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U.S. Catholic Historian, Volume 31, Number 2, Spring 2013, pp. 25-49
(Article)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press
DOI: 10.1353/cht.2013.0012



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“To the Ends of the Earth”: Catholic Women Religious in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco

Jamila Jamison Sinlao

Introduction

In the last thirty years, the study of Catholic women religious and their impact on the United States has grown dramatically. Scholars have expanded the shared understanding of the historical record, striving “to build bridges, make connections, and integrate the history of women religious into the larger contexts of Catholic history, religious history, women’s history, and American social history.”¹ These studies reveal that in addition to braving the dangers of urban streets, sisters helped to settle the frontier and held positions of authority and leadership, becoming some of the earliest female founders and chief executives of institutions including schools, hospitals, and orphanages. They grappled with poverty; combated religious, ethnic, racial, and gender discrimination; and navigated a rocky political terrain, caught between civil government, anti-Catholic and Nativist movements, and the patriarchal Church’s structure.

Women religious became co-creators of the Church in the United States. They served essential roles in its founding and expansion, providing much-needed labor and funding, and spearheading the creation of social-service institutions serving both Catholics and non-Catholics in need. As historian James Kenneally writes the sisters were,

the force holding the Church together. By the last half of the century they outnumbered male church workers in every diocese, were four

1. Carol Coburn, “An Overview of the Historiography of Women Religious: A Twenty-Five Year Retrospective,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 2–3. Also see Anne M. Butler, *Across God’s Frontiers: Catholic Sisters in the American West, 1850–1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012) and Margaret M. McGuinness, *Called to Serve: A History of Nuns in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

times as numerous as priests, exercised the major influence on the growing immigrant population, and bore the economic brunt of selfless service—‘Catholic serfs,’ according to one historian.²

As women working beyond the accepted boundaries of marriage and motherhood, sisters faced gender discrimination both within and without the Church. The lack of canon law governing sisters in the United States led to authority clashes between bishops and women religious. Despite these issues, evidence suggests that the relationships between women religious and priests included elements of partnership and collaboration. Sisters became, as Janet Ruffing writes, “active agents in both the mission of the church and the advancement of women.”³ As such, the relationship of sisters and clergy has been described as “institutional partnerships” often more “liberating rather than oppressive.”⁴ Experiences of U.S. women religious, then, developed in the context of coalition-building with clergy, civic officials, lay people, and the broader community. This network of supporters became a crucial resource upon which sisters drew in order to carry out their manifold apostolic activities.

The Catholic Church’s history in the San Francisco Bay area illustrates the ways women religious forged institutional partnerships with clerics at all levels. In many ways, San Francisco may be regarded as a microcosm of the larger U.S. context; like sisters throughout the country, congregations in San Francisco braved primitive living conditions, struggles with debt, illness, and discrimination. Unlike other parts of the country, the 1848 Gold Rush touched off a population explosion. Rapid urbanization, coupled with an inefficient, corrupt, and ill-prepared city government, presented a unique set of problems. Within fifty years, San Francisco was transformed from a rough and tumble frontier town to the West Coast’s most cosmopolitan urban center. As the region’s institutional life evolved, so did that of women religious. Together with clergy and ecclesiastical authorities, they adapted to the changing times, drawing upon their spirituality, ingenuity, and creativity to tackle social problems and tend to the needs of a growing Catholic population.

This essay draws from the archival records of the Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, with supplemental material from secondary literature, providing an overview of the ministries of San Francisco’s women religious. As gov-

2. James Kenneally, *The History of American Catholic Women* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), 58.

3. Janet Ruffing, “Recovering a History of Partnership: American Sisters in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Where Can We Find Her? Searching for Women’s Identity in the New Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 124.

4. *Ibid.*

erned by their Rules and constitutions, sisters’ worked as educators, health care providers, and champions of the most vulnerable members of society. Their efforts helped to nourish and shape Catholicism in one of the most important regions of the West.

Beginnings

As soon as women religious arrived in San Francisco, beginning in 1850, they worked with clergy in a symbiotic relationship, motivated by a vision of building and sustaining the growing Catholic community in the archdiocese. Overall, religious women’s conceptions of active spirituality, along with their alternative visions of femininity in which women were empowered, allowed them to claim a level of autonomy that contradicted their subordinate position within the overall structure of the Church. Sisters’ practice of chastity, along with their ability to become “spiritual mothers,” formed the foundation for their conception of agency. These beliefs grew out of medieval nuns’ understanding that women were “central agents of conversion and salvation.”⁵ In this way, sisters legitimized their commitment to action and praxis, as opposed to solely contemplative life and prayer. More importantly, women religious believed that they ultimately served a higher power—God—who deserved their complete obedience.⁶

This rich history of symbols, myths, and role models formed an important foundation for the many communities of women religious dedicated to “active” works that emerged in the wake of the religious, political, and social upheavals that plagued Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Though organized under religious rule, sisters differed from cloistered nuns, taking simple vows rather than solemn ones, and trading the enclosed contemplative life for one of “apostolic” activity, leaving convent walls to serve the poor, sick, and ignorant. Their labor was especially valuable in mission territories like the United States, where priests were overwhelmed by the needs of so many people. Because active communities lacked canonical recognition accorded cloistered nuns’ orders, they came under the local bishop’s authority upon taking up work in his diocese. Few precedents guided bishops, as “existing canon law assumed that vowed women religious were nuns bound to a life of prayer in cloisters separated from the outside world. Hence, the way a bishop directed a diocesan community of non-cloistered sisters could differ strikingly according to his

5. Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727–1834* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 62.

6. Helen R. F. Ebaugh, *Out of the Cloister* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1977).

concept of episcopal authority.”⁷ Under such circumstances, women religious navigated a complex and, at times, precarious terrain, one in which bishops’ personalities, views, attitudes towards women, and countless other local conditions shaped their activities within the diocese. While they had a great deal of latitude over convent life and the running of their institutions, the bishop maintained control over many other matters, including the founding of branch houses, the creation of new institutions, construction, the buying and selling of property, fundraising activities, and travel beyond the diocese.

