



# Special Report

Placing social science research at the service of the Church in the United States since 1964

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## Population Trends Among Religious Institutes of Women

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In spring 2014, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) initiated a longitudinal study of women religious in the United States drawing on data reported by the religious institutes of women listed in the *Official Catholic Directory (OCD)*. The contributions of women religious in the United States continue to be evident today in Catholic institutions of education and healthcare across the country, but there are, and have been, countless other contributions as well. Over the years, these valiant women have adapted to changing circumstances and forged ahead despite challenges to their way of life and ministry. The U.S. Catholic Church is indebted to the ministerial efforts and sacrifices made by women religious in the past and present.

This CARA Special Report is an effort to disentangle the story of women religious in the United States that is hidden in the numbers. Past studies that have presented the overall population of Catholic sisters in the United States have focused on the rapid decline that the total numbers revealed, but such studies did not provide the more nuanced narrative of what decline meant for the individual religious institute. How, for example, did religious institutes respond to declining membership? The data reveal not one response, but many quite varied responses. Some institutes responded by reorganizing internal structures, while others responded by merging with other religious institutes. In the face of diminishment, women religious have innovated by responding with new models when old models proved ineffective.

What gets lost in the discussion of the overall decline of women religious are the stories of institutes that have not followed the prevailing trend. Religious institutes experiencing growth, for instance, were virtually unaccounted for in past studies. Since any growth in vocations did not surpass the number needed for replacement, many institutes were assumed to have no new members. While new vocations to religious life are not abundant at this time, it is important to recognize that women continue to be called to this way of life. Although the numbers overall continue to decline, this Special Report presents signs of life that are hidden in those numbers.

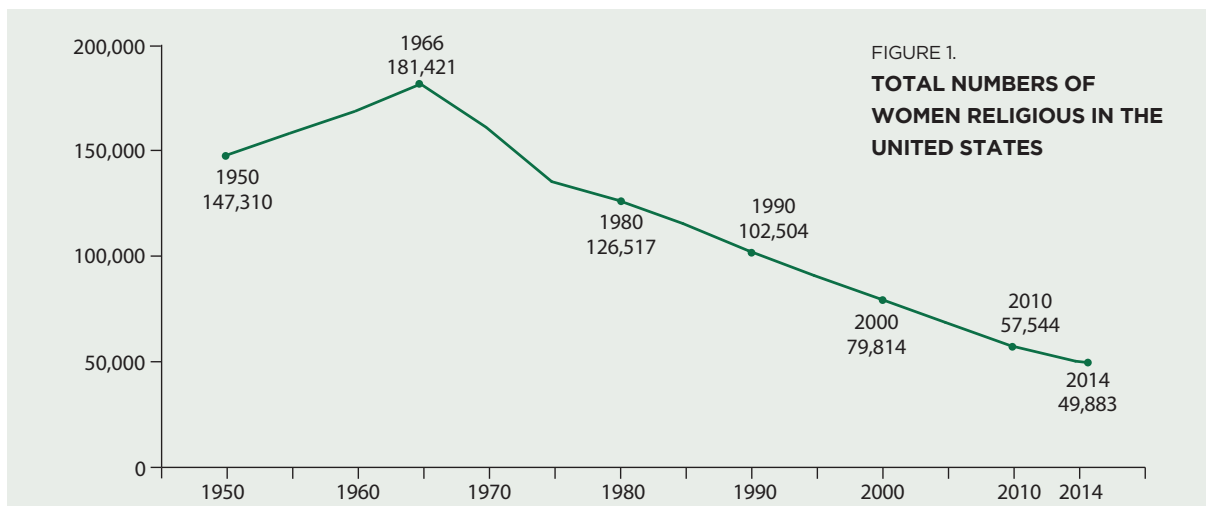


Ursuline sisters and students, St. Peter's Mission, Montana, 1892  
(Courtesy Jesuit Oregon Province Archives, Gonzaga University)

In focusing on the religious institutes of women themselves, this study responds to gaps in past studies of religious sisters by presenting the more particular stories of religious institutes in the face of general diminishment. How did these religious women organize in the midst of decline? How do international institutes of women religious respond to the changing landscape in the United States?

