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The Harvest of Ministry

Exploring the Ministry of Catholic Sisters

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Abstract

Women religious serve in a range of ministries, often with the most disenfranchised in society. The nature of sisters' ministries has often been reduced to its external character – providing education, health care, or social services. What has been less understood is the enduring nature of the forces underlying these ministries. This study draws on six focus group conversations involving 33 Catholic sisters. The study surfaces key themes that frame a better understanding of the work of today's women religious. These themes can be adapted for others who seek to work with people in need.

Introduction

Catholic sisters have had a significant role in North American society, and these women have undertaken a dramatic breadth of service and ministry over more than two centuries (McNamara). Driven by changing societal structures and other forces, a decline in the number of women religious has taken place in the U.S. and across many western nations (Ebaugh, Lorence, and Chafetz). The work and contributions of Catholic sisters over time in the United States have been detailed in numerous book-length accounts (see for example, Fialka; Kauffman; Koehlinger; Lewis and Appleby; McCauley; McNamara; Munley; Taylor). Such descriptions have often discussed the role of sisters in specific geographic regions or in categories of ministry (e.g., health care, education) (Small and Csank; Small, Csank, Ott, and Wills). In addition, authors have frequently examined the religiosity of Sisters as well as the various roles they have taken on in religious and other contexts (Briody and Sullivan; Juteau

and Laurin; Petersen and Takayama; Wallace; Wittenberg). Though there has been considerable description of the work of Sisters, less work has been done examining the underlying nature of their approach to direct service. The present study seeks to extend the knowledge base by documenting how Catholic Sisters think about their ministry and what can be learned from these observations. This work focuses on sisters in apostolic communities, those whose mission includes ministry in communities such as education, health care, and pastoral work. The experiences of sisters in contemplative communities, who live communal lives of prayer and contemplation, are not a focus of the present study.

Research Purpose

The broad objective of this research is to describe the unique approach of women religious and to inform others who now or in the future strive to help people in poverty or with other vulnerabilities. Consideration of the themes can especially benefit faith-based agencies as they adapt to increasing needs, fewer resources, and a need to develop new leaders. This work builds on an earlier survey of Catholic sisters in active ministry in the Cleveland region (Fischer and Bartholomew). While the earlier survey offered an overview of the ministries, this study describes the fundamental character of their ministry and vision for the future, based on perspectives shared in these focus groups, and centers on the charism of the sisters' congregations. Charisms are divinely conferred gifts or powers that usually stem from the lived experiences of the order's foundress and, therefore, shape the distinct spirit that gives a religious community a particular character. For example, the charism of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Augustine (CSA) is "Charity – namely – love of God, particularly as we find God incarnate in our neighbor, motivates us. We seek to love one another and each person we encounter." The charisms explored here only relate to communities in active (apostolic) ministry. Sisters in contemplative communities would likely identify their charism in very different ways.

Methodology

Catholic sisters were invited to take part in a focus group discussion of their ministries and the work of women religious. Invitations were sent to 101 sisters who had participated in a 2009 survey and agreed to be contacted about related work; also, an open invitation was made at the April 9, 2011 *Women With Spirit* convocation, a daylong meeting of over 240 sisters from northeastern Ohio. It was convened as a follow-up to the experience of hosting the national exhibition *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America* at the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage in Beachwood, Ohio in 2010. A total of 44 sisters responded with an interest in participating in the focus groups.

During the period April 28–May 24, 2011, six focus groups were held involving 33 sisters, approximately 20% of the number of sisters who took part in the 2009 survey. Sisters from 8 congregations participated in the focus groups (See Table 1); 17 (51.5%) had attended the *Women With Spirit* convocation in April 2011. All six of the focus groups were held at a conveniently located Catholic senior care center; sessions were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed.