As the population of women religious swelled, the difficulties created by lack of canon law gained greater recognition. By the end of the nineteenth century, sisterhoods began to centralize their houses, uniting disparate communities into congregations that often crossed diocesan lines. They obtained pontifical constitutions, thus bringing them under the jurisdiction of the Holy See rather than episcopal authority. In 1900, Pope Leo XIII issued *Conditae a Christo*, which accorded official recognition of sisters as true vowed religious. As Angelyn Dries writes, “Helpful protections for religious congregations had been secured, their lifestyle affirmed and authority relationships clarified, especially between bishops and superiors.”⁸ The *Normae*, an official guide to establishing new religious congregations, followed in 1901. This document “provide[d] information for bishops and religious superiors to pass ‘with more ease and quickly upon the Constitutions.’”⁹ Both developments solidified the position of women religious, and eased tensions between sisters and clergy.¹⁰

The foregoing dynamics are revealed in negotiations between ecclesiastical authorities and women religious. Negotiations between Mother M. Francis Bridgeman, superior of the Sisters of Mercy community in Kinsale, Ireland, and Rev. Hugh P. Gallagher, whom Archbishop Joseph S. Alemany of San Francisco, delegated to recruit sisters for his archdiocese, illustrates

7. Joseph M. White, “Path to Sainthood and Episcopal Leadership: Mother Theodore Guérin and Bishop Célestin de la Hailandière in History and Memory,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 93.

8. Angelyn Dries, “The Americanization of Religious Life: Women Religious, 1872–1922,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 10, nos. 1–2 (1991/1992): 20.

9. Dries, “The Americanization of Religious Life,” 23.

10. While *Normae* standardized the creation of religious congregations, reducing the inconsistencies and difficulties of the process, Dries notes that it homogenized religious groups, reducing the emphasis on original charism to that of adherence to the rule. This set the stage for a growing emphasis on uniformity and regulation all but eliminating the innovation that characterized sisters’ actions in the nineteenth century. See Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith, *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836–1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 224.

some complexities of the women religious-clergy relationship. Like many U.S. bishops, Alemany made the establishment of the parochial school system a priority. While Mother Bridgeman agreed about the importance of education, she firmly insisted upon the terms required for her to send sisters to California:

[N]amely, that no interpretation of our Holy Rule be pressed upon them, but to that which they have been professed and are accustomed; that they will not be required to undertake any duties but those which it prescribes or which, if not expressly prescribed, are obviously in accordance with the spirit. For example, tho' a hospital is not prescribed they would gladly devote themselves to it; that the sisters would not be in any way dependent on their own exertions for support. I believe you are aware that the real duties of our Institute are, the visitation of the sick, instruction of the poor, and the protection of distressed young women. To these duties we really are devoted; in them we hope to find contentment and perfection; we could not hope for a blessing, however good for others, to which we are not called by God, if we are to undertake such.¹¹

Bridgeman's emphasis on the Rule, as well as her alarm when Gallagher stressed the importance of teaching the wealthier and middle classes lest their children be driven “into state or Protestant schools,”¹² reflects the horror stories that European sisters heard about autocratic and dictatorial bishops in the U.S.:

I have heard of some very serious modifications being made in the Rules of some orders on foreign missions by the Bishops. I do not know of course what special powers foreign Bishops may have, nor do I wish to risk the least difference of opinion with our Bishops, but as we are not willing to have our Holy Rule changed or modified, we do not feel called on to go anywhere until a previous engagement be given by competent authority that nothing of the kind will be attempted.

As she reminded Gallagher, the Sisters of Mercy believed educating the higher and middle classes a “holy and meritorious duty ... for those called by God to do it, but it is not our vocation; no one of our Community has attraction for it.” Rather, the Sisters of Mercy took vows to serve “the ‘sick, poor, and ignorant,’ and our Sisters would willingly go to the ends of the earth to accomplish this vocation.”¹³

11. *Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*, Archives of the Sisters of Mercy, Burlingame Regional Community, Burlingame, California (hereafter SOMB), 2.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

Despite some miscommunication, Gallagher assured Mother Bridgeman that no threat would be made to the sisters' Rule, and so she agreed to send several sisters to California. For pioneer sisters who left their homeland for San Francisco, the journey's dangers and the conditions they found once they arrived tested their willingness to "go to the ends of the earth." "California in 1854 was regarded as the end of the earth," the Sisters of the Presentation noted in their annals, "and very little was known of it outside the United States, hence it was heroism in these nuns to volunteer to come on the mission."¹⁴

Travel to the Golden State before the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 was long and arduous. Sisters traveled by sea, passing overland through either Panama or Nicaragua via rail, boat, and muleback. Their travel journals and letters are filled with descriptions of fearful storms encountered at sea, along with the uncomfortable and dangerous shipboard conditions. Death, either by shipwreck, illness, accident, threatened, as the Daughters of Charity found on their journey from Emmitsburg, Maryland, to San Francisco in 1851. Passing through Panama during one of the country's worst outbreaks of cholera, they lost two sisters to the dreaded disease.

The original five communities of San Francisco's women religious arrived between 1850 and 1854, all initially aiming to establish schools for young women, except the Daughters of Charity. The Dominican Sisters, accompanying Archbishop Alemany in 1850, established their first school in Monterey in 1851 but relocated to Benicia, a small town north of San Francisco, in 1854. The Daughters of Charity, recruited to staff a much-needed orphanage in San Francisco, arrived in 1851. In 1852, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, originally from Belgium, left their mission in Oregon and settled in San José. Finally, in 1854 the Sisters of Mercy and the Presentation Sisters, both from Ireland, opened schools in San Francisco.

While these five pioneer communities shared similar goals, their methods, intentions, and spiritual motivations differed. As historian Ann Butler writes, "Although they shared religious affiliation under the mantle of the Roman Catholic Church, nuns and sisters represented a broad assortment of women. Their religious congregations, social profiles, national loyalties, spiritual goals, and personal expectation gave them diversity."¹⁵ Finally, charisma—the distinct spirit of the group, reflective of Rule, mission, foundress, history and heritage—gave each religious community a unique character, one that was deeply inculcated into sisters' identities and understanding of self and shaped how they pursued their goals.

14. *Reconstituted Annals of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Archives of the Motherhouse of the Presentation Sisters, San Francisco (hereafter APMH), 8.

