

Women Religious in their Foundations and since Vatican II –

This month we are featuring on the “Jesuit A to Z” tab of our website brief biographies of twelve [Founders of Women Religious Communities](#), recently written for us by members of those communities. They were founded as early as the 16th century and as late as the 19th. Most have some affinity with Ignatian/Jesuit spirituality. All of them are well represented among American apostolic (rather than contemplative) religious congregations today. And current historical research reveals that they and their peers have long been key agents for good in the life of the church and the nation (e.g., education, health care, social service).

In this time that marks 50 years since [Vatican Council II](#), what makes looking back to the origins of these communities so rewarding is the way their foundations can help us understand active, apostolic sisters today. How well they appropriated the Council’s spirit and teachings. And, in spite of aging and of shrinking numbers, how creatively and compassionately they are serving the church and the world in their 21st-century ministries. One could say that the Spirit is palpably alive in them.

Their adult gospel-inspired lives and ministry can be threatening to church leadership that does not know where they’ve come from. Not surprising that they (though human and imperfect like all of us) have been misunderstood and attacked--too often by people not their equal in spiritual or theological living and learning. One positive effect of these attacks, however, has been a new appreciation by the sisters themselves of who they are. Immaculate Heart of Mary Sister Sandra Schneiders, scholar of the history of (women’s) religious life and perceptive observer of that life in the U.S. today, has distilled from the life experience of contemporary sisters what she calls “a new prophetic life-form.” (To see some of its characteristics, go to [Women Religious after Vatican II, Life and Work of Apostolic](#)).

The appearance of this new life-form has caught many Catholics and others unprepared for understanding what has come to be. They are unaware that the seeds of post-Vatican II women’s religious life were already planted years ago in these communities’ foundations, modeled to some extent on the new form of male religious life that emerged in the 16th century--not monastic, but apostolic and ministerial in orientation. And just as the early Jesuits ran into opposition from church authority (Pope Paul IV forced them to sing the Divine Office in choir, a monastic practice contrary to the spirit of their founding, which had been church approved), so women founders had to face opposition to their new ways. The church, for instance, would not recognize [Mary Ward](#) (1585-1645) as founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM) for centuries, after declaring her a “heretic” and persecuting her and her sisters for trying to expand the role of women in spreading the faith. And Vincent De Paul (1581-1660) and Louise de Marillac (1591-1660) decided that their Daughters of Charity, unlike religious women who were expected to be cloistered, would maintain the mobility and availability their ministry demanded and live among the poor.

Knowing this history, we may be less surprised if post-Vatican II American sisters do not live (“monastically”) in big houses where they’re cared for, but rather singly or in small numbers in rented apartments or modest-sized homes like people of ordinary means.

Yet they do live “in community” because they interact with one another in frequent and meaningful ways whether they live under the same roof or not. Also, wanting in another way to be close to the people they serve, most of them do not wear uniform clothes (the “habit”) and yet they are recognized--recognized for the way they accompany people (especially the vulnerable), for the way their “consecrated celibacy” frees them to go where the need is, and for the way they speak out and lay their lives on the line as advocates for the poor and the stranger.

Their own particular spiritualities (as, say, Franciscans, Notre Dames de Namur, or BVMs) are yielding to a common inspiration in the gospel and in Vatican II. The Council’s document on the “Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life” tells them to return to the gospels and to the spirit of their founders. The document on “The Church” emphasizes the priesthood of all the faithful and Baptism’s universal call to holiness and ministry. And the document on “The Church in the Modern World” (“*Gaudium et spes*”) calls them to read the “signs of the times,” to side with the poor and suffering, and to oppose--non-violently--the forces of evil and injustice that oppress the vulnerable. The sisters, by their working and identification with the poor and by their not belonging to the clerical power structures of the church, know what it’s like to live on the margins rather than in the mainstream. From that vantage point, they can be critical and prophetic gospel witnesses to the world and the worldliness of the church.

Once again, find the featured short biographies at [Founders of Some Women Religious Communities](#).

And see lives of some contemporary American women religious: Feister, *Thank You, Sisters: Stories of Women Religious and How They Enrich Our Lives* (Franciscan Media, 2013)

and Schneiders’ 3-volume study “Religious Life in a New Millennium”:

vol. 1 – *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (Paulist, 2000).

vol. 2 – *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life* (Paulist, 2001).

vol. 3 – *Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission to the World* (Paulist, 2013).