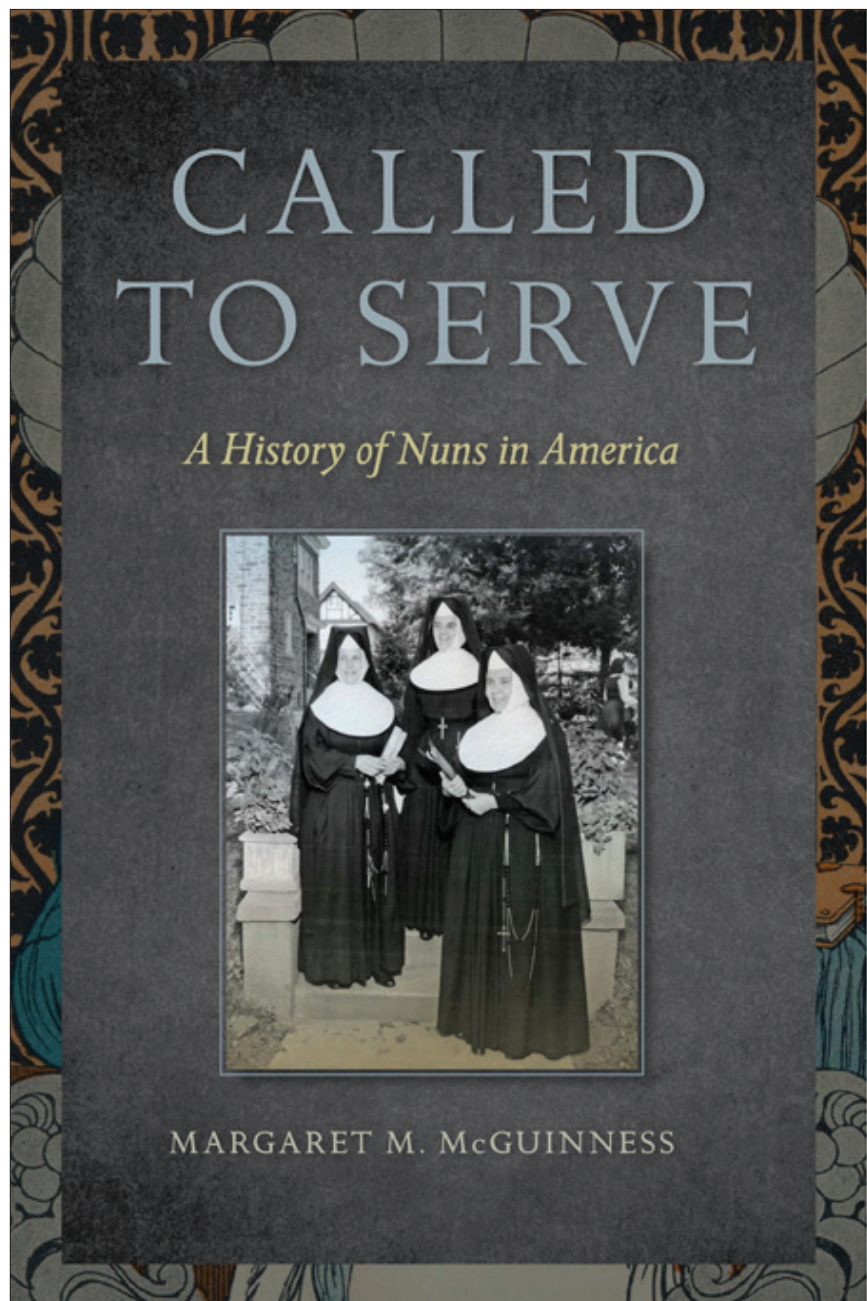


CALLED TO SERVE

A HISTORY OF NUNS IN AMERICA

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



For many Americans, nuns and sisters are the face of the Catholic Church. Far more visible than priests, Catholic women religious teach at schools, found hospitals, offer food to the poor, and minister to those in need. Their work has shaped the American Catholic Church throughout its history. Yet despite their high profile, a concise history of American Catholic sisters and nuns has yet to be published. In *Called to Serve*, Margaret M. McGuinness provides the reader with an overview of the history of Catholic women religious in American life, from the colonial period to the present.

