

Victims of a Church In Transition: The Transition of the Catholic Church and its Effect On the  
American Nun Population

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The Catholic Church has been one of the most influential and controversial institutions in modern history. The Church traces its origins back to its first pope, Saint Peter, one of the original apostles of Jesus Christ. In fact, the pope remains a dominant force in religious and political issues in modern times. Throughout its history, the Church has crowned kings of Europe and backed, financially and morally, religious crusades into the Middle East to guard against its relics and self-proclaimed holy land. Moreover, the Church and its followers have been the victims of brutal persecutions as well as the instigators of equally brutal acts. The Church itself is a global institution capable of small scale focus.

The Catholic Church has and continues to operate on global levels without losing its ability to maintain the sense of security it provides for its individual followers on a personal level. The Church operates effectively in a local context, usually through men and women who have taken a special vocation and who have committed their lives to serve the Church in their own capacity. Nuns, in particular, are best known for their religious service in a variety of secular institutions in the United States such as medical nursing, caring for the homeless, fighting poverty, and perhaps best known for their role in education. Nuns have had a rich and storied history of serving the Catholic Church and assisting its followers.

Following the Second World War changes in the expectations placed on nuns in America and the influence that the Catholic Church itself has over a broad range of issues in public and private life have taken place. As result, there has been a change in the strengths of the Church and a noticeable decrease in population of nuns. The main focus of this paper will be to explore the transformation and progressive transition of the Catholic Church from the years 1945-1960. As a consequence of such study, reasons for why the nun population in the United States seems

to be diminishing and how this trend fits into the broader context of the Catholic Church's loss of hierarchal structure and traditional positions will be brought to the surface. Furthermore, in the process of investigating these larger questions regarding the Church, the history of St. Patrick's Elementary School, a parochial school established in Arroyo Grande, California in 1963 by the Sisters of Mercy, will be discussed in hopes of consolidating the previously mentioned questions into a local example.

Historians and intellectuals involved in the field of Catholic studies and religious social trends have commented on the various aspects of change in the Church since World War II and the controversial years leading up to and encompassing the decisions made during Vatican II. After a great deal of preliminary research, there seems to be a connection between the decisions made about how best to pursue a traditional Catholic life during the 1960s, specifically adhering to the decisions of Vatican II for both the laity and the clergy, and the decreasing of nun populations in relation to the supremacy of the Catholic Church. The Catholic institution, which is hierarchal by nature, has been under the threat of democratic virtues seeping into its structure since its first days within the borders of the United States.

The Catholicism has discouraged democratic ideals which pose a threat to an established hierarchy. Angelyn Dries, professor of humanities at Saint Louis University, contends that "American missionaries before 1960 were not necessarily advocates for a 'democratic church'." That is to say, the traditional hierarchy of the Catholic Church was more closely aligned with their beliefs. However, as the Church entered into the middle and latter part of the 1960s, pressure to firm up its foreign policy positions began emanating from liberal Catholic intellectuals who valued Church support for their democratically inspired ideas. Dries notes that the Catholic Church slowly came around to embracing American ideals which are evident in

their “eventual critique of American foreign policy.”<sup>1</sup> By 1968, all missionaries, American Catholics specifically, viewed themselves as global Catholics, which would have been a controversial claim if it were announced during the 1930s-40s before Vatican II. Dries is thus proposing that there has been a trend for mainstream Catholics to separate themselves from the out-of-date teachings of the Church. This obvious detachment by committed Catholics during the 1960s is a fact that Dries tries to make clear and one which is linked directly to the shrinking nun population.

Dr. Patrick Carey, professor of theology and history at Marquette University, shares a similar view with that of Professor Dries. He contends that the “elite laity have been involved in American ecclesial and social life, but that their actual activities and their perceptions of their roles have been significantly influenced by the American context.” Dr. Carey defines laity in the realms of Catholic theology as a “dialogue between the Catholic tradition and the dynamics of the American culture.”<sup>2</sup> The common thread that both of these authors share is located in their focus of the increase of laity in the Church. I view this increase in laity during the 1940s-60s as a response to the broadening opportunities for women and men in secular life. Consequently, the institutions that provided women with an increase of opportunity in daily life such as sisterhoods were no longer as necessary or useful.

Patrick N. Allitt, a professor of history at Emory University, contends in his journal article, “American Catholics and the New Conservatism of the 1950s,” that Catholics during the 1950s who embraced “New Conservatism” and those on the left were restless under the “close embrace of the pre-conciliar Church.” Allitt continues by citing the fact that Catholics of the

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<sup>1</sup> Angelyn Dries, “The Missionary Critique of American Institutions: From Catholic Americans to Global Catholics, 1948-1976,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 17, no. 1 (Winter, 1999), pp. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Carey, “Lay Catholic Leadership in the United States,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 9, no. 3 (Summer, 1990), pp. 223-224.

1950s were “well disposed to many of the changes introduced by Vatican II.”<sup>3</sup> During the late 1940s, it was still acceptable for print journalism to be anti-Catholic. However, as the craft of journalism progressed into the 1950s, many conservative Catholics, such as William F. Buckley and Garry Wills succeeded in publishing and contributing to major conservative publications.<sup>4</sup> According to Allitt, Catholics embraced conservatism because it represented an anti-communist force that promoted the “Captive Church” in tyrannical governments. While this anti-communist trend related to the politicization of the Church and the close affiliation it had with secular events, however, these lay intellectual Catholics were unable to fully participate in Catholic decision making and were regarded as “second class citizens.”<sup>5</sup> In turn, the laity welcomed the Second Vatican Council’s offer to give them a more dynamic role. In the end, according to Allitt, there arose a schism between the “New Conservative” Catholics and the Church on a variety of issues. As a result of this, an article was published by Garry Wills that the Pope could err.<sup>6</sup> Wills’s condemnation of the Pope’s judgment, though not as heavy as Martin Luther’s ninety-five theses, did draw massive amounts of attention to the question of whether the hierarchal structure of the Church was indeed outdated. Wills’s comment also served as a line of demarcation separating the traditional Church with what could be expected in the outcome of Vatican II. Truly, the struggle between the Church and its new laity is at the center of these aforementioned historians’ views.

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick Allitt, “American Catholics and the New Conservatism of the 1950s,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7, no. 1 (Winter, 1988), pp. 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

Accordingly, there are other branches of historians that see the decreasing of the hierarchal powers of the Church and how this correlates to the population of nuns in more cultural means. Justus George Lawler, a prolific writer of various works in the 1950s and onward, states in an interview that most of his work was “sponsored” by nuns.<sup>7</sup> In remembering his life before the revolution of Vatican II, he laments that the “absence of women from the discussion...is understandable, though regrettable.” He goes on to make a brief observation about sisterhoods; “once a common and almost uniquely Catholic term [sisterhoods] are now part of a real sisterhood, and so find themselves in a much more flourishing state than do any communities of men; they are no longer losing their best people, simply because there is nothing ‘outside’ that cannot be reformed as well from the inside.”<sup>8</sup>

Essentially, all of these various opinions regarding the strength of the Catholic Church revolving around the post-World War II years until the mid-1960s share a commonality in their approach of viewing the Church as an institution that ebbs and flows in importance and popularity in direct correlation with the cultural changes emanating from the American culture. There are numerous other scholars that further the argument that the most fundamental change in Church doctrine occurred in the years leading up to Vatican II and exploded in the years immediately following the decisions made by the council.<sup>9</sup>

