SISTER MARY SCULLION, RSM, a member of the Sisters of Mercy, began working with Philadelphia’s homeless and mentally ill men and women in 1978 at the age of twenty-five, leading her, she once reflected, to “the most profound experience [she] ever had of God.” As her ministry to this population grew into a lifetime commitment, Sister Mary was arrested at least twice for distributing food to those homeless seeking shelter in Philadelphia’s 30th Street train station, and although never convicted, she spent several nights in jail. On another occasion, Sister Mary, along with some men and women who had been denied admittance to the city’s overcrowded shelters, occupied the basement of the Municipal Services Building, “the hub of city offices and services.” These public demonstrations, combined with other activities such as leading protestors into Philadelphia City Council meetings and badgering then Mayor Edward G. Rendell to increase city allocations for services for the homeless and mentally ill, drew cheers from some and angry comments from others. Rendell once remarked that “Sister Mary Scullion is Philadelphia’s Joan of Arc because so many people want to burn her at the stake.”

All women religious, often called nuns or sisters by the general public, take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but Sisters of Mercy also vow to care for the poor, sick, and ignorant. Project H.O.M.E., which Sister Mary cofounded with Joan Dawson McConnon, a lay activist and volunteer working with the homeless, in 1989, helped her to live this fourth vow by seeking solutions to the problem of homelessness. The approximately 56,000 women religious serving the Catholic Church in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century, like Sister Mary Scullion, constitute the most recent in a long line of sisters and nuns whose commitment to their faith led them to choose a life of service to those in need.

The history of women religious is intricately connected to the story of the church in the United States. The small group of Catholics who sailed from England on two ships, the Ark and the Dove, in 1633 certainly did not imagine the large number of parishes, schools, hospitals, and social service
agencies that would comprise the twenty-first century Catholic Church in the United States. Their calling to a life of service led many communities to involve themselves in these “traditional ministries.” American sisters have worked as parochial school teachers, nurses and hospital administrators, and social workers, and served on the staff of orphanages and residences for senior citizens. Others, however, have undertaken a journey leading in a different direction, including ministering to those suffering from Hansen’s disease (leprosy) on a remote Hawaiian island, teaching on Indian reservations, marching in civil rights demonstrations, and advocating for the abolition of the death penalty.

This book tells the story of those women religious who have been serving their church and its people since 1727. Although Catholic sisters could have chosen other ways to work with those in need that did not involve entering a religious community, their faith directed them to minister in institutions identified as Catholic. Portions of every sister’s day were dedicated to prayer and meditation; it was her relationship with God that gave meaning to what she did. In addition, sisters embraced a specific lifestyle governed by a rule that often restricted many activities, including visiting with family, going out at night, and eating in public places. Despite a strictly legislated lifestyle, they contributed to the growth and development of the church in the United States, and were often the visible manifestation of Catholicism for Americans of all religious beliefs.

A Long Line of Foremothers

As early as the fourth century, women and men chose to set themselves apart from the temptations of the world in order to achieve a deeper relationship with God. Sometimes they lived alone as hermits, but other times they formed a community with like-minded Christians desiring to share an experience of the holy. This style of living and praying became known as monasticism, from the Greek word monos, alone. Both men and women believed they were called to monastic life, and by the end of the fourth century approximately seven thousand monks and nuns were living in Egypt.

Female monasticism migrated from the Middle East to Europe by the middle of the fifth century, but communities of women grew more slowly than their male counterparts. Historians suggest two possible reasons for the rather slow growth of women’s monastic groups: first, convents for women tended to be founded by members of the upper classes for their...
families and friends, leaving few options for those from lower socioeconomic groups desiring to enter religious life; and second, the Viking invasions of the sixth and seventh centuries destroyed or damaged many of the European houses of women religious, and it was difficult to finance the rebuilding of these institutions. Women who wanted to dedicate their lives to prayer and meditation were given the option of either remaining in their own homes or finding a way to attach themselves to a male monastic community.\(^7\)

Distinctive clothing, called habits, was originally intended to distinguish women religious from the upper classes in European society, but later became a “visual symbol of consecration and practical physical protection.”