15. Butler, *Across God's Frontiers*, 15.

The Dominican Sisters responded first to Alemany’s call. The California community’s first superior, Mother Mary Goemaere, as a forty-year-old novice in a Parisian monastery, answered Alemany’s request for sisters. While Goemaere initially thought she would be teaching French in Ohio, Alemany changed plans and brought her to California, a decision that she accepted “‘very willingly’ in order to follow the will of God.”¹⁶ Her community’s early years proved difficult since three languages (French, Spanish, and English) were spoken in the convent, leading to some confusion among the sisters. By the time the convent and boarding school were relocated to Benicia, English had become the language of instruction, thus improving communication. At the time Benicia was considered an up-and-coming city, but its predicted prominence failed to materialize. Still, the Dominican Sisters served the growing number of Catholic families in Marin County, north of San Francisco.

While the Dominican Sisters represented a well-established European community, the Daughters of Charity from Emmitsburg, Maryland, comprised the first indigenous women’s religious community in the U.S., founded by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in 1809. Seton drew from the Rule and constitution of the Daughters of Charity, founded by Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in seventeenth century France, and adapted the latter’s focus on those in poverty, including children and the sick. De Paul and de Marillac’s concept of active spirituality, one in which sisters were to consider “the streets of the city” as their cloister,¹⁷ fit perfectly with the challenges that the Daughters of Charity encountered in San Francisco. The pioneer sisters differed from others because of their ages: thirties and forties when they began the voyage, significantly older than other congregations’ members. Their ages meant the small band of Irish ethnic sisters led by Sister Superior Frances McEnnis had the benefit of knowledge and experience. In addition, they had a deep understanding of American culture, a distinct advantage over other communities arriving directly from Europe.¹⁸

For the Belgian Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, eight years of hardships and privation while teaching and administering to indigenous groups in Oregon and Washington made them familiar with pioneer life. When the

16. Patricia Dougherty, “Dominican Sisters of San Rafael,” in *Catholic San Francisco: Sequicentennial Essays* (Menlo Park, CA: Archives of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, 2005), 81.

17. Carlan Kraman, “Women Religious in Health Care: The Early Years,” in *Pioneer Healers: The History of Women Religious in American Health Care*, ed. M. Ursula Stepsis and Dolores Liptak (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 18–19.

18. The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur are the exception, having worked in the Oregon frontier for eight years before moving to San José.



Mother M. Cornelia Neujean, superior of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, California Province (Courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, California Province, Belmont, California).

Gold Rush all but emptied the region, placing the sisters in a financial predicament, Sister Loyola, superior of the Oregon community, decided to relocate the sisters to San Francisco, where Archbishop Alemany warmly welcomed them. Because San Francisco was considered too small for more than one religious community, the Sisters of Notre Dame settled in San José, then the state capital. In their new location, they benefitted from proximity to the Jesuits' newly-founded Santa Clara College. Soon after the community settled in San José, Sister Loyola was transferred to the community in Cincinnati, Ohio, leaving Mother Mary Cornelia Neujean in charge. The Sisters of Notre Dame, as their foundress Julie Billiart had articulated, were dedicated to the instruction of young women, and found a ready field for their work.

In San Francisco the Presentation Sisters made their first foundation in the United States. As an enclosed community the difficulties of life in San Francisco differed from any previous experiences. The cost of living in San Francisco far exceeded what they expected so that obtaining food and other goods became difficult. Through the kindness and charity of neighbors they survived the early days. Three pioneer Presentation Sisters left before the end of their first year in San Francisco due to illness, including Mother Mary Joseph Cronin, the superior, leaving three to continue work in the school. Archbishop Alemany appointed Sister Mary Teresa Comerford as the new superior. As a "lady of captivating personality, refined and highly educated, [who] had the gift for making friends, and so of gaining the patronage of the



Mother Mary Teresa Comerford, foundress of the convents of the Presentation Sisters in California (Courtesy of Presentation Archives, Sisters of the Presentation, San Francisco, California).

cultured elite,”¹⁹ she cultivated the patronage needed for “[t]he struggling pioneer community, cloistered and vowed to *free* education of the poor.”²⁰

The Sisters of Mercy, also from Ireland, started their community’s first foundation on the West Coast. Mother Mary Baptist Russell led the group of eight women religious. At age twenty-five, Russell was described as having a “gracious manner, astute business sense, teaching and nursing skills, and utter faith in providence,” qualities essential for the community’s success.²¹ Their mission—the “visitation of the sick, instruction of the poor, and protection of distressed young women”—was interpreted with the goals of their foundress, Mother Catherine McAuley, in mind. McAuley’s commitment to preserving the dignity of the poor, as well as educating the most vulnerable populations, guided the Sisters of Mercy. The community pursued multiple activities in their first months in San Francisco, ranging from education and healthcare to work with the unemployed.

In addition to their Catholic faith and idealism, these sisters shared in common a working knowledge of social problems from their home countries, as well as an understanding of the difficulties presented by anti-

19. Mary Rose Forest, *With Hearts of Oak: The Story of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in California, 1854–1907* (San Francisco: Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 2004), 51.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Mary Katherine Doyle, *Like a Tree by Running Water: The Story of Mary Baptist Russell, California’s First Sister of Mercy* (Nevada City, CA: Blue Dolphin Publishing, 2004), 67.

Catholic civil governments. While equipped with practical skills needed to establish and maintain their communities, their spiritual foundations helped them to face the many challenges of the unsettled frontier. Though they labored separately, the women who traveled to California shared the same sense of faith and obedience to God's will. Disappointments, suffering, and reversals of fortune were interpreted as spiritual challenges; sisters believed that their endurance further glorified God.