I contend, as previously mentioned, the transformations in Church philosophy during the 1940s-60s have led to a fundamentally different Church than that of pre-World War II. This thus led to a desertion of nuns from orders in the United States of America. In order to provide

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<sup>7</sup> George Lawler, “Catholicism in the Fifties: An Interview with Justus George Lawler,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7, no. 1 (Winter, 1988), pp. 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Scott Appleby, Steven Avella, George Wiegel, Dorothy Dohen, and Eugene McCarragher are scholars that focus their studies around the Catholic Church.

evidence for this contention, it will be important to recognize the viewpoints of various scholars who are not only Catholics themselves, but who also find it necessary to reflect upon Church history. Furthermore, the cultural gaps which became evident in the Church during the post-World War II era will be analyzed and placed in the appropriate context for the subject matter. In conclusion, this trend will be discussed in a local context by observing the failure of St. Patrick's Elementary School in Arroyo Grande, California to replace their disappearing Sisters of Mercy.

## II. The Years 1945-1960, the pre-conciliar Church and “the seeds of change.”

In order to make sense of the reasons why American nuns are disappearing, it is necessary to acquaint oneself with the actual numbers. According to information compiled by the *Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate*, *The Official Catholic Directory*, and the Vatican's *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae*, a trend is easily distinguishable in the total number of nuns since 1965 to present. In 1965, there were 179,637 religious sisters actively engaged in parishes as compared to today where only 59,601 are active in Religious Orders.<sup>10</sup> Statistics such as these, are so drastic that they bring forth a number of questions and concerns about not only the health of individual orders across the United States of America, but also the overall condition of the greater Catholic institution. A number of changes originating from the decisions of Vatican II have taken place in the Catholic Church over the years--specifically the years from 1945 to 1960--that may answer these questions of concern.

The brutalities inherent in war often have a devastating affect on the mental state of men and women. In order to deal with the stresses imposed by war, soldiers as well as society, will

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<sup>10</sup> Since 1965 a steady decline is apparent: (135,225 in 1975; 115,386 in 1985; 90,809 in 1995; 79,814 in 2000; 68,634 in 2005; 59,601 in 2009). Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, “Frequently Requested Catholic Church Statistics,” <http://cara.georgetown.edu/bulletin/index.htm> (accessed August, 25, 2009).

sometimes turn to each other, a powerful leader, or a religious faith. As for the Americans who felt the affects of World War II, many men and women strengthened their faith in or turned toward an institution that could meet their faith-based needs, namely, the Catholic Church. The Catholic doctrine is steeped in circumstance and ritual which provides a rigid structure for its followers. As seen in the aftermath of World War I and the “Lost Generation,” a sense of uncertainty tends to arise when society is witness to its own atrocities against humanity.

In the post-war years following 1945, as years previous, the Catholic Church provided the structure and ritualism that many Americans seemed to crave. Such interest in the Church can be seen in the numbers of active lay Catholics and those who took up orders. In the period from 1945 through 1965, the amount of American Catholics participating in the sacraments doubled from 24,402,124 to 46,246,175, while nuns and other clergy grew at a less rapid pace. However, a sudden decrease in clergy is not obvious until post-Vatican II.<sup>11</sup> The pre-conciliar Church was a different institution in a variety of ways than that of the Church post-Vatican II, however, the transitional church of 1945-1960 contains plausible reasons for the coming of Vatican II and the loss of American nuns.

The Catholic Church vested its authority in a specific way of doing things in through Religious Orders and in the world of the lay. However, the democratic values held by most Americans had been gradually weakening the hierarchal structure of the Church for decades, if not centuries. Yet, Catholic authorities preferred to ignore this phenomena for as long as possible. Until 1965, the common interpretation of the Catholic religion was: Catholicism encompasses all truth and therefore whatever is true must be Catholic.<sup>12</sup> It has been the

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<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Sandra Y. Mize, “A Catholic Way of Doing Every Important Thing: U.S. Catholic Women and Theological Study in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 13, no. 2 (Spring, 1995), pp. 53.

questioning of this fundamental idea, as seen in the years 1945-1960, by community congregations all over the world which has resulted in a weakening of Catholic authority.

Many Catholics who reached religious maturity before the Second Vatican Council had as great a difficulty comprehending the mid-twentieth century Catholic intellectuals who pushed progressive agendas as did their Protestant and secular contemporaries in the 1940s and 50s. Neither group shared the earlier Catholic assumption of the radically social nature of humanity. Within this perspective, individuals could evade their intrinsically social nature by claims of autonomy, but never escape its contamination. A person hoping for strict individuality and searching for a sense of owning one's future, found life in a hierarchal environment difficult. Women, specifically, accepted their inherent social nature and engaged in its fulfillment through their Catholic commitments prescribed by the Church.<sup>13</sup> This rudimentary and simple view of gender and more so, lay and clerical distinctions, were not greatly challenged by either side to any serious degree. However, as time pushed closer to the eve of Vatican II, men and women began to view religious life in a different light.

As American culture began to change with the counter-culture movement of the 1960s, generational gaps became more evident. The difference among age levels became more visibly marked than formerly distinguished. American youth desired a religious life that brought them in contact with others. Also, they considered community life from a fraternal aspect rather than a hierarchical viewpoint, thereby, causing misunderstandings among older religious folk who did not share this view. There is a direct correlation between what is articulated in the aforementioned observance and analysis with the disintegration of the hierarchal formation of the Church. A hierarchal institution that cannot control its base will topple unless some sort of

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

reform can be installed, or so was conjectured by Catholic authorities. However, Church authorities were lacking in their knowledge of public opinion as can be seen in the testimonies of the Catholic youth at this time.

A recently taken survey among Catholic scholars who were asked to comment on their experience as young Catholics during the period 1945-1960 further emphasizes the schism. Each contributor brought different perspective regarding the strength and direction of the Catholic Church. Russell Barta reflected on the mood of Catholic life and culture during the latter part of the 40s and 50s. In describing these pre-Vatican II years, Barta says, "As Christian Catholics, as priests and laity, we knew who we were and what we were supposed to be about. There were no identity problems then that I can remember."<sup>14</sup> Barta goes on to describe a sense of unity among all the different secular movements with the traditional Catholic sect. Thus, creating a foundation of Catholic belief and culture that fit with the befitting vision and action of the time. However, what is most compelling about Barta's memories is that they are best described as a lamentation of what Catholicism was before Vatican II.

Similarly, Robert E. Burns reflects on the political mood of the 50s in the relation to the direction of the Catholic Church. Burns says, "The 1950s were still good times for 'us' but times were a-changing."<sup>15</sup> The conservative policies of President Eisenhower in Burns's view watered down the liberal projects he and his other liberal-Catholics championed, such as the Fair Employment Practices Law. Furthermore, the zealousness that the majority of young male

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<sup>14</sup> Russell Barta, Robert Burns, John C. Cort, John Tracy Ellis, and George W. Higgins, "Symposium: Tradition and Transformation in the 1950s: Autobiographical Reflections on the Immediate Pre-Vatican II Period as a Time of Continuity and Change," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7, no. 1 (Winter, 1988), pp. 132.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

Catholics returned with from war slowly dissipated as more and more became absorbed into the job market.