Ecclesiastical legislation mandated that women religious wear a habit as early as the Fourth Council of Constance (869–870), and the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) decreed excommunication—expulsion from membership in the church—for all nuns not dressed as religious.\(^9\) One knew the congregation to which a nun belonged by the habit she wore.

By the end of the twelfth century, the number of European houses for women religious, known as convents, had significantly increased.\(^10\) Between 1070 and 1170, for instance, houses in northwestern England, some containing as many as one hundred women, quadrupled.\(^11\) These institutions usually developed rather informally. At times, a group of women followed a hermit, emulating his lifestyle until he worked out a way for them to live and pray together; at other times, they established a house in close proximity to a male monastery and constructed a lifestyle modeled on that of the monks. Nuns—as these women came to be called—began to wear a veil and ring to symbolize a spiritual marriage with Christ. They lived a life of strict claustration or cloister—nuns did not leave the monastery grounds—and dedicated themselves to prayer and devotional exercises. In order to remain as far away from the temptations of the world as possible, a grille separated convent residents from their visitors; even priests hearing confessions had no direct contact with them. Turntables allowed the women to pass gifts and necessities back and forth with their visitors.\(^12\)

In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII (1294–1303) issued the papal bull, or proclamation, *Periculoso*, which required nuns to be cloistered, because, according to the pontiff, men were constantly tempted by women, and consequently unable to stop themselves from committing rape. Nuns living outside of an enclosed convent, Boniface VIII reasoned, were in danger of being sexually assaulted. As a result of this papal bull, women called to religious life had very little opportunity to serve those in need. Those women...
not interested in a traditional contemplative life that called for devoting oneself to prayer within the confines of a cloister had no formal place in the institutional church.

This situation began to change in 1532, when Angela Merici (1474–1540), who was sixty years old at the time, formed a “company of virgins” to serve wherever needed. Because Merici placed the community under the patronage of St. Ursula, the women who answered Merici’s call became known as Ursulines. They lived in their own homes, did not wear distinctive clothing, took no vows, and were required to support themselves. The ministry of the Ursulines was to “give charity where charity was needed,” and they quickly became involved in the care of orphan girls. By 1544, when the new community was approved by Pope Paul III (1534–1549), one hundred and fifty women were affiliated with it. Critics expressed their disapproval of women religious ministering outside of the confines of the cloister, but the Ursulines remained the only option for women who chose not to marry or enter an enclosed convent. In 1568, Milan Cardinal Charles Borromeo requested twelve Ursulines to teach catechism in his diocese. He attempted to silence the negative voices by permitting the women to live together in a community under the authority of a local bishop beginning in 1580. They were expected to perform works of charity, many of which were related to education, and spend part of the day in prayer. One contemporary described them by saying, “They frequented the Sacraments and the exercises of Christian doctrine; they assisted the poor, visited the sick, and devoted themselves to all the other works of piety which their age and their sex allowed.”

At the Council of Trent (1545–1563), called to respond to the Protestant Reformation, Periculoso was inserted into canon law, which governs the Catholic Church, and the requirement concerning women religious and strict enclosure began to be reiterated and enforced. In order to adhere to the Tridentine decrees, Ursuline communities were eventually forced to adopt a cloistered lifestyle. They were able to continue teaching, however, as long as their schools were located within the convent walls and they maintained a daily schedule of prayer. Purists worried about what they considered a compromise, but “early modern society was getting serious about educating its girls, and there was no one around who could do it as well as these women.” By the middle of the seventeenth century, almost every French town boasted a convent of teaching nuns.

