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A friend with whom I shared a dormitory at our convent boarding school recently gave me a present of Nunzilla. Nunzilla is a squat, ferocious-looking clockwork nun in black habit, who walks towards you, ruler at the ready to smack a miscreant hand and sparks flying out of her eyes. Along with the Catholic School board game available in America and the 'I Survived A Convent School' badges, these are, in general, tokens of rueful affection for institutions that are fast disappearing all over the Western world. As a whole new generation of Catholics is growing up with little or no experience of what religious life might be, knowing few religious and recognizing even fewer, as they walk in anonymity in public, it is good to take stock of the contribution religious women have made to the building up of the church, as well as to acknowledge the extraordinary, if less visible role that many still play today.

If parish sisters are now the most familiar female religious on the pastoral scene, women religious occupy a space far broader and more varied than any formal categories can cover. They can be found in prisons, in factories and universities, living as a witness to community and human dignity in condemned estates or among workers in the sex industry. The most remarkable feat of all has been the way in which older religious women, many now in the seventies and beyond, with little experience of life outside their own communities and institutions have reinvented themselves, taking up pastoral ministries among those with AIDS, asylum seekers, migrant labourers and the abandoned elderly in our cities. But a glance at the history of religious women indicates that this versatility is nothing new, and that the only thing enclosing religious women into narrow confines has been the fear of what they might get up to once let loose. That fear has, at times, been internalized, so that religious women have hedged themselves about with unhelpful customs and restrictions that were alien to their original founding charism. Nothing makes bolder and braver reading than the life of many of the women founders of religious congregations, as they struggle with a society and an institutional church slow and fearful of acknowledging the value of what they feel called by God to undertake. The history of religious women has been dominated by fear, both external and internal, but those fears once overcome, the story of their achievements is one of the crowning glories of the church.

Among the many astounding and breathtakingly beautiful sights that greet visitors to the royal monastic foundation of Las Huelgas in Burgos, one of the more remarkable is the gallery of formidable-looking abbesses, each one looking particularly grim in her mitre, worn over the monastic veil, and grasping her crosier with determination. The abbesses of Las Huelgas in the middle ages ranked as archbishops, and there are many lively stories about the interchanges between successive abbesses and the hapless bishops of the city,

who were rarely a match for women bent on ruling their own destiny at a time when such autonomy was rare.

The story of women religious in the Church makes mixed reading, and reflects the tensions between religious and diocesan structures of authority based on differing theologies and anthropologies. Tensions between diocesan and regular clergy are a constant theme in Church history, and are not only a matter of past history. It can be difficult for a bishop to accept the presence of what can appear as a parallel authority structure within his own diocese, particularly if the labour force and resources are sparse, and there arises a form of rivalry for access to resources or to particularly fruitful areas of ministry. Add to this, in historical terms, the differing understandings of the role of women in the Church, and the relative autonomy of women religious, and it can make for stormy relationships.

The inclusion of women into his circle of disciples was one of the more radical aspects of the transformation wrought by Jesus in human and social relationships. While it was the Gnostic tradition that gave women a more prominent role in the apostolic life¹, there is evidence in the New Testament of the zeal and dedication of women disciples, which lies at the heart of the subsequent development of religious life. Women provided both the practical and the financial support that underpinned the ministries of Jesus and his apostles². But there is also some evidence of tension around the role of women in the Church in any structural or hierarchical sense, especially when that role involved some liturgical function³. The distinctive roles attributed by Christian tradition to Martha and Mary point to areas in which religious women have been able to develop a life of their own within the Church. Historically speaking, it proved easier for women to embrace the monastic than the apostolic life, since contemplative prayer was seen as a more appropriate goal in life for women than apostolates among the poor and sick, which would lead them out of the safe confines of the home, or to teaching and the academic life, which were perceived as dangerous for those considered intellectually and emotionally unstable.

Books such as Jo Ann Kay McNamara's *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia*⁴ give lively accounts of an historical tradition of the role of religious women in the Church that have largely been lost to the wider public. Among the many impressive accounts of collaboration between men and women in the religious enterprise are those of married couples, such as Paulinus and Therasia of Nola, or Germanus of Auxerre and his wife, who took the decision to live under vows and found a monastic household. And further accounts of collaboration, either within the religious tradition or between religious women and their bishop or the local clergy offer a positive model for best practice. But from the beginning there were tensions over the control of money and property, especially where aristocratic women chose the cloister over dynastic marriages brokered by their fathers or brothers, and took their money and lands with them. Life was rendered more complicated still by the tension within a culture that simultaneously placed women on a

pedestal, and exalted virginity to the highest degree, but also saw women as being inherently weak and corrupt, incapable of sustaining a life of virtue and devotion, and a constant threat to the chastity of men. Many spiritual writers saw women as attaining to sanctity by becoming honorary men⁵, while male failure to measure up to the standards of religious perfection was commonly attributed to effeminacy⁶. But from a remarkably early period, women lived varied and autonomous lives in the cloister, or in the less restricted form of life than that of their monastic sisters, as canonesses. They were able to achieve a prayerful and apostolic way of life within the complex social structures of the age⁷.

