

Concentric Circles of Sisterhood¹

Introduction to *Building Sisterhood: A Feminist History of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan* ((Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997)

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"Claiming Our Roots" (COR) was conceived in 1988, when the Central Administration of the religious community known as the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (or, more familiarly, IHMs) authorized creation of a task force to "set up a process for examining the history of the Congregation from an interdisciplinary, feminist perspective." In so doing, the Central Administration was responding to a decision by a small group within the 1987 IHM Assembly to "consciously choose to educate [o]urselves to the feminist perspective . . . and to operate from our understandings as they develop." That group submitted what became known as "Proposal 14" to the 1988 IHM Chapter (constituent governing body), calling for creation of a task force to implement feminist research into IHM history. While the Chapter did not ratify Proposal 14, the Administration's subsequent action can be credited directly to this grass-roots' initiative.²

The initial incarnation of COR³, comprised of volunteers from among the IHM Sisters, met for the first time in March 1990. The group began a process lasting more than a year, resulting in a set of seventeen "working assumptions" about its understanding of history, feminist scholarship, and its own mandate from the community.⁴ Since then, others have joined COR as consultants, observers, researchers and writers, while additional women--most, but not all, of them IHMs--have cooperated with and supported various aspects of the endeavor.

My own connection with COR began in April 1991. As a historian of American sisters, and a feminist, I was invited to serve as a consultant in the final stages of the project's formulation. It was believed that I could provide some expertise to the diverse collective that was helping to birth the project. After reading the early COR documents, as well as minutes of its first year's meetings, I became both excited about the work that had started to emerge and rather skeptical about what "expertise" I might be able to

¹ Originally published in *Building Sisterhood: A Feminist History of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

² Information and quoted passages from an unpublished background document, COR Task Force, February 1991. Copy in possession of the author.

³ For clarity's sake, the task force will be referred to in this essay as "COR"; the publication it produced, to which this essay serves as an introduction, will be referred to as *Claiming Our Roots*.

⁴ See Appendix A for a copy of the "Working Assumptions."

bring to it. Even at that stage, it was clear that COR was composed of a remarkable group of women: bright, rigorous, articulate, prayerful, willing to take risks--and to laugh a lot along their way! Who would not want to spend time with such a group, superfluous as my participation might be? Certainly not I, and so I arrived in Monroe for my first face-to-face contact with COR.

Since that weekend, I have been kept informed about the group's evolution and efforts through frequent written and verbal communication. Also, several members attended the second History of Women Religious Conference during the summer of 1992, and I was able to reacquaint myself with them and resume our face-to-face dialogue. Then, early in 1993, I was asked to write the introduction to COR's proposed book--an invitation I had hoped would come, and that took me about seven-and-a-half seconds to accept. Finally, I have had the chance to read one or more versions of most of the essays that appear in *Claiming Our Roots*: the output of over four years of intensive and innovative activity.

There, in bare-boned terms, is the outline of my relationship with COR. And yet, like any formal or official document, such as a chronology or organization chart, it conveys little of the reality that is COR, or of my own response to the undeniably limited role I have played within it.

Historians are "causal" creatures; we are obsessed with providing motivation and grounding for whatever phenomena we try to explain. But despite assertions to the contrary from generations of scholars, we are not wholly "objective"; instead, like all inquirers, we inevitably bring our own pasts and preconceptions to the subjects we explore. So it seems appropriate to preface what I intend to say with a brief explanation of the perspective I have on the history of American Sisters generally, and of the IHMs in particular.

I grew up in near ignorance of nuns. My non-Catholic childhood was spent in a university town of the Deep South, with one Catholic Church and no school or other institution where sisters might have been found. Only two, distinct but not inconsistent, images served to interrupt this obliviousness; the first was my attendance at the original Broadway production of *The Sound of Music* (in which Mary Martin portrayed the world's oldest [failed] postulant, and the cloistered religious seemed to spend most of their time singing), and the second was a fascination with the books of Maryknoll's Sister Maria del Rey, which I discovered in the public library and which chronicled the adventures of her order's missionaries in Asia, Latin America and the Pacific. From the former encounter, I determined that nuns were unusually happy creatures, who

nonetheless did their part to subvert the Nazis; from the latter, I became convinced that Sisters were among the most adventurous and daring of women, highly accomplished professionals who lived far more exciting lives than most of the other "role models" presented for me as a pre-teen.

As I got older, sisters made only sporadic incursions into my consciousness: usually as participants in civil rights demonstrations or antiwar rallies, as tutors of inner-city youth, and as occasional guests on television programs, modeling "modified" habits and speaking articulately about issues of social justice. Such was the state of my (un)awareness until the fall of 1982, when a colleague at Syracuse University told me one day at lunch that she had taught a sister in a graduate seminar the previous semester, and had had a few conversations with her about religious life. "It was fascinating," this woman declared. "Sisters really are very interesting people." And then she asked the question whose effect neither she nor I could possibly have understood at the time: "Why don't you think about including a lecture about sisters in your History of American Women course next term?"⁵

The result was not only a lecture, but a fascination with what I discovered as I began to inform myself about the remarkable and generally unknown record of sisters' contributions to both U.S. history and American Catholicism. Long after that first lecture was delivered, I found myself poring eagerly over whatever books I could find about these women. Within a year, I decided that since the story had to be told I might as well be the one to tell it.

Thus, my own understanding of sisters evolved not within a religious framework but within the context of Women's History and feminist studies--not from personal experience with the "good sisters" at some vaguely-remembered parochial school, but from research and personal acquaintances that date back only to the mid-1980s. Since beginning my own exploration into what has evolved into a book-length, feminist analysis of the Americanization of women's religious life,⁶ I have read hundreds of books, visited over six dozen congregational archives (including those of both the Monroe and Scranton IHMs), and come

⁵ The colleague is Amanda Porterfield, formerly of Syracuse University and now Professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University/Purdue University-Indianapolis, who has continued to provide valued personal and intellectual support for my research.

⁶ I am currently in the final stages of writing *The Yoke of Grace: American Nuns and Social Change, 1808-1917*, which will be published by Oxford University Press.

into contact with countless sisters who continue the traditions of community, spirituality and service that their foremothers initiated in the U.S. nearly two centuries ago.⁷

This, then, is the vantage point from which I came to know COR, and it is from that set of perspectives that I shall attempt to put Claiming Our Roots "in context," as my mandate from COR

demands. It is a context that, I believe--for me, as for the writers of the essays that follow--is intellectual and affective, objective and subjective, communal and highly personal. It is all these things because the story of "COR" (the task force, as well as the book) is more than an account of "facts" and "events." For COR, before and beyond everything else, is preeminently a story of sisterhood.

One of the most prominent metaphors in feminist discourse is that of the circle: something that has no beginning or end, and something that challenges the presumptions of hierarchy (because each point is equidistant from the center). Over time, I have come to see COR as a set of concentric circles: each representing a dimension of the sisterhood that both initiated and continued to inform its analysis.

