



**The Transformative Power of Story:
The Creation of Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America**

Annmarie Sanders, IHM

Communications Director, Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)

For those moments when we women and men religious wonder about the value of telling our stories, the experience of building the LCWR exhibit [Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America](#) can shed some light.

My own involvement in this project began in 2005 when asked to serve as staff to an LCWR committee that was exploring the feasibility of an exhibit. Previously, LCWR members voiced their wish to create an exhibit that revealed the untold story of the vast contributions of Catholic sisters to the building of this country. The committee members grappled with its task. We ourselves knew something of the complete story and believed it was a history that needed to be recorded. But was it interesting enough to attract the public? Who would fund it? And although LCWR members clearly stated that they wanted the exhibit to go to the Smithsonian, would the nation's foremost museum even be vaguely interested? Would any museum be interested? What value would relating these stories hold?

Boldly, committee members sought an appointment with Smithsonian staff – no easy task! At what was clearly a courtesy meeting agreed to out of politeness on the part of these museum professionals, the staff listed the many reasons why such an exhibit would probably never see the light of day. There were rigorous academic standards, stiff competition for limited exhibit space, political systems that were nearly impossible to break through, and costs that went way beyond what LCWR ever envisioned.

Still, if LCWR wished to proceed, they said, the first requirement was to hold a brainstorming session, known in the field as a charrette. With some seed money donated for the cause, LCWR gathered experts from a diversity of disciplines: historians, archivists, museum directors, journalists, artists, and others for a several-day meeting. The goal was to ascertain whether there was enough material and enough public interest to mount a full-scale public exhibit.

Armed with statistics, stories, and photos, the LCWR History Committee presented what we knew of the US Catholic sister story. The charrette participants studied the materials, envisioned designs, and mapped out plans. By the end of those days, the conclusion was unanimous and clear: this was a story that needed to be told. Our charrette colleagues pledged their support and assured us that the money could be found. And, indeed, it was. Through the generosity of many donors, the committee raised more than \$4 million – all from people who were also convinced of the critical need to chronicle the story.

Even before the exhibit opened, we on the LCWR History Committee had the opportunity to tell over a four-year period what we knew of the contributions of women religious. We spoke to donors, historians, museum directors, graphic designers, exhibit script writers, camera crews, set designers, and the media. The transformative power of this story of approximately 220,000 people was evident each time.

So, what were some of the stories that seemed particularly compelling for today's times? Here is what I found.

Stories of the Unexpected

In speaking of those first pioneering women religious who arrived in this country, the exhibit notes, "Many sisters discovered they had to rapidly adapt their works to fit social conditions in America. Cloistered contemplative communities lived without walls. Nursing orders opened schools. Teaching orders ran hospitals. Sisters who dreamt of converting American Indians instead assisted a growing population of Catholic immigrants."



Benedictine Sisters (pictured) anticipate the completion of St Anthony's Hospital in Bemidji, Minnesota in 1900. Before workers' compensation was mandated by law most laborers went without coverage. The sisters made healthcare affordable by selling "Lumberjack Tickets" (from \$1.00 - \$9.00) and guaranteed medical care in Benedictine hospitals. (Photos courtesy Benedictines of Duluth.)

Our preconceived notions of what may be needed, as well as our own hopes of the impact our lives may have in this world often change, making our facility to adapt to ever-shifting

realities key. In an age where the capacity to modify plans, retool, and develop new proficiencies has become indispensable to survival, what might the dexterity of these pioneering women say to us?

Stories of Ingenuity

Catholic sisters found themselves repeatedly in places of great poverty and dire need. The exhibit reads, "Despite minimal financial resources of their own, sisters were effective fundraisers. Once they determined that a work or institution was essential to serve the community, they found innovative ways to finance it. They begged. They negotiated loans. They initiated an early version of health insurance." For example, Northern Minnesota experienced a logging boom in the mid 1800's, supplying railroad ties and lumber for homes, schools, and businesses across the nation. Before state law mandated workers' compensation insurance, most laborers went without coverage. To meet the need for affordable health care and to finance their fledgling hospital the Duluth Benedictine Sisters sold hospital insurance to loggers. Similar insurance provided by the Hospital Sisters of Saint Francis in Springfield, Illinois in 1897 excluded the following conditions from coverage: "insanity, delirium tremens, venereal, chronic and contagious diseases and all diseases, ailments and injuries existing before the date of this ticket, or arising from intoxication, fighting, boxing or wrestling." Where there was a need, these women found innovative and often never-before-tried ways to respond.