The early years of religious life in the United States found women religious in immigrant communities and on the frontier, teaching, nursing, and caring for marginalized groups. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, the role of women religious began to change. They have fewer members than ever, and their population is aging rapidly. And the method of their ministry is changing as well: rather than merely feeding and clothing the poor, religious sisters are now working to address the social structures that contribute to poverty, fighting what one nun calls "social sin." In the face of a changing world and shifting priorities, women religious must also struggle to strike a balance between the responsibilities of their faith and the limitations imposed upon them by their church.

Rigorously researched and engagingly written, *Called to Serve* offers a compelling portrait of Catholic women religious throughout American history.

277 PAGES • 8 HALFTONES
PAPER • 978-0-8147-9556-9

Introduction

SUMMARY

The primary focus of the Introduction is the development of congregations of women religious within the Roman Catholic Church. By the middle of the fifth century, female monasticism was attracting European women who believed they were called to serve God by living in community. In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII required women religious to be cloistered, but in 1532 Angela Merici formed a “company of virgins” to serve wherever needed. Placed under the patronage of St. Ursula, the community became known as Ursulines. In the middle of the seventeenth century, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac began to recruit young French women interested in serving the poor. These Daughters of Charity, as they came to be known, took simple vows, which allowed them to live and work outside of a cloistered environment. The Ursulines and Daughters of Charity helped to begin a model by which women could serve both God and others by ministering to those in need. When leaders of the Catholic Church in the United States were seeking a way to serve the needs of Catholic immigrants, they often turned to European and American congregations of women religious.

DISCUSSION POINTS

The Introduction sets the context for the main theme of the book:

Women religious in the United States staffed a vast array of institutions, including schools, hospitals, and childcare facilities. Because they worked with so many Americans—Catholics and non-Catholics—they often served as the face of the Church. The history of American women religious is an important component of the history of Catholicism in the U.S., as well as women’s history.

The Introduction also explains the way in which the topic is presented and offers a brief synopsis of each of the eight chapters.

Organizing to Serve

SUMMARY

Beginning with the arrival of twelve French Ursulines in the French colony of New Orleans in 1727, Chapter One examines the early history of women religious in the United States. After describing the arrival of three American nuns from the Carmelite monastery in Hoogsraeten (Belgium) to Port Tobacco, Maryland, in 1790, as well as the establishment of the Visitation nuns in Washington, DC, the chapter focuses on congregations of women religious established in the United States. The central figure in this discussion is Saint Elizabeth Seton, founder of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph; however, five other congregations of women religious were founded in the U.S. between 1809 and 1830. Of special note is the Oblate Sisters of Providence, a community founded by and for African American women to serve the growing Black Catholic community. The Sisters of Loretto, Dominican Sisters, Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, and Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy ministered to the growing Catholic communities on the Kentucky frontier and in South Carolina.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Explain the reason behind the Ursuline community's letters to government officials following the Louisiana Purchase. How did Madison and Jefferson respond?
- Why did John Carroll hope women religious engaged in active ministries would agree to work with American Catholics?
- Why is the Order of the Visitation significant in American Catholic history?
- Why did Protestant reformers attack women religious?
- What role does racism play in the history of the Oblate Sisters of Providence?

Service to a Growing Catholic Community

SUMMARY

As European Catholic immigrants arrived in the United States during the nineteenth century, church leaders needed women religious to administer and staff institutions to meet the many physical and spiritual needs of these recent arrivals. The chapter opens with the story of Mother Theodore Guerin, who led a group of Sisters of Providence from France to Indiana in 1840 at the request of Simon Bruté, Bishop of Vincennes. American Bishops recruited sisters from Ireland, France, and Germany to provide ministries of education, healthcare, and social service to needy Catholics. These sisters often labored under very difficult conditions, especially when compared to the world they left behind in Europe. In addition, they were forced to respond to anti-Catholic rhetoric and attacks directed at them from nativists. The final section of the chapter focuses on the difficult issue of race and U.S. women religious. Prior to the Civil War, some religious communities located in the South, owned slaves. At the same time, a group of African American Catholic women in New Orleans came together to establish the Sisters of the Holy Family, under the leadership of Henriette Delille. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Catholic sisters and nuns were familiar—if not always welcome—figures on the streets of many cities and towns where Catholics had settled.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Describe Mother Theodore Guerin's conflict with Bishop Celestine de la Hailandière.
- Explain some of the difficulties that women religious faced in the first half of the nineteenth century.
- How did the Sisters of Mercy expand throughout the country from their original foundation in Pittsburgh?
- What role did Sister Mary John play in the burning of the Charlestown convent?
- Discuss the issue of race as it appears in the story of Sister Theresa Maxis and the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Serving through Education