This report provides a snapshot of some notable phenomena occurring in U.S. religious institutes of women. The religious institutes discussed in the report were selected by examining trends in the collected data. Analyzing the data allowed CARA researchers to investigate why some institutes declined at a lower rate than others. Why did some institutes of women religious defy the general trend over time, while others closely followed it?

CARA compiled *OCD* data on membership for each religious institute by decade, beginning with entries reported in 1970 up to



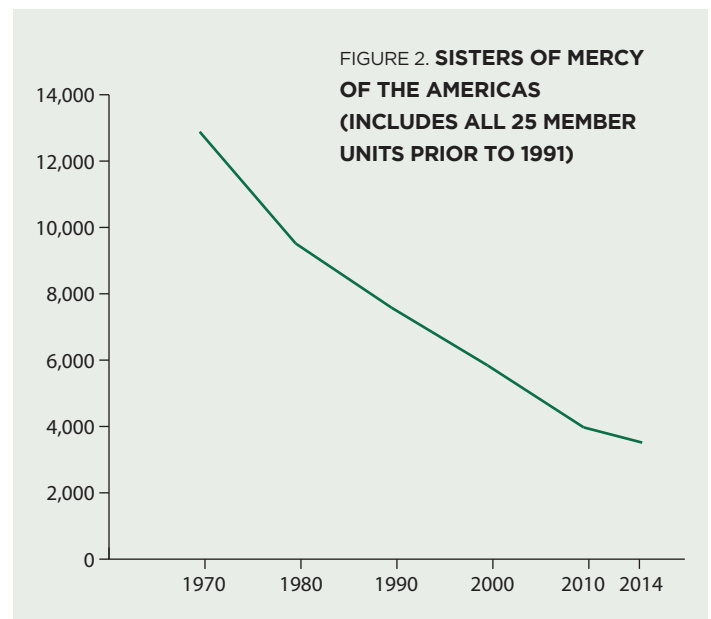
reported numbers for the most recent decade (see Appendix for an in-depth discussion of research methodology). The goal of the study was to reveal more nuanced trends of growth and decline among Catholic sisters in the United States over the past 50 years by focusing on the patterns in particular religious institutes themselves. The study also presents a few institutes that have women entering formation at a rate that allows them to grow. This growth is easier to observe for smaller, newer institutes than it is for the larger, more established institutes that are losing many older members who entered religious life decades ago.

### Overall: Sisters in the United States

The overall change in the population of women religious in the United States over the past 50 years is one of dramatic decline. This decline has been well documented. The numbers show that the overall population of women religious in the United States grew rapidly over the course of the twentieth century and reached its peak in 1965 with 181,421 sisters.<sup>1</sup> Today, the total number of women religious in the United States has fallen below 50,000, representing a 72.5 percent decline from the peak total in 1965. There are about as many women religious in the United States now as there were a hundred years ago.

While many have lamented the decline and some have speculated as to its causes and implications, few have actually examined the trend lines for the individual institutes of women religious as this study does. A number of stories in the popular press have made the claim that the more traditionalist institutes (e.g., those wearing a full traditional habit) are growing, while those institutes that do not wear a traditional habit are declining. However, as Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier report “The reality of the situation is that an almost equal percentage of LCWR [Leadership Conference of Women Religious] and CMSWR [Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious] institutes have no one at all in formation at the present time (32 percent and 27 percent, respectively). One of the most striking find-

ings regarding new entrants is that almost equal numbers of women have been attracted to institutes in both conferences in recent years.” (pp. 20-21). The reality that these *OCD* data disclose is that nine in ten institutes follow the trend line shown above while one in ten have defied that trend (see Appendix).



The largest religious institute of women in the United States remains the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, with almost 3,400 members in 2014. In 1970, the *OCD* listed nearly 13,000 Sisters of Mercy. This institute was founded in 1991, when nine provinces and 16 congregations of Sisters of Mercy came together. These 25 later consolidated into five U.S. and one Latin American province. This institute illustrates the general pattern of decline and merger found in most institutes. Mergers such as this require hard work, but they are done for the sake of new life. The institute counts 25 women in formation at this time.

