

## Sister Surveys -- What Might Have Been

Ken Briggs | Oct. 1, 2009 NCR Today

The storm over Rome's investigation of American sisters makes me wish that someone of the stature of the late Sister Marie Augusta Neal were doing the kind of sister surveys for which she was renowned.

Neal, one of the first women to earn a Ph.D. at Harvard, conducted all-inclusive surveys to study the influence of Vatican II's directive to U.S. sisters to renew their communities. The first was in 1966, in the wake of that call, and the second was done in 1982. Combined, they showed solid and increasing support for changes instituted by the congregations: housing, work, prayer and personal growth.

In the current turmoil, such a survey could clear up lots of confusion and misunderstanding. Perhaps there is much more of a live-and-let-live frame of mind among both conservatives and liberals. If a majority of sisters on both sides viewed religious life as a common devotion with multiple expressions, would that make a difference? What do sisters themselves think, apart from their leadership or the local bishop's attitudes or Rome's agenda? That would, of course, assume that sisters had a role in deciding their futures.

Such an inquiry might have made an investigation superfluous and nudged communities toward cooperation and understanding. But the top command had other ideas.

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