Upon arrival in San Francisco, they found a city seemingly on the verge of anarchy. The 1848 discovery of gold transformed a small frontier town into a bustling city almost overnight. By 1850, the year of California's admission to the Union as a state, the city's population surpassed 25,000 permanent residents, mostly adult males under age forty, a far cry from the estimated population of 850 people in 1847.²² Ill-equipped to handle this rapid urbanization, the city lacked the infrastructure needed to accommodate the sudden influx of people. A series of economic downturns resulted in high unemployment and increased lawlessness. The high level of vice and crime overwhelmed San Francisco law enforcement, and vigilante groups, like the dangerous "Committees of Vigilance," organized to solve their own problems often through violence. Sister Frances McEnnis of the Daughters of Charity summed up the public mood: "This is a strange place, a real bad place, immorality seems to be the favorite virtue here. God pity us, we need prayers and good fervent ones, for we see nothing good in this miserable place."²³

Illness, poverty, and subpar living conditions plagued communities during their early years. Drawing upon the Presentation Sisters' annals: "It should be remembered that the city was then in its infancy and the streets not yet laid out. No sidewalks, no gas, no water save by pumps and wells, no bus nor streetcar services. Most of the dwellings were mere 'shanties.'"²⁴ These shanties served as the sisters' first convents and schools, becoming quickly overrun and crowded as more and more children enrolled. In spite of overwhelming challenges, sisters embarked on works of charity almost as soon as they arrived. The Sisters of Mercy began visiting the sick within a week of arriving, along with establishing a night school for adults, an employment office, and a House of Mercy—"soon filled with children sent to San Francisco waiting for news from their parents in the mining camps."²⁵ Once the Dominican Sisters, Presentation Sisters, and the Sisters of Notre

22. Herbert Asbury, *Barbary Coast: An Informal History of the San Francisco Underworld* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1933), 12.

23. Margaret Ann Gainey, "Daughters of Charity," in *Catholic San Francisco: Sesquicentennial Essays* (Menlo Park, CA: Archives of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, 2005).

24. *Reconstituted Annals*, APMH, 18.

25. *Annals*, SOMB, 17.

Dame de Namur were settled into their primitive dwellings, they began classes for young women of the surrounding areas. Sometimes, sisters’ ministries began even earlier, as with the Daughters of Charity. While en route to San Francisco, the mother of a one-year old girl died, and the sisters accepted her as their first orphan. Two weeks after arriving in the city, they opened the orphanage; six weeks later, they started a school for girls.

The public’s virulent anti-Catholic prejudice also made the sisters’ early days difficult. Barely a day after the Sisters of Mercy arrived in December 1854, anonymously written articles began to appear in the city newspaper accusing the sisters “with neglect of the Sabbath and a tendency to indulge too freely in alcoholic beverages,”²⁶ among other inflammatory, but false charges. One article, printed in the *Christian Advocate*, even advised the sisters to “return without delay to their proper destination [Mexico, or another Catholic country in Latin America] particularly as the institutions of our Protestant and Republican country are known to be obnoxious to their sentiments and taste.”²⁷ Likewise, James King, editor of the *San Francisco Bulletin*, engaged in similar attacks on the sisters and clergy working with them, casting aspersions on their schools, hospitals, and other institutions, stoking a city-wide campaign against them. Historian Mary Katherine Doyle describes this campaign in 1850s San Francisco as “a time of both racial and religious intolerance. The Gold Rush had attracted persons from all nations to California, both the lawless and the law-abiding.”²⁸ Furthermore, as attacks against Catholic clergy and women religious gained strength, as Doyle states, they

coincided with significant improvements in the fortune of Roman Catholicism in San Francisco. While the Sisters of Charity had found meager accommodations when they arrived in 1852, this first pioneer group was able to move into a newly built orphan asylum on the very day the Mercy company came to share the Western mission with them... The new facility allowed the Sisters of Charity to extend hospitality and shelter to Mary Baptist [superior of the Sisters of Mercy] and her Sisters until housing could be secured. Little by little the services provided to the poor and needy were moving from makeshift buildings to more permanent structures.²⁹

The city’s growing Catholic presence was reflected in the erection of St. Mary’s Cathedral, then San Francisco’s largest building. Serving as “a concrete symbol of permanence” for Catholicism, the cathedral opened in 1854.

26. Doyle, *Like a Tree by Running Water*, 61.

27. *Ibid.*, 60.

28. *Ibid.*, 62.

29. *Ibid.*, 63.

Religious discrimination affected the ability of women religious to carry out their activities in education and health care. Under the 1851 Marvin-Pelton Bill, the city of San Francisco was allowed “to organize a number of tax-supported educational institutions to be known as ‘the common schools.’ By this law, ‘any school, public or private, high or low, secular or religious, charitable or endowed, sectarian or not, where the same branches are taught as in the district schools, may come in for a share of the funds.”³⁰ San Francisco’s education policy was further complicated in 1853 when the school district was divided into two: the city’s public schools, known as “district” or “city” schools, and “ward” schools, which included the city’s Catholic schools. With the growing political strength of the Nativist and anti-Catholic Know-Nothing Party, funding parochial “ward” schools ignited controversy. Such funding, many believed, represented an encroaching threat of “sectarianism” as the Catholic population grew. Know-Nothing politicians succeeded in enacting the 1854 Ashley Law, discontinuing the dual system of “district” and “ward” schools, and ending funding for parochial schools—unless Catholic schools placed themselves under the supervision of the newly-formed San Francisco Board of Education. To do so, all parochial school teachers had to undergo a public examination to certify their qualifications.

Rev. Hugh P. Gallagher, offering friendly advice, encouraged the sisters to accept the board of education’s offer, as the funding would ease the pressure of soliciting donations—essential for communities operating free schools. However, Mother M. Baptist Russell, superior of the Sisters of Mercy, refused, drawing on the experience of her fellow sisters in England and Ireland whose schools had suffered while controlled by public school boards. Hardly a groundless fear of hers, the examination process became notoriously arbitrary, featuring questions like “Name all the rivers of the globe.”³¹ Furthermore, teachers had to reapply for certification positions each year and were required to have “their classes visited and examined by an agent of the Board, possibly an antagonistic one, and also acceptance of textbooks approved and specified by the same authority.”³² The Sisters of Mercy closed their school conducted in the basement of St. Mary’s Cathedral barely a month after its opening and turned their attention to healthcare.

While the Presentation Sisters initially accepted the offer of board control, they objected to the public examination of teachers. As a religious community practicing enclosure, they requested the sisters be examined in private. Their request touched off the “school wars” as Know-Nothings argued

30. Forest, *With Hearts of Oak*, 51.

31. Doyle, *Like a Tree by Running Water*, 136.

against giving the sisters preferential treatment. Although Gallagher pressed Mother Mary Teresa Comerford to submit to public examination, she refused, stating, “[T]hey were prepared to make any pecuniary sacrifice rather than submit to requirements she did not believe in keeping with their state as enclosed religious.”³³ Archbishop Alemany upheld her decision, pledging his support and that of his successors, so that the community could continue without government aid or interference.