## Factors Affecting the Overall Trend of Decline

The 2009 NRVC/CARA *Recent Vocations to Religious Life* study found that there are more Catholic sisters in the United States over age 90 than under age 60. This concentration of elderly sisters, which characterizes nearly all religious institutes, is perhaps the single greatest challenge to attracting new vocations. While many religious institutes of women continue to receive new members, these new vocations tend to be older, on average, than new members entering religious institutes of men. About a third of religious institutes of women have no one in formation and, among those that do, half have only one or two in formation.

Another factor that is perhaps slowing the rate of decline among women religious in recent years is an increase in vocations of women

from diverse ethnic backgrounds and from countries outside the United States. New research by CARA for NRVC, entitled *Incorporating Cultural Diversity in Religious Life*, finds that while nine in ten perpetually professed members of religious institutes of women are Caucasian/Anglo, four in ten of those who entered in the last ten years are of another race or ethnicity. More than half of these institutes of women religious say that at least one entrant in the past ten years was born outside the United States. Many U.S. based institutes of women religious, such as the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas described above, include members from outside the United States in their member counts. In many cases, the numbers provided to the OCD by religious institutes include the members of the institute who are serving abroad.

## Explaining Sharp Declines

A few religious institutes of women stood out in the data, displaying rapid rates of decline over a short period of time. An investigation of these institutes reveals that these sharp declines in membership occurred shortly after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which coincided with a period of turmoil and rapid social change in the United States. The Council had called for *aggiornamento*—or bringing up to date, which left religious orders with the task of determining what updating might mean for their particular institute. Renewal proved especially difficult, however, because the Council had, at the same time, called for what was termed *ressourcement*—or a renewal through a return to the sources. For many, looking back to their initial foundation and charism suggested ways to read the “signs of the times,” which facilitated renewal of their institutes. For others, debates ensued which caused irreconcilable divisions. Some sisters responded to these divisions by breaking from their institute in order to found new religious institutes, while others sought dispensation from their vows altogether.

A well-known example of mass exodus is found in The California Institute of the Sisters of the Most Holy and Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the period following Vatican II, these women determined the practical *aggiornamento* needed for their Los Angeles based institute. Cardinal McIntyre, Archbishop of Los Angeles, vehemently disagreed with a number of changes in their institute and barred the sisters from teaching in diocesan schools when they refused to comply with his wishes. The confrontation with Cardinal McIntyre caused a rift within the religious institute, with some members desiring to comply while the vast majority maintained that these changes were needed.

The Vatican commission sent to investigate the dispute concluded the investigation with a compromise, which allowed the community to split temporarily and continue their discussions. At the time, 50 sisters remained in the original institute. Unable to reach an agreement, the other 300 plus members of the institute sought dispensation from their canonical vows in favor of a lay movement called the

FIGURE 3. **AGE DISTRIBUTION OF SISTERS IN THE U.S.**

Source: 2009 NRVC/CARA Study of Recent Vocations to Religious Life

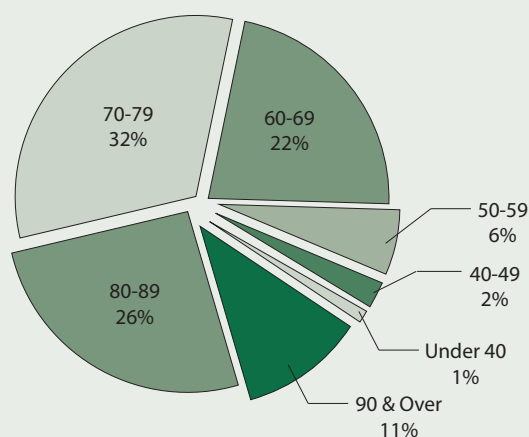
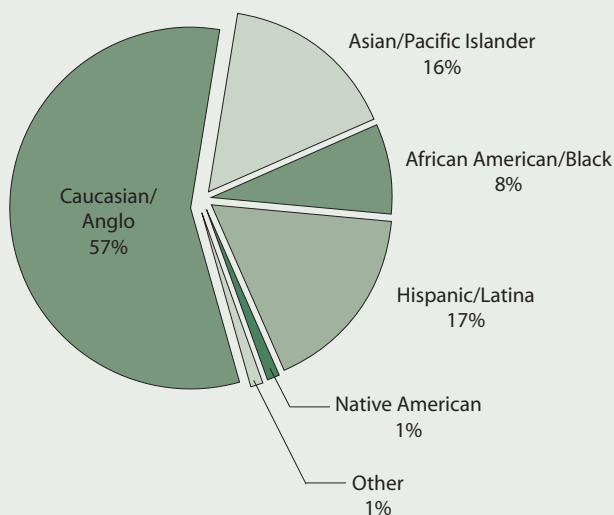


