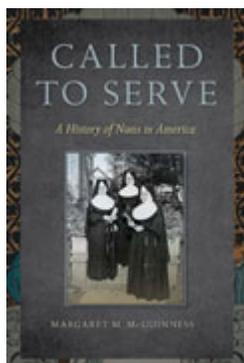


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Author studies sisters in US history

by Paula Kane



CALLLED TO SERVE: A HISTORY OF NUNS IN AMERICA

By Margaret M. McGuinness

Published by NYU Press, \$35

If you are joining the "Nuns on the Bus" this summer, in the flesh or in spirit, it would be nice to take along some good reading. Historical studies of nuns and sisters in the United States seem to be appearing in inverse proportion to the very decline of those sisterhoods.

The latest contribution, *Called to Serve*, is a handy concise history by Margaret M. McGuinness, professor of religion at La Salle University in Philadelphia. Spanning the colonial era to the present, McGuinness takes a collective view of women religious rather than singling out heroic individuals.

In earlier centuries, women religious regarded themselves as servants of the poor, the sick, the immigrant and the student. The post-Vatican II sisterhood, now already a half-century underway, continues to care for those groups, but with the desire (and academic training) to understand what social structures created their needs.

This expanded training and orientation, which enabled sisters to be active in the world, impelled them into new activities: the civil rights movement, nongovernmental agencies, environmental responsibility, opposition to the death penalty, resistance to nuclear weapons, and immigration reform.

Traditionalist sisters comprising a minority of the women religious in America also emerged at the time of the Second Vatican Council, expressing opposition to revising their rules in order to be relevant to the modern world. The conflict led to the creation of a conservative group of major superiors that eventually became the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious. The Vatican recognized the council in 1992, alongside the existing Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which was founded as the Conference of Major Superiors of Women in 1956 and renamed in 1971.

Contrasting styles of sisterhood are demonstrated, too, by a chapter devoted to contemplative nuns and their vocation to prayer, and by another section on religious activism in the present. Serving the public from a cloistered existence has been a primary problem for many women's congregations, consequently much of their histories involve problems of continuity versus transformation of their self-understanding.

Further changes within congregations since Vatican II included experimenting with new methods of prayer, the modification or abandonment of religious habits, and struggles -- often with obstructionist bishops or Vatican officials -- over ministry.

This well-documented and well-written book assesses these issues from the years of the three congregations that served colonial America in the 17th and 18th century -- Ursulines, Carmelites and Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph (now the Daughters of Charity) -- to the unexpected and unprecedented Vatican announcement in 2009 of its intention to investigate American women religious.

The unanticipated outpouring of lay support and sympathy for the nuns and sisters suggested that the Vatican institution under Pope Benedict XVI was lagging behind its own declared principles. Before Pope Francis launches his effort to continue the investigation of American sisterhoods, perhaps he would profit from reading this book.

[Paula Kane is the John and Lucine O'Brien Marous Chair of Catholic Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. Her forthcoming book is *Sister Thorn and Catholic Mysticism in Modern America*.]

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