Know-Nothing influence affected the sisters’ first forays into healthcare. Mother Mary Baptist Russell, superior of the Sisters of Mercy, offered the community’s services to work in the city’s main hospital, the State Marine Hospital. At that time,

the State Marine Hospital was a shared undertaking of the County of San Francisco and the newly formed State of California. Economic conditions were poor and money scarce. A policy of bidding out the care of the sick was instituted. The Sisters submitted a bid to care for the sick to the County of San Francisco [and were refused].... The Sisters had two strikes against them. They were Catholic in a period of intense nativism and they were women.³⁴

As with the “school wars,” the Sisters of Mercy’s bid for the hospital contract was discussed at great length in the city newspapers with fears of sectarianism once again made public. However, the cholera outbreak of 1855 provided the Sisters of Mercy with the opportunity to earn their fellow citizens’ respect: “The Sisters, some of whom had experience in treating the dreaded disease and were the only ones on the Pacific coast who could properly care for the afflicted sufferers, remained entirely in the hospital, never sparing themselves and doing all in their power to care for the sick.”³⁵ Their selflessness and devotion to the sick and indigent demonstrated the power of their vocation, easing religious tensions in the city. According to Archbishop Alemany, their work was “the chief factor in restoring religious harmony in San Francisco.”³⁶

The end of the cholera epidemic coincided with the state government’s decision to make each county, not the state, responsible for its own sick. The State Marine Hospital was placed on the market, and Mother Mary Baptist purchased it, receiving a contract from the county to care for the sick in

32. Forest, *With Hearts of Oak*, 56.

33. *Reconstituted Annals*, APMH, 22.

34. Doyle, *Like a Tree By Running Water*, 85-86.

35. *Annals*, SOMB, 20.

36. *Golden Jubilee Souvenir of the Sisters of Mercy, San Francisco* (San Francisco: The Moore-Hinds Co., Printers, 1904), 14.

exchange for \$400 per month to cover expenses and rent. This partnership, however, was short-lived. A constellation of factors prevented a cooperative relationship between the Sisters of Mercy and county officials, chief among them the rising influence of the Know-Nothing Party and economic instability. Anti-Catholic bigots led a public smear campaign against them in San Francisco newspapers with accusations ranging from their mistreatment of patients and poor management skills to the dangers of their religious practice. These claims were all false, as a grand jury investigation concluded. Although the community was exonerated, declining economic conditions in the region soon put an end to the contract. Despite the sisters' agreement with the county, their expenses remained unpaid after a year. Accordingly, Mother M. Baptist withdrew from the contract. Because the community had purchased the hospital with their own funds, they reopened the facility as a private institution—St. Mary's Hospital, California's first Catholic hospital.

As painful and alarming as this outpouring of virulent bigotry may have been, the controversies Know Nothings and their ilk incited had one important result: they pushed women religious to reject public funding and remain independent of government regulation. Instead, they ministered on their own terms, in keeping with their Rule, constitutions, and charism. The ability to create private foundations gave sisters greater control over their service to those in need and set a course allowing them an even greater impact on San Francisco and beyond.

Expansion and Growth

The expansion of Catholic institutions throughout the Archdiocese of San Francisco resulted from collaboration of sisters and clergy. The sisters' common concerns—a strong Church with a flourishing parochial school system and institutions that served the vulnerable—united them in a shared vision. Women religious were just as enthused as priests with the prospect of working in new territory. This excitement and zeal for living their vocation helped to propel sisters forward despite considerable difficulties arising from establishing new houses and institutions in undeveloped regions.

Before sisters took on challenging new ventures, they had much to consider, including their potential success, ability to raise necessary funds, and available personnel. Their advisors often cautioned them about taking on too much, as Mère Constantine Collin, mother general of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, reminded Sister M. Cornelia Neujean, superior of the San José community: “We feared in more than one occasion, that if we did not accept certain foundations, others would go, and time has proved that it was a snare of the enemy to make us undertake what we could not continue on

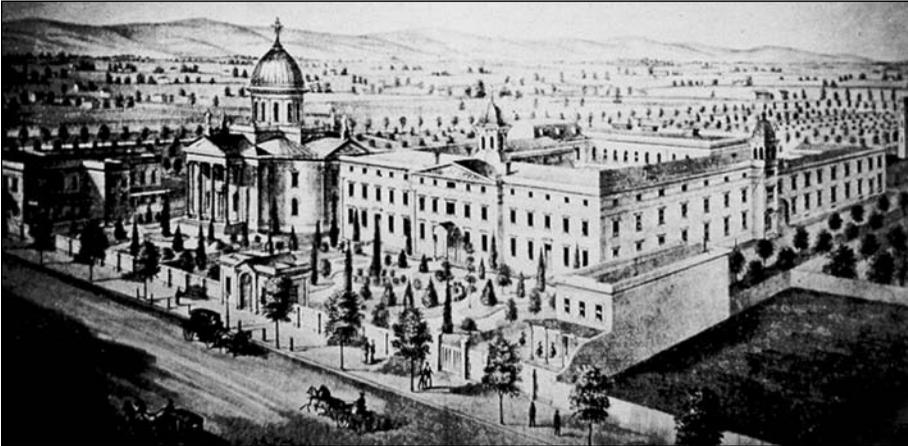


Illustration of the College of Notre Dame de Namur in San Jose, California, circa 1868 (Courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, California Province, Belmont, California).

account of not having means. Do not fear then, and do not desire to do more good than you can. The good God does not ask it.”³⁷

Funding was one of the primary concerns. To sustain their community women religious had the responsibility for raising funds to cover construction costs and operating expenses. The organizational structure of each congregation shaped fundraising. Each diocesan community, like the Presentation Sisters, Sisters of Mercy, and the Dominican Sisters, had sole responsibility for funding their projects. Congregations like the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, affiliated with their motherhouse in Belgium, could petition the mother general for assistance. While loans were provided on occasion, they entailed a sacrifice the European houses could not afford. As Mère Constantine wrote,