FIGURE 4. **RACE/ETHNICITY OF ENTRANTS IN THE LAST TEN YEARS**

Source: 2014 NRVC/CARA Study of Incorporating Cultural Diversity in Religious Life

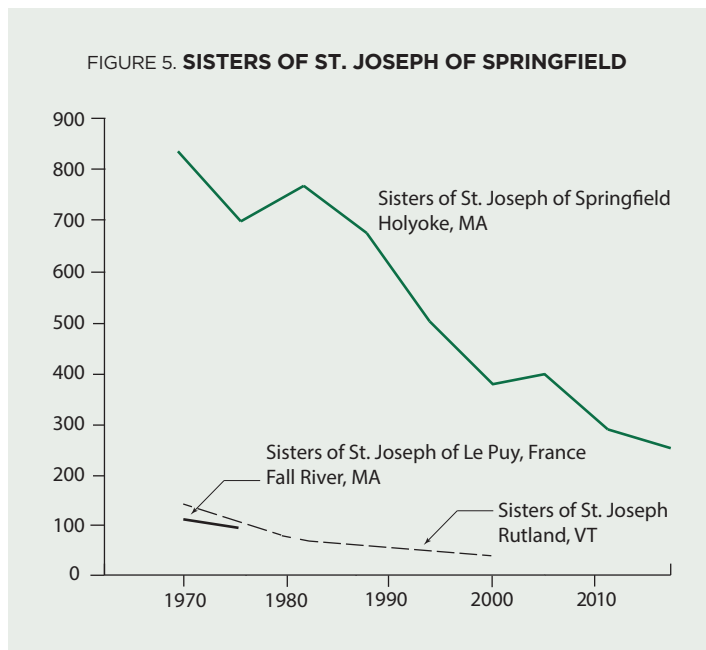


Immaculate Heart Community. *Time* magazine called them “rebels,” but they saw themselves as grappling with Vatican II’s call for *aggiornamento*.

### Internal Reorganization of Religious Institutes

The CARA examination of data reported to the *OCD* revealed a number of interesting findings about religious institutes of women that did not follow the general trend of rapid and increasing rate of decline. A number of religious institutes stood out in the data by evidencing a slowing rate of decline since 2000. When these communities with slowing rates of diminishment were investigated further, a number of them were found to have absorbed smaller communities (or institutes with a much faster rate of population decrease) thereby accounting for the slowing decline in the base community.

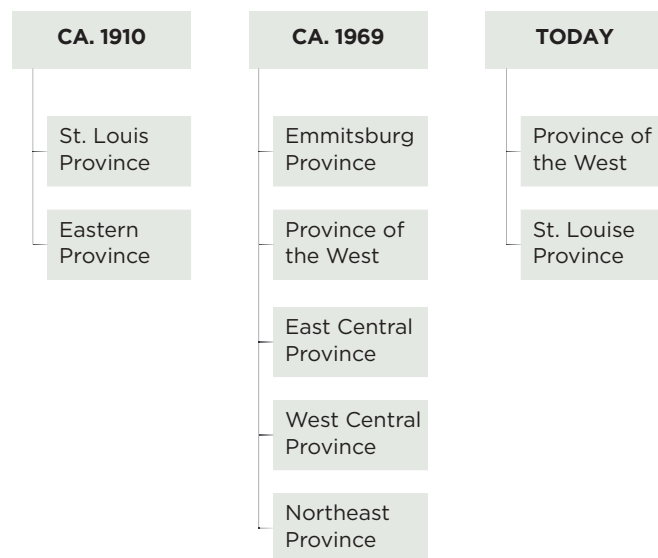
The Sisters of St. Joseph of Springfield (MA) is one helpful example. In the mid 1970s, a first merger with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Springfield took place when the Sisters of St. Joseph of Fall River joined the community. In 1974, just before the merger, the Fall River institute numbered 99 sisters. In 2001, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rutland, Vermont, also merged with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Springfield. The figures can be seen on the graph.



