



Women in the Vanishing Cloister: Organizational Decline in Catholic Religious Orders in the United States

Professor Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh

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Religious orders for women have existed for fifteen centuries, but their future in this century is bleak. In 1966, 180,000 women belonged to Catholic orders; by 1986 that number had decreased to 126,000. Helen Rose Ebaugh tells the story of the decline of these orders, set against the back drop of rapid social change and religious reform.

To illustrate the problem, Ebaugh takes us into a declining order, here named the Sisters of Service. In 1990, only one candidate sought admission to the order, and the median age of members reached 70. While these demographic changes were occurring, the sisters adapted themselves to the reforms of Vatican II. The concept of a cloistered life faded. Nuns sought college degrees, gave up their habits, moved into apartments, and began to identify with the outside world. Vatican II further encouraged the nuns to democratize and decentralize. Many nuns accepted jobs that paid poorly but were consistent with their goal of social service. They identified with the feminist movement and in turn influenced it.

Ebaugh shows how declining orders have not followed the sociological model of organizational decline, one typically marked by centralized authority, a fear of risk taking, lack of direction, internal conflicts over turf, and low morale. Rather, they have established democratic structures, reduced internal positions in favor of committing resources to empowering the poor, abandoned security in favor of diversity in jobs and missions, minimized conflicts over scarce resources, and exhibited a sense of freedom rather than poor morale.

Although Ebaugh is convinced that Catholic orders in the U.S. will not continue for long, non-canonical communities of women and associate programs are growing. Dedicated women can perpetuate the mission and spirit of the order without becoming vowed members.

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