John C. Cort, a Catholic who worked as an executive secretary for a CIO union newspaper witnessed the disintegration of Catholic enthusiasm during his time. Cort blames the “stultifying” effects of the materialistic American dream with which most men returned home from war as the main contributor to Catholic weakness.<sup>16</sup> The pursuit of wealth and the attitude that befits such dreams quashes any sort of devotion away from the primary goal, whether it be religious or not, merely because it is a distraction. The triumphalist tendencies that men brought back with them from war seriously damaged the bond between Catholics and their Church. For some Catholics, their dependency no longer rested upon the Church but on themselves. Another excellent point Cort makes about the condition of the Catholic Church at this time is its loss of communal spirit. The rapid endorsement of individualism that spread across the minds of Americans in the 1950s contributed to their waning devotion. This is in stark contrast to the 1930s, when the vast majority of Catholics were poorer and needed one another and their faith in a greater degree.

John Tracy Ellis focuses on the encyclicals Pope Pius XII issued during this time. Specifically, he mentions the *Humani generis* (August 12, 1950) which sought to hasten intellectual opinion that threatened the foundations of Catholic doctrine.<sup>17</sup> Surprisingly, the encyclicals that were crafted by the Pope to restore traditional attitudes did little to change the opinions of most Catholic intellectuals already on a path to freer expression and religious freedom. George W. Higgins echoes the thoughts of Ellis’s, the last scholar asked to respond to

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

the survey. Higgins focuses primarily on the role of the laity in these years in relation to the Church, specifically, the way the laity saw themselves in relation to the Catholic institution. Higgins explains that “many laymen were disappointed that the top-down approach, in many cases, was being more heavily emphasized after Vatican II than it was by some of the pioneers (Higgins) who were working in the field before the Council.”<sup>18</sup>

In the end, all four of these Catholic scholars seem to have a similar view concerning the imminent confrontation between the influx of laity during 1945-1960 and the direction of the Church. Their survey suggests that in an effort to control their followers, the Catholic Church weakened its outreach for fear of contaminating itself with secular values and losing its hierarchal authority. The 1950s marked the time where lay Catholics searched for power and place in the Catholic Church. A majority of educated laymen sought to intertwine their faith with their occupational status and their political views. Though highly intelligent and articulate, this class of laymen would find their place in the Church near the bottom of the pyramid of influence.

The steady influx of the Catholic laity during the 1950s and the destabilization of priestly power and authority that accompanied the immigration are two inter-related commonplaces of American religious historiography. According to Eugene McCarragher, a professor of history at Villanova, the years “between the end of the Second World War and the close of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, so the tale goes, ‘ghetto’ Catholicism--a narrow, ‘parochial’ religious culture--gave way to a more open, cosmopolitan, ‘assimilated’ Catholic community, one that remains both more critical of clerical authority and less defensive toward non-Catholic and even

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

secular currents in American life.”<sup>19</sup> This observation by McCarragher can be attributed to the growing increase of a middle class during this time and the strength of the lay movement.

The defining figure in the quest of the laymen’s struggle for recognition was a new phenomenon the Church had yet to deal with, the American man in the grey flannel suit. According to McCarragher, the professional managerial worker and a new kind of priest were emerging from a more secularized society and bringing with them their democratic philosophies. Secondly, a new form of hegemony in American Catholicism slowly found its way into Catholic congregations. There was a desire by the newly emerged Catholic intellectual lay class that sought to bring their faith with them into the “crabgrass frontier of postwar suburbia.”<sup>20</sup> Hopes of quietly assimilating into the Catholic hierarchy were dashed relatively quickly as highlighted by the rise of the new conservatives and their political astuteness.

New conservatives, namely Garry Wills, felt compelled to question the authority of the Church. As previously mentioned, Wills’ assertion that the Pope was capable of misjudgment and political naiveté encapsulated the sort of direct attack by the lay that worried Catholic officials. Essentially, this group of laymen felt ostracized and turned away from the Church. Thus, they perhaps posed a greater threat to the Church from their position on the outside than they would have if they had been readily accepted as valuable members of American Catholic congregations. Accordingly, such reactions as those communicated by Wills and his simply stated but controversial attack on the Pope readily act as supporting evidence for a decline in numbers joining Religious Orders, knowing that such ideas would not be tolerated. However, not all lay participation was limited to the business real nor the political arena. The academic

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<sup>19</sup> Eugene D. McCarragher, “The Saint in the Gray Flannel Suit: The Professional-Managerial Class, ‘The Layman,’ and American-Catholic-Religious Culture, 1945-1965,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 15, no. 3 (Summer, 1997), pp. 100.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

elite also vied for a piece of Catholic power. By 1960 “there was no longer a single scholastic system” but a “diversity of systems” reflecting a variety of different approaches to philosophy and theology.<sup>21</sup> Out of one doctrine came many as new generation theologians and philosophers began to dissect Catholic ideology. This intellectual interest resulted in a less confident but more unified generation as compared to the commonplace stratification and rigid postures that characterized the 1920s

All of these various categories emerging in the postwar period within American society--the businessman, the political analysts, the academic--called the middle class niche their home. Thus, the Catholic Church felt an undeniable impulse to corral them as best as possible. However, the quest to incorporate would eventually lead to a compromise of Catholic principle and the loss of those willing to dedicate their lives to religious service.

### III. A Changing Society: Lay Involvement, the Feminist and the Businessman.

Mark Massa, co-director of Catholic studies at Fordham University, asserts that the post-World War II period in the United States was deeply rooted in a religious revival. This revival was the effects of the realization by the American people of the horrible truth that modern weapons, such as those that destroyed Hiroshima, and the spread of communism in eastern Europe, were realities in accordance with the new postwar world.<sup>22</sup> Massa goes on to make another interesting point about the transition of the Catholic faith in the nineteenth and twentieth century. He says the American Catholic life during those years became totally consumed with the struggle to fit into American life and finding a path toward bourgeois normalcy. Thus, Massa

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<sup>21</sup> Garry Wills, *Why I Am a Catholic* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), pp. 58.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Massa, “Young Man Merton: Erik Erikson, the Mountains of Purgatory, and the Post-War ‘Catholic Revival’,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 15, no. 4 (Fall, 1997), pp. 108.

continues, “the heroes of American Catholic culture had been ‘Americanist’ accommodationist leaders who sought a church adapted to a democratic, pluralist culture.”<sup>23</sup>

During these same years many third generation immigrants seeking to assimilate into the newly formed American middle class niche, found their solace in the teachings of a plethora of priests willing to investigate and promote the latest European trends of neo-Thomism, and the growing population of American intellectuals.<sup>24</sup> The mid-twentieth century also led to the breakdown of the tight ‘in-group/out-group’ boundaries that had defined the ethnic identity of previous immigrant clusters. In fact, throughout the nineteenth there proved to be a weakening in the tribal bonding that determined the easy demarcation of social location for many immigrants. According to Massa, “The secure but somewhat narrow world of parochial school networks, Catholic labor unions, and communion breakfasts now appeared cramped and unsatisfying in light of the invitation to join the larger cultural feast.”<sup>25</sup> As cultural diversity grew in America so did the social networks that men and women of all ethnic backgrounds could join. In order to compete with more liberal establishments the Church had to relax its doctrinal demands in the effort to make them more inclusive.