These two mergers with the Springfield community help explain the increase in the numbers for the community in 1974 and 2001. It is not that the Sisters of St. Joseph of Springfield exhibited a sudden increase in new vocations, but rather these two mergers account for the upswing. In such cases, the apparent slowing rate of decline is not related to an increase of new vocations; instead, it is these mergers that account for the increases in membership.

Other larger institutes have reorganized internally, or are in the process of reorganizing, by reshaping their province jurisdictions. In some cases, this entails returning to an organizational model once employed in their earlier history. Such religious institutes deal with decline in members internally, rather than through merger with another religious institute. In the past, a rapidly growing institute would have responded to increased numbers by creating new provinces in order to better administer their religious community. Today, faced with a corresponding rapid decline, such an institute might consolidate provinces to form fewer, larger provinces and do away with replicated administrative offices across the country. By responding in this internal manner, a religious institute might avoid the challenges of merging with another institute that may not share its charism and traditions.

FIGURE 6. DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL



The Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, for example, were founded as the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph at Emmitsburg, Maryland in 1809 and divided into two provinces in 1910 (the St. Louis Province and the Eastern Province). In 1960, those two provinces reported more than 2,500 total members. In just a short time (ca. 1969), the organizational structure for the institute swelled to five U.S. provinces to respond to growth in numbers of sisters. In 2011, however, the St. Louise Province was established, which joined together four of the five provinces and thereby returned to the previous organizational model of the institute. Today, the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul list 670 members serving in the United States.

### Mergers of Religious Institutes

The formation of “new” religious institutes, amalgamated from smaller communities of women, is a common trend among religious institutes faced with declining numbers. This reorganization of com-



munities explains why a number of religious institutes cease to exist while other institutes, often larger than 500 members, have suddenly appeared in more recent years. It is not that communities have vanished, but simply that they are to be found under new designations.

The Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities, for example, is the result of a merger of five communities beginning in 2004. The five communities varied in size from 30 to 335 members. After the merger, the new Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities numbered 528 members in 2010.

Many institutes of women religious will reorganize or merge institutes as numbers continue to decline. Recently, the Union of Sisters of Our Lady of Charity celebrated their reunification with the Religious of the Good Shepherd. The amalgamation of these two institutes represents an international merger, bringing together traditions and resources under a shared charism. Transition marks the experience of many sisters, as they work to negotiate their past with hopes for the future.

Today, there are fewer religious institutes of women based in the United States than there were in the 1970s, but determining an accurate number of institutes for any given year is really a matter of definition. In one accounting, a number for religious communities could include the number of provinces of a single religious institute. Such a count would grossly overestimate the number of total institutes but would account for the changes in internal structures. Another accounting could exclude the individual provinces but this would grossly underestimate some religious communities with distinct administrative units.

### Vocational Growth in Communities

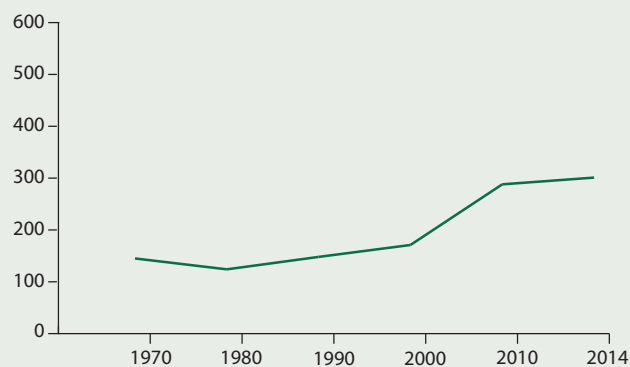
Although the overall trend among religious institutes today suggests general decline, some institutes with established histories continue to experience vocational growth. The Dominican Sisters of the Congregation of St. Cecilia (also known as the Nashville Dominicans) is one such example. Following a slight decline between 1970 and 1980, the Congregation of St. Cecilia has since grown steadily. The institute has experienced its most rapid growth in the period since 2000, with a 76 percent change. Today, the community numbers just over 300 members. Growth, not decline, captures this institute's trajectory.