Near the center of the set is, of course, the organized sisterhood of the IHM Congregation: the group of women religious whose past and present comprises the immediate focus of the essays that follow.

But the IHMs are not unique; neither have they evolved in isolation. Rather, as a canonical community of "apostolic" sisters, they are one of over 420 such groups that had established themselves in the U.S. by 1917.⁸ Thus, another of the concentric "circles of sisterhood" here is that which unites the experience of the hundreds of thousands of women who, over time, have taken the same vows as the IHMs.

⁷ Some of my preliminary findings, upon which I shall draw extensively in this piece, are contained in the following essays: "Discovering Foremothers: Sisters, Society, and the American Catholic Experience," *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 5 (Summer/Fall 1986); "To Serve the People of God: Nineteenth-Century Sisters and the Creation of an American Religious Life," Cushwa Center (University of Notre Dame) Working Paper Series 18, No. 2 (1987); "Women and American Catholicism, 1789-1989," in *Perspectives on the Catholic Church in America, 1789-1989*, ed. Virginia Geiger and Stephen Vicchio (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1989); "Women, Feminism, and the New Religious History: Catholic Sisters as a Case Study," in *Belief and Behavior: Essays in the New Religious History*, ed. Philip VanderMeer and Robert Swierenga (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991); "Cultural Conundrum: Sisters, Ethnicity, and the Adaptation of American Catholicism," *Mid-America*, 74 (1992); and "The Validation of Sisterhood: Canonical Status and Liberation in the History of American Nuns," in *A Leaf of the Great Tree of God: Essays in Honour of Ritamary Bradley*, ed. Margot H. King (Toronto, Canada: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1994).

⁸ As of now, I have identified 422 such communities; a list will appear as an appendix to my book. Principal sources I consulted in compiling this list were: Elinor Tong Dehey, *Religious Orders of Women in the United States*, rev. ed. (Hammond, IN, 1930); Joan M. Lexau, *Convent Life: Roman Catholic Religious Orders for Women in North America* (New York, 1964), pp. 209-387 ("Index of Orders"); Evangeline Thomas, *Women Religious History Sources: A Guide to Repositories in the United States* (New York, 1983), pp. 169-76 ("Table of U.S. Founding Dates"), and Catherine Ann Curry, "Population Statistics, 1820-1900: Statistical Study of Women Religious in the United States" (unpublished manuscript in my possession, 1989). Additionally, I have incorporated individual references encountered in the course of my research.

Much of what I will say in the next several pages will center on this larger understanding of religious sisterhood, in an effort to determine where the IHMs "fit" in the larger picture of American religious life.

The deliberately feminist approach that COR has taken from the outset, meanwhile, suggests the largest of the concentric circles that surround this project: the "sisterhood" that feminists perceive among all women, regardless of their particular experiences or "states of life." And while most of the pieces contained in this book make the feminist dimensions of their analyses explicit, I will try here to suggest some of the broader implications that emerge from the overall work.

Finally, and at the center of what is encompassed here, there is the special "sisterhood" of COR itself. Although all of the task-force members and writers are part of the IHM Congregation, the particular experiences they have shared as participants in the four-year process that produced this book have created "bonds of sisterhood" which are theirs alone. It is this "heart" of COR that is most difficult to convey in words--especially for an outsider--and yet I am determined to make at least a cursory attempt to do so. For in microcosmic form, the deliberation, collaboration, ritual, rigor, humor, tears, struggles, celebrations, and emerging awareness that COR itself reflects are also characteristic of the larger "circles of sisterhood" that comprised its context and informed its vision.

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The particular history of the IHMs, including the community's founding and early experiences, provides most of the substance of the essays that follow--and, thus, will not be the principal focus here.⁹ In many ways, particularly in its early stages, its story was typical rather than unusual. Like nearly all the 27 apostolic congregations whose founding preceded its own, the IHMs were born more out of practical necessity than out of disinterested spiritual impulse.¹⁰ Teachers were needed for the growing French, "American," and native populations of Michigan, and--like the majority of Catholics at the time--clerics in the

⁹ Like the authors of the various essays, I have read all the principal published sources on IHM history; additionally, I have worked in the archives of the Monroe and Scranton congregations.

¹⁰ Figure comes from the table cited in note 7, above; generalization is based on my research, some of which is included in the works listed in note 6.

territory believed that religious could more effectively assume the responsibilities of forming the young than those not committed permanently by vow to such ministry.¹¹

Indeed, the birth of the IHMs did not represent the first attempt to provide sister-teachers to instruct the area's young women. Some itinerant French Poor Clares, as well as a briefly-extant group under the direction of pioneer missionary Fr. Gabriel Richard, had conducted short-lived schools in Detroit during the first decade of the nineteenth century. Even in Monroe, where the IHMs eventually would emerge, there had been a previous attempt to begin a religious order. Father Samuel Smith, pastor of St. Anthony's Church, created what he designated a "monastery" in 1829 to take charge of a school in his parish. Although he did this without authorization, the house was said to contain both "sisters" and "novices" when Bishop Edward Fenwick of Cincinnati (who at that time had jurisdiction over Michigan) granted it tentative approval in early 1830. But when Smith left St. Anthony's and Monroe later that year, both school and community were disbanded.¹² So it is fair to describe the IHMs as the first women's religious order to establish itself permanently in Michigan.

Like most contemporary foundations, the IHMs owe their existence to both female and male "founders." For many years--in fact, until after Vatican II--primacy in this respect traditionally was given by the sisters in Monroe to the young Redemptorist missionary, Father Louis Gillet. It was he, after all, who presented the case to both his bishop and his religious superiors that sisters were desirable and necessary; it was he who invited Sister Marie Therese of Baltimore's Oblate Sisters of Providence to leave her community and help to birth a new one on the banks of the River Raisin. But three factors make a persuasive case for Therese's (later, Mother Theresa) co-equality in the endeavor.¹³ First, it is clear from Theresa's extant writings (some unavailable to earlier IHM historians) that she was desirous of leaving the Oblates even before Father Gillet's formal invitation arrived--and that, in all likelihood, she had offered to

¹¹ This notion of the "spiritual superiority" of sisters is discussed extensively in my "Women and American Catholicism," and "Sisters, Feminism, and the New Religious History."

¹² Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Seasons of Grace: A History of the Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), chapter 4; see also "Appendix Two: Poor Clares from Bruges," in Mary Camilla Koester, *Into this Land: A Centennial History of the Cleveland Poor Clare Monastery of the Blessed Sacrament* (Cleveland: Robert J. Liederbach, 1980), pp. 155-69; and Mary Christine Sullivan, "Some Non-Permanent Foundations of Religious Orders and Congregations of Women in the United States, 1793-1850," *United States Catholic Historical Society Historical Records and Studies*, 31 (1940), 7-118.

