

Introduction

On Unruly Nuns (and the Women Who Admire Them)

*Go calmly in peace, for you will have a good escort, because He
Who created you has sent you the Holy Spirit and has always
guarded you as a mother does her child who loves her.*

—*St. Clare of Assisi*¹

St. Clare, one of the first followers of Saint Francis of Assisi, founded the order that is now known as Poor Ladies, a monastic religious order for women in the Franciscan tradition. She wrote their Rule of Life—the first monastic rule known to have been written by a woman. To do this, she had to resist the rules and efforts of her father, a noble and wealthy man. Her words make clear not only an understanding of a female feature of God but also the active role of women in the church.

When we began to think about the next book in our Unruly Catholic Women Writers series, we knew exactly whom we wanted to represent, what stories we wanted to relate, which voices we wanted to make heard: religious women. We wanted to tell the Sisters' stories, which we knew were out there. We also knew exactly what—and whom—we were referring to when we were thinking of unruly nuns, although the nuns we reached out to frequently did not see themselves in such a way. One told us she wasn't unruly enough to be in our volume; others demurred, saying they had nothing to contribute. Even when they submitted

something to us, many Sisters offered disclaimers to their pieces, referring to them as “incomplete” or “a draft” or “just some ideas.”

This is characteristic of nuns: unwilling to talk about themselves, unassuming in regard to their own work and abilities, humble to a fault. But we know who they really are. They are S. Simone Campbell, the force behind Nuns on the Bus, addressing social justice issues such as immigration reform and welfare legislation across the United States. They are S. Joan Chittister, whose speech on women’s ordination the Vatican tried to silence, but whose order, the Benedictines, asserted that silence was not the Benedictine way. They are S. Teresa Kane, who publicly confronted Pope John Paul II regarding the prohibition against female priesthood—an iconic moment in the history of sisterhood. They are S. Jeannine Gramick, known for her work with the GLBTQ community, who are often ostracized from the Catholic Church.² (We are fortunate to include a piece from S. Jeannine here.) They are self-sacrificing. They are unpretentious. They are quietly and without fanfare doing God’s business in the world, carrying out small or large tasks, taking care of a child or a nation, performing the work of Christ.

The nuns we know are intelligent, dedicated, often strategic about how best to use resources and how to maneuver around, across, or through the institutional church in order to do the work that God calls them to do. There is the story of one of our colleagues, a nun well into her seventies, still teaching religious studies at a Catholic college. When the bishop issued a directive discouraging theology professors from teaching about women’s ordination in the Catholic Church, she gave out the readings on the topic to her students in class and told them to discuss it amongst themselves—and so, therefore, did not technically teach it! This Sister represents the entrepreneurial spirit possessed by so many nuns, as well as their dedication to teaching what is morally right in the face of an often oppressive and discriminatory church.

Recently, Pope Francis has been creating positive change in this historically traditional institution. His focus on issues of social justice is refreshing: he has spoken out against poverty, religious intolerance, environmental destruction, and the church’s intense focus on such divisive issues as abortion, contraception, divorce,

and homosexuality. He has even signaled his intent to create a commission to study the possibility of allowing women to serve as deacons in the Catholic Church.

However, Pope Francis has not yet moved in the direction of changing papal doctrine on these issues. Moreover, he recently stated that the Roman Catholic Church's teaching that women cannot be ordained as priests is likely to last forever, citing Pope John Paul's position that ordaining women is not possible because Jesus chose only men as his apostles. Pope Francis instead limits women's role to the "feminine dimension" (Brockhaus). And while he has backed down on the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's criticism of the U.S. Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and he has even spoken out against pay inequity for women, these measures are dwarfed by the penultimate patriarchy that is the Roman Catholic Church today, in which nuns can never be priests, women can never hold positions of significant power, and gender inequity remains the rule rather than the exception.

Whether you have faith in him or not, the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church has massive global influence; the importance of the Church on a worldwide scale is unquestionable. Women in the Church are now looking to see to what extent Pope Francis will bring real change to women's lives. But many women religious are not waiting around for his permission to produce the church reforms that many Catholics view as desperately needed and long overdue. They are actively working to secure peace on Earth, rather than asking the needy only to pray to achieve peace in Heaven.

Robert Calderisi, in his exploration of the Catholic Church's role in reaching out to the poor and voiceless around the world, opens his introduction to *Earthly Mission* with a vivid image of the dedication, the sacrifice, and, often, the risk nuns take on a daily basis:

Somewhere in the developing world, a 57-year-old woman is trudging up a steep hill in the early afternoon, sorry she could not come earlier when it was cooler or delay her visit until the evening. But the person at the top of the

hill needs her urgently [. . .] She is a nurse and a nun,
and the woman at the top of the hill may be dying. (3)

Throughout his study, Calderisi discusses countless cases of such nuns, cases that cause him to recommend that a woman become Pope. He asserts that “not everything that it strives to achieve before a woman does finally step out onto the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica should be dismissed as worthless and hypocritical” (9). As his book goes on to show, it is through the work of dedicated, motivated, and often unruly individuals that the Catholic Church has made an impact on addressing inequality and oppression.

