Femininity, Society and the IHM Sisters

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Imagine Keanu Reeves dripping sweat from his bulging biceps in the hot Californian sun, while falling madly in love with the beautiful daughter of a vineyard owner. It was a typical Saturday night. I was settling down to watch the film *A Walk In the Clouds* with my family, and no less than five Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. As I curled up on the floor, I remember thinking 'Are they allowed to watch this film? Where am I going to look when the love scene starts? Are they going to disapprove of two Catholic schoolgirls watching this movie?' It was such an awkward revelation, realizing that these women, who devoted their lives to God, watched dramatic romantic films as any other woman might on a Saturday night. This project explores how relevant the reaction of a teenage girl is to American societal views of these Sisters' femininity.

Was my sixteen-year-old reaction just naiveté, or was it a socially valid perception of religious women? Americans hold the image of the Sister as a socially ignorant, sexually frustrated female detached from the realities of everyday life. (Janosik 1997: 75) As women who have taken vows of poverty chastity and obedience, society must create an image of Sisters' femininity which is independent of the traditional suburban housewife. This project tries to identify the societal image of IHM Sisters in relation to femininity.

To examine their femininity, there are three topics to touch on: the aspect of childlessness, the debate over female priesthood and the stigma of the attractive Sister. These aspects bleed into the social views of religious women. First and foremost, because of the seclusion of religious life, society does not have much exposure to individual religious women. Most interaction comes from the media in films like *The Sound of Music* and *Sister Act*, or the comedic images of 'Pregnant Nun' fancy dress costumes. The first two sections of this project reflect on the themes of the feminine and societal impressions of Sisters through literature and film. Two case studies, Sister Frances Dominica and Sister Angela Thérèse, are referenced as examples from a book of interviews with religious women. Within these two themes, I provide my own fieldwork, to refute some misconceptions of Sisterhood, and end with a look inside the Sisterhood, giving comments from Sister Joan,

Sister Mary and Sister Anne illuminating a few of the decisions and aspects of choosing a religious vocation.

Femininity

The childfree

One traditional expression of femininity centers on the role of having children, getting married and raising a family. Women who have chosen a religious vocation take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, limiting their ability to conform to this standard. This project originally stemmed from the assumption that as teachers, these Sisters must have identified with their pupils as their own children. After interviewing three Sisters and perusing a few case studies, this assumption is embarrassingly incorrect. This mistaken conjecture that women naturally gravitate towards children as part of a 'motherly instinct' implies a failing in their lives for not having children of their own.

The premise of the 'childfree' woman, versus the 'childless' woman, highlights the ideology behind the choice against having children. Often the childless woman is seen as pitiable for her inability to give birth. (Gillespie 2003: 123) As a contrast to this connotation, the description 'childfree' focuses on the woman's choice of life without motherhood. (Gillespie 2003: 123) Discussion of this choice, however, cites 'spinsters, widows, nuns and nannies' as groups which are 'socially sanctioned,' or made up of those who 'prefer,' to be childfree. (Gillespie 2003: 133) This allocation does not seem justified.

Sister Mary and Sister Joan commented that had they not entered the convent, they would be married with children living somewhere in Northeast Philadelphia. For them, the pull of a religious vocation was they path they chose in life. The idea of religious women as an example of 'childfree' women implies that Sisterhood is a means to the end of evading childbirth. These two Sisters chose a religious lifestyle in itself, with the inability to bear children as one of the byproducts of that choice.

In one case study, Sister Frances Dominica was able to adopt and raise a child of her own named Kojo. (Loudon 1992: 127-129) She was visiting Ghana to speak at a spiritual healing conference, and during her stay went to a local hospital. Kojo was an abandoned child lying in his bed, and when Sister Frances picked him up, 'he gurgled at me, grinned at me and he was just super, my heart went out to him.' (Loudon 1992: 129) Kojo fell very ill a few days later, and Sister Frances spontaneously asked if she would be allowed to adopt

him. (Loudon 1992: 130) After getting permission from her superiors, she was allowed to bring Kojo to live with her in Oxford. (Loudon 1992: 130)