¹³ I base this discussion on the work of Margaret Gannon and, especially, Connie Supan, "A Dangerous Memory: Mother Mary Theresa Maxis Duchemin and the Michigan Congregation of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary" in this volume; see also Suzanne Fleming, "She Who Remained: Mother Mary Joseph Walker and the 'Refounding' of the IHM Congregation."

follow him west during a visit he made from Michigan to Baltimore in the months before her departure. Second, Father Gillet remained in Michigan for less than two years after the IHMs were born; thus, Mother Theresa's formative influence was of much longer and more constant duration than his. Indeed, it was she rather than Gillet or his confreres--all of whom had left Monroe by 1855--who exhibited the determination to preserve Alphonsian practices as the basis for an IHM spirituality that, even today, is recognizable as an essential part of the IHM charism and tradition.¹⁴ Finally, Gillet's "primacy of place" is consistent with Catholic tradition that historically has given clerics credit for all that occurs within their pastoral jurisdictions.¹⁵ Thus, while Gillet was certainly a significant factor in the establishment of the IHMs, at least as much credit seems to be due to the woman with whom he collaborated.

One of the most difficult tasks that COR faced throughout its deliberations and its research was in determining and specifying the actual roles that Father Gillet and Mother Theresa played in its community's foundation. To what extent would feminist intentionality lead to a distorted emphasis on the woman's contribution? On the other hand, to what extent had patriarchal assumptions resulted in a diminution of her significance in the past and what responsibility did feminist scholars have to acknowledge and remedy that situation? It is not this writer's job to answer such questions. But it becomes clear, both in the minutes of COR's meetings and in several of the accounts that follow, that celebrating the formative influence of Mother Theresa--not to mention the common legacy IHMs share as beneficiaries of both her gifts and her suffering--constitutes an important if not fundamental task for anyone trying to decide what IHM sisterhood has meant and continues to mean.

In dealing with the circumstances of their founding, COR and the IHMs had to confront a number of factors that, superficially at least, seemed unique. To begin with, Theresa Maxis Duchemin was a "woman of color" (who, after her departure from the Oblate Sisters of Providence, spent the rest of her life "passing" as Caucasian) and the daughter of an unwed mother. Since the IHMs were, for most of their history, a deliberately and exclusively "white" congregation, and since until recently "illegitimacy" required special dispensation under canon law, both of these matters had traditionally been regarded as both problematic and embarrassing (and easier to obscure or ignore than to acknowledge). As some of the essays in this book suggest, Theresa's racial identity in particular continued to complicate both her own life and the lives of

¹⁴ See Margaret Brennan, "'...No Two Exactly Alike': An Essay on IHM Spirituality" in this volume.

¹⁵ See, for example, almost every entry in Dehey, *Religious Orders of Women*, for the most telling evidence of this.

subsequent generations of IHMs, both before and after Theresa's death and both in Michigan and in the later Pennsylvania foundations.¹⁶

In what ways did the fact that Theresa was a "woman of color," for instance, exacerbate the tensions that emerged between herself and the various clerics who sought hegemony over the IHMs? To what extent was Theresa's eighteen-year exile from the congregation(s) of her founding--and even the country of her birth--attributable to her status as a person of "mixed race"? Again, even today, answers to questions like these may be impossible to discern definitively. But it became clear to COR, as well as to this author, that the integrity of IHM sisterhood demanded that such issues be confronted with honesty and as much rigor as possible.

Thus the "circle of sisterhood" that encompasses the Monroe IHMs is circumscribed by factors that, in the form they have taken, are unique to these women's history. Even--or perhaps especially--as they have been obscured over the years, the controversies surrounding Mother Theresa have had pronounced effects on what it has meant to be a Monroe IHM. Would Father Joos, for example, have been able to exercise the extent and duration of authority that he enjoyed for forty-four years had Mother Theresa not been who she was? Would submission to clericalism have become so characteristic of the congregation first century or more, had most of its senior members not followed Theresa to Pennsylvania in the 1850s, thereby leaving the young, inexperienced, sickly and scrupulous convert, Mary Joseph Walker, to become "Mother" and "second foundress" to those who stayed behind? And would a founder less concerned than Theresa about maintaining secrecy regarding her background have been more capable of preventing the division of her sisters into distinct communities officially forbidden for years to communicate with each other? Would today's IHM sisterhood, then, incorporate all of Mother Theresa's daughters into a single and unbroken circle--instead of the three more-or-less "cousinly" bodies that pledge separate loyalties to Monroe, Scranton, and Immaculata?

A volume like *Claiming Our Roots* cannot answer all these questions--but it can at least ask them: explicitly and forthrightly and, in some cases, for the first time. What has become apparent as a result, is a

¹⁶ Note, in particular, the essays by Supan and Fleming. See also the work of Margaret Gannon; and Diane Edward Shea, Marita Constance Supan, "Apostolate of the Archives: God's Mystery Through History," *The Josephite Harvest* (Summer 1983). I have addressed these issues in two articles: "Philemon's Dilemma: Nuns and Blacks in Nineteenth-Century America--Some Findings," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society*, 96 (1985); and "Sisterhood and Power: Class, Culture, and Ethnicity in the American Convent," *Colby Library Quarterly* (Fall 1989).

powerful historical subtext that records the survival of what might be regarded as an underground IHM charism that represents an ongoing (though not consistent or wholesale¹⁷) challenge to what several of the authors describe as the authoritarian and "Jansenistic" framework imposed on the congregation by Bishop Lefevere and Father Joos during the nearly half century of the latter's reign as "ecclesiastical superior." It is impossible to determine the extent to which this was maintained deliberately as a form of resistance, and the extent to which it was unintended or unconscious. What is clear, though, is that--underneath the formalism and legalism that defined so much of the congregation's outer framework throughout the 100+ years after Mother Theresa's departure--there was a definite persistence of the flexibility, personalism, and pioneer creativity that Connie Supan has detailed as characteristic of the community's first decade.

The particular ways in which these traits manifested themselves are valued components of IHM folklore and tradition. Joan Glisky's piece may catalogue the many proscriptions against "particular friendship" in IHM constitutions and practice, but it and the one by Nancy Sylvester make equally evident that sisters in every period have found ways to circumvent such restrictions. Similarly, Amata Miller's analysis of the extraordinary building program undertaken during the Great Depression reflects the "Providential"--and practical!--spirituality that Mother Theresa carried with her from the Oblates, while her delightful aside concerning Mother Ruth and Sister Miriam Raymo's surreptitious stops for fast food is yet another example of subversive yet pervasive playfulness. Both Carol Quigley and Jane Shea, in their treatments of mental and physical illness, record a legacy of loving and sisterly care that survived despite a distorted "religious" notion of "death to self" that encouraged disregard for individuals' well-being. And as Barbara Johns recalls through her account of Immaculata High School, underneath the façade of "Marian" meekness and gentility that the faculty worked so diligently to model in themselves and to instill in the "young ladies" under their tutelage, there was a respect for rigor, intellectual curiosity and womanly accomplishment that was constitutive of IHM education.

