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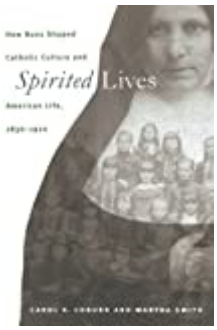

Carol K. Coburn, Martha Smith. *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xii + 327 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-4774-9.

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Published on H-Catholic (August, 2003)

This book is a much-needed addition to the historiographies of women in the United States as well as Catholicism in the United States. While there have been many valuable studies of individual congregations of women religious in the last two decades, this is the first to take a broader view of how, as the title says, nuns shaped Catholic culture and American life. While the authors focus on one large and fascinating congregation, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (CSJS), they place this congregation firmly in the context of the larger society and Church. As the CSJS were engaged in a variety of work, including education and health care, their work illustrates the tremendous impact that women religious have had on the development of the United States and the strength of the Catholic Church in that country. Coburn and Smith report that by 1920, 90,000 American women religious, belonging to 300 different congregations, served in 50 women's colleges, 500 hospitals, and 6,000 parochial schools attended by 1.7 million school children (p. 2). Amazingly, however, some university women's history courses make little, if any, reference to nuns. This book makes it unacceptable for any responsible teacher in any American women's history course to exclude nuns anymore.

The first two chapters of *Spirited Lives* examine the early years of the CSJS in the United States. Founded in LePuy, France around 1650, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet were part of a trend in establishing active congregations of women religious during and after the Catholic Reformation. The Congregation's early-nineteenth-century move to the United States was also part of a much wider movement to bring European congregations to America. The CSJS came to St. Louis, Missouri in 1836, at the invitation of Bishop Joseph Rosati, to open a school for deaf children. In response to fierce anti-Catholicism as well as human and financial resource needs, the Congregation quickly adapted to American culture and established a specifically American foundation with its own constitutions. Within a decade they opened two new schools in St. Louis, an ethnically diverse parochial school and a school for "colored" children, as well as a home for boys. By the late 1850s, they served in almost every region of the country, providing a variety of educational, health care, and other social services.

During this early period, the Congregation struggled with the politics of the church, both within the Congregation and in the form of clerical interference. Coburn and Smith do a superb feminist analysis of the issues of power in which the CSJS were embroiled, particularly regarding the division of the CSJS into diocesan communities. Bishops who invited the CSJS to their dioceses

preferred that they break away from the larger community of the CSJS and thus come under a diocesan bishop's control, rather than continue under papal authority and the structure of the original St. Louis CSJS. Bishops were well aware of the potential strength of a large, cohesive group of women religious and fought to crush it. In the authors' words:

"The CSJS were not alone in this dilemma, nor was their battle with male hierarchy unusual. This divide-and-conquer tactic occurred again and again in dioceses throughout the United States. That is why papal approbation was so important to the CSJS and other women's congregations. It was their only defense against local bishops who felt the need to control and constantly interfere with the internal affairs of women religious [...]. Additionally, many Catholic sisterhoods felt the submission to male authority in Rome, thousands of miles away, was far preferable to subjugation to a local bishop who could closely monitor and control every aspect of community life" (p. 61).

The remaining chapters of *Spirited Lives* are thematic rather than chronological. The third chapter explains what drew women to the convent, who entered, and how the convent "formed" them both in religious life and in occupational professions. The authors discuss how some aspects of convent culture contributed to a lack of appreciation for nuns' work in Catholic and secular society, while other aspects of the culture allowed the women far greater autonomy and influence than lay women could have experienced during the same period. Chapter Four explains how the sisters, as part of the larger society, founded new communities in the west, helping Catholics from a variety of ethnic backgrounds build rural and urban communities. Partly because of a scarcity of priests, the sisters, "trained the children, helped the poor, nursed the sick, and buried the dead" (p. 99), much like they do today, I might add.