Table 1. Congregations of Sisters Involved in the Research

Order of Women Religious	Survey Population	2009 Survey	2011 Groups
Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland (OSU)	88	49	12
Sisters of Notre Dame (SND)	71	44	8
Congregation of Saint Joseph (CSJ)	25	14	1
Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis (SSJ-TOSF)	24	12	2
Sisters of the Humility of Mary (HM)	15	10	3
Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati (SC)	12	10	4
Sisters of the Holy Spirit (CSSp)	7	5	2
Other Orders	46	20	1
Total	288	164	33

The first column provides the number of sisters in active ministry who were contacted about participating in a written survey. The second column provides the number of sisters who completed the 2009 survey. The third column provides the number of sisters in the 2011 focus groups.

The focus groups used a structured interview approach in which the facilitator led the group through a set of eight questions. These questions engaged the sisters in a discussion of topics such as the attributes of faith-based services; the nature of charism and its role in ministry; the identity of women religious and how it impacts the work; the varied nature of ministry settings and how it impacts ministry; and planning for a successful transition of the work over time.

The authors reviewed written transcripts and listened to the audio-tapes of the focus groups and used an open coding technique to identify themes. Once preliminary themes were identified, the authors used a consensus coding approach to enhance reliability. Quotations were organized by theme across the six focus groups and then quotations were selected to highlight the central aspects of each theme. Word cloud depictions (“wordles”) were developed to provide a visual representation of the 25 terms and phrases most frequently used by sisters that link to each theme.

Findings

Many themes emerged from the rich conversations with sisters. These themes were organized in two ways. First, themes were organized according to their temporal quality – those that were more focused on the background of the sisters’ ministry, those that are present-focused and descriptive of “what it is” in regard to ministry, and those that are more future-focused and address “what it can become” in regard to ministry. Second, the themes were organized according to gospel-based imagery of gardening or farming. This imagery was frequently cited by sisters, so we have chosen to draw on this as a way to convey the themes. Table 2 shows the three temporal foci, the four thematic areas, and the associated

sub-themes. The image draws on the four phases of gardening – sowing seeds, cultivation, preparing for harvest, and ensuring future harvests.

Table 2. Framework for Themes

Temporal Focus	Thematic Areas	Sub-Themes
How it came to be	Sowing the seeds and deep roots of love	Charism at the Core Leveraging Community Life & Formation
What it is	Cultivating love and nurturing God's people	Care for People as Defining Quality The Power of Presence What Sisters Receive
What it can become	Come with us into the fields Ensuring a hope-filled harvest	In Collaboration Not Competition Promoting Leadership Development Sustaining the Commitment and Planning for Transitions

Discussions evoked the image of ministry as threads, which individually have limited strength but collectively, woven together, are both strong and beautiful and can be woven across time. As one sister noted, however, some ministries are “hanging by a thread” and this reminds us of the delicate nature of many ministries and the need for attentiveness to them.

Sowing the Seeds and Deep Roots of Love

A first pair of themes connects with the foundation of religious life that shapes the character of the work of women religious and allows them to serve others effectively. Here, charism, formation, and the nature of community life emerge as defining aspects that enable sisters to successfully sow the seeds of love through ministry.

The charism of sisters' congregations serve as the “guiding principles” around which all ministry is organized. Charism, which stems from the Gospels, defines the spirit of the congregation and the formulation of their call to serve. More overarching than mission, charism traces its origin to the congregation's foundresses.

Variouly referred to in the focus groups as the “active ingredient,” “propelling energy,” and “spiritual DNA,” charism is the thread that links sisters to one another and to the people they serve. In this sense, charism is both timeless and evolving to meet the ever-changing needs of the people. Figure 1 shows a depiction of words most frequently used in describing this theme.

Figure 1. Charism



Charism is both a conceptual understanding of the call to ministry and a description of what ministry looks like on the ground.

I think the charism . . . is to be a practical expression of concern for others and to help people come to grips with who they are and what they can do with what they've got, so I think that's what we do all in the light of gospel . . .

Common to their description of charism is the sense that it has both enduring qualities but is also responsive to the changing face of need in the communities they serve.

And so part of our charism is just responding in whatever way we can with the resources we have to the needs that come down the pike, and it has resulted in our being very diversified at this point and continuing to discern what are the needs now . . .

Though they speak of their charism as central to their call and work, it also challenges them to push themselves in their ministry.

