RESISTANCE
Susan Francois, CSJP

Experience
Resistance as a response to injustice and social sin has received a surprising signal boost in 2017. From protests against police brutality and executive orders, to creative displays at marches for women’s rights or climate justice, or even as a trending hashtag on social media, resistance is suddenly on the radar of the body politic.

We do well to remember however that resistance is not a new creation, but rather is at the root of our Christian experience. Christian resistance to evil has always taken root within a particular social context and as such requires navigating a web of complex social, political, and economic relationships.

This complex web of relationships certainly faced the ordinary Christians who chose to resist the extreme social sin of the Nazi Holocaust during the last century. These Christians faced evil by acting from within their own spheres of influence, frequently paying with their own lives. Many Germans of course supported Adolf Hitler and his regime when they assumed power, while others chose a position on the sidelines. What is less well known is the story of the thousands of ordinary citizens arrested or executed for acts of resistance: 300,000 German political resisters were in prison by 1939; 5,000 active resisters were executed; and 15,000 members of the military were killed for desertion or other actions deemed subversive. Beyond these numbers, still other ordinary citizens were able to carry out meaningful acts of resistance protecting the life and dignity of neighbors, coworkers, and even strangers.

Social Analysis
As we discern how to resist the social sin and injustice of our time, it is worth considering what enabled thousands of ordinary people to counter the dehumanization of the Nazi regime through acts of resistance to extreme social sin in their daily lives. Political psychologist Kristine Renwick Monroe, in her book Ethics in an Age of Terror and Genocide: Identity and Moral Choice (Princeton University Press, 2012), offers a critical insight.

Monroe analyzed extensive interviews with rescuers/resisters, bystanders, and Nazi supporters to examine their diverse responses to genocide. She concludes that in all cases, moral identity constrained the response to evil. In other words, one’s identity—how one sees Germans of course supported Adolf Hitler and his regime when they assumed power, while others chose a position on the sidelines. What is less well known is the story of the thousands of ordinary citizens arrested or executed for acts of resistance: 300,000 German political resisters were in prison by 1939; 5,000 active resisters were executed; and 15,000 members of the military were killed for desertion or other actions deemed subversive. Beyond these numbers, still other ordinary citizens were able to carry out meaningful acts of resistance protecting the life and dignity of neighbors, coworkers, and even strangers.

As we engage with the movements of resistance emerging in our global and local communities, we have a transformative role to play as women religious rooted in the Gospel.
oneself in relation to self, other, world, and agency—radically influences one’s ethical response and actions. Monroe proposes thinking of identity as providing a menu of moral choice. Just like pizza is not an option at a Japanese restaurant, certain moral actions are not on the menu depending on your moral identity.

Monroe found that bystanders were led to inaction by their self-identity as weak and feeling that they had little control over the situation. Their common response was, “But what could I do? I was one person alone against the Nazis.” Supporters of the Nazi regime, paradoxically, saw themselves as victims whose well-being was under threat. They were willing to strike preemptively at target groups out of a perceived need for self-preservation. They also saw themselves as being influenced by forces beyond their control.

In contrast, members of the rescuer/resister group saw themselves as connected with everyone and able to effect change. Monroe discovered that they were the only group who had integrated the value of human life into their worldview. She concludes that moral identity is the force that moves us beyond thoughts and feelings to action in the face of injustice and social sin.

Our experience and Christian tradition teaches us that resistance to social sin is possible and serves to affirm inherent human dignity and the integrity of creation, even if it does not actually serve, by itself, to end the social sin.