Ultimately, however, the tradition of personalism--of resistance to blind uniformity--may be recorded most movingly in Margaret Brennan's essay on IHM spirituality. For even as "regular" religious observance came increasingly to be defined as one of uniform and unison prayer-saying, the Monroe tradition of "poverty books" ensured that each sister would continue to be encouraged to develop and express her own

¹⁷ See, for example, the essays by Joan Glisky and by Maryfran Barber and Mary M. McCann, below.

special and distinct relationship to God. At its most profound level, therefore--and even when it might appear on the surface to reflect a standardization at once all-encompassing and unbroken--the "circle of sisterhood" to which IHMs collectively belonged was composed simultaneously of individuals.

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Yet even as particular attributes of the Monroe sisterhood are acknowledged, attributes that collectively shaped an IHM identity, the group's kinship with the larger community that comprises America's women religious must also be recognized and affirmed. Others besides the IHMs, for example, can trace their origins to founders as unlike the alleged "traditional" model of alabaster purity as was Mother Theresa of Monroe. Odilia Berger, for example, founder of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary, was herself an unwed mother--and so, of course, was Sr. Anthony Duchemin, OSP, Theresa's own mother!¹⁸ The women who began orders such as the Hawthorne Dominicans, Religious of the Holy Child Jesus, the Sisters of Divine Compassion, and the Franciscans of Perpetual Adoration (La Crosse) were separated from spouses or divorced.¹⁹ Like Mother Theresa, Mother St. Andrew Feltin of Texas's Sisters of Divine Providence was forced into involuntary exile from her community (ironically, for an identical eighteen years)--and her congregation also was divided, by a bishop's determination and not hers.²⁰ Also like Theresa, a number of American founders were women who during their lifetimes belonged to a succession of congregations; among these were Mothers Alfred Moes, Stanislaus Leary, and Scholastica Kerst.²¹ And like the women in Monroe, others too have had to confront the trauma of founders' departures from "home," as well as fissures

¹⁸ Mary Gabriel Henninger, *Sisters of Saint Mary and Their Healing Mission* (St. Louis: priv. publ., 1979).

¹⁹ Theodore Maynard, *A Fire Was Lighted* [biography of Rose Hawthorne Lathrop] (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1948); Patricia D. Valenti, *To Myself a Stranger: A Biography of Rose Hawthorne Lathrop* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1991); Radekunde Flaxman, *A Woman Styled Bold: The Life of Cornelia Connelly, 1809-1879* [the best and most recent of many biographies] (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991); M. Teresa Brady, *The Fruit of His Compassion* [biography of Mary Veronica Starr, founder of the Sisters of the Divine Compassion] (New York: Pageant Press, 1962); and M. Mileta Ludwig, *A Chapter of Franciscan History, 1849-1949* [for Mother M. Antonia Herb of the La Crosse congregation] (New York: Bookman Associates, 1950), especially pp. 415-20.

²⁰ See several of my articles for treatment of Mother St. Andrew Feltin; also Mary Generose Callahan, *History of the Sisters of Divine Providence, San Antonio, Texas* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1954); and Angelina Murphy, *Mother Florence, A Biographical History* [biography of Mother St. Andrew's successor, with extensive coverage of the latter's exile] (Smithtown, NY: Exposition Press, 1980).

²¹ Carlan Kraman, *Odyssey of Faith: The Story of Mother Alfred Moes* (Rochester, Minn.: priv. published, 1990); Sister Peg Brennan of the Rochester Sisters of St. Joseph is at work on a biography of Leary, but see also M. Evangeline Thomas, *Footprints on the Frontier: A History of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Concordia, Kansas, from 1883-1948* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1948); for Kerst, see Mary Richard Boo, *House of Stone: The Duluth Benedictines* (Duluth: St. Scholastica Priory Books, 1991).

and permanent separations--frequently at clerics' rather than sisters' initiatives--among members of once-united religious families. If one adds to these experiences those of (temporary) excommunication and interdict; corporate relocations to escape from the jurisdictions of abusive prelates; clerical interference in sisters' internal juridical affairs, admission (or dismissal) of members, finances, and selection of leaders; and frustrations in defining or pursuing original or sought-after spiritualities--one realizes how "typical" the IHM's "atypicality" really is!²²

Those familiar with pre-Vatican II religious life, for example, will appreciate much that is familiar in Mary Ann Hinsdale's insightful account of IHM novitiate formation, although her essay is rich with detail particular to this congregation. Similarly, those who attended or otherwise came into contact with academies like the IHM's Immaculata High School will recognize in Barbara Johns's piece the similarities it shared with dozens of such schools throughout the United States. On the other hand, Josephine M. Sferrella's essay on the education of the IHM sisters themselves describes a phenomenon with parallels in other congregations but that, here--in its relatively early emphasis on professionalism and advanced studies--was precedent-setting, rather than strictly representative of what American sisters generally experienced. The pathbreaking IHM role in the Sister Formation Movement, however, which Sferrella also discusses, introduced much of what had originated in Monroe to sisters across the country, thereby enabling others to share in the fruits of this "atypical" development.²³

In the years since Vatican II, contact and cooperation among religious communities has become so common as to seem commonplace. No longer is it remarkable that women from various orders routinely work, live, and pray together; no longer are they separated by barriers of habit, constitutional minutiae, or rigidly-enforced "custom." But sisters' general lack of familiarity with the entirety of their own--much less others'--histories has resulted in a tendency for many communities to underestimate the common bonds they share with others, as well as to obscure or even deny what some sort of imposed decorum of piety has led them to believe must be "aberrant" or "disedifying" pieces of their individual and collective traditions. Such distorted notions of religious propriety have had consequences: for contemporary praxis and as well as for the construction of a usable past.

²² See my "Sisters, Feminism, and the New Religious History"; I discussed this, as well, in "'Father' Didn't Always Know Best: Sisters Versus Clerics in Nineteenth-Century American Catholicism," paper delivered at the 1987 meeting of the Social Science History Assn., New Orleans.

²³ Additional information on Sister Formation can also be found in Ellen Clanon's essay, "A Life Revisited."

A single example will serve to illustrate the dangers. Various of the COR scholars note, correctly, that "strictness" of observance and an exaggerated rigor were characteristic of prerenewal Monroe. For decades, this was a source of both community pride and individual salvific reassurance, for any sister who was "obedient" according to these precepts was one well on her way to "perfection" and, presumably, heaven. Unquestionably, hundreds of women were able to adjust to the expected standards--and most doubtless achieved both temporal fulfillment and eternal reward for their efforts. Still, Carol Quigley suggests in her essay that at least some of the insanity that has been diagnosed in IHMs of every generation can be attributable to the inability of certain individuals to "fit" into a standardized, rigid, and perhaps unhealthy uniform mold. Supan and Fleming, meanwhile, reveal that this mold derives more from the legacies of the scrupulous and deferential Mother Mary Joseph Walker and the Jansenistic Father Joos than it does from the intentions and charism of Theresa, Louis Gillet, and the earliest pioneer sisters. Meanwhile, subsequent generations of congregational leaders would denigrate and minimize the formative roles of Theresa and Gillet, or stigmatize them as unfortunate "deviations" from which the community later needed to be "saved" by its "true" founders, Walker and Joos. Under the circumstances, who is aberrant and what really are the community's most fundamental values and behavioral norms? Ultimately, what adjustments in self-understanding are required of a group that comes to recognize that its earliest roots have been depreciated, and that some of the most basic values it has espoused derive not from its original charism but from reaction against that charism?

