



Study Guide for *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America*

Both the *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America* exhibit and documentary were created to tell the virtually untold story of the lives and service of women religious in the United States. The hope has always been that the exhibit and film would not only be informational, but inspirational. The creators of *Women & Spirit* invite those who have visited the exhibit or seen the documentary to take the stories of magnanimity, courage, and fidelity to the Gospel mission portrayed here and let them be agents of transformation in their own lives.

This guide is meant to be used by individuals or groups who are interested in more education, reflection and conversation on this film and its relevance for their own lives. While the guide can be utilized for personal use, it also can easily be adapted for use by groups who may wish to view the film together and engage in reflection and conversation afterward.

Synopsis

The film, *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America*, is a 54-minute documentary that gives an overview of the history of women religious in the United States and their contributions to the growth of the country. It tells the story of sisters as pioneers, institution-builders, educators, healthcare professionals, innovators, and courageous advocates for justice in all realms of society. The film spans several centuries, from the arrival of sisters in the United States in 1727 to the stories of where they are living and working today.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Women & Spirit relates many stories of Catholic sisters and their works in this country. The questions below are offered to engage your own thinking about these stories and how they may speak to your own life. You may choose to engage with all or just some of the questions, but we encourage you not miss the questions under “Stories for Tomorrow.”

Stories of the Unexpected

The film shows that the first pioneering women religious who arrived in this country rapidly had to adapt their works to fit the social conditions in America. The capacity to change to ever-shifting realities in life is imperative today.

In an age where the capacity to modify plans, retool, and develop new proficiencies has become indispensable to survival, what might the dexterity of these pioneering women say to you?

Stories of Ingenuity

Catholic sisters found themselves repeatedly in places of great poverty and destitution. Yet, where there was a need and, although they had few resources, these women found new and innovative ways to respond.

In age of shrinking resources to serve pressing societal needs, what does the undaunted ingenuity of these women inspire?

Stories of Persecution

While receiving accolades for their work, women religious throughout the years have also been the objects of criticism and scorn.

The tide of opinion can so easily change. At you think about experiences in your life when you have been a target of criticism, to what do the stories of women religious and their resiliency under fire call you?

Stories of Turning Weaknesses into Strengths

The transformative story of Mary Ignatia Gavin, CSA has impacted thousands of persons throughout the world. While recovering from a difficult emotional period in her own life, she worked in the admissions department of a hospital, where contrary to common practice, she admitted alcoholics as patients. Her own vulnerability helped her understand that mind and body heal best when treated as one. In 1939, Sister Ignatia partnered with Alcoholics Anonymous co-founder, Dr. Bob Smith, to establish a treatment program for alcoholism at the hospital.

Through what perceived “weakness” in your life might God be inviting you to participate in transformation for the life of the world?

Stories of Solidarity

A part of Catholic sister history that surprises many is the role these women played in times of war, natural disasters, and epidemics. At many moments of massive crisis, women religious responded with immediate assistance – taking leadership to organize survivors and creatively find the means for them to go on.

To what do these stories of human solidarity in the hardest of circumstances invite you?

Stories for Tomorrow

In the documentary, historian Kathleen Cummings poses the questions, “What is the purpose of women’s religious life? Is it to do all of the work of the Church or is it to be a witness to something larger?”

What do you think is the purpose of women’s religious life today and into the future?

What do you believe the world most needs from Catholic sisters today?

What is the unique contribution these women can make and you hope will make?

Background

The Making of the Exhibit and Documentary

In September 2004, five Catholic sisters gathered in the historic motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in St. Louis, Missouri. Appointed by the LCWR, this committee had accepted a mandate. Their mission was to develop an exhibit for the Smithsonian demonstrating how Catholic sisters had helped to shape the history and culture of the United States.

Characterized by rich and diverse educational backgrounds and broad leadership experience, the group nevertheless possessed a grand naiveté regarding museums and exhibits. Soon, however, the sisters developed clear purposes for the project.

- To document the significant leadership role of Catholic sisters in social change, in building the social fabric of the country through education, healthcare, and social service;
- To tell the untold story of the leadership of Catholic sisters in developing and sustaining institutions of culture in the United States and broadening access to them;
- To demonstrate the leadership of Catholic sisters in the public arena at a time when few women occupied leadership positions in the United States.

After visiting Sheila Burke, Chief Operating Officer of the Smithsonian, and Katherine Ott, Curator, National Museum of American History, the sisters realized that they would have to design and finance the exhibit themselves and rigorously compete for the remote possibility of having it mounted at the Smithsonian. Grasping the enormity of the project, Catholic sisters went to work.