Due to the sudden increase of Catholic interest amongst its American congregations the Church suddenly had to meet clerical demands. The diverse and expanding American Catholic population of the 1950s demanded that their children be taught by intelligent and educated Sisters. According to Steven Avella, professor at Marquette University, Catholic sisters were depended upon to deliver a quality education to a growing size of parochial school attendees. The period leading up to Vatican II was a time of a reenergized “conservative approach to social

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

and theological issues.”<sup>26</sup> This revival of Catholic fellowship, mixed with the discontent of large lay Catholic sects and progressive priests and nuns, foreshadowed the schism which would directly affect those men who decided the direction of Church policy. Unbeknownst to many Catholics in the early post war years a mandate of drastic changes would sprout from the seeds of change so dutifully and quietly planted that the culmination of events would become known as Vatican II.

The influence of the lay, which has been the dominant topic in the former arguments, is only one shade of many colors that make up the colorful transition of the Church and the health of its nun population in America. Running parallel with the conservative movements set in motion, a liberal movement was taking root in activist priests and women with a desire for recognized equality.

As historian Jeffrey Burns notes in his article regarding Catholic laywomen during the 1950s, a disjuncture in ideology and practice took place. According to Burns, “A new breed of Catholic woman developed in the 1950s--middle class, college educated, devoutly Catholic, activist in spirit, and articulate.”<sup>27</sup> Prior to the rise of the new laywoman taking place in the 1950s, women in general were seldom found in positions of any real political sway. Burns goes on to say that men’s ideal role of women in the years immediately following the end of World War II was totally absurd. Burns states that the “same woman that transitioned from the home into the workplace during World War II were expected to resume her previous roles as homemaker, despite their newly acquired skills and the obvious evidence of their value in commercial industry.”

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey M. Burns, “Catholic Laywomen in the Culture of American Catholicism in the 1950s,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 5, no. 3/4 (Summer-Fall, 1986), pp. 392.

Consequently, as women's rights began to improve during the early 1900s a new class within society slowly unfurled in front of the Catholic Church, the educated and astute man and woman. This phenomenon of empowered women during this time period does not accuse nor celebrate the traditions of the Church. In fact, before women were given the opportunity to express themselves intellectually in the public sector, the Church allowed them to challenge themselves within the confines of Sisterhoods. The celebrated female Catholic educators were not a coincidence but a direct result of the quality of study allowed by Religious Orders. However, this is not to say that there was not a great deal of friction between those laywomen who wished to pursue intellectual careers outside the realms of the Church and the Catholic hierarchy. Women discovered that the only way for them to release themselves from the Catholic family ideology, which promoted the idea that a woman remain in her predetermined gender sphere, namely, the housewife, was to "disregard masculinity and femininity altogether and push into a role of charitable devotee."<sup>28</sup>

In doing so the "emerging Catholic laywoman" could escape her expected role and venture into the male dominated clerical realm by means of expanding her Christian role.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the Catholic laywoman carved out a position of respect and power similar to that of a nun. Unfortunately, for the health of Catholic sisterhoods, a laywoman could now achieve the same sort of respectability and prestige as a nun without the taking of vows and committing herself to a long term lifestyle choice. A woman could become educated, raise a child, marry, and play an integral role in her church without the ecclesiastical restrictions placed upon nuns during the same time period.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

In order to further the argument of distinct gender restrictions in the hierarchal structure of the Church, James Kenneally, describes the role of women in the Catholic Church as being one of oppression and restriction. Kenneally goes on to say that, “many Catholics believed there was an order designed by God, exemplified by the Virgin Mary, justified by St. Paul, and supported by historical tradition. Thus there were distinct spheres of activity for each sex. Women centered on their role as perpetuators of the race and nucleus of the family; if then she moved from that orbit her action would be unnatural, a threat to the order of society.”<sup>30</sup>

The Catholic Church’s inclination to elevate women to a feminine pedestal beyond the reach of men aided in their yearning to escape the home. However, nuns in particular had to struggle to stay independent because their qualities of leadership challenged the traditional female stereotype. The most brazen Catholic women were those who were willing to risk their excommunication from the Church. These nuns, before Vatican II, open the doors to feminine agendas which allowed for the breakdown of the traditional hierarchal structure of the church and its treatment of its nuns.

Catholic feminists interested in a wide variety of intellectual and practical issues were responsible for questioning traditional stances supported by the Church. The women's movement was not led by priests vulnerable to Vatican censure, but by a combination of nuns and laywomen somewhat harder to isolate and to discipline. The issues were not tangentially related to patterns of ecclesiastical structure and authority, but were fundamentally at odds with traditional understandings of ecclesiology.<sup>31</sup> Feminist pushes for change opposed the Biblical traditions held by the Catholic Church which called for gender segregation.

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<sup>30</sup> James Kenneally, “Reflections on Historical Catholic Women,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 5, no. 3/4 (Summer-Fall, 1986), pp. 414.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

According to Mary Jo Weaver, professor of religious studies at Indiana University, “If Vatican II empowered the laity to adopt the slogan, ‘We are the church,’ the women's movement within Catholicism made that slogan its own with a combination of certainty and determination that went beyond anything I had seen since the rhetoric of the Reformation.”<sup>32</sup> Simply put, the modernists and feminists that were now knocking at the front door of the Church put pressure on the clergy to practice what they preached. Thus, while knocking for opportunity these feminists were knocking down the walls of sisterhoods and other religious orders. By maintaining a position to end gender segregation and liberate women from the bondage of a male dominated clergy, feminist brought advancement in equality for women. However, the gender equality that permeated all facets of religious and lay society also made places of female sanctuary such as Religious Orders irrelevant.

The same priests that withheld their participation in the feminist cause for fear of Vatican censure supported other progressive ideology. Though the majority of this liberal outreach in cities and international mission was carried out by priests, their actions were mimicked by their female counterparts. It is important to explore this liberal outreach as well as the aforementioned feminist movement if not to point to specific examples, but to ensure and support the idea that the Catholic Church during the postwar years was desperately trying to calibrate their views to attract a greater following. At this point, a clear line of demarcation can be seen separating a peak and decline of hierarchal organization within the Church. Furthermore, it is necessary to remember that until the early-to mid-1960s priests and sisters were maintaining high membership numbers. Yet, the transitions and transformations that have been discussed so far, and remain to

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<sup>32</sup> Mary Jo Weaver, “Feminist Perspectives and American Catholic History,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 5, no. 3/4 (Fall, 1996), pp. 404.

be so, signal the coming change of Vatican II as well as the resulting drop off in Religious Order membership.

Scott Appleby, professor of history at the University of Notre Dame, examines the words of an influential priest active in the years leading up to Vatican II. The interviewee, Fr. Gremillion, was resident priest of Saint John the Baptist Catholic Church in Many, Louisiana where he was well known for fundraising and initiating a variety of programs. Appleby writes that Fr. Gremillion's concern for the needy outside of the parish. This view was shared by other 'pioneering' priests of the pre-conciliar period, an influential minority within the American presbyterate of the 1940s and 1950s who experimented with parish structures, participated in extra-parochial professions, and saw the presbyterate as a distinct, quasi-independent sub-group with its own rights, privileges and responsibilities within the church."<sup>33</sup> However, looking outside of the parish for charitable opportunity meant that the hierarchal authority associated with a resident priest became less effective by its distance from the actual place of worship.