You were right in imagining that I would find the expenses for Santa Clara very great. All the more that while you are enlarging, we must pay a good interest on the money of which we have urgent need, this would not have occurred if you had restricted yourself a little to pay at least for your commissions for which we paid out even what was so necessary to us. This is not a reproach I make you my dear S. M. Cornelia, but a little pain that I express to you.... I hope your first care will be to return to

37. Letter of Mere Constantine Collin to Sister M. Cornelia Neujean, March 21, 1859 in *Letters of Our Dear Mother Constantine to the Sisters of Oregon, Book 2*, Archives of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, California Province (SNDC).

us the amount of your bill, for I perceive that you get money much easier than we do and that you will make no further expense until your debts are paid.... You do not know the difficulty we have of procuring money, we must return 15,00 frs. in the month of May, and this embarrasses me considerably[.] [F]or you this amount is but a trifle.³⁸

The sisters in San Francisco depended on their own resources. As a result, they generated an array of creative options to raise funds. Mother M. Francis Bridgeman, superior of the Sisters of Mercy community in Kinsale, offered Mother M. Baptist Russell a few of the popular ideas:

My advice is, and I have tried to consider it before God—Work up the hospital, Visitation, and house of Mercy well—*viz.* to organize a collection, raffles, or Bazaar &c try to make the house of Mercy self-supporting, this ought to be easy where labor is so valuable, take sewing, washing &c &c which you will surely get in abundance when well known; open your *free* school as soon as possible—classify as you please—ask nothing—refuse nothing—God will send sufficient.³⁹

Sisters' options for raising money reflected each community's Rule. While the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur could charge tuition to wealthy students at their schools, the Presentation Sisters' Rule to provide free education for poor girls left them dependent on loans and donations from laity. Beyond tuition, the San Francisco communities funded their endeavors through donations; dues collected from members of sodalities and other organizations; proceeds from raffles, fairs, and bazaars; begging expeditions; and, on occasion, grants obtained from local and state government. Despite these measures, fundraising for large construction projects required loans that placed them in a precarious financial situation.

For these reasons, sisters could not accept every request for their assistance. When doing so, women religious made the sacrifices necessary for their ventures to succeed. For example, in 1857, Archbishop Alemany asked Mother Mary Baptist Russell, superior of the Sisters of Mercy, to found a house and school in Sacramento, the state's new capital. As the "doorway" to the gold mines in northern California, the city was a strategic location for the Church's expansion. Alemany originally intended to settle the Presentation Sisters in Sacramento, but as a small, enclosed community, the city's isolation would have made it difficult for the sisters to support themselves.

38. Letter of Mere Constantine Collin to Sister M. Cornelia Neujean, March 15, 1863 in *Letters of Our Dear Mother Constantine*, SNDC.

39. *Annals*, SOMB, 78.

Since the Sisters of Mercy had been in San Francisco less than three years, they had difficulty marshaling resources to establish a house and school in Sacramento. According to Mary Katherine Doyle,

With the Sisters already engaged in building the new St. Mary’s Hospital, working in the Magdalen Asylum, and providing shelter for women and children in the House of Mercy, it is hard to imagine how Mary Baptist could say yes to this request. It would mean that four or five of her Sisters would be sacrificed to the needs and mission of this new branch house. At the time there were barely twenty Sisters in the community. The stretch would be great.⁴⁰

Despite “an unhealthy climate, limited accommodations, and lack of ready access to the spiritual resources provided to them by the Jesuits in San Francisco,”⁴¹ Mother Mary Baptist agreed to the archbishop’s request, sending five sisters to establish St. Joseph’s, the community’s first branch house. The convent school, St. Joseph’s Academy, was the city’s first permanent Catholic school,⁴² serving children of the wealthy and those from rural areas. In 1878, the academy received state accreditation to award teaching licenses to graduates.⁴³

Sisters found ways of overcoming challenges when forming new foundations. They opened schools, orphanages, and other foundations throughout San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, Watsonville, Alameda, and Santa Clara, as well as in mining towns beyond the archdiocese like Marysville and Grass Valley. In almost every case, they left the growing metropolis of San Francisco for towns that, at least initially, that were isolated and primitive. Sacramento and Berkeley, where the Presentation Sisters opened a house and school in 1878, differed fundamentally from San Francisco. When the sisters arrived, the town “was a mere prairie with a few scattered houses ... [the] only buildings of importance being one University department and the isolated Convent.”⁴⁴ According to the annals, the isolation especially affected Mother M. Teresa Comerford, superior of the small community. She “had been a member of large communities in cities and had been the head superior of numerous children for twenty-four years. Yet she made no complaint but cheered all by her happy smile and encouraging words.”⁴⁵ The Presentation Sisters’ rule of enclosure meant that each house was considered

40. Doyle, *Like a Tree By Running Water*, 136–137.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Steven Avella, *Sacramento and the Catholic Church* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2008), 87.

43. Avella, *Sacramento and the Catholic Church*, 79.

44. *Reconstituted Annals*, APMH, 49.

45. *Ibid.*, 53.



First Communion Class at the Academy of the Sisters of Notre Dame in Marysville, California, 1900 (Courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, California Province, Belmont, California).

a separate entity. In leaving San Francisco, Mother M. Teresa also severed relationships with the community of women with whom she had worked and labored for years. However, she did so knowing the importance of working there. “The Catholics were few and scattered. The children and their parents made immense sacrifices to attend school and church—coming on foot and horseback over miles of bad roads and through the foothills.”⁴⁶ The basic needs of Catholic infrastructure were reflected in the lack of a church. The schoolhouse doubled as the place of worship in Berkeley for five years, yet another way in which the Presentation Sisters could serve the region.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the influence of women religious abounded throughout the archdiocese and beyond. The Dominican Sisters operated seven schools, and, in 1899, opened St. Joseph’s Home and Hospital in Stockton. The Daughters of Charity maintained the original orphanage and school in San Francisco, adding a second orphanage, Mount St. Joseph’s Infant Asylum in South San Francisco. In 1893, they fulfilled their vow to serve the sick, establishing Mary’s Help Hospital in Daly City. The Presentation Sisters staffed three schools. The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur founded six schools, including the College of Notre Dame de Namur. In 1868, the College became the first in California to issue baccalaureate

46. *Ibid.*, 52.

degrees to women, two months after the creation of the University of California in Berkeley. The Sisters of Mercy operated nine schools and two orphanages, St. Mary’s Hospital, and a range of other social-service ministries. These included the House of Mercy (established for unemployed women and girls of good character); the Home for Aged and Infirm Ladies; and the Magdalen Asylum, later renamed St. Catherine’s House, a foundation for former prostitutes and penitent women. In addition, they began a nursing school at St. Mary’s Hospital, founded in 1900, seven years before the University of California established its nursing program.