Now, this case is a rare one. The relevance of this story is the sister's supposed 'maternal instincts' coming into play. This resonance shows that Sisters, while childfree, are not robots who have chosen to renounce mothering. Sister Frances was able to resonate with love for Kojo, regardless of her choice to remain chaste. By no means does this imply that every nun biologically wants to adopt an ailing abandoned child. Sister Frances' personality and position in the Church, not her female 'mothering' instinct, dictated her adoption of Kojo. The resonation to keep hold of here is that even though sisters choose a religious vocation over motherhood, it does not mean they are child-*rejecting* women. It also shows that Sisters are individual women with varying personalities who have chosen the same path in life, as opposed to a blur of crosses and prayers and habits.

The female priest

A significant amount of literature and theory about the feminine in religious sisters revolves around the feminist complaints of women being excluded from the priesthood.[1] There are three general arguments to keep a woman from being ordained in the Catholic Church. The first argues 'from tradition,' ordaining a woman is contrary to the tradition of the Church. (Norris 1984: 39) A second argument says the necessity of maleness for the priesthood is derived from the gender of Christ. Because the priest is the 'icon' representing Christ at the altar, a woman would not be able to fulfill the role due to her anatomy. (Furlong 1984: 6) A third argues that men would not be able to contain their sexual feelings upon seeing a woman leading Mass, an argument which reflects the temptation of Eve, the original source of female sexuality in the Bible. (Furlong 1984: 2)

These arguments have held sufficient for a long time in keeping women as Sisters, nuns or simply religious leaders in the Catholic Church, who are never allowed to achieve ordination. The privileges for priests, such as larger stipends and freedom to leave the community for extended periods of time, are much more extensive than those allowed for

[1] When I searched 'nuns and feminity' in the library, and looked through the sections on religious women, the majority of the titles either involved the women priest debate, or historical accounts of sisters in the Middle Ages. There is not much literature examining religious women in the post Vatican II time period in the 1960s.

Sisters. There is sexism in the Catholic Church, but portraying the role of femininity for Sisters as damsels-in-distress is limiting and unfair to the women themselves.

Sister Frances comments, 'I do not feel called to ordination myself, but I do feel that it is *grossly* unjust that there is not the opportunity for those women who do feel called to ordination to be ordained as priests. I mean, I *cannot* find any valid argument against it...' (Loudon 1992: 134) Another account however, from Sister Angela Thérèse, claims 'The priesthood? No! Absolutely not.' (Loudon 1992: 38) She provides an example of a woman who presided over a mass creating a 'butch image almost, with a dog collar on and everything. It just has a strange effect on me. Ugh. No thanks.' (Loudon 1992: 39)

These two conflicting opinions illustrate an important stipulation of the female priest dilemma. Not every sister wants to be a priest. Not every sister feels the need to have the priesthood opened to women. Sister Frances mentions the inequalities between religious men and women she's observed over the years, (Loudon 1992: 134) and certainly Sister Joan has provided anecdotes of priestly privileges, delivered in heavily disapproving overtones on her part, over the years. There is an inequality to be addressed. This push is difficult to initiate however, because, as far as the Catholic Church goes, women who live in the Community would face serious consequences if they voiced an individual or collective opinion against sexism in the Church.

<u>The 'waste' of a pretty woman</u>

One final connection with femininity is the stigma of an attractive nun or priest is a 'waste.' (Dolan 2007: 514) Sister Mary illustrated this mentality in a scene from a movie. *The Mighty Macs* is a film, set in the 1970s, about the Immaculata College basketball team winning a national championship in order to raise funds to save their school. The scene she referred to is a conversation which takes place between the married basketball coach and a Sister. The attractive Sister Sunday reveals she had a great apartment, a nice car, and virtually wanted for nothing before she became a Sister. She says despite having 'everything,' she wasn't happy; so she listened to her inner voice, and decided to enter the convent. The coach's opinion illustrates the connotation that becoming a nun is a kind of last resort, or meant for people without the qualities of beauty or financial success which are necessary to prosper in secular society. The sister's reply advocates the allure of

religious life, which Sister Mary mentioned is not an ideal life path in the financially driven, material world of today.