Priests and nuns during the second quarter of the 1900s generally spent 6 to 8 years educating themselves after high school. They were well versed in Latin, law and theology. However, as Fr. Gremillion acknowledges by his referring to the pioneering priests, many priests and nuns felt completely unprepared for the expectations from their congregations. Appleby goes on to make an important point about the pioneering priests in saying:

In the 1950s, these men reconsidered parochial presence in light of a renewed commitment to the world beyond the parish. Many of the post-conciliar experiments in priestly ministry, including the social activism of the 'urban priest' and the professional specialization of the so-called 'hyphenated priest' (the

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<sup>33</sup> Scott Appleby, "In the Church but of the World: Pioneer Priests on the Eve of Vatican II," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 11, no. 1 (Winter, 1993), pp. 83.

priest-sociologist, the priest-psychologist, etc.) were prefigured in the organizational and initiatives of this network of pre-conciliar priests.<sup>34</sup>

One can gather from these changes in the traditional parish structure that a breakdown was occurring in the once self-contained parochial society found in the traditional Church. Also, this new breed of priests doing their best to serve their communities as greatly as possible found it helpful and a necessary to share ideas. Thus, due to the new appearance in the 1950s of communication capabilities priests from all over the United States could exchange ideas. Indeed, shattering the isolation of parishes from one another and more interestingly, these priests were bending tradition. No longer was the priest only expected to perform the necessary sacraments for his parish but the laity themselves no longer expected to simply sit and pray. Both parties wished to share in this resurgence of liberal outreach outside the parish that fostered their joint desires for productivity and approval. In the end, this liberal outreach created a unsatisfiable need among the laity and those in Religious Orders for a new parish model and a reexamination of Church tradition.

These new feelings and desires for change spawning from an introduction of ‘pioneering priests’ and nuns reached their peak in the pre-conciliar years of the Church. However, the calls for change and reorganization of the Church hierarchy not only emanated from the parishes within the borders of the United States, but also from international missionary hubs. Two such Catholic missionary hubs were the Catholic Student Mission and the Mission Secretariat. Missionaries before 1960 were not necessarily full fledged supporters of a revised hierarchy but this stance would change as time moved closer to Vatican II. Consequently, circa 1960 the

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

Catholic Church came to embrace American ideals which is evident in their “eventual critique of American foreign policy.”<sup>35</sup>

The Catholic Student Mission and the Mission Secretariat active in the early twentieth century encapsulated the Catholic response to American ideals. One example of this was The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and their protest against the Japanese Exclusion Act of 1924.<sup>36</sup> The protest initiated by the nuns signified a distinct aspect of American democratic ideology that was taking hold in Religious Orders. After the Vatican Council years of 1964 and the emergence of the Catholic Student Mission, missionaries were critical of U.S. involvement in the governance of other countries. By 1968, all missionaries, American Catholics specifically, viewed themselves as global Catholics, a controversial claim if it were announced during the 1930s and 40s before Vatican II.

The suggested Americanization of the Catholic Church was one of the most dangerous ideas thus pondered in pre-conciliar America regarding the future of the Church. The term Americanization often coincides with the idea of democracy. Thus, the reflection of such ideas by Catholics--nuns, priests, and lay--conjures the visualization of a “democratic church.” A democratic church in the 1950s, as with the idea of global Catholics, have been considered an outrageous claim. In order to completely understand the threat of democracy in relation to the Catholic Church, one must step back from the current discussion and remember the origin of the Church. The Catholic Church was created with the intention of having a single leader not necessarily bound by global opinion or responsible to a single parish. A democratic Church would inherently lead to the breakdown of any sort of hierarchy. Furthermore, the disintegration

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<sup>35</sup> Angelyn Dries, “The Missionary Critique of American Institutions: From Catholic Americans to Global Catholics, 1948-1976,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 17, no. 1 (Winter, 1999), pp. 59.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

of this hierarchy would act as vacuum of vindication for all those men and women within Religious Orders.

However, in order for the Church to maintain its place among other religions of the world it became necessary in the 1950s to relax some of its hierarchal positions. This thought had wrapped itself so firmly around the minds of high level Catholic officials during the pre-conciliar era since the late 1800s that Pope Leo XIII announced the beginning of the end of the Catholic hierarchy. He said, "...in order the more easily to bring over to Catholic doctrine those who dissent from it, the Church ought to adapt herself somewhat to our advanced civilization, and, relaxing her ancient rigor, show some indulgence to modern popular theories and methods."<sup>37</sup> Thus, the idea of such drastic but understated theories remained in the background of Catholic ideology. In an attempt to hold the Church together and escape a momentous ruling of transformation the pre-conciliar transitional phase of the Catholic Church prepared for a campaign of ecumenical proposals.

#### IV. The Popularization of Catholic Doctrine: An Introduction of Mainstream Attitudes and the Impending Second Ecumenical Council

During the last years of the transitional church, which occurred just before Vatican II, a growing sense of a need to open up ecumenically began to transpire for fear of losing followers. According to Gustave Weigel, the renowned American Jesuit who participated in Vatican II policy, the definition of ecumenical is "any aspiration, any action, any institution whose purpose is to bring together the separated churches which bear the name of Christ, through representatives, in order to hold converse, dialogue if you wish, in order to teach and learn, in the hope that God will use this conversation as an instrument to bring about the greatest unity

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<sup>37</sup> Joseph White, "Theological Studies at the Catholic University of America: Organization and Leadership before Vatican Council II," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7, no. 4 (Fall, 1988), pp. 455.

possible among the churches which bear the name of Christ.”<sup>38</sup> Prior to 1950, the Roman Catholic ecumenism had been practically non-existent. Gustave Weigel, during the late 1940s said, “It would be easier for me to become an atheist than a Protestant,” which is essentially how most dedicated Catholics felt about their religion at this moment. The war between Protestantism and Catholicism has reoccurred consistently since the Dark Ages.<sup>39</sup> According to Gustave Weigel there were three main reasons why Catholics during the 1950s rejected ecumenism.

First, Catholics were very suspicious of Protestants and were discouraged from attending any service or function that might relay Protestant beliefs. Second, the brutal past that Protestant and Catholic relations have endured created a wall between the two sects that could not be bridged. Finally, for Catholics, reunion must mean only one thing: a return to Rome, “...a cordial but general invitation to non-Catholics to be Catholics.”<sup>40</sup>

In fact, beginning in the United States in the 1900s, the Protestants slowly began to decrease in numbers as Catholics increased. In America, as the Catholics became less of a poor immigrant religion and more of a middle-class institution, the Protestants reluctantly acknowledged their political weight. Both sects were worried about the salvation of their American followers during the 1950s, as pragmatism and secularism began to take effect on the thinking of the general population. However, it is precisely this thinking that has compromised the structure and control of the Catholic church because Catholics and Protestants approached their faiths in two very different ways. Again, according Weigel, “For the Protestant it is a

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<sup>38</sup> Patrick Collins, “Gustave Weigel, S.J.: The Ecumenical Preparations,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7, no. 1 (Winter, 1988), pp. 119.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

trusting self surrender to the revealing God. For the Catholic it is an intellectual assent to the content of Revelation as true because of the witnessing authority of God the Revealer. This is communicated to humankind through the church more than through the Protestant vehicle, the Bible.”<sup>41</sup> The historical approach the Catholics toward truth and the subjective trust of Protestants have blended to some extent in the ecumenical world born at Vatican II. Essentially, the fact that the follower of the Catholic Church no longer needed, in some respects, to seek salvation through the Church allowed men and women to pursue a life of faith and a place in the Catholic Church by charitable work and faith independent of the Church. This stint of ecumenism was fully realized in the Ecumenical Council announced on January 25, 1959. Weigel’s push for an “Open Door mentality” found its recognition in the preceding and present years of Vatican II.

