

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Sisters Michigan, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe; *Building Sisterhood: A Feminist History of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.* Women and Gender in North American Religions. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997. xxiv + 392 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8156-2741-8; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-2737-1.



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This marvelous history of the congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IMH), based in Monroe, Michigan will appeal to a wide audience of scholars, women religious, those interested in women's history, and anyone educated by Catholic sisters. The authors themselves note on the very first page that the book is written for "readers of every persuasion who love to discover humanity's story told through diverse lifestyles" (xiii).

It is especially appropriate that this book on the history of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is reviewed for H-Communal-Societies. Indeed, the reader interested in intentional communities is likely to be drawn to this volume written by a group of IMH sisters. Not only is this a book on the history of one of the longest-lived intentional communities in the United States, but the book itself is also the product of a community/communal effort. For readers interested in the ways intentional communities work this volume provides a double benefit—a history of how a long-term and successful community is built, and how that community produced this fascinating book. The sections written describing the process also demonstrate a feminist praxis, which will be of great benefit to those interested in the mechanism and outcome of such work.

In the Foreword, Dorothy McDaniel, I.H.M. records how *Building Sisterhood* came to be written. In 1988 a group of sisters of the Monroe, Michigan Immacu-

late Heart of Mary congregation proposed creating a history that would incorporate a feminist interpretation of their community and the historiographical methods of women's history. The "Claiming Our Roots" project (the word COR is also Latin for "heart") described in the book's foreword, afterword, and appendix traces the communal and feminist approach to this work and the conscientious effort to reflect the history of the IMH congregation's community structure. The introduction is titled "The Concentric Circles of Sisterhood," and reflects the community(ies) that produced this volume. After hundreds of hours of discussion and work, the ten COR members came to agree on guidelines for their project. For these women the process was a crucial component of the final history that was produced. The COR group decided to find editorial assistance from outside of their congregation. Margaret Susan Thompson, well known for her extensive work on the history of women religious, was asked to write sections which place the essays into the larger context of women's history and the specific history of women religious. In addition, true to the IMH's congregation central mission of education, the COR group included in the book several helpful appendices, lists of contributors, and lists of abbreviations of immense value to the reader outside the IMH world.

The structure of the book itself replicates the "design" of the larger IMH community as lived by the writers.

Essays in the first section of the book define the center and the spiritual heart of the congregation, from its founding to the present. The first chapter of the book, called "Groundings," explores the very early history of the congregation with its complex narrative of class, race, gender, and church hierarchy. Over the last one hundred fifty years, this history has been open, hidden, re-evaluated, as needed, by the church and/or the sisters themselves. With this essay, the IMH congregation reclaims the mixed-race Sister Theresa Maxis as foundress of the sisters in Michigan and as a woman who challenged the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Theresa Maxis was removed from leadership of the congregation, both physically and in the minds of subsequent sisters. This history is revealed in this first chapter, and so are the ways in which subsequent members of the congregation sought to hide this interracial past, and others had the courage to seek it out and reveal it once again in the mid-twentieth century. An essay on the history of spirituality and prayer in the IMH congregation forms another aspect of the "Groundings" chapter. Its placement in this chapter indicates the role of prayer as the spiritual center for the sisters of the congregation and of the COR project. This essay reveals the history and changes in the role and practice of prayer over the last one hundred forty years and what it discloses about the congregation itself, women religious, and their role in the Catholic Church.

Other essays cover various aspects of the Monroe congregation. The histories of individual women, who founded the community and made it live, are balanced with essays on the aspects of the whole community such as education, health, financial considerations, and community growth. There are intriguing insights here that have implications for ideas about community, the history of women religious, and all women. In a section about the life cycle of sisters in the congregation, Joan Glisky, I.M.H. and Nancy Sylvester, I.M.H. explore the history of friendship at the Michigan congregation and how its place in the community changed over time. Often tinged with a sense of the forbidden, friendship was seen by some as a hindrance to spirituality, to the idea of community. The authors report that sadly, some sisters never made personal friends within the community. For others, friendship was a necessity, a crucial way of building community, and the IMH family. Some women reported that friendship with specific sisters in the large congregation sustained them throughout their life and enriched their IMH world. Indeed, Amata Miller, I.M.H. writes of the long friendship between Mother Ruth Hankerd, I.M.H. and Sister Miriam Raymo, I.M.H. and the role that rela-

tionship played in the building of the motherhouse and of the great expansion of the congregation in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

In her essay, "The Roughest Sort of Prose," on the history of the socialization of new sisters, Mary Ann Hinsdale, I.M.H. presents fascinating examples, which have implications for women religious and other women as well. Through the interviews that Hinsdale conducted and the use of archival sources, the reader learns of the ways in which IMH sisters defined new meanings for womanhood for themselves in a setting somewhat apart from men and the outside world. Sections on dress, female beauty, work, and their meanings in community and the changes over time are the most intriguing. For example, one sister interviewed by Hinsdale reported that in the 1950s: "In the novitiate we redefined what counted as beauty, or looking good and feeling good about yourself as a woman. The standard became a clean-shaven head and a clean [head] band" (pp. 138-139). The same sister reported that an un-ironed hem of the habit "became a sign of beauty" (p. 139). In the 1950s, U.S. women outside of such a community would never have defined womanliness or beauty in these terms. In fact, a shaven head or un-ironed clothes would have been considered signs of physical or mental illness, poverty, and unwomanliness. However, many IMH novitiates and sisters did view their success as women and congregation members in such ways, thus taking on or creating a different set of standards for themselves.