Society

In fictional writings during seventeenth and eighteenth century England, nuns were portrayed as satirical examples of women going against natural impulses, like sexual intercourse and raising children. (Dolan 2007) Limited exposure to real religious women facilitated fantasies about nuns, and those fantasies fed back into perceptions of real nuns. (Dolan 2007: 512) Limited exposure proves to be a contemporary cause of the connotations surrounding nuns today. Because of their seclusion and involvement in the Community, ignorance surrounding the Sisters shows itself in social constructions of religious life.

Film and The Earth Mother

Images of religious women in the modern day stem in a large part from Hollywood. Religious women are depicted by the media as a cultural afterthought, creating gimmicky characters, like Debbie Reynolds as *The Singing Nun* or Sally Field as *The Flying Nun*, allow audiences to relate to the characters, for not many could relate to the non-fantasized life of a Sister. (Janosik 1997: 76) One common role which is seen in films is that of The Earth Mother. (Janosik 1997) The Earth Mother is the role which influences public opinions of religious women most, as seen by the Mother Superior in *The Sound of Music*, and Maggie Smith's Mother Superior in *Sister Act I and II*. (Janosik 1997: 83) *The Mighty Macs* also has an Earth Mother character called Mother St. John.

This Earth Mother type is a strong intelligent woman with clearly defined priorities and a sense of wisdom and morality. (Janosik 1997: 81) These women balance 'strictness and caring, distance and understanding.' (Janosik 1997: 83) The Sisters I encountered did not necessarily fill this role. Once, my principal, a Sister, wrenched my mother by the arm from the front lawn of my school, almost making her drop my infant sister. Her personality is reminiscent of the 'mean' Catholic nuns who taught my parent's generation in Catholic grade school. These Sisters would hit children's knuckles with rulers when they were misbehaving. In one episode of *Frasier*, Martin Crane says in reference to one Sister who nursed him, 'Hey, you know that nightmare where I wake up screaming 'Not the sponge not the sponge!' That's her.' Conversely, Sister Joan has been like an aunt to me over the years,

as well as the group of IHM Sisters who watch Keanu Reeves films at my home. As a vague whole, the image of religious women is that of a disciplined yet nurturing Earth Mother, or in other cases a disciplinary 'nightmare.' Each type of Sister does exist, but it depends on the personality of the individual, not her choice of vocation, which makes her that woman.

The humor of Sisterhood

Nuns represent the extreme restraints expected of all women, chastity, confinement and obligation, and expound on those expectations by actively seeking out a life of rigorous religious devotion, or 'constraint.' (Dolan 2007: 514) Dolan (2007) argues that the lifestyle of nuns is subject to ridicule in order to create distance between their lifestyle and the formula of housewifery. Essentially, nuns are made into punch lines in order to deter women from running away from marriage and babies. The ideology behind the 'pregnant nun' or images of religious women at a bar echoes this idea. Because of the 'restraint' of religious life, the irony of seeing a woman who's allowed herself to give in to less-than-pure practices reaffirms the belief that nuns are 'sexually frustrated and detached from social life.' (Janosik 1997: 75)

With the image of Sisters at a bar in mind, I offer this anecdote. Around the time they first met, in 2004, my mother decided to take Sister Joan out to lunch. Sister Joan suggested Houlihan's, a restaurant and bar lounge. Sister Joan was running late, and showed up fifteen minutes late in her full habit. Mum didn't know what to order her to drink, or even to order her anything, because, well, 'she's a nun.' Sister Joan bellied up to the bar, and when the bartender came over, said in her raspy voice, 'I'll have a Manhattan straight up with a Sidecar.'