#### EMERGING COMMUNITIES: THE EARLY 1970S

The CARA study of *Emerging Communities of Consecrated Life* revealed that a number of communities, many of which were founded in the 1970s, displayed a period of initial success followed by the more common pattern of decline. These religious institutes, inspired by the Second Vatican Council, placed themselves at the service of the Church with a renewed commitment to the poor.

The Sisters of St. Joseph the Worker, for example, were founded in 1973 in the Diocese of Covington, Kentucky, by sisters from the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth. They began with 18 professed sisters and experienced growth in the early years of their foundation. Their apostolic life was dedicated to the care of the elderly and the education of children at their academy in Walton, Kentucky. By 1990, the community numbered 23 sisters; representing a growth of 27 percent since 1973. The years following, however, returned the Sisters of St. Joseph the Worker to a size comparable to that of their initial foundation. Today, the community numbers 12 members.

FIGURE 7. DOMINICAN SISTERS OF THE CONGREGATION OF ST. CECILIA



Still other religious institutes of women that emerged in the 1970s experience consistent growth even today. These communities do not exhibit the growth-followed-by-decline pattern and seem to point to even further expansion into the foreseeable future. Established in 1973 with only nine members, the Religious Sisters of Mercy of Alma, Michigan serve as such an example of ongoing growth. If this rate of growth continues, the community will approach 100 members by the end of the decade.

CARA's analysis of the *OCD* data identified six religious institutes of women that have doubled their membership between 1970 and 2013. Some of these units are cited in anecdotes and news reports as evidence of a reversal in this overall trend of diminishment. However, all six institutes together have increased their net membership by only 267 members since 1970, too few to have an effect on the overall picture. Whatever these institutes have done or are doing is unlikely to offset losses in the tens of thousands elsewhere. It is simply not enough.

### International Institutes

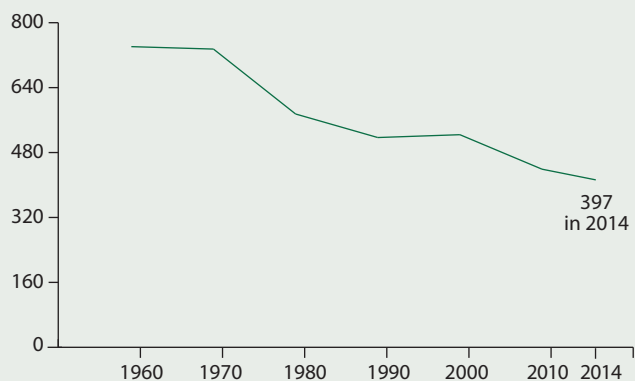
Many religious institutes of women in the United States are part of an international order. The U.S. provinces of these communities therefore do not provide the full picture. In some cases, the U.S. branch of the institute represents just a small delegation of the international order

and might furthermore be housed in the United States by members who are born and formed abroad. Decline for these communities inevitably means an honest appraisal of the situation in the United States and a response situated in a global context. At times such an appraisal will lead to the withdrawal of members serving in the United States to a ministry deemed to be in greater need of support internationally. Other communities might respond to aging and decline of membership in the United States by sending more sisters from another part of the world. An international religious institute might, for example, send sisters from their congregation in India to minister in the United States, where apostolates may continue to thrive but whose membership is low.