Attempts like COR's at uncovering the realities beneath the layers of pious myth are both difficult and painful--even if, in the end, they are liberating. Sisters who make the effort must do not only the nitty-gritty of research that is integral to all historical inquiry; they must be prepared to discard the hagiographic baggage accumulated through several generations of synthetic (and frequently quite reassuring) tradition-building. But the pain and difficulties can be assuaged to the degree that they are understood as part of a process that engages an even wider/broader circle of sisterhood than any single community can contain. It is a process that, in the aftermath of Vatican II, has been entered into by dozens of groups--with frequently unexpected results. That this is less fully appreciated than it might be is due to remaining (if lesser) barriers between congregations, constructed equally of persistent assumptions about meritorious "uniqueness" and scholarly practices that have valued the solitary inquiry over the collaborative. Perhaps what is required

here is a new component to the spirituality of poverty--a recognition that congregations do not "own" their pasts exclusively but, rather, share them with a larger community.

Thus, it is important to realize that the IHMs are not alone in needing to uncover the truth of their past and in needing to reinterpret what has been handed down. Nor are they the only ones to have started to do so. Even as they struggle to acknowledge Mother Theresa as a founder in whom they can take pride, and one who had a vision very different from that which has been long-accepted as "essentially" IHM, groups like the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace have begun to reidentify themselves gratefully as daughters of the "apostate" Margaret Anna Cusack, who left the Catholic Church in the wake of persistent clashes with prelates, and who spent much of the last decade of her life writing harsh critiques of Roman clerical authoritarianism.²⁴ Only for the past decade or so have the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon faced openly their origins in what must be recognized as a schismatic "cult," not to mention the demotion and humiliation of their Mother Wilhelmina, the woman who both preserved their story in her diary and memoirs and who saw to their rescue and "rehabilitation" and served as their first (if demoted) superior.²⁵ Groups whose founders or former leaders spent their final years in obscurity or exile are too numerous to recount; only now are at least some of these congregations looking frankly at the "institutionalizing" factors that led to the suppression or censure of the prophetic and free spirits among them.²⁶ As a result, and contrary to earlier notions of proper and edifying piety, it appears that deviation from some ahistorical and mythic "norm" is in reality an "essential element" of religious life!

Therefore, as they have struggled to confront their own heritage with honesty and intellectual rigor, the Monroe IHMs are assuming their place within a larger "circle of sisterhood" that includes all those women religious who have taken seriously the call of post-Vatican II renewal to explore and claim identification with the truth of their own pasts. But another task remains, even as the IHMs complete their

²⁴ Rosalie McQuaide, "'My Dear Lord': Letters from Margaret Anna Cusack to Bishop Winand Michael Wigger," paper delivered at the 1992 meeting of the History of Women Religious Network, Tarrytown, NY; see also Margaret Anna Cusack, *The Nun of Kenmare: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1891); Irene Ffrench Eagar, *Margaret Anna Cusack* (Dublin: The Women's Press, 1979); Dorothy Vidulich, *Peace Pays a Price* Teaneck, NJ: Garden State Press, 1975); Margaret Rose O'Neill, *The Life of Mother Clare: Out from the Shadow of the Upas Tree* (Seattle: priv. publ., 1990).

²⁵ Mother Wilhelmina's journal, Archives of the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon, Beaverton, Ore.; see also Wilfred P. Schoenberg, *These Valiant Women: History of the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon, 1886-1986* (Portland, Ore.: priv. publ., 1986).

²⁶ Apart from many of the accounts cited above, see, in particular, M. Edwina Bogel and Jane Marie Brach, *In All Things Charity: A Biography of Mother M. Colette Hilbert, Franciscan Sister of St. Joseph* (Hamburg, NY: priv. publ., 1983; and my accounts of Mother Catherine O'Connor, S.L., in essays cited previously and "Loretto, The Vatican and Historical Irony," *NCAN News* [publication of the National Coalition of American Nuns], December 1986.

own research and publish their findings. The product of their labors--like similar endeavors by other sisters--must rightfully be placed into a context which transcends specificity and exclusivity, and which celebrates a sisterhood both broader and deeper than one bounded by either community membership or canonical status.²⁷

* * * * *

Underlying the entire COR project--and fundamental to the impetus that gave it birth--was the 1987 Assembly's commitment to "reflecting on our experience as women" and its consequent choice "to educate ourselves to the feminist perspective and to operate from our understandings as they develop." Thus, from the outset, COR members placed themselves implicitly in a "circle of sisterhood" that linked IHM history with the history of women generally. This may seem both logical and unremarkable; after all, sisters are female before they are nuns, and they retain their gender even after taking vows. But the bonds of womanhood uniting sisters and other women were obscured, and occasionally even denied, through much of what evolved over the years as the normative praxis of "traditional" religious life. Indeed, even the "femaleness" of sisters themselves was given a distinct and confusing significance.

To begin with, religious were told they had to "die to self" in order to pursue the "life of perfection" that the evangelical counsels entailed. As aids to doing so, religious clothing concealed the female anatomy and religious names were assigned without regard to gender. From their entry into the community, sisters typically were told that they occupied a "higher state of grace" than those not "gifted" with this vocation; distinctiveness, then, rather than similarity to those "outside" was evidence of "cooperation" with that grace. Sisters were to avoid discussion of (and, ideally, thought about) their lives prior to entering the convent; references to old friends (or even to friendships with those who might have joined the community with them) were considered part of the "old man" that was to be cast off. Contact with those outside the community was strictly regulated, including personal conversations that might have encouraged discovery of kinship

²⁷ There are ironies here, for the call to "rediscover founders' charisms" came directly from the hierarchy. So, in responding to it (initially, at least), sisters like the IHMs acted out of precisely the sort of "daughterly obedience" that was constituent of the history they now, inevitably, are revising. It's also difficult to imagine that the prelates who called for rediscovery of founders' charisms expected what has been uncovered; did they know that, underneath the pious rhetoric, there would be strong, assertive, and controversial women--who challenged not only the comfort of their own times but of the present?!

and common interest with those women still "in the world."²⁸ Meanwhile, pious readings--predominantly written by men or, at least, granted the imprimatur of male "authorities"--stressed the value of virtues described as "manly" and decried any vestiges of the "spiritually effeminate." Thus, on a number of dimensions, sisters were encouraged to ignore or repudiate the female aspects of their identity--and especially their similarities to (or prior existence as) "laywomen."²⁹

