.

Helen Rose Ebaugh, Jon Lorence, and Janet Saltzman Chafetz offer a sociological perspective on the subject of declining membership in women's religious orders in "The Growth and Decline of the Population of Catholic Nuns Cross-Nationally, 1960-1990: A Case of Secularization as Social Structural Change," *Journal For The Scientific Study of Religion* 35 (June 1996), 171-83.

The Sisters of Charity, Cincinnati, have come out with a reprint of Sister Blandina Segale's journal, *AT THE END OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL*, descriptive of Segale's experiences in Colorado and New Mexico the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The publication is also available on a set of 8 audio tapes. Contact Archives, Sisters of Charity, 5900 Delhi Road, Mount St. Joseph, OH 45051.

M. Cecilia Murray, OP, has co-authored with David Buerge, *EVERGREEN LAND*, an account of the history of the Dominicans of Edmonds, Washington. Murray can be reached for more information at Dominican Sisters, 320 Powell Ave., Newburgh, NY 12550.

Irene Mahoney, OSU, reports that research for *SWATOW! THE URSULINES IN CHINA 1922-1952*, which has just been published, was both fascinating and exhausting, involving work in archives in Quebec (the Swatow missionaries were Canadian Ursulines), Rome, France, and Taiwan. Request to purchase may be directed to the author at Ursuline Provincialate, 323 East 198th St., Bronx, NY 10458.

A COMPANY OF WOMEN: JOURNEYS THROUGH THE FEMININE EXPERIENCE OF FAITH (Ligouri Publications, Box 615, Ligouri, MO 63057) is a collection of autobiographical narratives by eight Ursulines whose sharing took place the summer of 1994.

PROCEEDINGS and a video from the conference, "Catherine McAuley: Timeless Legacy," are available from the Pastoral Ministry Institute, Saint Xavier University, 3700 West 103rd St., Chicago, IL 60655. The Spring issue of *MAST*, the journal of the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology

NOTICES

The fourth Southern Conference on Women's History will be held June 12-14, 1997, at the College of Charleston. For information, contact Jane Turner Censer, History Dept., MSN3G1, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030; tel. 703/993-1250.

Competition for 1998-99 Fulbright awards to faculty and professionals opens March 1, 1997, with a competition deadline of August 1. For information and application materials contact the USIA Fulbright Senior Scholar Program, Council for International Exchange of Scholars, 3007 Tilden St., NW, Ste 5M, Box GNEWS, Washington, DC 20008.

March is National Women's History Month, a good opportunity for publicizing the history of women religious. HWR member, Paula Holdman, SC, presented a paper for staff members of the former Elizabeth Seton College of Yonkers, NY, and the College of Mount St. Vincent staff, on M. Ambrose Dunphy, SC, the founding dean of the latter college, on the occasion of NWH month last year.

HWR News and Notes would like to publicize ways readers have found to promote the history of women religious through their teaching syllabi or other events, displays, etc. Please forward information so we can share your ideas.

The Communal Societies Association invites submissions for the Starting Scholars' Competition, an award designed to encourage and recognize authors new to the field of communal studies. Submissions should be articles that conform to the standards of the CSA's journal, Communal Studies. Award to be announced at the 1997 CSA conference, Tacoma, Washington. Deadline: June 1, 1997. Send two copies of article to Regina Siegfried, ASC, Dept of Theological Studies, 3634 Lindell Blvd, St. Louis, MO 63108. E-mail: siegfr@slu.edu or Tel. 314/977-7361.

Irene Marie Richards, OP, has retired from the archives of the Dominican Sisters of Caldwell, New Jersey, after seventeen years of service during which she organized and established the current

archives, museum, and historic room. She was succeeded as archivist by Helen Marguerite Leddy, OP.

The Archivists for Congregations of Women Religious (ACWR) will hold their annual national meeting at Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, August 21-24, 1997. HWR members are invited to attend the meeting which will feature exploration of the rich archives of this Sinsinawa Dominican motherhouse as well as field trips to other historic sites of the Sinsinawa-Dubuque locality, in addition to the presentation of papers and business meeting. For information, contact Emma Cecilia Busam, OSU, Archives, Mount St. Joseph, Maple Mount, KY 42356. Also for future planning: the 1998 ACWR national meeting will be in Orlando, Florida, August 31-September 6, 1998.

BOOK REVIEW

SISTERS IN ARMS: CATHOLIC NUNS THROUGH TWO MILLENNIA by Jo Ann Kay McNamara (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), 751 pp.

The title of Jo Ann McNamara's work sounds ambitious for a single scholar--but actually it understates the book's scope. A more accurate title would be something like "Where We Are Today as Women in Western Culture—and How We Got Here."

Starting with primary sources from every century and building with the solid pieces of research on women done over the last thirty years, McNamara applies recent feminist theory and produces a stunning edifice—a coherent understanding of the forces that have shaped women's lives and choices over the last two thousand years. She takes the lives of women in Christianity as her specific topic, but the story feels like Everywoman's story, our collective consciousness. The twenty centuries flow like twenty years, and pieces of the past that we have often found puzzling become understandable for the first time. Furthermore, she leaves us on the brink of the next ten years: we are the newly autonomous women ready to "advance anew toward that vision

where slave and free, male and female, are reconciled.”