#### RETURN TO INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATIONS

The Irish Ursulines of Blackrock, having a prominent history of missionary work, established a new mission in the United States in the 1960s with a small delegation of women. The sisters arrived in Georgia, ministering in the Diocese of Savannah until they approached the age of retirement. Vocations do not appear to have boomed in their mission territory, since the numbers of sisters in the U.S. delegation remained relatively consistent over the reported years. The remaining sisters in the United States (four in number) returned to Ireland in 1997, rejoining the larger contingent of women from their religious institute. This decision marked the cessation of direct missionary activity in the United States. Advanced age (and likely declining numbers in Ireland) influenced the decision of this institute to return to their home foundation.

FIGURE 8. SISTERS OF CHARITY OF SETON HILL  
(TOTAL SISTERS)



#### VOCATIONAL STRENGTH FROM THE MISSIONS

Another notable phenomenon is found in the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill (Greensburg, Pennsylvania). Originally established in the United States in 1870 with only three sisters and two novices from the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati community, the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill enjoyed vocational success in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. Only 19 years after the first sisters moved to the Pittsburgh area,

the Seton Hill sisters were staffing 20 parochial schools as well as their own flagship schools, Saint Mary School for Boys and Saint Joseph Academy for Girls.<sup>2</sup> By 1960, the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill numbered 741 sisters in the United States. That same year, the institute set their eyes on the missions by electing to send four sisters to South Korea at the invitation of a bishop.

FIGURE 9. NUMBER OF SISTERS OF CHARITY OF SETON HILL  
(MINISTERING IN SOUTH KOREA)



Lost in the presentation of raw figures of total sisters for this religious institute, however, is the overwhelming growth experienced in the international mission. The rate of decline of this religious institute has been slowed by the continuing vocational vitality in South Korea. In one way, the number of sisters reported by the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill inflates the number found in the U.S. community. For many *OCD* entries, the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill did not distinguish the South Korean sisters from the U.S. based sisters, but rather provided only a total number of sisters in the religious institute. However, the example proves useful in drawing attention to the rapid growth of international sisters for this community.

The original U.S. foundation has experienced a steady decline similar to other religious institutes of its size. Today, more than half of the sisters belonging to the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill are ministering in South Korea. In the case of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, therefore, the mission territory experienced a more robust growth in vocations than its original U.S. foundation. The story of vocational strength of this religious institute has flipped. While several of the members of the Korean Province of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill are U.S. born, most of the sisters serving in Korea are native to that country. Perhaps one day, the United States will itself become the mission territory of this religious institute with sisters coming from South Korea to minister here.

#### Defunct/Extinct Institutes

For a number of institutes, data were only available for the 1970 reporting cycle. Trying to account for these institutes that did not

appear in later editions of the *OCD* led CARA researchers to consider the possibility of defunct communities. With the likelihood of mergers ruled out by unique foundations, CARA looked for the historical trajectory of these unamalgamated diocesan communities.

The Society of Christ Our King, for example, began in 1931 in the Diocese of Raleigh and moved to Danville, Virginia, in 1938. Under the guidance of a Carmelite nun from Philadelphia, the community established itself in social outreach at local parishes. Gaining national attention in 1951 for their Hattie Carnegie-designed habit, *Time* magazine praised the hard-working sisters for their modern dress. The early 1960s presented a further refinement in apostolic outreach for the sisters. With civil rights demonstrations mounting in the area and instruction from the local bishop to refrain from public demonstration, the sisters opted to provide hospitality to demonstrators at their convent (Moore 2006). There are conflicting accounts as to why the community was eventually disbanded, but one author suggests the possibility that the Society of Christ Our King had never gained canonical recognition as a religious institute (Fogarty 2001). Never growing beyond ten members, the Society of Christ Our King dissolved in the early 1970s.

### Conclusions and Future Research

The unique contribution of this CARA study of population trends among religious institutes of women is the creation of a database of the population of sisters in the United States by religious institute since 1970. Although not all religious institutes of women reported figures for each year, the available data are a rich resource for historians and sociologists of religion alike. This study demonstrates the shortcomings of looking only at the overall population trend over the last 50 years. The full narrative of religious institutes of women cannot rely on generalizations, but requires nuance. Decline alone does not capture the full picture. The narratives here display some of the richness to be found in the data. Further research should explore the different patterns exhibited by religious institutes of men as well as a broader exploration of these trends regionally around the world.