But the message sisters received was strangely mixed. The same spirituality that stressed "manly" virtues, and that equated chastity with suppression or denial of sexuality, also designated sisters as "spiritual mothers" of those to whom they ministered--and, most significantly, as "brides of Christ." Indeed, many dimensions of religious life seemed to imbue some "feminine" characteristics and behaviors with all the force of natural law. In no respect was this clearer than in the contrast between women religious and clerics. The priest, on whom sisters were dependent for most of their spiritual nourishment (and for all the sacraments), was designated an "alter Christus," to whom the "spousal" sister owed deference, submission, and gratitude.³⁰ Consider, for instance, this admonition from the Rule of a women's order quite similar to the IHMs:

Distrust your knowledge and be set on nothing whatsoever. Hold to nothing against the decision of a priest, though it might seem to you that you have read or heard that which you have in mind. I have known people who thought they had heard me say things that I never said, and others who have misunderstood what I did say. With all the more reason should you distrust your intelligence and your memory if there be a question of a passage from Holy Scripture, or some similar difficulty, always submitting your judgment to that of priests; but if exceptionally and for good reasons, you should think some one of them evidently wrong, you may certainly consult others. However, generally speaking, be assured that in spite of all you may know or remember, it is far more probable that it is you who are in error.³¹

Such assumptions about the appropriateness of women's deference were not confined to the purely spiritual or sacramental realm. So, for instance, women were considered incapable of governing themselves independent of male leadership. Juridically, until the twentieth century, no woman could serve as the final "superior" of a woman's congregation; the men who filled such roles retained enormous power over temporal as well as sacramental affairs, as this passage from a representative Constitution reveals:

²⁸ This kind of personal interaction was, of course, forbidden among sisters as well; see essays by Joan Glisky and Nancy Sylvester who explain, correctly, that the principal rationale for such intracommunity prohibitions was fear of "particular friendships." Nevertheless, it had the additional effect of restricting bonding among the sisters as women.

²⁹ This word is in quotation marks because sisters--like all women, precluded from ordination--are, of course, also members of the laity. In popular usage, however, the term "laywomen" is used only to refer to women not under religious vow.

³⁰ See my "Women and American Catholicism," and "New Religious History."

³¹ "On Distrust of One's Own Light," Art. XX, *Constitution of the Sisters of Divine Providence*, 1883, p. 80; archives of the Sisters of Divine Providence, Melbourne, Ky.

The Superior General, being the head of the whole Company throughout Kentucky, and other places whither it may be extended, nothing can be done in it, no resolution can be carried into effect, without his concurrence or approbation; and, in all cases, if the vote be equally divided in the Council, he has the casting vote. In matters of importance, such as making improvements on the property belonging to the Sisters; receiving new foundations, legacies, donations; buying or leasing real property; borrowing money to an account heretofore specified; dispensing for a time with any point of the Rules; admitting Candidates or Novices; or dismissing them either; removing Sisters from one place to another; he must be consulted in person. To him it belongs to examine the affairs of the Company and its accounts; to confirm the resolutions taken; to approve of the new Establishments. To him also belongs to permit any of the Sisters to add corporal austerities to those already allowed by the Rules; to appoint ordinary or extraordinary Confessors, with the approbation of the diocesan Bishop, out of the priests already approved by him, unless he should receive from him certain restrictions concerning individuals. Although the Bishop has an unalienable right to appoint any priest he may think proper in his respective Diocese as Confessor, nevertheless, it is humbly presumed he will permit the Superior General to make any representation to him respecting those appointments, which he will weigh in his wisdom.³²

The result of such precepts, particularly when reinforced by ecclesial approbation and codification into the "Holy Rule," was inevitable spiritual and personal dependency on the part of those to whom the words were directed, and implicit if not overt internalization of a belief in the limitations to woman's potential.

This is not the place for a full discussion of the "reawakening" of Catholic sisters: how they came to rediscover not only their identity as women but also the insights into that identity that feminist theory could provide. Suffice it to say here that the IHMs are not alone in the realization they have reached that the apparatus that for so long enclosed them within the "state of perfection" also separated them from other women. Since Vatican II, women within and outside religious life have discovered that what they have in common is vastly more significant than what differentiates them. Both groups have been constrained by remarkably similar assumptions about what is "natural" or "inherent" to women; both are discovering that most of these assumptions are of man-made rather than divine origin.

Thus, the "spousal" subordination of nuns, for instance, is not only akin to that of women in traditional marriage, its design can be traceable directly to male clerics' determination to find a safe and familiar place in which to locate women who, in their religious fervor, liberated themselves from the

³² Constitutions of the Sisters of Charity [of Nazareth], established in the State of Kentucky, (Cincinnati, 1878), pp. 8-9. And should these sisters have forgotten the alleged virtue of submitting to such authority, they needed only to turn to their Customary, published the preceding year: "They shall, for the love of God, suffer cheerfully inconveniences, contradictions, scoffings, calumnies, and other mortifications, which they may have to endure, even for their good actions; remembering that our Savior, who was innocence itself, endured far greater sufferings, and even prayed for those who crucified him; and that, in all their pains, they have but a small share in the cross, which he was pleased to carry, in order to merit for them the happiness of beholding him for ever in heaven." *Regulations for the Society of the Sisters of Charity, of the United States of America, for the Mother-House of Nazareth, Kentucky* (Cincinnati, 1877), p. 5. This type of deference to clerics was meant to be practiced at various organizational levels of religious life; just as "reverend mother" was subordinate to the bishop or his designated "ecclesiastical superior," female "local superiors" on mission were subordinate to pastors--and, indeed, to all parish priests.

jurisdictions of fathers or husbands. The restrictions that nuns had placed on their education and their ministries, the "feminine gentility" that was to characterize their demeanor, their presumed "innate" revulsion against "worldly" prominence and power--all these things and more applied equally to their sisters outside the convent. As COR's "Working Assumption #7" declares: "Patriarchy exists in society and its institutions, including [but not solely] the church." All women, therefore, collectively and coequally, have experienced and must overcome its consequences.

The process of "consciousness raising"--of developing and "claiming" feminist awareness--has come easily for no one, within or outside religious life. Indeed, some women of great intelligence, creativity, and insight were unable to complete the journey, and experienced substantial pain and even alienation as a result. Ellen Clanon's essay in this volume tells the story of such an individual. Sister Mary Patrick Riley was a pioneer educator, a real innovator at both the congregational and national levels, who for years played a major role in the advancement of IHM professionalism. Yet she could not embrace the sweeping changes that ensued in the aftermath of Vatican II, and ended her life sadly and in largely self-imposed isolation from many in the community to which she had devoted her life. Clanon's sympathetic account is in this respect the story of a representative woman, and sheds light on the experiences of those who felt left behind (or swept aside) in the wake of feminism.