The attempt to unite the wayward Catholics and broader Christian sects with the more traditional orthodox Catholic doctrine came to an affront during the late 1950s when television became a viable avenue for persuasion. In so many words, the 1950s expressed the homogenizing impulses within post World War II American religion.<sup>42</sup> “Life is Worth Living” steered away from the stereotypes closely associated with Catholics prior to the 1950s and strived to promote a more Americanized form of Catholicism.<sup>43</sup> “The series represented a careful effort to construct a Catholic identity in the context of the postwar era and the continuing tensions between Catholics and other Americans.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony Burke Smith, “Prime-Time Catholicism in 1950s America: Fulton J. Sheen and “Life is Worth Living’,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 15, no. 3 (Summer, 1997), pp. 57.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

The Catholic Church had to quash the rumors that damaged the reputation of the Church. For example, many felt that Catholicism was associated with totalitarian ethos and too traditional to add anything substantial to a society as burgeoning as America. Thus, being able to profess new and true Catholic motives over the television airwaves was a great asset to the Church even though it added to the continual weakening of the traditional Catholic Church.<sup>45</sup> Smith notes that Auxiliary Bishop “Sheen presented an image of Catholicism that sought to dispel such negative impressions and suggest that Catholics were just like their fellow citizens in their commitments to freedom, democracy and social peace.”<sup>46</sup> In this regard, Sheen's message emphasized the bonds of national community that all Americans could share and emphasized the idea of Americanization.

In order to reach the widest audience as possible it was inevitable that Sheen would have to draw upon aspects of cultural traditions that did not coexist smoothly with the “naturalness of the social order.”<sup>47</sup> Sheen “played the image of official Catholicism against his populist message to craft a new representation of traditional religion in postwar America that could simultaneously be learned, democratic, and compassionate.”<sup>48</sup> Sheen took advantage of the pervasive anti-communism of 1950s America and identified himself with the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union. Yet in his discussions of Soviet communism he repeatedly insisted on distinguishing between communism and the Russian people. This distinction was crucial for Sheen's project which few scholars have recognized. For when he talked of the Russian

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 62

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 63

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

Orthodox people who would not succumb to atheistic communism, Sheen identified them in highly Catholic terms.

Sheen turned the Russian Orthodox people and their struggle against communism into surrogates for the Catholic conflict with modernity. Sheen often told his viewers that Soviet communism derived from the Western philosophy of Karl Marx and was not native to Russia, thereby excusing the support given to Marxist leaders by the Russian people. “When we think of Russian communism,” Sheen stated in the episode ‘Communism and Russia,’: let us not forget that the ideas that Russia today are wholesaling to the world, we once retailed in our own Western civilization...When we blame Russia...also blame ourselves and...say ‘mea culpa, mea culpa, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.’”<sup>49</sup> This could be viewed as plea from Sheen to the greater American audience to view the Church as a victim of modernity that is trying its best to assimilate without losing its moral core. However, it was unable to achieve such success without compromising an integral part of Catholic tradition.

The attempted commercialization of the Catholic Church by Sheen and Weigel accomplished the refreshment of the Catholic brand at the expense of Catholic tradition. The liberal outreach of Weigel provided the Catholic Church with new frontiers for intervention that were previously closed off by their own hierarchal structure. Also, as seen during the airing of Sheen’s television show, Catholicism desired to be considered a religion for the American man and woman, not just the devout Catholic man or woman.

The initiatives proposed by the Church and implemented by such figures as Weigel and Sheen may have broadened the influence of Catholic doctrine but did so only by diluting the traditional Catholic message of Catholic supremacy. The process of dilution and transition of the

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

Catholic Church itself began in the immediate postwar years of America but would climatically come to fruition during the early 1960s.

#### IV. Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican or Vatican II 1962-1965, “The Rise of the Social Gospel and the Crusade Against Poverty.”

The clear autumn day of October 11, 1962, marked the opening day of the Second Vatican Council. A culmination of all the ideas and arguments expressed by the pioneering priests as well as the laity were solidified under the decisions made during Vatican II, thus formally acknowledging a definite change in the Catholic Church. Vatican II took place between the years 1962-1965 beginning under the leadership of Pope John XXIII and closing under Pope John Paul VI. The intent of the council was to explore ways for the Church to become more efficient and presentable in the in the ever-changing world that it found itself in; essentially, the task was to try to relate to a world that had been changing since 1945 and culminating in the autumn of 1962.

Vatican II produced four constitutions, nine decrees, and three declarations outlying the Church’s own identity, its relations with other religions, and among a variety of other topics, its own men and women living within the boundaries of Religious Orders. A brief description of the nine decrees provides a general example of the content that passed through the 2,540 Council Fathers. The first two decrees *Ad Gentes* and *Apotolicam Autositatem* calls for its members to engage in a quest of evangelization and directs the laity to direct the nonbelievers to the Church. Both these decrees are asking for activism outside of the Church which until this point would have been strongly discouraged s it would have drawn authority away from the parish. The third decree, *Christus Dominus*, establishes a privilege of greater authority to the bishops within their own respective diocese. The fourth decree, *Christus Dominus*, approved of greater support for

free press and mass communication. This decree was somewhat revolutionary due to its opening up of the Church's private life. No longer would the Catholic Church be so guarded against public intrigue and criticism.

The second half of the nine decrees focuses more intently on the Church itself. *Optatam Totius* directly confronts the training of those participating in Religious Orders. The Church called for reenergizing of the doctrine used to train its men and women. The sixth decree, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, essentially loosened up the restraints the Church in Rome placed upon the Eastern churches. Thus, allowing these churches to embrace their native customs and culture. The consistent thread that is running through these decrees is a sense of opening up and a feeling of relaxation. Even the seventh decree, *Prefectae Caritatis*, though commending a renewal of discipline having to do with the functions of nuns and priests, allowed for a freshening up of the proposed doctrines which was first touched upon by the pioneering priests. The eighth decree, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, was essentially a reemphasis of the seventh, however, the ninth decree denounced a previous mandate. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, was an unapologetic renunciation of the papal bull, issued in 1896 by Pope Leo XIII, declaring all Anglican ordinations to be "absolutely null and utterly void."<sup>50</sup>

Thus, completing the ecumenical agenda and the transformation that the Catholic Church hoped to achieve through Vatican II. However, these nine decrees would forever change the outlook of the Church and weaken its hierarchal structure which without a doubt has led to the decrease in the American nun population. The direct effects most commonly associated with the results of Vatican II are those directly related to the formalities of the mass. The pre-conciliar mass was one of ritual severity. According to Edward P. Hahnenberg, writer for the American

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<sup>50</sup> Archive, "Documents of the Vatican II Council," [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/) (accessed August 20, 2009).