Allies and Partners

To achieve success, women religious depended upon a broad coalition of allies and partners. The latter ranged from priests and Catholic laity to independent organizations, business people, and local and state governments. They provided sisters with the material and emotional support they needed to carry out their apostolic activities.

The laity’s contributions began as soon as the communities arrived in San Francisco. The Daughters of Charity’s orphanage owed its founding to a group of Irish Catholic gentlemen in San Francisco, concerned with the number of children left orphaned during the devastating cholera epidemic in 1850. Many children were Catholic; the gentlemen, aware the Daughters of Charity would soon arrive, planned for an orphanage and school. “Three of the gentlemen donated a lot on Market Street ... and almost immediately a small wooden building, the old brown house, was constructed there.”⁴⁷ For two years, the “old brown house” served multiple uses, functioning as “a church on Sundays, a school on weekdays, and an orphanage with dormitories at night.”⁴⁸

Overall, the Irish lay community provided a great deal of support to the religious communities in San Francisco. As one of San Francisco’s largest immigrant groups, comprising 12 percent of its population in 1856 and growing to 33 percent in 1880, Irish and Irish-American lay people acted as important allies for women religious communities and the Church itself. They provided funds for constructing churches, schools, and charitable institutions. They donated money and goods to the sisters, provided them with loans, and assistance in acquiring and selling property.⁴⁹ For the Presentation

47. Gainey, “Daughters of Charity,” 94.

48. Gainey, “Daughters of Charity,” 98.

49. Jeffrey Burns, “The Immigrant Church,” in *Catholic San Francisco: Sesquicentennial Essays* (Menlo Park, CA: Archives of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, 2005), 190.



The Presentation Sisters' first convent and school in San Francisco, 1855 (Courtesy of Presentation Archives, Sisters of the Presentation, San Francisco, California).

Sisters, this support was especially needed because they maintained enclosure. Through efforts of the Gentlemen's Society at St. Francis Church, enough money was raised to buy a lot in San Francisco for their first permanent convent and school.

Sodalities, confraternities, alumnae associations, and other benevolent societies formed an important link in sisters' coalitions. These organizations combined spiritual training, charitable activities, and fundraising. The description of St. Mary's Society for Catholic Females, founded by the Sisters of Mercy, indicates their importance: "This unique partnership between the Sisters and lay partners provided an effective way to expand the mission. Persons likened to the works became identified with them and brought the Mercy charism to places where the Sisters were not directly involved."⁵⁰ Such partnerships gave women religious the ability to delegate some charitable work. They also provided sisters with dedicated volunteers willing to organize fairs, raffles, lectures, and other events to raise funds for each community's apostolic activities. In return, women religious sponsored organizations providing women with the means for deepening their faith, becoming involved in the community, and socializing with one another.

50. Doyle, *Like a Tree by Running Water*, 184.

While sisters had limited ability to interact across congregational lines, a few opportunities allowed them to form partnerships with each another. Most notably the Catholic Teachers’ Institute was created in 1894 to bring together sisters of ten religious communities. The institute resulted from collaboration of Mother M. Baptist Russell of the Sisters of Mercy and Mrs. Alice Toomey, a laywoman who was inspired by attendance at a summer school teaching convention in Pittsburgh. Planning for the event began in May 1894 at a meeting held at Presentation Convent, Taylor Street, with representatives of teaching communities. As the annals of the Sisters of Mercy note, “the first Archdiocesan Convention of Catholic teachers ever to be held in America”⁵¹ was considered a success:

The daily attendance ranged from one hundred and twenty to one hundred fifty, which number represented delegates from ten different Religious Orders. The Archbishop was present at the opening on September 20, and expressed his approval and appreciation of the Convention. He hoped it would be held annually, as much good could not fail to come from the meeting of the members of so many teaching Orders, with a general interchange of ideas, methods, etc., etc. Throughout the program the papers read were thoroughly appreciated and were the cause of many questions and interesting discussions.⁵²

The convention had two important results. First, sisters agreed that all parochial schools should adopt a common system

for dividing students into grades and that this system should parallel the one used by the local public schools. Toward this end, seven Sisters were assigned to draft a uniform syllabus. Second, the Sisters decided that the Baltimore Catechism was too hard for younger children and so they began to compile a simple book of religious instruction well enough illustrated to attract young children. The nine Sisters assigned to this project were to collaborate with Father Peter C. Yorke, who was appointed to the task by Archbishop Patrick Riordan.⁵³

The uniform curriculum and syllabus did not succeed initially, though the revised catechism became popular. The Catholic Teachers’ Institute provided sisters with the opportunity for sharing pedagogical strategies, tips, and ideas. The organization met annually until at least 1899.

51. *Annals*, SOMB, 144.

52. *Annals*, SOMB, 144–145.

53. Lawrence Scrivani, “Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of San Francisco,” in *Catholic San Francisco: Sesquicentennial Essays* (Menlo Park, CA: Archives of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, 2005), 230–231.