. . . our charism is humility, and for us that means authenticity, integrity, speaking the truth, being very down to earth. So the images for us are humus and humor and hospitality, and it's a very tough charism to sometimes live, but I believe it's the grace, the energy that attracted me to the community in the beginning, and it's also the grace that moves us forward now in times that are really tough.

As a central feature of ministry, they note that the communication and infusion of the charism to lay partners is an undertaking for women religious. Interestingly, often the identification of the charism is most apparent to those with whom they work. One sister observed, “. . . that those who associate with us can seem to name it better than we can do it for ourselves is always fascinating to me.”

The lifestyle of sisters, as vowed women in community, gives them freedoms that allow them to take chances, be supported, have time to reflect, and access resources in their work in ways that others often cannot. They are unified in their view that, because they have unconditional support from their community, they have the freedom to put their entire selves into ministry and go wherever the needs are. In addition, they use their status as religious women and organizational leaders to elevate others – both clients and lay co-ministers. There is an authenticity to the life of a sister, one that is countercultural, that causes people to respect, listen, and learn from them.

One is it comes out of our vowed commitment: poverty, chastity, obedience. Although that may sound very limiting, it is extremely free. It's very free. . . Yet I don't own anything, you know. I really don't own anything, and I'm not feeling bad. I am not bound in the same way to someone as you are in marriage. There is a freedom to that that it's a little bit hard to describe, but it is truly a freedom, and obedience, the whole concept of obedience you know it's just. . . So I think there's a freedom that comes that you bring to whatever it is that you're doing . . .

Sisters identify numerous aspects of community life that allow them to be more effective in their work. A key aspect is the mutual support and reinforcement that they receive from each other.

. . . as a sister I have thousands of people behind me that are pushing me and moving me and saying "You're doing a good job," and if I didn't have anybody telling me that, I don't think I would get up in the morning you know and go.

I'm not alone in what I do, we do have the support of congregations and that support is pretty powerful you know in terms of encouraging you, telling you to go farther . . . but you know you're not alone, and in today's world so many other people that you're working with, they're very alone.

Another attribute is the ability to nurture oneself spiritually, an activity that is encouraged and fully supported by the community.

I have that community support, but I also have the opportunity by choice to be a reflective person and have the time to be a reflective person, and so I really can and am called to through my commitment to really strive to be very focused as a gospel person with gospel responses. So there's a focus. It's not just the identity.

They also feel they are able to take risks and change course if necessary when others often cannot or will not take such risks due to their life situation.

So there is something to devout life that does allow a level of freedom that goes beyond time, that goes to levels of risks that we can take that other people aren't free to take because of their relational commitments and their marriage and family.

. . . what sustains that attitude of poverty over the years is being willing to reduce your needs and being very willing to go on a moment's notice wherever you might be needed next. It gives you tremendous flexibility. And I know we all complain when we move . . . but really we own very little I think, you know, and it gives you a lot of freedom, so you just can go wherever you need to go.

Cultivating Love and Nurturing God's People

A second thematic area has to do with how sisters undertake their work in ministry, that is, in translating their charism into action. Themes that were evident here were a distinct focus on the care of people and on the power of presence. In addition, they were quick to note how they are personally nurtured in the process of caring and being present.

Sisters believe their work is more effective because people feel welcomed, comforted, and cared for in an authentic way. They highlight their role in building relationships with those they serve, affirming the dignity of the person and serving as a catalyst for personal development. One sister noted happily "When I was teaching . . . one of the little boys when he had me as a teacher came in, he says 'Oh good, I've got a nun,' he says 'because when you get a nun you get a second mother.'"

They uniformly expressed commitment to equality with those they serve, even – or especially – when society does not project this equality. This translates into a client's feeling of being cared for, rather than being helped or served.

[The clients] have this sense that they will be respected, they'll be cared for, they'll be protected. They don't have to be fearful.

But it's the way that we work with them. It's always encouraging them, hopefully, to move forward, to do a little bit more, to try to change what they've come to know as their way of living . . .

This feeling extends beyond experiences with the individual sister to an association with the sister-sponsored programs and environments.