As communication between so-called "nunwomen" and "laywomen" progresses, the "circle of sisterhood" in which both reside will become larger and more fully realized. And research of the sort represented in this book will facilitate this growth in at least two ways. First, throughout the essays, feminist insights from a variety of disciplines--sociology, literature and psychology, as well as history--have been incorporated deliberately and effectively into the analysis. By delineating a religious subject in terms congruent with secular scholarship in this way, the COR writers have made their work both palatable and accessible to the general community of feminist scholars.

Second, and equally important, Claiming Our Roots can serve to introduce secular scholars to at least some dimensions of feminist spirituality and theology. This is a field which has remained relatively unknown to many feminists, who mistakenly equate all religion with the patriarchal structures that traditionally have surrounded it--and, therefore, dismiss religion itself as at best a topic of marginal (and usually negative) significance to them. A project like COR--not to mention the IHM history that is its focus--

demonstrates convincingly that a life of faith is not incompatible with either intellectual rigor or a feminist perspective. So, even if theology and spirituality are overtly treated in only a few of the essays in the present volume, their implicit role--and the evident experience of faith manifest in both the writers and the women they write about--should help to dispel many feminists' misconceptions.

* * * * *

One of the essays in which spirituality figures most prominently is that by Maryfran Barber and Mary M. McCann, on a post-Vatican II IHM experiment in collegial governance known as the "Representative Assembly (RA)." Barber and McCann discuss the brief lifespan (1972-75) of what they call the "RA of less-than-happy memory" and, more importantly, suggest some of the reasons for its failure. "Perhaps the most commonly accepted analysis," they write, "is the one voiced by many members of the RA: 'We simply weren't ready.'" Barber and McCann continue:

Given the IHMs[] long history of hierarchy, the change to collegial governance was too abrupt.... We lacked adequate communication skills; we had not yet learned to be in touch with and express our feelings, particularly anger; we did not know how to deal constructively with conflict. In summary, we were expecting too much of ourselves.

Nonetheless, in the end, the authors do not dismiss the RA as a failure; rather, relying on John of the Cross's concept of the "dark night of the soul" and Sister Constance FitzGerald's understanding of "impasse" situations (seen as types of John's "dark night") as times in which "what looks like and feels like disintegration, meaninglessness, and even death at one's present level of perception and affectivity is, at a more profound, but hidden level of faith, a process of purification leading to a resurrection experience." The problem, they declare, was that "the congregation was unable to see and choose the creative, spiritual potential of the impasse it experienced."

Barber and McCann end their account by saying, "with the following powerful declaration: "[I]mpasse is a place in and through which the Spirit hovers over the chaos, breathing life into being where previously there was no life. The RA is history, but its legacy lives on." Moreover, they declare:

We believe the RA "of less-than-happy memory" challenges us to contemplate and discern our experience of communal darkness and struggle, knowing that the darkness may contain the new and authentic life for which our hearts long.³³

I would argue that the "new and authentic life for which our hearts long" has manifested itself, to a very great extent, in the "circle of sisterhood" that is COR itself. Indeed, the very aptness I find in considering COR as a "circle of sisterhood" reveals how much growth has occurred among IHMs since the days of the RA. For example, Barber and McCann tell of one RA delegate's recollection of her reaction to the logistics of Assembly meetings in this way:

"It was like in a circle and then there was a stagelike space where the altar was in the novitiate. That's where some of the action was going on." When asked "Did the circle 'speak' to you?" "Well, yes, the whole idea was that we all had some authority; that we were all in a decision-making mode." But then she corrected her image, "It was like a half-circle, not a complete circle."³⁴

In contrast, my own observations of COR, my reading of the minutes of meetings I did not attend, and discussions with participants all suggest the extent to which things have changed.

From the very beginning, members of the COR task force acted on the premise that how they worked was as important as--and, moreover, constituent of--what they produced.³⁵ Perusal of the group's minutes reveals that part of every meeting, and sometimes the greater part, was devoted to discernment regarding process; additionally, the group read extensively in the literature of feminist theory, process and organization theory to prepare for these discussions. COR sessions regularly began with prayer, new members were incorporated into the body with ritual, facilitators were drawn from among COR itself and varied from occasion to occasion. Because the women were expected to "do their homework" before the gatherings, it could be assumed that everyone present was prepared for active involvement in the group's work; the minutes indicate that most of those present usually participated actively in ensuing discussions, and that all contributions were taken seriously.

I only attended two COR meetings, but have no reason to believe that they were unrepresentative. Everyone sat in a circle--absent the "stagelike space" that had intruded into the RA--occupying comfortable

³³ Barber and McCann, "The RA of Less-Than-Happy Memory"; quotations are from pp. __, __, and __. See also Constance FitzGerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), pp. 287-311.

³⁴ Barber and McCann, p. 8 (italics added).

³⁵ An early memorandum by Maryfran Barber, in fact, cites Judy Chicago's *The Birthing Project* as a work offering potential insight as the group developed a process which would allow "decentralized work while maintaining central focus and artistic control": a process that would be "participatory," "collaborative," and "collegial."

chairs and partaking freely of readily available refreshments.³⁶ Still, business came first; when the group was "in session," attention was focused completely on the tasks at hand and conversation was largely substantive. Despite the relaxed atmosphere, a great deal was accomplished in a relatively short period of time.

To some extent, the "sisterhood" among COR members can be explained by two group characteristics. First, all belong to the same religious congregation, and therefore can draw upon a common tradition, shared prior experience, and at least some previous acquaintance with each other.³⁷ Second, COR is an "intentional group"; everyone in it chose to participate and, implicitly at least, was favorably disposed from the outset to the body's rationale and purpose. But these factors alone are not sufficient to explain COR's success in developing its own "sisterhood"; if they were, then the RA would have compiled a similar record. In addition, I believe it was the group's overtly feminist approach, its persistent nurturing of congenial process, and its members' prior involvement in "circles" with similar dynamics that contributed substantially to its achievement.

None of this is "provable," of course. Still, it has been my experience that collegiality does not just "happen" but depends mightily upon the commitment of persons working to insure that it happens.³⁸ As its 1991 "Working Assumptions" suggest, COR has believed from the outset that "the way we do feminist history is crucial to what we discover as our history" and therefore it made a wise and ongoing investment of time and energy in the "design [of] a feminist process for the history project that includes active participation, collaboration, and consciousness of our own biases."³⁹

³⁶ Since it probably will not be mentioned elsewhere, I feel compelled to memorialize one form of refreshment that, even as of 1991, apparently had become something of a COR "tradition": the "trail mix" of nuts, M&Ms, and raisins prepared regularly (and in great quantity) by Joan Glisky. The recognition, enthusiasm and humor with which COR members (and, after tasting it, I) greeted its arrival in their midst was indicative of the sort of "sisterhood" that this essay wishes to invoke.

³⁷ As of May 1994, the Michigan IHM congregation had 822 members [telephone conversation with Joan Glisky, IHM, congregational secretary, 2 May 1994], and had many more in the past. Further, especially in recent years, IHM sisters live and work throughout the U.S. and abroad (two writers for COR live in Canada, for example). Thus, it would be a mistake to exaggerate the extent to which COR members knew each other prior to their service on this task force.