Among the sisters' closest relationships were those with collaborating clergy. Each community's records are filled with references to clergy and male religious tending to their spiritual and material welfare. The latter donated money to sisters' foundations, assisted with fundraising, provided advice, and acted as allies for women's religious communities. The Sisters of Mercy and Presentation Sisters recognized the Jesuit community of San Francisco for their services as confessors, work conducting annual retreats, and friendship. The Sisters of Mercy described the Jesuit priests as

the true friends of the Community. When work is prosecuted under difficulties and prospects are cloudy, then it is that friendship that shines more resplendent by reason of the encircling gloom. It was when the vista opening before the young Community was anything but cheering, that the support of the clergy was most encouraging.... In a family of religious, the lapse of years cannot block out the memory of past deeds of kindness, nor obviate the gratitude to which they are entitled."⁵⁴

Likewise, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur spoke highly of the Jesuits at Santa Clara College (later Santa Clara University):

The Rev. Jesuit Fathers have always been very devoted to us. Saying Mass, hearing confessions, giving us instructions and the retreats which have never failed us.... Never will we be able to prove our gratitude to their holy religious, they came for a long time three miles on foot to say mass for us and return afterwards the same way and that for more than three months till the Rev. Fathers were settled in San Jose. That proves their generous zeal. May the Lord grant them a hundred fold for we feel unable to acquit our selves of such a debt. Few religious houses enjoy such a privilege.⁵⁵

While such effusive descriptions of praise should be read with some caution, these passages must be considered in light of the importance the sisters attached to opportunities for regular Mass and confession. Retreats, required annually for vowed religious and priests, provided the chance for much-needed spiritual reflection and renewal in the midst of lives filled with hardship. Given the limited number of priests, these sisters were grateful for the clergy's attention and support. Accordingly, women religious often requested availability of Mass and confession when negotiating contracts for new foundations.

Relationships with clergy at times could be difficult, especially as sisters struggled to balance their communities' rule and self-governance with obligations

54. *Golden Jubilee Souvenir of the Sisters of Mercy*, 22.

55. "Early San Jose": *Sr. Marie Catherine's Account*, SNDC, 10.

to local ecclesiastical authorities. As Carol Coburn and Martha Smith write, “Sisters’ vow of ‘holy obedience’ to their female superior provided a buffer to patriarchal authority, permitting them to resist pressure from male clerics.” This is illustrated in a letter from Mère Constantine, mother general of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, to Mother M. Cornelia Neujean, addressing the archbishop’s oversight of community finances. She states,

When the Bishop visits you again, do not show him the accounts. If he asks for them, do not show any reluctance to do so, but you can say that you send them to me every year.... Do not show yourself too independent, but at the same time do not subject yourself in such a manner as to have your hands tied. It is to us that you must address yourself for everything.⁵⁶

Sisters also challenged the archbishop when they fundamentally disagreed with his suggestions for their institutions. In 1872 Archbishop Alemany suggested that the Dominican Sisters “give St. Catherine’s [School] in Benicia to any religious group who would shoulder the heavy debt. The sisters [Mother Superior and her council] firmly refused and undertook sacrifices and begging expedition to pay off at least some of the debt.”⁵⁷

Outright rejection of the archbishop’s wishes rarely occurred. Instead, sisters strove for compromise and common ground as in the case of the Sisters of Mercy’s rocky beginnings in Grass Valley, part of the Vicariate of Marysville. Bishop Eugene O’Connell wanted the sisters to conduct an orphanage for boys. His request touched the question of their vocation. As a community dedicated to educating and protecting young women, should they conduct a boys’ school at the bishop’s request?

Mother Mary Teresa King, superior of the Grass Valley community, strongly disagreed, though nothing in the Rule explicitly forbade working with boys. Her refusal to accede to Bishop O’Connell’s wishes, as well as her publicly-stated doubts about the desirability of a permanent location in Grass Valley, only increased tensions. Her intractability prompted advice from Mother M. Francis Bridgeman of the Kinsale, Ireland community:

I would calmly but firmly decline doing what my conscience told me was wrong; try to bring the Bishop to my way of thinking, let the Priests talk, try to manage them kindly and advance in humility & perfection by those rude Speeches which probably are more on the tongue than in

56. Letter of Mere Constantine Collin to Sister M. Cornelia Neujean, March 15, 1863 in *Letters of Our Dear Mother Constantine*, SNDC.

57. Dougherty, “Dominican Sisters of San Rafael,” 85.

the heart. Then if the Bishop *really insisted* on my doing irreligious things & that I could not get him off it I would feel justified in claiming my right of profession but *only* in that case.⁵⁸

Bridgeman's strategy consisted of deference and humility. It allowed sisters to voice their opinions without defying their ecclesiastical superior.

In due course, Mother Mary Baptist resolved the matter using tact and diplomacy. Advised by Mother M. Francis and Archbishop Alemany, she reassigned Mother Mary Teresa and appointed a sister more agreeable and capable of a better working relationship with Bishop O'Connell. Though not ideal, the solution allowed the Sisters of Mercy to continue their activities in Grass Valley, a matter of chief importance for them.

Building relationships with laity, clergy, and other congregations was crucial for the success and survival of women religious. Engaging with the broader public presented sisters with greater opportunities for funding and support; entering into partnerships with clergy allowed for the creation of much-needed services and institutions. Without women religious, the men of the Church would have been hard-pressed to serve the archdiocese's growing population. Likewise, sisters benefitted from their interdependency with clergy, gaining allies who helped to ensure both their spiritual and financial welfare.

Conclusion

The women religious in the Archdiocese of San Francisco have left an indelible mark on the region. Despite the bigotry and discrimination encountered when they arrived, they persevered, drawing on a network of allies and partners as well as their substantial faith to establish a network of schools, hospitals, and other social service institutions throughout the San Francisco Bay area. Many of these institutions exist today, a testament to their ingenuity, flexibility, and adaptability to changing times. The parochial school system that sisters helped to establish, fund, and maintain continues, with many of their elementary and secondary schools in operation. Likewise, the College of Notre Dame de Namur (now Notre Dame de Namur University) and Dominican College (now Dominican University) are fully accredited and widely respected institutions of higher education. The Sisters of Mercy's St. Mary's Hospital still serves San Francisco, and the Daughters of Charity's Mary's Help Hospital now thrives as Seton Medical Center in Daly City.

58. *Annals*, SOMB, 337–338.

These accomplishments stand out as more impressive because they were achieved when most women were barred from roles beyond marriage and motherhood. Catholic women religious occupied a unique position in society and the Church. Through their beliefs and actions, they reinterpreted a “woman’s place,” allowing them to endure hardship and deprivation, forge new institutions, and take on leadership positions traditionally reserved for men. They offer a paradox, of course, since their work was never done for self-promotion or personal gain. Rather, women religious expressed their spiritual beliefs and dedication to God by following what they believed as His will: to care for the poor, the sick, the uneducated, and all those in need.