### Appendix: Research Methodology and Resources

For this analysis, CARA compiled data on the total number of sisters reported to the *OCD* by each institute of women religious in 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2014 (the most recent edition available at the time of data collection). To compare growth or decline over time, CARA calculated the slope of the trend line for all institutes with data across all six years. A positive slope indicates overall growth between 1970 and 2014, while a negative slope indicates overall decline across that same period. Of the 492 units for which a slope could be calculated, 444 showed a negative slope and 48 showed a positive slope.

Regarding the number of total sisters in the United States, researchers will notice an incongruence in the *OCD* between the figures



Sisters view the Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America touring exhibit (Courtesy msarchivist via Flickr.com, Creative Commons)

reported by the religious institutes and the “General Summary” figures reported by dioceses. The data reported in the “Religious Institutes of Women” section of the *OCD* appears to be independent of the summary data reported by the dioceses of the United States. The contrast in summary figures might be explained largely by the fact that some religious institutes included international sisters in their reporting. Diocesan summaries included only those sisters living within a respective diocese for a given year.

In *Marvels of Charity: History of American Sisters and Nuns* (1994), George C. Stewart presents a detailed history of Catholic sisters in the United States drawing on *OCD* numbers for the twentieth century. In the Appendix of his work, Stewart notes this inconsistency in self-reporting by religious institutes. Rather than dismissing the inflated numbers due to the inclusion of international members, in his final analysis he relies on a questionnaire to a number of religious institutes that confirms the self-reported figures. Consequently, his numbers for the self-reported totals of sisters remained consistently higher than the totals represented in the General Summary.

Facing the same discrepancy, CARA concluded that some religious institutes were indeed providing figures that included their sisters worldwide. Entries in the *OCD* for some institutes noted “Total in Congregation” or “Sisters Worldwide,” but did not provide a separate number for their U.S. membership. Other institutes listed figures for their “Generalate” or “General Motherhouse” located in another country, but did not report figures for their U.S. based “Motherhouse.” Since the CARA study was interested in patterns for

religious institutes in the U.S., those institutes clearly including international figures were flagged, to note a change in the database. The process of cleaning data for international counts allowed the totals to approach those figures reported in the General Summary.

The inconsistent reporting of data by religious institutes of women complicated the process of data entry. A number of institutes did not provide any figures whatsoever over the 50-year span. These institutes are recorded in the database, but only indicate address, year of foundation for the U.S. institute, and whether the institute is pontifical or diocesan. Data errors in the *OCD* were also discovered. At times, CARA researchers imputed a figure using the average of the most reliable years for that institute. For example, if a 1980 entry was found to be inconsistent with the 1970 and 1990 entries, the average from 1979 and 1981 was used.

To account for institutes that simply listed figures for “Sisters” or “Total in Community” but did not distinguish between professed and non-professed, CARA chose to include in its count for each institute those members listed in formation when the number was available. Those listed in formation included sisters in temporary profession, junior sisters, scholastics, postulants, novices, and candidates. Excluded from data entry were figures for lay associates or “Associate Members.”

In some cases, identifying the religious institutes of women to highlight in this report resulted from anomalous data trends, such as religious institutes that did not follow the general pattern observed in other communities. Alerted by such divergence, CARA researchers discovered the unusual patterns described in this Special Report. Researching an institute’s history enabled CARA to fill in the narrative hidden in the numbers and to identify orders that disappeared in later editions of the *OCD*.

Preparing this report also required gathering data for years outside the scope of the original project design. When, for example, a religious institute was discovered to have undergone a merger in its history, data from the year of the merger was drawn from the *OCD*. This resulted in CARA researchers undertaking a second phase of data entry to better grasp the story. In many cases, the 1960 figures for a religious institute aided researchers in verifying that 1970 data were consistent.

## ENDNOTES

1. From numbers reported in the 1966 edition of the *Official Catholic Directory*.
2. According to history accessed on the official website for the institute of Seton Hill.

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CARA was founded by Catholic leaders in 1964 to put social science research tools at the service of the Catholic Church in the United States. For information on CARA and its mission of research, analysis, and planning, contact:

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