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FADICA



Understanding U.S. Catholic Sisters Today

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Report by Kathleen Sprows Cummings, Ph.D. for
Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities

In proclaiming 2015 as the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis urged men and women religious to remember the past with gratitude. “Recounting our history is essential for preserving our identity, for strengthening our unity as a family and our common sense of belonging.... We come to see how the charism has been lived over the years, the creativity it has sparked, the difficulties it encountered, and the concrete ways those difficulties were surmounted.”

In the spirit of those words, this report interprets the life of women religious in the United States on a continuum of the past, present, and future. It contends that those who want to ensure the future vitality of U.S. Catholic sisters—their benefactors, colleagues, those they serve, the Catholic Church, and sisters themselves—must have a firm grasp on the contemporary reality of U.S. women’s religious life as well as its historical trajectory.

This FADICA report uses historic comparison to highlight the major findings of the latest sociological studies of U.S. women religious. The report’s author, Kathleen Sprows Cummings, director of the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism at the University of Notre Dame, shares the story of Sister Assisium McEvoy, SSJ (1843-1939), a teacher and congregational leader in Philadelphia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as a way to illuminate present realities of U.S. women’s religious life.

This report challenges stereotypes and pushes against worn out narratives regarding Catholic sisters in the United States. Instead, it presents the latest sociological data, highlights two sources of change that have shaped the reality of current sisters (the influence of the Second Vatican Council and changes in U.S. culture), and identifies **10 key themes for understanding U.S. sisters today**. The report first briefly reflects on how each of these 10 themes were expressed in Sister Assisium’s life and times, before focusing on a summary analysis of current data and the present reality.

10 Key Themes for Understanding U.S. Sisters Today

1 Path to Vocation

Entrance is influenced by encouragement/discouragement from parents, priests, and invitations from/examples of Catholic sisters

2 Ethnicity, Race, and Region

Increased ethnic and racial diversity and international entrants present cultural challenges/opportunities; regions shifting away from Midwest and Northeast

3 Generations and Gender

Congregations are more mono-generational, yet millennial entrants desire intergenerational living; perspectives between genders within the millennial generation inform vocation recruitment

4 Characteristics of Religious Life

Generational differences more than ideological perspectives influence adoption of certain religious practices

5 Age of Entry and Education

Sisters today are, on average, older and more highly educated when they enter religious life than ever before

6 Ministry

Sisters' ministries are increasingly diverse and sisters engage in multiple ministries

7 Collaboration

Congregations are collaborating more with each other and with laity, presenting new challenges/opportunities

8 Charism and Identity

Articulating charism and identity to prospective women and lay collaborators remains a challenge and important factor

9 Leadership

Congregations recognize the need to develop leaders for the next generation of sisters and lay collaborators

10 Sisters' Visibility in U.S. Culture

Awareness of sisters' contributions to Church and society increased among U.S. Catholics, Americans more generally, and within academia



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full report at
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Finally, the report acknowledges several places where more research is necessary:

- A focus on sisters in the southwestern United States
- Reasons U.S. Catholic women give for not entering religious life
- Best practices for women's religious orders to transmit their charism to lay partners

An accompanying campaign and website, WeAreSisters.net, communicates the report's key findings and provides informational and promotional materials in accessible formats. It's a resource for those seeking to become, engage, and support Catholic sisters. The website is hosted by NationalCatholicSistersWeek.org.

Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (FADICA)

FADICA is a network of over 50 private foundations and donors committed to supporting Catholic-sponsored programs and institutions. FADICA's mission is to enable its members to be informed, involved and effective in addressing church needs through their philanthropy.

FADICA has been involved in a variety of projects in support of Catholic sisters throughout the years. Several important initiatives launched by FADICA members have provided valuable assistance to religious congregations in the U.S., including SOAR! (Support Our Aging Religious) which has raised millions of dollars towards retirement funds for U.S. religious orders, and a multi-million dollar support campaign which helped congregations of sisters in New Orleans to rebuild their ministries in the aftermath of Katrina. FADICA members also supported the launch of the new U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking network, a collaborative ministry of sisters.

This report is the result of FADICA's Church Vitality member affinity group's interest in bringing current research on Catholic Sisters to bear in supporting their growth and vitality. It is FADICA's hope that the report spurs interest in the life of Catholic women religious, promotes joyful optimism and support for the vitality and vocations of Catholic sisters, and provides leaders and interested parties with easy-to-read, up-to-date information.



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