An inside look: The Sisterhood Experience

To describe religious life, Sister Joan provided the common phrase, 'modern nights and medieval mornings.' Typically, a Sister will have morning prayers at six am, mass at half six, breakfast at seven am, and then head off to do her ministry for the day. Then around 5pm, sisters return to the convent for evening prayers and dinner. She said that in the '60s, that schedule was strict and unforgiving. After the Vatican II reforms[2], if she has meetings or

[2] The Second Vatican Coucil, also known as Vatican II, was a Roman Catholic Church council reform meant to adapt the Church to modern times. It was begun on October 11, 1962, and ended on December 8, 1965.

dinners for her job as the convent's PR officer, there is much more leniency and understanding. When she and some of the other Sisters come to our home for a late night dinner party, they still must be home by eleven, or have a very good excuse for being late.

Before Vatican II, Sisters also had to wear long habits, with big white bibs, underskirts and long underwear. The reforms showed the Church's adaptation to the modern era. Nuns were allowed to wear regular clothes when leaving the convent and opt out of wearing their veils all day, every day. Instead of the long habits, they are now given navy blue and light blue professional suits. This physical change could cause the societal view of Sisters to mutate, although Sister Joan pointed out that even in normal clothes Sisters can be generally identified by conservative dress, post earrings, a cross necklace, little to no makeup, and sensible shoes.

Sister Mary made a connection between living with other women and marriage, because it involves compromise, patience and communication. She also believed she had more opportunities than her married friends. She's been to Peru and California as a teacher, not something a lot of women could boast when she joined the convent in 1968. Sister Joan mentioned that living in a house with fourteen other women sometimes requires 'the Grace of God.' She also compared the living arrangement to marriage, and touched on her travels to California as an opportunity she wouldn't have had in married life.

In terms of choosing the Sisterhood, Sister Joan was the oldest of five children, and the only girl in her family. She chose to be a Sister because she wanted to teach, and the IHMs are a teaching community. Sister Mary said that she was raised in a very religious house, and used to play Mass in the basement with her altar boy brothers, and similarly knew she wanted to teach children. Sister Anne had an older sister who joined the IHMs two years earlier than she did. Her mother begged her not to join the Sisterhood, offering to let her stay home for a year without working. Her mother paraded boys around the house in the hopes Sister Anne would take a fancy to one of them. Each of these three nuns were raised in row homes in Philadelphia, and back then the city was very religious. Religious here means Catholic.

Back then there was a sense of normality to entering a religious vocation; Sister Joan listed it as one of six possible careers for women in the 1960s, while now opportunities are limitless. Sister Mary pointed out that religious life is now seen as a 'radical' lifestyle, which

she made reference to in *The Mighty Macs*. In the 1960s, there was a sense of pride in religious vocation. Sister Anne's mother's reluctance to her entrance would have been due in part to 'losing; a second daughter to the convent. Before Vatican II, Sisters weren't allowed to visit home for six years at least after joining the novitiate. The Philly life back then influenced their choices to enter the convent, but the stigmas of modern material society have developed since then.

Conclusion

Sister Joan, Sister Mary and Sister Anne were all lovely women to talk to and gain insight from. While their backgrounds are similar, their personalities and experiences prove that there is not one standard form of 'Sister.' Because I've known Sisters for a long time through school or personal relationships, my view of them is more individual than societal, which is one reason I thoroughly examined literature to understand how someone more on the 'outside' saw the women I've known so well. As found out in the Femininity and Society literary sections of this project, Sisters are sexually frustrated, have never known the joy of child bearing, live in a system plagued by sexism, and are didn't have the physical or financial prowess in their youth to succeed 'in the world.' Filmography shows them as gentle, disciplinarian, Mother figures; other media produce humorous images of Sisters at bars; and Catholic school parents can regale their children with stories of their childhood terrors of teaching Sisters.

I've known individual women, who in their yount chose a largely accepted religious lifestyle. The case studies I've cited, and the interviews I conducted reflect the personality of the person. The common denominator is entering the Sisterhood, but the social construction of the sexually frustrated, praying women in veils crumbles, once you see that each Sister is an individual woman. While the nature of their vocation secludes the IHM Sisters in the Community, they are not, however, prisoners left to read Bibles and pray all day. Theirs is a way of life, not a lack of it. The feminine and societal constructions of Sisters should then focus on the individual, not a generic image of the 'Sister.'

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