The story of Mary de Sales Leheney, SC, illustrates how religious have executed remarkable feats even when they lacked adequate preparation. A copy of a medical license issued by the New Mexico Territorial Board of health to Mary de Sales is among the exhibit artifacts. This courageous woman "performed emergency medical procedures when no doctor was available, and gained a reputation for her excellent medical care. In 1901, New Mexico granted her a medical license even though she had never attended medical school."

In an age of shrinking resources to serve pressing societal needs, what does the undaunted ingenuity of these women inspire?

Stories of Persecution

While receiving accolades for their work, women religious throughout the years have also been the objects of hatred and scorn. For example, in 1804, President Thomas Jefferson so valued the presence of the Ursuline sisters in New Orleans that he sent them a letter assuring them the Louisiana Purchase and the transfer of power to the United States would not affect their property rights. The letter states in part, "... the charitable objects of your institution cannot be indifferent to any; and it's [sic] furtherance of the wholesome purposes of society, by training up it's [sic] younger members in the way they should go, cannot fail to ensure it the patronage of the government it is under. Be assured it will meet with all the protection which my office can give it." Yet, just 30 years later, another group of Ursulines were targeted in an outbreak of anti-Catholic violence. As highlighted in the exhibit, "On a winter day in 1837, a mob set fire to the Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, and burned it to the ground." In Philadelphia in 1844 mobs burned two Catholic churches as well a residence of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The tide of opinion can so easily change. At a time when the Catholic church and its clergy and religious find themselves targets of criticism and attack, what does the humility of these women in light of their accomplishments and their resiliency under fire call us to today?

Stories of Turning Weaknesses into Strengths

The transformative story of Mary Ignatia Gavin, CSA, has impacted thousands of persons throughout the world. As the exhibit recalls, “While recovering from a difficult emotional period in her own life, Sister Ignatia worked in the admissions department of St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, Ohio. Contrary to common practice, she admitted alcoholics as patients. Her own vulnerability helped her understand that mind and body heal best when treated as one. In 1939, Sister Ignatia partnered with Alcoholics Anonymous co-founder, Dr. Bob Smith, to establish a treatment program for alcoholism at the hospital. She later established a similar program at St. Vincent Charity Hospital in Cleveland. President John F. Kennedy recognized her service in 1961.”

In this time of fewer religious and aging congregations, what strengths may be arising? Through what perceived “weakness” might God be inviting transformation for the life of the world?

Stories of Solidarity

A part of Catholic sister history that surprises many is the role these women played in times of war, natural disasters, and epidemics. As noted in the exhibit, “On a winter day in 1861, a gunboat ran upriver under flag of truce. It carried the remains of Mary Lucy Dosh, a Sister of Charity of Nazareth, the first sister to die on duty during the Civil War. More than 600 sisters served as nurses during the war. They earned respect from a once-suspicious public. Throughout many wars, epidemics, and natural disasters, sisters, too, lost their lives along with those they served.”



In describing the heroic service of women religious during plagues of influenza and smallpox, the exhibit recognized that “Working for little or no pay, sisters risked their safety, often alone. Describing an outbreak of yellow fever in New Orleans, Mother Austin Carroll, RSM, wrote, ‘Not a bell rang, not a note of music – the very songbirds have deserted us.’”

At many moments of massive crisis, women religious responded with immediate assistance – taking leadership to organize survivors and creatively find the means for them to go on. One example described in the exhibit was the 1906 earthquake – later estimated at 8.25 on the Richter scale – that hit San Francisco. “Gas and water lines broke, causing a fire to rage for four days,” the exhibit reports. “Sisters and others responded by setting up relief stations and temporary schools in the Bay Area.” A telegram sent from Eugenia Garvey, DC, to another sister reads, “Miraculously escaped nursing wounded well but everything burned.”

As men and women religious seek to best live their congregation charisms in today's world, what direction might these stories of human solidarity in the hardest of circumstances provide?

During the last four years, we, the members of the LCWR History Committee, surrounded ourselves with many, many stories of amazing religious who accomplished the seemingly impossible. We were also highly aware of the thousands of other religious who labored quietly and often obscurely in schools, hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, shelters and so many other situations of need and whose individual stories are not recorded. Was it worth the labor and expense to chronicle this history? Our answer, I am sure, would be, "Absolutely!" The confirmation of this, however, may not be found for many years down the road. Our hope had always been that this exhibit would not only be informational, but inspirational. Now it is incumbent upon the exhibit visitors to take these stories of magnanimity, courage, and fidelity to the Gospel mission and let them be agents of transformation in their own lives.