. . . the concept of caring is the sense of community that's created in our institutions where people truly feel welcomed, and I think that's really rooted in gospel values, and I think that's what people want.

Sisters are seen as being "with the people" both within and beyond the structures of the Catholic Church. This has created a strong bond with the people and neighborhoods they serve. They are seen as having durable commitments to the people they serve. One sister quoted a neighborhood resident as saying "churches close, sisters don't." Sisters provide a human presence that results in a direct influence in ministry, as well as an indirect influence as they work with priests and the laity.

I think they [the people] find that they're accepted for who they are, where they are, and they're not afraid of rejection. They have the room to grow where they need to go and in their time.

In all of this there's a level of commitment too, that people see and sense that we've been where we are over the long haul and it's because we're faith-based that we're able to do this . . . Somehow our faith grounds us enough to be able to stay with it in the good times, the rough times, the thin times and the thick times, the whatever . . . I mean when we look at our institutions and structures, there is a long-term commitment and we have a history, and that history continues to give us momentum . . .

Sisters see themselves serving the mission of the broader Church but acknowledge that lay people often distinguish between them and the institutional Church. One sister described this sentiment as "Sisters have not abandoned them . . . there is a real sense of confidence that this is the group that won't abandon them." Whether it was the pain caused by the child abuse crisis internationally – or the loss experienced as churches closed in the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland during 2009–2010 – sisters remained a steady and distinct part of the Church and a positive healing presence.

So my presence among them, without me saying anything, gives them some hope. It soothes a little of that hurt. So when you talk relationship or if you want to say presence, I think that is what very often speaks louder than anything else we do is that we're there.

Sisters speak of presence in both tangible (physical) and intangible (through prayer, bond) terms, with both being crucial manifestations of being with the people. Ultimately, their presence has to do with a feeling of unity and solidarity with the people in the communities where they live. Sometimes it translates into sisters residing near the people they serve. Through prayer, sisters can extend their presence much further.

. . . we live there. We live there all year long and we're right in the heart of the urban area.. we're right there in the neighborhood with them. We don't go somewhere else at night. I think that helps a lot with our relationship. We know the noise they're dealing with. We're experiencing the same dangers, the same messiness . . .

Though sisters give much in their ministry, they are quick to point out that they receive a great gift through their ability to serve. In fact, they uniformly expressed the sentiment that whatever they give in ministry, they receive much more in return.

. . . when I see people that are living on the edge of survival and living that way with dignity, it just constantly makes you aware that the faith is alive and well and thriving . . .

. . . it's in giving that we receive, but isn't it in serving whoever comes to us, no matter what the need is, is serving the poor and serving the greatest need in the church because that is the most pressing need at the time? And often I have found in ministry, when I'm giving, when it seems like I'm giving to somebody else, I'm really receiving more back.

Some sisters spoke of feeling a general sense of gratitude from those they have served and highlighted specific instances where the response of an individual offered them a crucial gift.

. . . I remember he said to me “why are you helping me?” and I remember saying to him, “You are a very good man, I believe that,” and I said “So this is not hard.” So this letter said “No matter how long I have to live, I will never forget that somebody said to me I am a good man.” . . . I think that for me, I think just the gift of the awareness of God’s love for people, God’s goodness and his reflection in the people that God has made and the fact that God cares for them, that that’s powerful. That’s a powerful grace in your life.

The broader experience of service has allowed them to observe and retain a sense of fulfillment as well as an affirmation of the salience of their charism.

Come With Us Into the Fields

A third thematic area relates to what is needed to bring ministry to fruition. Among these, the work of ministry is seen as requiring a collaborative spirit and the cultivation of new leaders and leadership skills. Sisters also see themselves as uniquely suited to advocate for better systems and conditions that affect the poor and vulnerable.

Sisters know the value of collaboration and have increasingly pursued such approaches in recent years. They have seen both sides; in the early days, their religious communities had varying degrees of restriction or reluctance to reach beyond their own community and work together. In Cleveland, St. John’s College, established to educate women religious to become nurses and teachers, helped nurture the skill and desire to collaborate. One sister observed, “We always partner with others and always have from the beginning. It’s not about us. It’s more about mission.” Nevertheless, it has taken the challenges of today’s environment – fewer sisters, constrained resources, and growing needs – to firmly root the commitment to, and confidence in, collaboration.

