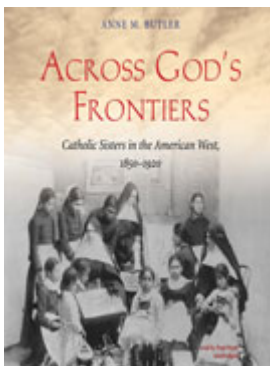


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Vagabond sisters left mark on US history

by Karen M. Kennelly



ACROSS GOD'S FRONTIERS: CATHOLIC SISTERS IN THE AMERICAN

WEST, 1850-1920

By Anne M. Butler

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It was circa 1901. "Now, sisters," Mother Baptista Bowen admonished, "don't come back with N.G. [No Good], written all over you. Be women," she told the little band of Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary that she was sending into the western expanses of Dakota Territory.

These sisters were nothing less than members of the largely forgotten cohort of Catholic sisters, "regional vagabonds," who migrated into that vast landscape known as the West a century and a half ago. In *Across God's Frontiers*, Anne Butler brings these women to life, often in their own words culled from letters, annals and journals in the archives of some 60 congregations scattered throughout 17 states and the District of Columbia.

Three Ursulines from Ohio wrote home lamenting the sudden departure of a discouraged young priest

from the remote Cheyenne reservation in Montana where the nuns had just arrived: "We are all determined not to give up. We are willing to bear anything for the work."

Throughout the frontier West, which in the 1850s included today's Midwest, Butler's vagabond nuns struggled to bring to birth a form of religious life adapted to American needs. They often met with incomprehension on the part of distant motherhouses and Vatican authorities. They stepped outside boundaries set by canon law. They endured all manner of hardships in order to meet the needs of the sick and poor. They stretched roles assigned to them as women by church and society. So what's new?

Modes of transportation were crude. From a Sister of St. Joseph crossing the Powder River in Colorado: "A freshet has washed away the bridge. We were taken over in a new and novel ferry of no less than a tub, with a seat in the center, a piece being cut out of the front, two ropes fastened to the sides. Thus we crossed, one at a time; and I can assure you we enjoyed the ride." Circumstances could be frightening, as when Blessed Sacrament Sisters far from their Pennsylvania convent found themselves caught in the turmoil of the bitter and brutal nationwide Pullman Strike of 1894. The nuns were temporarily marooned miles distant from their New Mexico destination. "We did not feel homesick leaving La Junta [Colorado]," they wrote, "but we did feel scared."

Migration to the West plunged the sisters into world of multiple races, cultures and religions, with poverty as the common denominator. As a Dominican nun put it from her vantage point in a Washington lumber port, "Catholics were few and far between and most of them very poor."

For the sisters, finding enough to eat -- much less financing the schools and hospitals they established almost from the day of arriving at their Western destinations -- was a constant struggle undertaken with grit and humor. "When I am Mother Superior, which will be the day after never," a Sister of Charity wrote to her Leavenworth, Kan., motherhouse amid a yearlong begging tour through California and Nevada, "I will send every Sister on her turn to beg to let them learn by experience, and to let them see how the two classes of people are divided in this world." Her concluding comment had a biblical ring: "The rich man will close his hand on his dollar, while the poor man will give *half* of his."

Whether in rural Montana or North Dakota, or on the city streets of San Francisco, Catholic sisters engaged in work that made an indelible impression on convent life. "You would not believe," wrote the Ursulines after some months among the Cheyenne, "what a strange place this is and what a change it has made in us." Conditions in San Francisco gave rise to a new congregation, the Sisters of the Holy Family, who adopted clothing in keeping with 19th-century secular fashion to facilitate their work in streets and tenements. Older congregations necessarily discarded rules of enclosure enjoined on them by canon law of the day.

Distant officials, whether based in European monasteries or at the Vatican, yielded cautiously to change, finally recognizing Catholic sisters with an active apostolate as real religious with promulgation of the bull *Conditae a Christo* in 1900, but retaining cloister-like restrictions for such congregations in the 1917 revision of canon law. It remained for a later era to revisit the themes Butler illuminates with such empathy and insight.

A powerful sense of vocation got the women through situations that would and did daunt men. If the sisters' Western migrations changed them, their presence also left an indelible impression on the West in the form of schools, hospitals, and a legacy of mercy and compassion that spanned the divides of rich and poor, Catholic and Protestant, Native American, African-American and Caucasian. Initially subject to many of the same prejudices that afflicted society, their early and prolonged contact with peoples of color

moderated racial and religious discrimination among themselves and in the communities they helped build in the West.

These sisters knew what they were about. And in words that rang down more than a century, Mother Bowen of the Presentation Sisters, an immigrant from Ireland, said, "It is not necessary for every woman to be a sister, but it is necessary for every sister to be a woman."

Butler has shown us that these daring young women were, indeed, both.

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