Opinion
News
Religious Life



Benedictine nuns are pictured in 1900 before the completion of St. Anthony's Hospital in Bemidji, Minn. The image appeared in a 2011 documentary titled "Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America," which chronicled the 300-year contribution of U.S. women religious. (CNS/Courtesy Benedictines of Duluth)



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Gone are the convents filled with sisters draped in long, dark dresses called "habits," clothing from much earlier centuries often topped with starched wimples that squeezed the wearer's face and allowed only a view of chin to just above the eyebrows.

Gone are the Catholic elementary schools filled with children of the baby boom taught almost exclusively by the sisters, who worked for a pittance.

Gone are the motherhouses where young women flocked to be educated and trained in the disciplines of particular religious orders.

Gone, for the most part, are the habits and the women, many of whom left, as did their male counterparts in religious life, in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The much smaller and aging corps of women remaining is often, understandably, viewed as the final remnant of religious life. It is easy to conclude, from that view, that religious life is over.

"Wrong," says Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister, in this episode, a discussion that emerges from her classic book, *The Fire in These Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life.*

The old forms of religious life, the "shape" of it, is certainly a thing of the past. "What's left," she says, "is a culture of young people looking for a way to live out their spiritual life, their contemplative understandings, their need to serve and their commitment to Jesus." Religious life isn't dead. It is changing.

"Risking the Questions" is a joint project of Benetvision and NCR. This podcast has been made possible in part by the generosity of Bill and Jeanne Buchanan. In episode 3, Chittister and her friend and biographer, former National Catholic Reporter editor Tom Roberts, discuss changes to religious life.

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