Sisters are particularly good at recognizing the gifts of individuals and in building relationships at all levels; this makes them more effective at collaboration. Their willingness to engage in collaboration stems in part from their selfless view of the work, with a focus on the end goals and making use of whatever means available to get the job done. They note the value of “figuring it out together” in order to work around barriers.

It’s not about us at all. It’s about the mission, and we’ll figure out a way to do it. If God sees this is what we’re called to do, then we’re going to figure it out together and we all bring something of our gifts and talents and our communities’ gifts and talents to the work at hand. So, that impact is something, and people keep saying, “Well who’s in charge?” Well it’s not that kind of an organization. We’ll figure it out together.

They see a natural relationship between the manifestation of charism and the call to be collaborative, and that these work together.

. . . are just pieces and parts of what I find my community about but also in collaboration with a lot of other congregations who are using some thread of their charism that brings them to that, but our different charisms in that

collaborative effort really mesh and create a very strong tapestry as an image or an underpinning . . .

Collaboration is understood as a means to an end and must bring about added value to the work to be worth undertaking.

I think out of our needs come the goal of collaborating, and so that's what we're searching for right now is that we can't answer all those needs, and so because of that we want to work together to make things better for children, make things better for families or life in general . . . we're propelled as very authentic forms of collaboration, rather than "Well it's nice to work together." No, it's very real and purposeful.

Sisters see particular value in collaboration to address systemic problems and conditions. This includes being willing to question or advocate for people within existing systems for serving people's needs where change is needed. It was noted that though they were drawn into hierarchical structures (e.g., hospitals, schools, parishes) over time, there is a sense that they are now trying to envision and develop collaborative initiatives to meet the growing needs of the people.

. . . we tend to step out of the organizational structure and form new organizational structures to meet the needs . . . but we tend to make a connectivity between the structures we create and the structures that we live . . . we make it fit somehow, and I think that's really part of our legacy. Sometimes it's almost we find the ability sometimes I believe to fit a round peg into a square hole, you know, and people don't even realize it until maybe 10, 15, 20 years down the road and then reflect back and say "Oh. Oh well that was because the Sisters did it."

There is an impressive history of women religious assuming leadership roles with little training or experience in the field. Now, they seek to call forth and nurture the leadership skills in fellow sisters, lay partners, and those they serve to strengthen and continue the ministry. One sister referred to "a sense of tenacity that sisters bring that's Gospel-based," and that this fuels a commitment to leadership. Another observed "I think we do that, and I think sisters do that well, find the positive piece in there and then encourage people to improve in particular areas." Figure 2 shows a depiction of words most frequently used in describing this theme.

Within their communities sisters acknowledge the importance of differing skill sets and callings. While some are called to leadership and advocacy, others are called to direct service. A full range of callings is needed for the community to be effective, and all of these are to be nurtured.

. . . we're encouraged to become the best teacher or social worker or nurse. We're given opportunities for training, I mean, and encouraged to go as far as we can in our education and to learn from one another. Now that mentoring process that happens to community is really a big part to helping us to be the best.

. . . having people so trained and empowered and immersed in our charism that lay leadership will partner with us in that for a while and eventually, who knows, the partnership may continue as co-mission effectiveness.

Sisters highlight the crucial role to be played in cultivating leadership in others, particularly lay partners. They seek to empower others to use their own gifts to strengthen and sustain the ministry. The conscious engendering the capacity of leadership in lay partners also allows them to extend the scope and scale of ministry that would otherwise be possible.

. . . one person can't do everything and so you trust, you delegate, you encourage, you appreciate all the gifts of the people around you, recognizing that even though as the Administrator or whatever it is, that your job is to encourage other people . . . your leadership is really encouraging the gifts you see in other people and bringing that forth in them . . .

Figure 2. Leadership



Ensuring a Hope-filled Harvest

A final thematic area is to ensure the future of the harvest. Sisters noted that the attentiveness to how needs change over time is tied to the nature of charism as well as to the effectiveness of ministry. They envision a future where more lay partners are called to execute the work of ministry and provide key leadership in these endeavors.

