

## U.S. women religious have earned place in American history

Jamie Manson | Jan. 18, 2011 | Grace on the Margins

One week before it's set to leave for Dubuque, Iowa, I was finally able to catch the "Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America" exhibition at New York's Ellis Island.

In many ways, the island is a perfect setting for the exhibition, which highlights the immigrant experience of the women religious who came to the New World as missionaries.

Ellis Island can only be reached by boat. Before arriving at the island, there is a scheduled stop at the Statue of Liberty. Viewing Lady Liberty from the front, one gets the impression that she is standing in with both feet firmly planted on the ground, stock still.

But as you sail around the Statue, you notice that her figure has much greater dimension and dynamism. Only one of her sandaled feet is on the ground. Her right leg is positioned behind the left. Her right knee is bent, her heel is raised, and a barely visible broken chain falls near her foot. She is taking a step into new freedom, moving forward to greet all of those voyaging into her port.

A similar experience occurs when viewing the "Women and Spirit" exhibit. Those static images of nuns transform into round, dynamic characters who eluded pirates, ascended mountains, and crossed prairies to seek out America's neediest.

The Statue and the sisters share a lot in common -- and not because they both don (or used to don) headwear that is often parodied or ridiculed. The Emma Lazarus poem engraved on the Lady Liberty's pedestal could easily be applied the sisters depicted in the show:

Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me . . .

"Women and Spirit" chronicles the 300-year history of women religious in America doing precisely this -- and, as a consequence, making unparalleled contributions to our educational, social service, and health care systems.

The show opens with a quote from Sr. Hyacinth Le Connat in 1855. "Need brings out our talent," she writes.

This insight frames the exhibit as it follows the legacy of sisters tending to the most urgent needs of the people. Their work was powerful and effective because they listened to the needs of the people, rather than imposing their own beliefs and services on them. The sisters asked first how they could be of service, and then created their mission around these needs.

They had the courage to go into the dark places of war, disease, and deprivation. An advertisement from the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Aberdeen, South Dakota, demonstrates the risks they

took and the sacrifices they made:

We offer you no salary; no recompense;  
no holidays, no pensions but much hard work;  
a poor dwelling; few consolations;  
many disappointments; frequent sickness;  
a violent or lonely death.

In their selfless giving, the sisters managed to do the work of justice and healing, with little or no support. They begged in the streets and at doorsteps for most of the money they needed to develop their missions. They taught young girls and African American children because they knew they would not get an education otherwise. They tended to wounded Confederate and Union soldiers, because, unlike the armies, they had the experience of running twenty hospitals. They triaged after the San Francisco earthquake and cared for over one hundred children a day at the height of the Polio outbreaks.

And doing all of this, they were -- and continue to be -- the embodiment of the true work of the church.

Their service to the margins of society won the respect of presidents, as seen in both a letter of support from Thomas Jefferson and a letter of admiration from Abraham Lincoln. Their unyielding commitment to the poor and the sick also helped mitigate the anti-Catholic sentiment that existed in U.S. in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Though the exhibit passionately promotes the witness and work of women religious, it does not avoid or revise the unfortunate aspects of their history. It acknowledges the complicity of some communities in racist practices and beliefs.

With admirable honesty, the show makes note of the writings of sisters who owned slaves as well as letters from women of color who were rejected in their requests for postulancy. The organizers also recognize that not all Catholics have warm or inspiring memories of sisters, particularly those who were strict in the classroom.

While recognizing the faults of their past, *Women and Spirit*, also deepens our understanding of the challenges and hardships faced by these women.

Today, one in six people is cared for through Catholic health services. This is an extraordinary feat, given that the sisters who built these systems started out in abandoned buildings with little medical training and even less funding.

As their almshouses transformed into functioning medical facilities, the sisters created nursing programs and modified their habits so that they would be more functional in treating patients. Through this work, the sisters actually entered the professional workplace decades before other women.

Given the countless contributions of these women religious, it must have been a challenge to choose which stories to highlight. These are just a few:

- There is a segment on Katherine Drexel, who built 62 schools and 49 convents between 1915 and 1955 -- including Xavier University, the only school for African Americans in the U.S.
- There are two profiles of women who founded orders of black Catholic sisters in the mid-19th century. Mary Elizabeth Lange, a West Indian born of a Haitian mother, started the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, while Henriette Delille, the descendant of a slave, began the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans. Both orders were dedicated to helping free and enslaved black people.

- Franciscan Sr. Antona Ebo is depicted with other sisters walking alongside Martin Luther King, Jr., in the march to Selma. "I am here because I am a Negro, a nun, and a Catholic and because I want to bear witness," Ebo announced at a press conference.
- There is a moving account of the founding of New York Foundling Hospital by the Sisters of Charity. After a baby was left on the doorstep of their Greenwich Village brownstone in 1869, they began their mission with \$5 and an abandoned building. By 1910, over 27,000 children had been given care by these sisters. Their work continues today through their extensive social services network. What started as a \$5 contribution is now a \$90 million agency providing services to over 13,000 people each year.

After going through the exhibit, one cannot help but marvel at all that has been accomplished by women religious over the past three centuries. The show shatters any images we might have of sisters as simple or angelic -- and allows us to see the genuine faith and entrepreneurial spirit that led these women to make indelible contributions to our social fabric.

Though unintentional, the exhibit gave me further insight into why the hierarchy might be showing reservations and concern about the work of women religious in the U.S.

Given so much achievement, there is no wonder that they might be threatened by the sisters' deep connection with the people, their successful leadership, their organizational prowess, and their unflinching commitment to the Gospel.

The exhibit not only honors the sisters' legacy, it allows them to take their rightful place in American history. And it invites us to move beyond the habits and clickers, and to re-imagine a sister in the same way that Emma Lazarus imagined the Statue of Liberty:

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles.

*To learn more about "Women and Spirit" and view the schedule for its future exhibitions, visit <http://www.womenandspirit.org>*

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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