In the middle decades of the seventeenth century, Vincent de Paul (1581–1660) and Louise de Marillac (1591–1660) worked together in France to recruit women interested in serving the poor. Those responding to this
call lived together in a community while they taught religious education to children, nursed the sick, and supported themselves through manual labor. Louise and Vincent were not interested in forming another cloistered community of nuns—they sought women willing to roll up their sleeves and move among those in need of their services—but Periculoso clearly stated that female religious communities were to be enclosed. Vincent de Paul's solution to this requirement was to allow members of the community, known as the Daughters of Charity, to take what are called simple vows. Cloistered nuns took solemn vows for life, but simple or private vows were renewed annually. In the official language of the Catholic Church, nuns took solemn vows, and simple vows defined one as a “secular sister.” The Daughters of Charity “adopted the characteristics of nuns, living communally, performing set devotions, obeying a rule and a superior—all of which made them, in a sense, half-nuns.”

Although the community did not receive official recognition from the Vatican until the late nineteenth century, they were credited with serving the needs of “civil society and of the church's apostolate.” Women entering religious life now had the option of becoming either a cloistered nun or a sister who served those in need through education, hospital work, or direct contact with the poor.

The young women responding to Vincent de Paul’s call began a ministry that originally called for them simply to visit the poor in French towns and villages. Under the direction of Louise de Marillac, they were taught skills that allowed them to add teaching and nursing to their list of ministries. Impressed with their dedication to the poor, civic and religious leaders invited the women to open small schools and staff hospitals. As their numbers increased, the Daughters of Charity became more organized and developed a rule, or constitution, which governed how the community would lead a common life. Unlike contemplative nuns, members of this community did not practice strict enclosure. Their cloister, according to Vincent de Paul, was to be the streets of the city.

The Ursulines and the Daughters of Charity helped to begin what became a pattern for women called to serve God and others by ministering to those in need. By the end of the seventeenth century, every French town with a population greater than five thousand contained a poor house administered by communities of sisters, including the Sisters of Providence, Filles de la Sagesse (Daughters of Wisdom), and Sisters of Saint Thomas de Villeneuve. Other traditionally cloistered communities followed the example set by the Ursulines and modified their rules so that they could care for the poor and sick within the confines of their enclosure.
The need for women religious willing to work outside of the cloister was so great that some of these new communities found themselves involved in several ministries. Founded in 1650 in France, the Sisters of Saint Joseph dedicated themselves to teaching and assisting the poor, but often cared for the sick as well. This pattern was repeated in the United States, where it was not unusual to find a religious community that administered schools, hospitals, and a variety of institutions devoted to the care of women, children, and the elderly. When the Catholic Church in the United States entered a period of rapid growth in the nineteenth century as a result of European immigration, its leaders discovered that many of the newcomers required a host of services. Women religious staffed the extensive network of parochial schools that stretched throughout the country, staffed and administered health care facilities, and cared for children, working women, and the elderly in various charitable settings. Because they earned a very small salary, bishops and other clerical leaders were able to expand services provided by the church without worrying about personnel costs. Sisters ministering in these areas not only carried out the mission of Catholicism, they also influenced the larger society. Religious communities administering orphanages and children’s homes, for instance, were involved in discussions concerning public policy related to the welfare of minors. Had women religious not been available and willing to serve wherever and whenever they were needed, the story of U.S. Catholicism—and indeed, of the nation itself—would be very different.

From Europe to the United States

There were no women religious ministering in the thirteen colonies prior to the ratification of the Constitution. By the time Jamestown, Virginia, was settled in 1607, England had been officially Protestant for about fifty years, and Catholic women called to religious life, including those in the colonies, had no choice but to enter a convent located in one of the more tolerant European countries. Several female colonists entered one of these convents, including the Carmelite monastery in Hoogstraten, located in the Belgian province of Antwerp, and later returned to the new nation to establish the first congregation in the former British colonies—the Carmelite community of Port Tobacco, Maryland—in 1790. During the next century, these Carmelites were joined by a host of other congregations of women religious. Some sisters left their homes in Ireland, France, Italy,
Poland, and Germany to begin ministering in a land where they were unfamiliar with the language and customs; others entered communities that were founded by U.S. Catholic women responding to the “signs of the times.”