The final three chapters discuss the four main endeavors of the CSJS: teaching in parochial schools, teaching in secondary and post secondary institutions, health care, and social services. The CSJS taught in a wide variety of public, private, and specialized schools, but the majority of sisters worked in the parochial school system. In fact, their inexpensive, sometimes unpaid, labor made the parochial school system possible, the impact of which, on American society, is perhaps incalculable. As Coburn and Smith note, rather somewhat modestly in my view, the sister-teachers' work "provided an important lynchpin for American Catholic culture and identity for generations of children" (p. 157). Despite sisters' extraordinary contributions, they endured a great deal of criticism, never seeming able to satisfy either secular or church authorities. Although they were constantly under threat of clerical interference in their schools, the sisters were able to assert some control, usually in the form of threatening to withdraw their services from a particular school or diocese. Coburn and Smith do a particularly good job in this chapter of describing the gendered justifications for the sisters' meager salaries. Most notably, they argue that male religious often received double the salary of female religious, despite male religious also being under a vow of poverty (p. 144). Historians of education will also find the description of sister-teacher training very interesting. As always, the authors' comments on the CSJS's experience are connected to the broader experience of women religious in America.

In the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the CSJS were also heavily involved in founding and administering secondary academies in which young Catholic women would be prepared for life. The development of the curricula in these academies, including the hidden curriculum of behavior and attitude, is presented very nicely in Chapter Six. Coburn and Smith describe convincingly the influence of these schools on Catholic culture and American life. The proliferation of academies in the mid-nineteenth century allowed Catholic girls to attend secondary schools in larger numbers than their male counterparts and perhaps their female non-Catholic counterparts. Catherine Beecher, for example, commented that Protestant young women should be given the educational opportunities that Catholic young women had (p. 163). Academies operated by nuns accepted non-Catholic girls too, however, particularly before the twentieth century. As in the private educational institutions they operated, nuns were completely responsible for the financial operation of academies. Obtaining qualifications for sister-instructors in the academies and colleges was a great drain on a congregation's financial resources as it cost thousands of dollars to support a sister studying for a Ph.D. Coburn and Smith also explain how exhausting it was for a sister to obtain such training, not only because it had to be accomplished while maintaining the requirements of religious life, but also because some behavior was contrary to the usual understanding of religious life, including competition and singularity (p. 187). While it was a tremendous struggle for the CSJS to staff and pay for women's academies and colleges, the sisters tended to appreciate the greater autonomy they had in these institutions compared to "parish, health care, or

social service institutions [where they] had to deal more directly with the whims of parishioners, local pastors, bishops, and male boards" (p. 175).

The final chapter of *Spirited Lives* concerns sisters' work in health care and social services. While the authors concede that the CSJS were unusual in being involved in three different fields–education, health care and social services–the Congregation was most heavily involved in education, and the book reflects this emphasis. In fact, the two topics of the final chapter, health care and social services, seem too disparate to be included in the same chapter. Whereas sisters ran the vast majority of Catholic hospitals in the United States, and were quite well-trained and respected for this work, their work in orphanages and other social services was usually unpaid and assigned to the least educated sisters. Although Coburn and Smith offer some very astute analysis on the separate endeavors of health care and social services, only about a dozen pages are devoted specifically to each, and then a final section of six pages deals with financing and networking with the laity. In my view, separate chapters on health care and social services would have been preferable. As it is, given the vast majority of the book focuses on nuns' work in education, the final chapter seems like an unbalanced addition. The historiography on nuns in health care and social services is very slim compared to that of nuns in education. Thus I think Coburn and Smith have missed an opportunity to contribute more to those less developed areas of research.

Overall, this is a well-written, well-researched, and much-needed book. It is equally strong in the two facets of American society it combines, the history of women religious and feminism. This smart pairing of religious and feminist insight is made possible by the smart pairing of authors. Coburn and Smith note their "unlikely collaboration" in the preface: "Separated by religion, ethnicity, professional background, life experience, and age, a fifth-generation German Lutheran, American historian began a professional collaboration with a fourth-generation Irish Catholic, European historian, who has spent her entire adult life in a religious community" (p. ix). The result of the collaboration, *Spirited Lives* is sound scholarly work that recasts notions of "How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life." Historians of both women and of Catholicism must read it.

Citation: Heidi MacDonald. Review of Coburn, Carol K.; Smith, Martha, *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920.* H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2003.

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