We, the editors of this volume, hope to contribute to the global conversation about the role of women religious in the Catholic Church by giving voice to these women and to their unruliness. In our volume, unruliness presents itself in two ways: first, in terms of how Sisters and former Sisters challenge cultural hegemonies and governmental policies or regimes; and, second, in regard to how they challenge the church itself. Many orders of nuns, as well as individual women religious regardless of order, have risked their lives to undertake the struggles of economically and politically oppressed people.³ Some, like S. Dorothy Stang, have given their lives to protect and give voice to the disenfranchised in Brazil. More recently, S. Lenora Brunetto has risked her life in Brazil to stand up for the landless and environmental devastation brought on by illegal ranching. In a recent interview, the unruly S. Lenora stated that, “As soon as I get time, I want to organize a strike by all the women in the church, all around the world. The church won’t function without women” (Cheney 69). She is unafraid.

Such brave women have certainly risked their already marginal position in the church hierarchy. Consider the Maryknoll order of Sisters, who have been fundamental in uniting impoverished women—in the Philippines, for example—and giving them viable and sustainable means to flourish as an alternative to being paid slave wages by multinational corporations. Also consider the School Sisters of Notre Dame, whose primary mission is social justice, with a focus on the education of women and those living in poverty. Clearly, there is great interest in unruly nuns in both

secular and religious circles. In these pages, we have collected and published the voices of women who engage in such struggles, and who have articulated these struggles through autobiography and memoir, fiction and nonfiction, poetry and prose. We hope that our book will shed greater light on the works of these Sisters, both in the United States and internationally.

While Pope Francis chose his name in honor of St. Francis of Assisi, who dedicated himself to the poor and who inspired St. Clare to do the same, we the editors see the Sisters in this volume as following the vision of an anchoress who lived and worked not long after these Catholic saints, around the turn of the fifteenth century: Julian of Norwich, the first English woman of letters. Her description and interpretation of her vision in what has come to be called *Showings* offer a conception of the trinity that applies directly to the Sisters in this volume. She writes:

. . . as truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. Our Father wills, our Mother works, our good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms. And therefore it is our part to love our God in whom we have our being, reverently thanking and praising him for our creation, mightily praying to our Mother for mercy and pity, and to the Lord the Holy Spirit for help and grace. (296)

We have thus divided the pieces in this volume into three parts, based on Julian's words: "Our Father wills, our Mother works, our good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms." The writings in Part I of this anthology demonstrate, first and foremost, how nuns have followed and continue to pursue the word of God, both in their daily deeds and in how they live their lives. But the will of the Father also reflects the teachings of a male-dominated clergy, against whom many of our contributors have railed, or around whom many have worked. The Father's will is thus depicted paradoxically as both a positive force that can change lives and a hindrance to the good works of the Sisters represented here.

Hence, in Part II, the Mother's work—while the texts herein reference the Blessed Virgin Mary as Mother, they likewise see the

face of God as not just father but also Mother, with all the cultural connotations this image evokes. The term “Mother” also invokes the leadership position in Catholic women’s religious communities of the Mother Superior, who plays a critical role in the lives of those in her community, as she may either enforce upon her constituents the rule of Rome or encourage in them their unique calling to social justice and mercy. Most significantly, however, Julian’s invocation of Mother inserts women into the Holy Trinity, asserting a position for women in church doctrine, just as our contributors assert the value and significance of women in the church.

Finally, in Part III, we include pieces that examine how the Holy Spirit, working through individuals both within and outside the church, confirms the good work that these Sisters have done and continue to do in our neighborhoods, our communities, our nations, and our world, and offers grace and assistance to Sisters in times of trial. The Sisters in this volume are indeed working for God’s will, Mother’s mercy, and the Holy Spirit’s grace. Through them we all can see the light of God’s grace on Earth.

Notes

1. These words are widely cited as her own, but they are recorded only in documents from the process of canonization, which show the source is Sisters Filippa and Benvenuta, who shared the words as one prayer of St. Clare’s on one of her last days. Sister Filippa asked others to try to remember the words (Armstrong 143).

2. See New Ways Ministry: <http://newwaysministry.org/co-founders.html>.

3. For example, Mariam Keesy’s work for the Justice and Peace Commission in Dar es Salaam, Sister Mary Gabriella’s opening of the first credit union for women in the garment industry in South Korea, and Sister Mary Grenough’s ambitious social action program for sugar cane workers in the Philippines.

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