The work of women religious in the United States began in 1727 in New Orleans—French territory at the time—when twelve Ursulines left France to begin a ministry of health care in that city. When the sisters realized that the residents of New Orleans also needed a school dedicated to the education of girls and young women, as well as a plan to catechize the city’s African population, slave and free, they expanded their work to include both teaching and a ministry to the area’s black residents. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, other European religious communities heeded the requests of bishops and priests and sent members to a new nation that, despite the relatively small number of Catholic citizens, needed their services. French members of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Sisters of Mercy from Ireland, Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who were founded in Italy, and Polish Felician Sisters, were among those communities that developed ministries of teaching, health care, and social service in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

European congregations were joined by communities of women religious founded in the United States. In the early nineteenth century, for instance, the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph and the Sisters of Loretto at the Foot of the Cross worked with urban Catholics as well as those living on what was known as the frontier, those regions where Anglo-Europeans found themselves feeling uncomfortable with both the surrounding topography and indigenous cultures. In the early twentieth century, Mary Josephine Rogers’s Maryknoll Sisters and the Sisters of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine founded by Marion Gurney, established congregations dedicated to specific issues facing the Catholic Church during the early twentieth century, focusing on the need for foreign missionaries and for women dedicated to assisting Catholics immigrants as they adjusted to a new country.

Writing the History of American Catholic Sisters

The history of Catholic women religious in the United States offered in this book steers clear of the “great man”—or, in this case, “great woman” or “great sister”—approach to history in favor of what might be called a collective study. It is, of course, impossible to include every community
of women religious that has ever ministered in the United States in one volume; there are too many, especially if the branches of some of the larger groups, such as Franciscans, Dominicans, and Benedictines, are counted separately. In addition to including those congregations with which most Catholics are familiar, such as the Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Mercy, and Sisters of St. Joseph, I have tried to make sure that others, such as the Sisters of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine, Sisters of the Good Shepherd, the Holy Spirit Adoration Sisters—also known as the Pink Sisters because of their rose-colored habits—and Adorers of the Blood of Christ also become part of the story.

A collective history of women religious in the United States demonstrates that with the exception of celebrating Mass or administrating the sacraments, sisters were more actively involved in the everyday lives of Catholics than priests. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, a large urban parish might have four priests living in the rectory, but the convent probably housed at least sixteen sisters. Children and parents experienced sister-teachers in parochial schools and academies, but Catholics interacted with them in a variety of other settings as well. Hospital patients, immigrants seeking work, and unemployed men eating in soup kitchens all came into contact with women religious. Sisters also worked with wounded Union and Confederate troops during the Civil War, Native Americans on reservations, and inmates on death row. For many, they were and are the face of the U.S. Catholic Church.

Writing about Catholic sisters collectively is not meant to minimize the fact that there were many communities of women religious from which a potential entrant could choose. In order to learn about the congregation she was entering, a candidate usually spent about six months as a postulant, and at least one year as a novice. Since a young woman leaving home for her new life as a sister or nun was expected to embrace the community as family and take on an identity as a religious, most congregations conferred a new name on a sister to symbolize her entrance into a new life. Although there were similarities among congregations, “these women identified themselves not as generic ‘sisters’ but as ‘daughters of St. Joseph,’ ‘children of the Immaculate Heart,’ or ‘daughters of St. Francis.’” Religious vows, Sister Assisium McEvoy, a Sister of St. Joseph explained, might seem the same to an outsider, but “every community does not observe them the same way.” Even congregations sharing the same ministry, such as teaching, did not often come together to share information prior to the middle of the twentieth century. “The average teaching sister was unlikely to ‘ever
see the inside of a school of another religious community or exchange a thought with a Sister of a different habit.” Despite the separation among communities, women religious did help each other out in unusual circumstances. When a new community arrived in a city or town, for instance, they often received assistance from sisters already living and working in the area.