Catholic Newsletter, “‘That was then, this is now.’ The Mass in Latin, clericalism, a closed Catholic ghetto was then, part of our past, described as ‘pre-Vatican II.’ Participation in liturgy, parish collaboration, an openness to the world is now, part of our future, ‘post-Vatican II.’”<sup>51</sup> All of these improvements and changes concerning the lives of Catholics had detrimental effects on the attractiveness of Religious Orders for men and especially, women.

## VI. The Local Effects of a Church In Transition

Since the closing of Vatican II in 1965 a decline in America’s nun population has taken place as a direct result of the transitional years of the Church and the reforms issued from Rome. The sisterhoods have experienced a 59 percent drop in 40 years. In 1965, there were 180,000 nuns in the United States. Today, there are about 73,000 women in 730 orders.<sup>52</sup> The reenergizing of the American Catholic community in the 1950s was met by an influx of nuns acting as educators for children attending parochial schools all over the country. However, as the number of Catholics in the United States has maintained a loose percentage of the relative population (plus or minus twenty-five percent) the number of Catholic elementary schools and Catholic educators has decreased.<sup>53</sup> The aforementioned evidence of a disintegrating hierarchy and liberal trends have since diluted the impact that was once treasured by those parents and children who partook in Catholic education. This trend can be seen in the inability of St. Patrick’s Elementary School in Arroyo Grande, California, to fill the ever more vacant rooms in their modest convent with additional Sisters of Mercy. The case study of St. Patrick’s provides an

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<sup>51</sup> Edward P. Hahnenberg, “Treasures of Vatican II,” *Catholic Update* (September 2005), <http://www.americancatholic.org/newsletters> (accessed November 10, 2009).

<sup>52</sup> Lawn Griffiths, “Author finds feminism, independence among nuns,” *East Valley Tribune*, March 6, 2004.

<sup>53</sup> Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, “Frequently Requested Catholic Church Statistics,” <http://cara.georgetown.edu/bulletin/index.htm> (accessed August, 25, 2009).

excellent example on a local level of the effects the transitions taking place in the 1950s and the result of Vatican II had upon everyday Catholics at the parish level.

The Sisters of Mercy found their start in the green hills of Ireland. Their founder Catherine McAuley was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1778. McAuley was orphaned at an early age but flourished under the loving support of her adopted family. In fact, upon her adopted father's death McAuley inherited a fortune of twenty-five thousand pounds. Thus, McAuley was able to thrust not only unbreakable will and tender heart but a considerable fortune as well toward the founding of the Sisters of Mercy on December 12, 1831. When McAuley died in 1841 there were 150 sisters who dispersed themselves upon bishop request in a various other countries, such as Canada, New Zealand, Argentina, and the United States.<sup>54</sup>

According to the founding sisters, the legacy of St. Patrick's began in the late 1950s, Monsignor O'Doherty, a native of Donegal, Ireland, and pastor of Lemoore, a farming community in the Central Valley of California, asked the Sisters of Mercy located in Ennis, Ireland, if they would consider staffing a school in his parish. Sr. Lelia McKenna was enthusiastic about the idea and actually had been considering such a move since other Sisters in our Irish diocese were already establishing missions in Mississippi and Florida.

Sisters were given the opportunity to volunteer and, in January 1959, seven were selected with Sr. Eileen O'Reilly as leader of the group and principal of the school named Mary Immaculate Queen. The number of sisters to begin with were small by some standards but the parish was committed to making the school work and parents were enthusiastic in their support. In 1961, two other Sisters from Ireland joined the group with Sr. Clare teaching fourth grade and Sr. Mary teaching grade. In 1962, Sr. Bernard came to Lemoore.

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<sup>54</sup> Mercy International Association, "Mercy Foundress," [www.mercyworld.org/foundress](http://www.mercyworld.org/foundress) (accessed July, 6, 2009).

In 1963, when St. Patrick's School opened in Arroyo Grande, CA, Sr. Eileen O'Reilly, Sr. Teresa, Sr. Regina, Sr. Eva, Sr. Norbert, Sr. Mary and Sr. Sheila moved to the new convent in Arroyo Grande. Sr. Eileen was principal and the school offered grades one thru six. Grade seven was added in 1964 and taught by Sr. Eva. Sr. Marie Stephens joined the staff that year and taught fourth grade. Grade eight taught by Sr. Eva was added in September 1965 and, in June 1966, the first graduation took place. The graduates wore royal blue for the boys and a lighter shade of blue for the girls. Most graduating students either attended Arroyo Grande High School or the recently opened St. Joseph's High School in Santa Maria.

When St. Patrick's opened in 1963, the basic curriculum consisted of Religion, Math, English Grammar and Writing, Reading-prose and poetry, Social Studies and Science. Physical Education was taught once or twice a week and after Sr. Terri Cummins came to the school she taught some of the classes. Also, California history was included in fourth grade, American history was included in fifth grade, a summary of European history was included in sixth grade, and American colonial and Civil War histories were included in seventh grade.<sup>55</sup> Such an array of subjects demanded a great deal of preparation for the nuns. However, never were the nuns' intellectual brevity spread too thin for they were always able to exceed the expectations of parents and lay teachers in the community.

A great effort was made by the Sisters to provide the students with as broad a curriculum as could be afforded while ensuring the students had mastered the basic skills at a level appropriate for their grade. At this time in the early life of St. Patrick's, classes were large. It was not unusual for a sister to carry a load of fifty students without the help of class assistants. Teachers divided classes into ability groups in Math and Reading/Literature and organized

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<sup>55</sup> A history of St. Patrick's Elementary School compiled by founding sisters.

lessons so that each level received the same amount of help teaching. This took quite some work as the classes were large, but it helped the students and this was the focus of the sisters.

The first lay teacher was John Beck, a native of Tulare. Mr. Beck taught fourth grade and P.E. and coached the school's boys basketball team. The boys at St. Patrick's were often successful in their sports careers, often overall winners in the tournaments they participated.

Religion was a very important part of the curriculum since the goal of St. Patrick's was not solely scholastic learning but to submerge the student in a knowledge of the Catholic religion. Religion was taught each day and classes took it in turn to prepare a monthly Mass and actively participated in it--performing Scripture readings, singing, and assembling prayers of petition.

These early years of St. Patrick's reflected the times correlating with the overall health of the Catholic Church. The conservative convictions of the 1950s can be seen on the curriculum and the emphasis on religion. Also, the overall discipline of the school children, even when classes exceeded the fifty student mark, was stiff and respectful.<sup>56</sup> However, as time progressed and the sisters aged in body but possibly not in mind, one by one they began to leave their positions as teachers. Some moved on to more prosperous positions at other local parochial schools and others retired back to Ireland. By 1993, only three sisters remained on staff.

Over the years, St. Patrick's has gone through expansions and renovations, as well as reforms regarding curriculum and the introduction of diversity and other secular programs. In a news article from a local newspaper, *The Tribune*, the departure of the nuns is lamented. The article acknowledges the obvious failure of St. Patrick's to replace its nuns. Written in 2004, the article exposes the sad truth that only one nun remains at St. Patrick's school.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> A history of St. Patrick's Elementary School compiled by founding sisters.

<sup>57</sup> "Founding Nuns Leave St. Patrick's Elementary - Sisters Will Return to Native Ireland After More Than Four Decades At South County's First Catholic School," *The Tribune*, 12 July 2004.