³⁸ Here, I might contrast the positive experiences I have had with COR and groups with similar orientation--the National Coalition of American Nuns and the Board of Directors of Mary's Pence, for example--with less successful groups to which I belong that operate from either no model at all or from a patriarchal one. Many of the subgroups at my university immediately come to mind as characteristic of the latter; in fourteen years, I cannot recall any explicit consideration of matters like process or group dynamics--and the results are predictable.

³⁹ February 1991 memo (italics in original).

It would be misleading, however, to imply that COR represented some sort of utopian community--that it has remained untouched by tension, pain, controversy, or disruption. A couple of people have left the group. Some of the women involved maintain reservations about the degree of overt feminism in COR's operating assumptions and procedures--and, while their opinions are respected, they have not substantively altered how COR has proceeded. Especially in the early stages of COR's work, there was disagreement over issues in IHM history: whether Theresa should be identified as "founder" (or "cofounder," along with Gillet),⁴⁰ how relations with the two Pennsylvania IHM communities should be treated (or if they should be included), the awkwardness of discussing or identifying "difficult" personalities in the essays (especially those who are still alive), and so on.

A difficult issue that remained troublesome to the very end of the writing process pertained to names. Specifically, were all persons to be referred to by last names only, or were sisters--especially those from the first century of IHM history--to be called by their religious titles and names?⁴¹ Some believed that a feminist approach required uniform usage for all women and men, and that references to women by first names and religious titles (e.g., Mother Ruth, Sister Mary Patrick) was both sexist and subordinating. Others, however, argued that women never called in life by their last names should not be so designated in this volume, and that "ahistorical" usage was anachronistic, as well as destructive of the "sisterly" status that existed among companions in community. In the end, the COR group decided that, as a general rule, last names were preferable; still, two writers who felt strongly that this approach would obscure both their and their subjects' "voices" were affirmed in their use of religious (first) names.

Finally, even toward the end of the writing process, there was sometimes hesitancy to offer necessary criticism of what members had written. To some extent, and despite a universally agreed-upon commitment to honesty, members tended to shy away from the inevitable difficult confrontations. The need

⁴⁰ *The Constitutions: Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan* (approved by the 1988 General Chapter, and privately published that same year) contains the following reference to the IHM's origins: "We cherish and are inspired by the lives of those who founded our Congregation, Louis Florent Gillet, Marie Therese Maxis, our pioneer Sisters, and by the lives of all our Sisters who have gone before us." [p. 11] As discussion at the final COR Writers' Group meeting (4 June 1994) underscored, however, this phrasing does as much to obscure as to resolve the "founder/cofounders" debate.

⁴¹ In the IHMs, as in most religious congregations prior to Vatican II, women received new names (usually those of saints) when they entered the novitiate. This was symbolic of their "taking on a new life." Additionally, they were referred to by the title "Sister," though those in leadership used "Mother" as their title. [The usage varied among congregations; in some--though not the IHMs--all finally professed members, or all those who had been professed for a certain number of years or who had ever held high office, were called "Mother."] In the majority of congregations, including the IHMs, sisters no longer used their family (last) names, but merely appended the initials of their congregations to their religious names: e.g., "Sister Mary Patrick, I.H.M."

to "affirm" each others' integrity and worth was undeniably important, but occasionally threatened to supersede the equally important value of ensuring the quality of the book being produced. As sometimes is the case in feminist circles, it seemed to be feared that criticism was inherently destructive, rather than potentially constructive; to put this in colloquial (but, under the circumstances, quite appropriate) language, COR members were loathe to "trash their sisters." Yet, in the end, the "tough" discussions occurred, around several essays--and the resulting volume is better for them.

To acknowledge difficulties, however, does not undermine my basic premise here: that a "circle of sisterhood" was created and maintained within COR that is real, strong, and likely to outlive the task force itself. No family--and sisters, whether in a religious congregation or not, are definitionally "family"--is without disputes or tensions. What is crucial is that problems are confronted and resolved, rather than evaded or buried. COR's members consistently have tried to do just that. As a result, its circle and its sisterhood have been forged more solidly than would otherwise have been the case.

* * * * *

As IHMs, as sisters, as women, and as members of COR, the writers whose efforts are contained in this volume bring the various circles of which they are part into the context and substance of their work. It is tempting, therefore, to forget that the writers and collaborators represented here are, before all else, very distinct and fully-formed individuals. To their common task, each woman brought the full range of her unique gifts and, as the essays that follow will reveal unmistakably, the collegial and cooperative was not intended to obscure the authors' individuality, or their particular insights and expertise. This individuality manifests itself clearly, and deliberately, throughout the book. Throughout all the writing and revision, each author's distinctive "voice" and interpretive insights were respected and preserved--as the discussion above of "names" suggests. The result is a collection that may be less uniform than many anthologies, but one that thereby conveys the diversity of COR's membership and historical perspective(s).

Such individuality, ultimately, is as essential to what COR is all about as is the degree of collegiality and synergy that the group was able to effect. Moreover, as Margaret Brennan reminds us, a creative tension between individuality and common purpose is constitutive of the very spiritual foundation of the IHM

congregation--and we must not forget, in reading *Claiming Our Roots*, that those responsible for it are fundamentally women of that spirituality. Brennan explains that despite Theresa's profound commitment to the spiritual legacy of Gillet and the Redemptorists, she had a concomitant appreciation for each sister's need to develop and express a personal relationship with God. Brennan places this charism within an explicitly feminist context:

Feminist thought is grounded in an ecological ethic which sees the relationship of all reality in an interconnected web of diversity, subjectivity, interdependence and community. Yet, at the same time, it prizes autonomy, self-actualization, and the individual and unique way in which each person approaches the transcendent God who is immanently present in all created reality as well.

Citing the work of Elizabeth A. Johnson, Brennan goes on to say: "Johnson pictures this cosmic reality as a circle of mutuality grounded and sustained by the Spirit who as the great, creative Matrix attracts it toward the future. 'The Spirit of God dwelling in the world with quickening power deconstructs dualism and draws in its place a circle of mutuality and inclusiveness.'" Thus, Brennan concludes, the tension is resolved in "sustained interaction around the foundational issues of faith and life which form the basis for our belonging to one another and for our common dedication to the mission of Jesus in a contemporary church and world that is dramatically different from that which gave us birth and growth."⁴² In other words, it is resolved through active awareness of and engagement in individual and collective history.

This awareness and engagement is, in the end, what has impelled the COR project and its various participants. It is an ongoing process, and one that will not end with the publication of this book. Nonetheless, the IHMs who have begun the journey here have taken a very important first step--one, it is hoped, that will be followed by those of other women, in their own "circles of sisterhood."

⁴² Brennan, "No Two Exactly Alike"; quoted passages are from p. __ (italics added). The reference to Elizabeth A. Johnson is from *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 60.