In order to write this history of Catholic sisters in the United States, I developed a framework that concentrates on their work, or ministry. This book is about what sisters did as much as who they were. A number of bishops, including Philadelphia’s Cardinal Dennis Dougherty (1918–1951), have claimed the title “God’s Bricklayer” because of the number of churches, schools, and hospitals erected during their administrations, but sisters were often the ones responsible for establishing, staffing, and administering those institutions. Although they often—but not always—enjoyed the hierarchy’s moral support, religious communities usually raised the funds needed to build and maintain many of the edifices that served hundreds of thousands of Catholic immigrants and their children. In addition to staffing thousands of parochial schools for very little compensation, women religious established private academies, colleges, hospitals, orphanages, and settlement houses, as well as convents, motherhouses, and centers to train those entering religious life.

When viewed from the perspective of their collective work, the accomplishments of women religious are impressive. Not every woman entering a religious community, however, was remarkable or holy; sometimes they were not even good teachers, nurses, social workers, or missionaries. In addition, until the 1960s women religious often supported the prevailing societal structures in the United States. Prior to the passage of civil rights legislation, for instance, southern hospitals, schools, and colleges were segregated. Sisters working directly with the poor did not often question the economic system that kept people in poverty. Religious communities devoted to foreign mission work usually combined the Gospel message with western values.

Chapter 1 focuses on the early history of women religious in the United States. The story began in 1727, when the twelve French Ursulines arrived in New Orleans, and is continued in the former English colonies by the four Carmelite nuns who settled in Port Tobacco, Maryland, in 1790. The establishment of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph, now known as the Daughters of Charity, by Elizabeth Ann Seton in 1808, helped Archbishop John Carroll (1789–1815) begin to create a network of American Catholic
institutions. Along with establishing schools, the sisters quickly found
themselves nursing those stricken in epidemics and caring for orphaned
children. Their willingness to serve the church and its people in a variety
of ways created a precedent followed by other communities of women re-
ligious. By the end of the 1820s, eight congregations of women were minis-
tering throughout the United States, including the Oblate Sisters of Provi-
dence, an African American community working with black Catholics.

The second chapter, “Service to a Growing Catholic Community,” fo-
cuses on the ways in which women religious in the antebellum period es-
established a network of institutions wherever they were needed. Religious
communities from France, Ireland, and Germany joined their American
counterparts as they followed Catholics settling throughout the country,
even when it meant living and working under less than ideal conditions.
Their distinctive style of dress identified them clearly as Catholic women
religious, and made them an easy target for Protestants concerned about
what they perceived as a growing “popish” presence in the nation.

Chapter 3 is the first of three chapters focusing on a specific ministry
of women religious. In this chapter, the subject is teaching sisters. Most
Catholics—and indeed most Americans—primarily think of teachers
when they talk about women religious, and there is good reason for this.
Sisters have been educating American Catholic youth since the Ursulines
began teaching young girls within three months of their arrival in New Or-
leans. Most congregations of women religious originally focused on the
education of girls and young women, but as the parochial school system
expanded during the nineteenth century, many of them adapted their rule
to offer instruction to both sexes. When young Catholic women began to
desire an education that extended beyond high school, sisters established
colleges as an alternative to secular universities. In the 1960s, changes in
the Catholic Church, American society, and the lives of women religious
led to a decrease both in the number of parochial schools and the sisters
who worked in them. Women religious remained committed to educating
those in need, however, and expanded their educational ministry to in-
clude work in prison literacy programs, English classes for immigrants, and
early intervention programs for at risk children.