It seems more than plausible that the decrease in the nun population at St. Patrick's is directly related to the national trend occurring since 1965. However, the reasons for this phenomenon are best related by the honest opinion of the retired and possibly most revered Sister of Mercy at St. Patrick's, Sr. Mary Keavey. Sr. Mary now lives in Ennis, Ireland where she continues to support her past students by providing them with valuable information regarding the history of St. Patrick's and her opinion regarding the Catholic Church. The following excerpt is Sr. Mary's response to a question posed in the summer of 2009 asking for her opinion on why there are fewer Sisters in the Catholic Church today:

In the early 1960s Vatican II opened the door, and rightly so, to more lay involvement in the Catholic Church. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the majority of Catholics went to Mass and received the sacraments, but many had only a very basic knowledge of their faith. The Mass was in Latin, a language that most people did not understand. Celebrating the Liturgy in the language the congregation meant ordinary people could better understand what the Mass was about and so actively participate in it. The Liturgy was no longer a mystery intelligible only to those who understood Latin.

In agreement with the evidence provided in the first section of this paper, Sr. Mary Keavey begins by acknowledging the distance of the Church from its congregation in the years leading up to Vatican II. She describes the Church in a manner that parallels that of how one would describe a private club, a club in which only members of a specific understanding education would be admitted. In fact, the Church in many ways was a private club defined by its own clerical hierarchy and it was not until there became more lay involvement that the walls of isolation began to fall.

Sr. Mary Keavey continues by explaining how the new emphasis placed in participation in the Liturgy, Catholics, both from the laity and the religious orders, could now study alongside one another. She writes that as a result, “...many members of both laity and Religious availed of the chance to be better informed in the more up-to-date understanding of their Catholic religion and, on successfully completing their studies, were offered jobs in their fields.” Also, Sr. Mary Keavey states that because of the enthusiasm of lay involvement grew to such a degree during this time, “...specific roles for the laity became part of the parish setup.”<sup>58</sup>

The issue of specific roles for the laity is an important aspect of the disintegration of Church hierarchy and perhaps the decline in religious order populations. So much more power was now in the hands of the laity even though the Church tried to continue to regulate their function by delegating specific roles. Unfortunately, upon opening such a tap of power and freedom the possibility of being able to turn it off becomes an impossibility. This idea is supported by Sr. Mary Keavey in her following analysis of what exactly caused the decline in vocations.

She admits that pinpointing one piece of evidence is impossible, however, she does provide insight into such explanations. She notes that “those educated in theology may have hesitated to make a lifetime commitment to the priesthood or religious life...” precisely because they could find such opportunity outside of the confines of the Church. She continues to theorize that families no longer felt the need to encourage their children to enter religious life because more and more choices for what seemed to be greater happiness were become available. Whereas it used to be a point of pride to have a son or daughter in the Church, now such ideas seemed to be out-dated and out of touch with society. Men and women no longer needed to

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<sup>58</sup> Sr. Mary Keavey, e-mail message to the author, September 11, 2009.

make lifelong commitments to the Church because volunteering their time for certain lay roles were valued to a similar degree. The value that people once found as a result of their involvement in the Church could now be found in the broader confines of society; consequently, diminishing the necessity and impact of local parishes within communities throughout America and the world at large.

Sr. Mary Keavey, being a nun herself, understands the sacrifice that accompanies devoting oneself to the Religious Orders. However, having made the sacrifice, I contend, changes one's perception when viewing the lay and their decision making process. For example, Sr. Mary Keavey continues with her evaluation by citing the opinion that "The way of life portrayed on television offered people more opportunities to find fulfillment in life as a lay person." I would argue that this fact is somewhat irrelevant to the overall argument. As seen previously in the section of this paper devoted to the televised priest, Auxiliary Bishop Sheen, television provided a vehicle for Catholic as well as lay agendas. Therefore, such technology played far less a role than Sr. Mary Keavey argues. The "opportunities" she mentions are a result of changing societal philosophies and would take effect regardless of how they are communicated. However, I am in full agree with Sr. Mary Keavey's opinion about how society's values were changing.

A change was not only occurring within the Church but also in the private lives of many Americans. In revisiting the theme of commitment, Sr. Mary Keavey makes the comment that "Married life and Religious life, both in earlier generations considered lifetime commitments, were now experiencing problems." The problems that she alludes to are those inherent to the breakdown of the family unit. She contends that families no longer made the time to practice their religious values and therefore, no longer passed those values on to younger generations.

Because of this breakdown, the younger generation no longer felt as connected to the Church as their parents generation. This lack of generational continuity and tradition changed the standards of what were expected of children. No longer would it be necessary for a son or daughter to join the Church since the tradition no longer existed. This uncertainty now found in family life translated directly into Religious life as well. According to Sr. Mary Keavey “large numbers left Religious life and some opted for marriage and/or continued their work as lay persons,” thus, departing from the once traditional lifestyles of the past. However, Sr. Mary Keavey concludes her analysis on an optimistic note. She writes that, “Those who remained in Religious life began to participate more in the everyday life of those to whom they ministered,” which, in turn, “led to close friendships between Religious Sisters and the people with who they worked, a positive outcome.” This was a positive outcome for some but not the Church itself. An integral part of its power left the hierarchy and found its way into the hands of the orbiting lay.

## VII. Conclusion: A Brief Reflection on Years Spent at St. Patrick’s as a Student

As author of this research project and one time student at St. Patrick’s I can attest to the quality of institution it once was and still is to this day. I entered St. Patrick’s when a handful of nuns still actively taught in the classrooms. However, even during my eight years of attendance I saw the departure of three nuns and an increase in the number of secular teachers. Even though the secularization of the school and the weakening of the hierarchy within the Church and therefore, the school had started years ago I believe I still witnessed much change. For example, there was a breakdown in the unique separation between boys and girls. The mandatory uniforms that at one time were gender specific suddenly took on a unisex look.

Even for the brief amount of time I experienced St. Patrick's I could feel a breakdown of the once solid traditional values and rigid hierarchy that offered a student so much more than a sanitized secular progressive education. As the nuns left the classrooms, so did the Catholic inspired respect, discipline, work ethic, and religious devotion they had brought with them from Ireland.

The Catholic Church of today is still one of the most influential and powerful institutions on earth. It is the religious home for more than sixty-five million people Americans. However, since the end of World War II, the Church has been forced to make the transition from a strict hierarchal organization to a more progressive religious institution with a view on political issues that befits the current day in order to retain their followers. Unfortunately, as the Church opened its doors wider to the public they gave up the privilege of being able to compel some of the brightest young women to serve within their halls. The decreasing nun population since 1960 is due to a variety of factors; specifically, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provided rewards in public life that the cloistered life no longer had a monopoly over.<sup>59</sup> To the dismay of many, the trend of young women refusing to consider the cloistered life will likely continue and the Catholic nun will fade slowly into the distant past forever remembered as one of the jewels in the crown of the Catholic Church.

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<sup>59</sup> Helen Ebaugh, Jon Lorrence, and Janet S. Chafetz. "The Growth and Decline of the Population of Catholic Nuns Cross-Nationally, 1960-1990: A Case of Secularization as Social Structural Change." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35, no. 2 (Jun., 1996), pp. 171-183.

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