Sisters seek to use the skills already described, especially collaboration and leadership development, in an intentional way. They are well aware of the need to prepare for transitions in their work, with an eye toward ensuring that the people’s evolving needs are effectively met over time. In fact, one sister stated bluntly, “. . . our obligation was and continues to be the forming of others for the future because there are not enough of us to continue.” Figure 3 shows a depiction of words most frequently used in describing this theme. Two key elements are apparent.

Intentional transitions – One is that the notion of planned transition is inextricably linked to the theme of leadership development.

. . . if the transition is “I am grooming leadership,” and “I am transmitting the mission and I’m making the charism a part of who we are and I’m grooming leadership to take my place,” I think that’s very hopeful, ‘cause that’s really planning.

I think there is some entrepreneurial sense to love that goes beyond just meeting a need . . . that there really is hope . . . to engender that courage and inspiration to nurture people to be able to do this on their own . . . the sisters won’t need to be there . . . They’ll be needed for some other kind of ministry and that need will take them elsewhere.

Figure 3. Sustaining the Commitment/Transitions



Becoming advocates – Sisters increasingly see the value of advocacy and a role for them, working collaboratively to be a “voice for the voiceless.” As advocates sisters are powerful internal and external leaders. As a group they bring a record as highly educated and accomplished women, along with their status as moral authorities working for social justice.

As they increasingly encourage lay partners to take on leadership roles, women religious can serve as advocates and take on other emergent roles. They acknowledge that as vowed women they are particularly effective in taking on the task of empowering others and serving as advocates for change.

. . . we are the ones who are best able to impact change and that may take a long time, but we can empower others as advocates to bring that change about, and I think we're motivated to do that where others may not. So I think in spite of the constraints, we're probably better able to bring about institutional change than most anybody, and we're motivated to do it.

I have learned the essential role of advocacy in social change. In other words, really working as high up the river as you can get . . . you've got to get to where the power is to change the system to get the effect down here. So I think the combined work of religious women who take on advocacy is enormous.

As sisters collaborate and empower others to take on leadership roles, they have more time to advocate for upstream social change that helps those involved in direct service. And, at all times, they continue to minister through prayer.

Future Directions

Women religious have a deep knowledge of how to serve the needs of those who may feel lost within existing service systems. They have made it their mission to stay attuned to changing needs, gaps in the social service system, and to adapt their responses to meet evolving needs. One sister observed, "Sisters don't do things to make the daily paper. They do things to do them . . . the point is not to make a name for yourself or for your order or whatever. The point is to do the work . . ." Beyond showing the value of having a sense of humility about the work, the experiences of Catholic sisters can inform the efforts of nonreligious in their desire to better serve those in need. Perhaps most salient among these are attention to charism, collaboration, and leadership development. Collaboration and leadership transitions are recurring topics in discussions about nonprofit management and promoting effective service delivery. The experiences of sisters informs our thinking by affirming the importance of these efforts not simply as methods to achieve organizational sustainability, but to better serve the underlying needs of the people. The translation of the role of charism to secular applications is more challenging, but fits well with the notion of nonprofit staff aligned with an organization's mission in a nonprofit settings. As sisters live and demonstrate the charism of their community so, too, staff at nonprofit and community organizations can be more effective in their roles by embracing the mission and ethos of their organization. This places a portion of the burden on the organizations themselves to ensure their mission is well articulated and understood by its staff.

Sisters see great promise in strategies that broaden leadership, promote collaboration, and extend the charism of their religious communities to lay partners. Collectively, these efforts will allow them to focus attention to areas where they have significant expertise and effectiveness, such as staying in touch with the needs of the people, serving as advocates for change, and being present, both physically and spiritually. Their own imagery promises an

abundant future for their ministries. With their foundation in religious life, enduring commitment to the care of others, and current focus on collaboration, leadership development, and advocacy, women religious can continue to be a major force for good in our communities. Nonetheless, sisters are aware of the challenges they face.

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