In addition to teaching, sisters developed an extensive network of health
care institutions; this is the subject of chapter 4. Along with the nursing
care provided by the Ursulines in New Orleans, Elizabeth Seton’s Sisters
of Charity found themselves involved in health care within fifteen years
of their founding. Religious communities not only established hospitals,
but willingly offered their services during the many epidemics that swept through American cities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the Civil War, sisters from both the North and the South ministered to the wounded and dying, earning them the respect of medical and government leaders. Women religious also founded hospitals in remote locations, such as mining towns, and offered health care to all those in need, including recent immigrants who neither spoke nor understood English and distrusted doctors and hospitals. Religious congregations involved in health care ministry worked to keep abreast of new developments in medicine and technology, but were also affected by changes in health care policy that sometimes led to the closing and merging of hospitals, increased bureaucracy (and paperwork), and spiraling costs.

Although sisters tend to be identified with either teaching or nursing, chapter 5 focuses on women religious called to other ministries. A concern for the welfare of Catholic children led some congregations to open orphanages, which were, at least in some instances, a logical extension of educational and health care ministries. Their work in schools and hospitals heightened sisters’ awareness of the numbers of children whose parents were unable or unwilling to care for them. Work with children caused some communities to develop ministries designed to help mothers care for their children, and others to assist young single women in finding a safe job and living situation in urban areas. Still others, notably the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, focused on “troubled” women and attempted to provide them with the skills needed to set them on the right path.

Other religious communities did very little teaching or nursing and used their talents to reach those in need in somewhat nontraditional ways. Several congregations established social settlements—or settlement houses—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to offer material, educational, and spiritual sustenance to Catholic immigrants struggling to assimilate into a new country and culture. In addition, European sisters sometimes journeyed to the United States to minister to a particular ethnic group. The Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (better known as the Cabrini Sisters) arrived in New York City in 1889 to begin work with the city’s Italian immigrants. Several communities willingly sent sisters to rural America, including the Alaskan territory, to minister to Native Americans, while others defied traditional stereotypes and worked with African Americans. Those called to be missionaries found themselves joining communities that believed the Gospel was best exemplified by living among people on the distant continents of Africa and Asia.
Although most American women religious served in active ministries such as teaching or health care, some answered a call to a life centered on prayer. The contemplative communities scattered throughout the United States—both in the middle of large cities and in remote rural areas—are the subject of chapter 6. Contrary to some public perceptions, contemplative women religious, all of whom are cloistered, have always believed that a ministry of prayer is an essential way to support both the church and the world’s people. The Poor Clares, Carmelites, and Pink Sisters are an integral part of the history of women religious in the United States. Like other Americans, contemplative nuns have adapted to societal and cultural changes, and begun to incorporate technology into their ministry, enabling people to request prayers via websites and email.

Chapter 7 details the changes in the lives and work of women religious during the second half of the twentieth century. There had never been a sufficient number of sisters to staff all the institutions in need of their services, and this situation was exacerbated when growing numbers of Catholic children, combined with the need for new schools in suburban parishes, placed an increasing demand on communities to supply sisters for teaching positions, even if they had not completed their own education. In the 1950s, the Sister Formation Conference not only helped congregations find ways for their young members to complete their undergraduate degrees before assigning them to a classroom, it also paved the way for further changes that took place in religious life during the 1960s and 1970s. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) did not solicit the opinions of women, lay or religious, as its participants drafted documents related to the Catholic Church in the modern world. Several of the Council documents, including a decree on the renewal of religious life, were of special interest to American sisters because they called them to adapt to the twentieth century in the same way that their founders had read the “signs of the times” when their communities were first established. As a result of the Council’s mandate, some sisters decided that the events of the twentieth century were calling them to support the civil rights movement, and they traveled to Selma, Alabama, to support those marching for voting rights; others worked to end racism by ministering in inner-city black communities.