Nevertheless women's religious life was subject to the shifts in thinking not only about women in society at a general level, but also about the collaboration of women and men within the Church. The great Carolingian reforms of the tenth century did much to wed the notion of monastic life for men to that of the priesthood, and as time went on, this had its own implications for women. The Roman Synod of 1059 condemned in one sweeping reform simony, clerical marriage, lay participation in papal elections and the rule of the canonesses. One can see this in various contexts. There were undoubtedly serious instances of corruption, with the appointment of bishops and popes being driven by secular political agendas, or power politics that had nothing to do with the furtherance of the kingdom of God. And the use and enjoyment of religious money and lands has been a fraught question throughout Catholic history, in constant need of reform and good guardianship. But at the same time it is tempting to see the Synod not simply as reforming an obscure outpost of religious life for women, but also giving expression to a whole movement towards increased clericalization within the Church. As pressure against clerical marriage grew more insistent, and the post-Gregorian reform of monks brought about a reinforcement of their clericalization, so also were non-enclosed forms of religious life for women increasingly condemned as corrupt and dangerous. Recluses and Beguines who worked for a living while dedicating themselves to poverty and service were gradually squeezed out of the mainstream of religious structures, while it was all too easy for zealous clergy or local rulers with their own agendas to accuse religious women of running not a monastery but 'a whorehouse for demon women'⁸, as an excuse for closing them down or redistributing their property.

This history is long and complex, but provides a useful background against which to see the rise of apostolic religious life for women, and the struggles that women founders have had to establish their way of life in collaboration with the Church structures of their day. In some instances they have come up against theological difficulties - such as the belief that women could not be left responsible for their own spiritual lives, let alone those of others. In a conference given to her sisters in 1617, Mary Ward referred to a priest who had said 'that he would not for a thousand worlds be a woman, because he thought that a woman could not apprehend God! I answered nothing, but only smiled, although I could have answered him by the experience I have of the contrary. I could have been sorry for his want of judgment. I mean not his want of judgment, for he is a man of very good

judgment - his want is in experience'⁹. It is this experiential gap that has at times driven a wedge of misunderstanding and suspicion between religious women and their male collaborators.

At other times the vision of religious women, their understanding of the specific contribution they had to make to the service of God's people within ecclesial structures, was too far in advance of contemporary notions of the proper place of women in society and in the Church. The history of the founding of religious congregations of women, especially those within the Ignatian tradition, is beset by such struggles, at times resulting in excommunication and outright persecution. Mary Ward's rehabilitation by the Church is still in progress, while others such as Rafaela Maria Porras¹⁰ or, more recently, Mary McKillop in Australia¹¹ have been canonized, despite conflicts with the hierarchy that did little credit to the latter and caused considerable suffering to the women concerned. To this day, in various parts of the world, it is tempting for bishops to see groups of religious women as a source of freely-available labour entirely under their jurisdiction and with no autonomy of their own, either in terms of canonical status or spiritual purpose. The considerable proliferation of diocesan congregations in the emergent churches of Eastern Europe and the developing world will undoubtedly come to reflect, in time, some of the struggles witnessed down the centuries.

In our own more local context, the picture has been dominated in recent years by the abandonment by religious women of many of their traditional institutional apostolates and, in some instances, their greater integration into the diocesan scene as parish sisters. The tensions between autonomy and collaboration have not disappeared, but many parishes have found themselves hugely enriched by the presence of sisters with many years of pastoral work in schools or the medical profession behind them. Few groups, if any, within the Church, took up the reforms proposed by Vatican II more energetically than the religious. Experiments have not always enjoyed uniform degrees of success, but the reform of religious life for women in the West since the 1960s has been radical. One of its more puzzling aspects, for the general public, has been the disappearance of many of the external signs that distinguished religious life from other ways of life within the Church. As distinctive habits and customs have disappeared and large convents have given way to more hidden forms of living, we have reverted back to a model of religious life for women that is closer to some of its origins, where religious were firmly ranked among the laity, rather than seen as some sort of 'third way' between clerical and lay.

Recent Church documents have sought to reinforce the distinctive status of religious, but religious themselves have largely resisted such moves. In Britain, as elsewhere in the Western world, discussion of religious life is dominated by a perception of its diminishment and disappearance. Numbers are certainly lower than they have been in the past two hundred years, and the median age is rising in most congregations. But the long view, from an historical perspective, shows that the post-Revolutionary bulge in numbers was the anomaly, rather than the present situation. Numbers may be smaller, but

this is perceived by many religious as a blessing, since it has liberated communities from the overwhelming weight of institutional life and encouraged close and fruitful collaboration with priests and people.

New forms of consecrated life are emerging within the Church, mostly on the continent, and are finding their way to Britain. Older established communities have widened their sense of membership to include un vowed, associate members, or have developed extended communities who, while not necessarily resident with vowed members, share the vision and spiritual life of those under vows¹². Some see this as the last gasp for survival of a dying institution. Others take a more historically nuanced view of a way of life that has continually transformed and reinvented itself down the centuries. In greater or lesser collaboration with other members of the Church, religious women carry forward the struggle to preserve a way of life that will survive in one guise or another, as long as the vision holds.

¹ James M. Robinson, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: Harper and Row 1981)

² Lk. 8:1-3, Acts 16: 14-15; 1 Cor. 9: 5

³ 1 Cor. 14: 34-35

⁴ Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 1996

⁵ cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of St. Macrina*

⁶ Ambrose, *Expositionis in evangelium secundum Lucam X*,

⁷ McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, pp.177-181, 201

⁸ Ivo of Chartres, *Epistola 70*

⁹ Gillian Orchard, ed. *Till God Will: Mary Ward Through Her Writings*, p.58

¹⁰ Founder of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, 1850-1925

¹¹ Founder of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart 1842-1909

¹² See Sandra Schneiders, *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy and Community in Catholic Religious Life*, Paulist Press, New York 2001, pp. 365-370