The first step was to hold a charrette, an interdisciplinary retreat of about 25 persons whose work defined the broad outlines of the exhibit. Following the charrette the committee initiated two ventures: the artifact search and fundraising. First, the artifact search. LCWR wrote to every congregation of women religious in the United States requesting a digital image of its five best artifacts with a short description of them. The collection resulting from this request provided a rich pool of resources from which to draw. Second, fundraising. Members of the committee traveled the country seeking support, eventually raising 4.1 million dollars. LCWR is particularly grateful to the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation for its gift of one million dollars and to the Catholic healthcare systems of the United States for their essential donations.

While raising funds and collecting artifacts, the committee made the crucial decision of engaging Bob Weis of Design Island who led the creative development of the exhibit design in collaboration with LCWR beginning in 2005. In 2007, Seruto & Co then assembled an award-winning team of designers, writers, producers, and fabricators to develop this concept in rich detail and to execute it with a passion for excellence. Along the way Katherine Ott of the Smithsonian proved an invaluable guide.

On May 15, 2009, the exhibit, *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America* opened at the Cincinnati Museum Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. Later on January 15, 2010 it arrived at its primary destination: The Dillon Ripley Center at the Smithsonian. As of this writing the exhibit, amid rave reviews, has traveled to Cincinnati, Ohio; Dallas, Texas; Washington, DC; Ellis Island, New York; Dubuque, Iowa; and Los Angeles, California where more than one million visitors have viewed it. Future bookings include South Bend, Indiana and Sacramento, California. In January 2011 the American Catholic Historical Association honored the exhibit with its Service to Catholic Studies Award, acknowledging its scholarly and artistic excellence.

Desiring to share such excellence with a wider audience, LCWR in collaboration with Design Island, has produced this DVD. It tells remarkable stories and shows unique artifacts collected for the first time from

sister communities across the country. Narrated by noted author and National Public Radio senior news analyst and ABC political commentator, Cokie Roberts, and featuring interviews with historians, journalists and sisters, this one-hour documentary brings to life the inspiring story of women, both personal and communal, who have greatly helped to shape the American landscape. Using rare archival photographs, video, film and new history unearthed through the research process, the documentary will be a vibrant journey from the arrival of the first sisters in 1727 to sisters working in surprising ways today. Completing the vision imagined in 2004, the documentary *Women & Spirit* embraces the fullness of the life of Catholic Sisters in America.

Catholic Religious Life

This film is about women who have chosen to live consecrated religious life within the Catholic tradition. Religious life is a permanent and public form of life within the Catholic Church that is entered by making a formal profession of vows (typically, poverty, chastity, and obedience) within a particular congregation of sisters. While there are several different forms of religious life, this film focuses primarily on the women who are living apostolic religious life. This form is characterized by mobility for mission, whereby sisters (or women religious) live as “pilgrims,” moving from place to place to serve various needs.

Religious life was transplanted from Europe to the United States, beginning with the arrival of the Ursuline Sisters in Louisiana in 1727. Many other sisters who later came to the United States discovered after their arrival that the ministry they came to do could not be performed within the structures of European-style religious life. Many of the groups of sisters refounded their orders here in the United States and created new forms of living that allowed them to better serve in the New World.

In the early 1800s several hundred new communities of sisters were formed. These women created the parochial school system that served thousands of young people, established Catholic hospitals and social services, and opened more than 150 Catholic’s women colleges, in addition to responding to needs in the country’s most desperate of circumstances found in wars and natural disasters.

In the 1960s, Catholic sisters responded to the call of the Second Vatican Council for the renewal of religious life. These women began to study, dialogue, and make decisions together on matters such as community life, the role of ministry, social activism, prayer, and religious dress. This movement has resulted in a form of religious life that finds women religious less separated from society than they were in the past, better educated, involved in a wide variety of ministerial service, more likely to revise and change elements of their lives based on experience, and more collaborative in the governance of their corporate lives. Catholic sisters continue to reflect upon and revise this life form today.

Leadership Conference of Women Religious

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) is an association of the leaders of congregations of Catholic women religious in the United States. At the time of this writing in 2011, the conference has nearly 1500 members, who represent more than 90 percent of the 59,000 women religious in the United States.

LCWR began at the initiative of the Vatican who sought to bring together the heads of religious orders in national associations. The movement began in 1950 when Pope Pius XII convoked the First General Congress of the States of Perfection, an international gathering of the heads of religious orders. There he told these women that their organized collaboration could make them a powerful instrument for the transformation of society. Updating and renewal, however, were needed first.

In 1956 at a gathering of approximately 235 heads of women's orders in the United States voted to form a national conference, which they named the Conference of Major Superiors of Women of the USA, a name they later changed to Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Since its founding, LCWR has worked to assist its members to carry out more effectively their service of leadership in today's world. Annually the conference offers its members an assembly allowing leaders to benefit from the input of many of the nation's leading scholars, as well as publications, workshops, retreats, think tanks, advocacy activities, and more. All of these resources are designed to enhance members' capacities and skills for effective leadership in the present environment and into the future.



www.lcwr.org

www.womenandspirit.org