Entering a religious community in the 1950s meant becoming part of a culture that had remained virtually unchanged for several hundred years. The changes taking place in both the Catholic Church and American society led to efforts to bring religious communities into the modern world. As women religious examined their place in the contemporary world, many
concluded that they no longer needed to dress in a style more suited to
sixteenth-century Europe than the United States of the late twentieth cen-
tury. In addition, a number of communities abolished many of the rules
that kept sisters separated from friends and family, including censorship of
mail, restrictions on traveling, and the requirement that they live in tradi-
tional convents. Church leaders did not always support these changes, and
conflicts sometimes developed between religious communities and local
bishops. The drastic decrease in the number of sisters in the middle dec-
ades of the twentieth century led to further changes. Not only did fewer
women hear a call to religious life, but many communities saw members
leave for a variety of reasons, including a general dissatisfaction with the
Catholic Church and a desire to marry.

The eighth and final chapter focuses on the work of women religious
since the 1970s. As an historian, I am reluctant to comment on the future
of sisters in the United States, but it is important to document the role they
have played in issues of social justice, such as the abolition of the death
penalty, ecology and environmental responsibility, and standing with the
poor throughout the world. The early years of the twenty-first century have
seen women religious demonstrate a keen understanding of both Catholic
social teaching with its emphasis on the dignity of the human person, and
the vision of those who first established religious communities. It has not
been unusual for sisters to lobby members of Congress, attend shareholder
meetings in order to advocate for corporate responsibility, or remind gov-
ernment and business leaders of the importance of placing the needs of
the poor and dispossessed before all others.

Women Religious in the Twenty-First Century

There are far fewer women religious in the United States in the twenty-
first century than there were one hundred years ago. According to George-
town University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA),
there were 55,944 women religious in the United States in 2010, down
from 179,954 in 1965. The result of this decrease is that there were not as
many sisters available to staff schools, hospitals, and social service institu-
tions, and some communities either closed these institutions or turned
them over to other groups. Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri, for
instance, was founded in 1915 by the Sisters of Loretto. Originally known
as Loretto College, it was one of the first Catholic women’s colleges west
of the Mississippi River. The school’s name was changed to Webster College in 1924, and it was operated by the Sisters of Loretto until 1967, when the congregation transferred ownership to a lay board of directors. Today, Webster University is a private nondenominational school.

As the numbers of sisters have decreased, the average age of women religious has increased. In 2003, 4 percent of those responding to a CARA survey reported that they had “very seriously” considered entering a religious community; by 2008 that number had dropped to less than 1 percent. The fact that the average age of American sisters in that year was over seventy—in some communities the average age was over eighty—meant that difficult decisions had to be made about ministries, property, and the care of aging sisters. Even contemplative nuns had to adjust their schedules to reflect the reality of aging. During the 1980s, the Carmelite community in Hudson, Wisconsin, changed the schedule of prayer that had been a part of the congregation’s life for several centuries. The nuns still came together to pray four times during the day, but they ceased gathering together in the chapel at midnight because of health issues. Although their lives remained centered on prayer, one member of the community was assigned to maintain the webpage, “fielding questions about the monastery and responding to an average of fifteen prayer requests a day.”

Many communities have worked diligently to ensure that those working in their institutions understand the importance of making decisions that are aligned with the community’s mission. They created Offices of Mission Integration and developed sophisticated orientation programs to educate employees—Catholic and non-Catholic—about the vision and history of their congregations. Recognizing the importance of keeping their spirit alive, a number of congregations have initiated associate programs, consisting of women and men supportive of the sisters and their work. Some associates focus primarily on communal prayer; others help raise money to support the congregation and its ministries. Still other associate programs function as lay partners, and members commit to incorporating the mission and ministry of the community in their own lives and work.

It is impossible to know what the future holds for women religious in the United States. Associate programs and mission integration offices keep the legacy alive, but do not bring in new members. Some communities will most likely fade away and others will merge. At least a few congregations are thriving, and may continue to flourish for at least several more decades. Whatever the future holds for religious life, sisters will continue to minister to those in need; in doing so, they remain the face of Catholicism for many Americans.