SUMMARY

Most American Catholics experienced women religious in Catholic parochial and secondary schools. Chapter 3 focuses on those sisters who built and staffed the most extensive non-public school system in the history of the United States. The first sisters to work in education were the New Orleans Ursulines (see Chapter 1), when they found themselves administering a boarding school within three months of their arrival. Bishops believed that Catholic schools were the best way to teach Catholicism and citizenship, and they were constantly seeking sisters willing to open yet another school. Religious congregations from Italy and Poland came to this country to educate young immigrants; they had to ensure that their students learned English in addition to reading, writing, and arithmetic. Women religious also assumed responsibility for providing Catholic women with college degrees. In 1895, the College of Notre Dame (Baltimore) opened; four years later, the school's six seniors became the first women to graduate from a Catholic college in the United States. Although declining numbers of sisters and shifting demographics reduced the number of women religious engaged in teaching, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, women religious had expanded their ministry of education beyond the traditional classroom, and were involved in literacy programs, health education, and other non-traditional forms of education.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What role did Elizabeth Seton play in the development of Catholic education in the United States?
- Why did Mother Aloysia Hofer refuse to accept responsibility for any new schools?
- What were some of the difficulties faced by sisters who taught children for whom English was not their first language?
- How did the ministry of education result in divisions among the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph?
- What were the two models followed by Catholic women's colleges?

Serving the Sick

SUMMARY

Women religious played a very important role in the development of Catholic hospitals and health-care facilities. Chapter 4 first focuses on the work sister-nurses performed as they nursed those who fell ill during epidemics, but also notes that women religious nursed the sick and dying who had no other access to health care. During the Civil War, sisters nursed both Union and Confederate soldiers because they were among the very few who had any real nursing experience. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, congregations of women religious were often involved in the establishment of Catholic hospitals to meet the needs of an expanding church. At times, sisters agreed to provide nursing care in remote areas of the United States; an example of this are the sisters who provided health care to lumberjacks working in logging camps. During the twentieth century, some sister-nurses wrestled with issues of race, such as the Sisters of St. Joseph working with the African American community in Selma, Alabama. In addition, some women chose to enter congregations (the Medical Mission Sisters, for example) founded to provide medical care to those in need. As health care underwent dramatic changes in the early twenty-first, American women religious, despite opposition from clerical leaders, supported the Affordable Care Act, demonstrating that despite changes in religious life, sisters and nuns continue to advocate for quality care for all.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How were the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph expected to conduct themselves in conversation with non-Catholic patients?
- Compare and contrast the experiences of the Sisters of Charity and the Oblate Sisters of Providence during the cholera epidemic in Baltimore?
- What were some of the difficulties faced by sister-nurses during the Civil War?
- What is the significance of church leaders permitting sister-nurses to perform surgery and obstetrics?
- How did the Sisters of St. Joseph, Rochester, support the civil rights marchers in Selma?