Religious women's history has come a long way since Lina Eckenstein's *WOMAN UNDER MONASTICISM*, the 1896 work that provided many of us with a comprehensive introduction to this subject as recently as the 70s. And even the carefully laid out theses of Gerda Lerner's *THE CREATION OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS* become background for the new assertions of McNamara. Where Lerner searched for the antecedents of modern thinking, McNamara simply examines the communal lives of women in the early church and subsequent centuries, making observations and asking key questions.

In her introduction, McNamara modestly describes this work as “only an initial glance” into religious women's life—an effort to call attention to these sisters “camouflaged by the mocking, belittling imagery of popular culture.” Yes, from Chaucer's prioress to Faulkner's *REQUIEM FOR A NUN*, from the pronouncements of bishops and popes to the sneers of radio talk shows, women religious have found little respect. Their aspirations and achievements have been trivialized.

In fact, “No human institution is older than this sisterhood,” McNamara observes. Yet “Nuns had long been trained to have no history, personal or communal.” She describes how Vatican II sent women religious back to examine their original charisms and was followed by much historical research, resulting among other things in the network represented by *HWR News and Notes*.

The book gets off to a fast start as McNamara lays bare her central theses:

“The entire structure of male authority in any age is rooted in the ideology of gender differences. Religious men and women living together in chastity, recognizing equal spiritual capacities, lay an ax to that root by minimizing those differences. The practice had a name among primitive Christians—syneisactism.”

Carolyn Heilbrun's entire *TOWARD A RECOGNITION OF ANDROGYNY* (1979) has become a

footnote to McNamara, as has Nancy Chodorow's *THE REPRODUCTION OF MOTHERING* (1978) in relation to McNamara's assertion that celibacy gave women the power and authority “that nature normally reserved for men by restricting women's autonomy and [physical] integrity.” (Chodorow in her first chapter had explained that heterosexual marriage and the assignment of infant and child care to women “organize and reproduce gender as an unequal social relation.”)

In her discussion of the first several centuries of Christianity, McNamara brings in the sisters of many church fathers: Ambrose and his sister Marcellina, Gregory of Nyssa and his sister Macrina, Augustine and his sister who founded a convent, John Cassian and his sister Caesaria of Arles, Caesarius and his sister Radegund, Benedict and his sister Scholastica. By telling stories of these pairs and their impact on each other and on the church, McNamara presents in yet another way her central theme of religious men and women working together and minimizing gender differences.

Varying levels of opportunity for syneisactism over the centuries become one of McNamara's major themes, and this male/female cooperation is underlined by her dedication of the book to her friend and collaborator on several projects, John E. Halborg. Besides adding syneisactism to our vocabulary, McNamara invites us to revision chaste celibacy in the ancient world as “the virginity movement.” Its adherents recognized the power of virginity to wipe out gender differences and give women independence and authority. Other recurring themes are gender reversals in Christianity (monk as bride of Christ, nun as soldiers), rivalry between clergy and ascetics, bishops reducing the autonomy of nuns, etc.

In every chapter McNamara debunks popular myths—that enclosure was a part of female monasticism from the beginning, that vows of chastity had to be permanent, that poverty and obedience were always part of female vows, that women assisting at the altar is a 20 twentieth century phenomenon, that Anglo-Saxon women had a higher status than English women later in the medieval period, that nuns are a kind of low-level clergy.

Also imbedded in the 644 pages of text are many moments of discovery--like a child's experience of reading those "How the Leopard Got Her Spots" stories. McNamara offers answers to questions I have thought about: why female schoolteachers c. 1900 had to quit teaching if they married, why schools of nursing c. 1920 forbade student nurses to visit beauty parlors, why lifelong virginity became such a central part of Mary's Catholic identity, why the number of monastic foundations for women dropped between 700 and 900 AD, why virginity was gendered as female, etc.

Anyone who wants to stay current in the on-going dialogue of women's history--whether male or female, religious or secular, scholar or politician--needs to read SISTERS IN ARMS.

Anne Eggebroten
Mount St. Mary's College
Los Angeles



NEWSLETTER DEADLINE

Please have copy for the June 1997 issue to the editor by May 1, 1997.

THE HWR NEWSLETTER

Published by the Conference on History of
Women Religious
12001 Chalon Road
Los Angeles, CA 90049

ISSN: 1504-545X

Annual Subscription: \$5.00

Editor: Karen M. Kennelly, CSJ
Book Review editor: Mary Hayes, SND
Ad hoc Conference Committee:
Kaye Ashe, OP; Florence Deacon, OSF;
Mary Ewens, OP; JoAnn McNamara;
Mary J. Oates, CSJ; Judith Suttera, OSB;
Margaret Susan Thompson