The essays on hospital care and care of mentally ill sisters give significant insights into this community and issues of health care for women. Although the mission of the IMH congregation is to educate the young women of the Detroit area, the congregation also remains responsible for the health and well being of their sister members. In the early years of the twentieth century, an infirmary staffed by nursing sisters was built at the IMH motherhouse. It maintained a sense of being "at home" for those women who were ill. In the 1930s, an adjacent sanitarium was built for sisters who had contracted tuberculosis. Like laywomen in the outside world, IMH sisters often learned their nursing skills "on the job" when caring for members of their family. This changed in the 1970s, with professional skilled sisters and lay workers providing care for ill community members when appropriate.

In her essay on emotional and mental illness in the congregation, Carol Quigley, I.M.H. provides an overview of how the community treated this illness, giving still aspects of the IMH family. Quigley notes that

the sisters were products of their time, often deferring to the “professional advice of doctors from the outside,” but they also “tried to balance compassion for a friend and sister with [that] care dictated by professional standards” (p. 203). Traditional views on “normal” mental health for women sometimes crept into the diagnosis of the sisters, though the women recognized that their chosen religious life was not the norm prescribed for the “emotionally healthy” woman. In a section titled “Feminist Connections” Quigley notes that sisters have sometimes “struggled to comply with traditional notions of womanhood or religious life” and that some were conflicted enough to suffer from emotional instability (p. 206). In these periods, when women who refused to meet the socially acceptable paths of marriage and motherhood, and instead chose intellectual pursuits and work, as did the IMH sisters, their behavior was sometimes viewed as unstable even among their own community. Despite some opportunities for intellectual pursuit, education, and leadership roles for some sisters, there are times that IHMs tended to “follow the unhealthy submission of the women of their time” (p. 208). Often mental illness became a stigma attached to a sister for a lifetime. Quigley concludes that the IMH community “have suffered the same pitfalls” as others who used their best instincts and “followed the best known methods of the time” in treating their emotionally distressed sisters (p. 208).

For too long scholars of intentional communities and scholars of the history of Catholic religious communities have ignored each other’s work. Even recent “comprehensive” works on intentional communities in the United States have, for the most part, ignored communities of women and men religious. For example, the latest edition of the *Communities Directory* (3d edition, 2000) makes little reference to communities of Catholic women religious, even though such communities would fit well within the general definition cited.[1] Historians of women religious have often ignored or misunderstood the field of communal studies. Margaret Susan Thompson, who wrote introductory essays in *Building Sisterhood*, recognized that the COR was “an intentional group.” However, she succumbs to linking any notion of communalism to superficial definitions of “utopia.” She states, “It would be misleading to suggest that COR represents some sort of utopian community—that it has remained untouched by tension, controversy, or disruption” (p. 18). There is little consideration in this volume of the entire IMH congregation as an intentional community. Scholars and researchers of intentional communities and of Catholic religious could greatly benefit

from each other’s research and approaches. Those interested in “successful” and long-lived intentional communities have only to look at the many Catholic religious communities still alive today for examples and inspiration. For scholars interested in gender and women’s role in communitarian societies, the histories of women religious and their communities provide an enormous area for research. Intentional communities of all kinds, including those of women religious have often been places where gender roles were in flux. Inhabitants of intentional communities have been in the forefront of exploration of new roles for women in work, sexuality, and political structures. *Building Sisterhood* is a wonderful addition to this growing body of literature. I believe the IMH sisters who authored this volume might see their own work and their community within this tradition. For those who investigate Catholic women religious, the theories of leadership, hierarchy, retention of members, social roles, economics, etc. that have been developed and applied to secular and other communities by scholars and contemporary communitarians might provide further insight into congregations such as the IMH, their longevity, successes, failures, and changes over time.[2]

Building Sisterhood should be just the beginning of the history of the congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The writers have covered a great many issues in this volume, but like any good historical overview, this only whets the appetite for more information and further investigation into the history of the congregation. While we learn much about some of the sisters who joined and led the congregation through the twentieth century, there is much more to know. Many questions about the congregation remain to be explored. *Building Sisterhood* reveals just how little historians studying women in the United States have taken the story of women religious into consideration when trying to analyze that history. These connections remain to be explored. There is every indication from this book that this would be a fruitful exercise. The writers of *Building Sisterhood* explore so many issues and concerns of their community and the history of women in general. There is much here for those interested in the many ways communities work and do not work, and how individuals become part of a community and shape it over time. Besides all of this, the reader meets such wonderful, independent, strong, reliant woman, excited about their faith and their community while working for a better future.

Notes

- [1]. *Communities Directory: A Guide to Intentional*

Communities and Cooperative Living, 3rd ed. (Rutledge, Missouri: Fellowship for Intentional Community, 2000). The definition reads in part: "An intentional community is a group of people who have chosen to live together or work together in pursuit of a common ideal or vision.... [intentional] communities ... hold a common commitment to living cooperatively, to solving problems nonviolently, and to sharing their experience with others" (p. 16). Monastic communities are included in a timeline tracing the history of intentional communities, but only the inception of the movement in the fourth century (CE) is

noted.

[2]. There have been a few scholars who have attempted to bridge this divide between disciplines. Several papers on women religious have been presented at conferences of the Communal Studies Association. Perhaps the person who has done the most to connect the two disciplines is Regina Siegfried, ASC, professor of theology at St. Louis University, former president of the CSA, and moderator of Sisters-L, a listserv discussing issues of interest to women religious.

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