Serving Those in Need

SUMMARY

Although most American Catholics came into contact with women religious through either education or health care, sisters were involved in a number of other ministries providing service to those in need. Some communities opened orphanages to provide a shelter for children whose parents were either deceased or unable to care for them. Other congregations, such as the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, ministered exclusively to women and girls who were either in trouble or abandoned. Catholic sisters also founded and administered social settlements and provided services for immigrants in need. The Congregation of Divine Providence worked to assist Mexican Americans and help them negotiate the mainstream Catholic Church, and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, founded by St. Katharine Drexel, established schools and ministries dedicated to Native Americans and African Americans. As American Catholics developed an interest in the foreign mission field, religious congregations, such as the Maryknoll Sisters, worked to meet the needs of those living in other countries. American women religious would adapt these ministries of social service and mission to meet the needs of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Give an example of how religious communities began caring for orphans as a result of their work in Catholic hospitals?
- How did issues of race and class complicate the plan to place New York orphans with families in Arizona?
- Why did the Sisters of the Good Shepherd receive so little support from Archbishop John Hughes?
- Why did Katharine Drexel decide not to allow African American women to enter the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament?
- How did Mother Marianne Cope and the Franciscan Sisters of Syracuse, New York, create an environment that demonstrated their willingness to identify with the lepers to whom they ministered?

Praying for the World

SUMMARY

Contemplative nuns, those women religious whose ministry is one of prayer, is the subject of Chapter 6. Women religious in contemplative congregations often found it difficult to establish monasteries in the United States. Bishops were looking for women religious who could support themselves by staffing schools, hospitals, and social service institutions, and worried that contemplative nuns would require support that they were unable or unwilling to provide. The first women religious to arrive in the former British colonies were cloistered Carmelite nuns; other communities such as the Poor Clares and the “Pink Sisters” followed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although it is difficult to document the ways in which contemplative nuns have contributed to the work of the American Catholic Church, members of these congregations believe that by their prayers for the world they too are serving those in need.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did the Carmelites in Port Tobacco adapt their rule to the situation they found in the United States, while remaining faithful the lifestyle promulgated by Teresa of Avila?
- Why were bishops unwilling to allow contemplative nuns to settle in their dioceses?
- How did contemplative communities adapt their lifestyle and prayer schedule to respond to changes taking place in the latter half of the twentieth century?

Redefining Sisterhood

SUMMARY

During the 1950s, women religious began to examine ways to meet the growing need for sisters and adapt their lifestyles to a world that was rapidly changing. A primary focus of Chapter 7 is the impact of the Sister Formation Conference (SFC) on religious congregations. SFC leaders, such as Sister Annette Walters, CSJ, and Sister Emil Penet, IHM, believed that education of women religious was essential for the future of the U.S. Catholic Church, and developed a curriculum designed to provide young sisters with an undergraduate degree before they began teaching in parochial schools. The work of the SFC, combined with the documents produced by the Bishops attending the Second Vatican Council, led many sisters to become involved in struggles for social justice, such as the civil rights movement. As members of religious communities studied papal pronouncements and relevant decrees issued by Vatican II, they often changed rules that had been in place for centuries. Other congregations, however, did not support the changes taking place throughout religious life. The number of women leaving religious life in the 1960s, along with societal changes that occurred during this decade, permanently altered the shape of U.S. religious life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Describe the Everett curriculum and explain its significance for women religious in the latter half of the twentieth century.
- Explain the conflict between the SFC and CMSW. How was the conflict settled?
- How did African American women religious respond to institutional racism within the Catholic Church?
- Using the examples of the habit and the rule, describe some of the changes that took place in religious congregations during the 1960s and 1970s.
- What issues of authority were involved in the conflict between Cardinal James McIntyre and the Los Angeles IHMs?
- How did clerical leaders respond to sisters who chose to challenge the idea that Catholic teaching on abortion was monolithic?

Serving Today

SUMMARY

Women religious of the twenty-first century continue to serve those in need. In addition to ministering in education and healthcare, sisters are now involved in efforts to abolish the death penalty, encourage sustainability, and advocate for equal rights for women within the Catholic Church. Working with the poor in countries torn apart by civil war has placed sisters in great danger, and sometimes cost them their lives. Towards the end of the chapter, the apostolic visitation of women religious conducted by Vatican authorities is discussed.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did Sister Jeannine Grammick respond when asked to discontinue her ministry to gay and lesbian Catholics?
- Describe three ways in which women religious chose to read the “signs of the times” and engage in ministries they believed were most relevant to the contemporary era.
- How and why did Mother Angelica serve a primary representative for Catholic traditionalists?
- How does the story of women religious help historians gain a better understanding of the history of Catholicism in the U.S.?