

**American nuns started back in 1675 and I think that is worth remembering.**

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**MS:** This first community also caught up in tensions among the Jesuits, the Franciscans and the bishops who were involved in that part of the world, and had to really defend their way of life, the integrity of their rule, and their charism. Controversy and innovation among

**MS:** Is that Ursuline monastery the same one in Jackson Square now?

**MS:** Yes, it is.

**MS:** I walked by there a few years ago; what a fascinating history.

**MS:** I think if you look back at some of the early stories about a lot of communities, they're very similar. The sisters who came to this country had to be flexible. Among other things, many of them had to learn other languages. But the communities of the other speakers on this panel (n.b. Immaculate Heart of

Mar and Dominican Sisters) are truly American in their foundations. I think it is very interesting how many indigenous American foundations there were.

**MS:** One of the issues that is not widely known, even among Catholic lay people, is the various kinds of orders. Could you speak a bit about charism, about what sisters intend to do? Then we can speak about their engagement in the wider world.

**MS:** Most communities were founded to meet the needs of the times. I'm not sure that that is charism. I think a lot of communities were founded for fairly instrumental reasons rather than for charismatic reasons, and not everybody would agree with me. However, I think over time even some of the most instrumental communities have developed a charism. I don't tend to think of charism

Q : Could you give some examples of the works you mentioned, such as serving immigrants or teaching?

A : Sure. A lot of communities were founded to work with particular ethnic groups because the Catholic Church was incredibly diverse, unlike in Europe where most countries were ethnically monolithic. It was important for people ministering to them to speak their languages and to understand, respect and help them preserve their traditions.

There was always this tension. On the one hand, Lithuanians or Poles or Italians or whoever wanted to maintain the traditions that they brought with them, but on the other hand, they wanted to be Americanized. The sisters often helped them negotiate that tension even as they were negotiating it themselves.

I'm just polishing an article right now in which I conclude by saying that their first students were of the teaching sisters. They had to learn what it meant to live in a culturally diverse society where Catholics were a minority, and to change the way they had been doing things in Europe. Of course, the communities that were founded here were almost all diverse from the very outset.

Q : Would you say that there's a

them of the sacraments. The bishop could say, "We won't give you a chaplain unless you do what we want, or could refuse to receive the novices' vows."

I ran across a lot of cases like this, where the sisters struggled. But they had the ultimate weapon, especially in the early years: they could leave and go to another diocese, which a lot of communities did. Many newer foundations came about because sisters said, "If this bishop is not going to respect our integrity, we'll find somebody who does." There are lots of examples of this.

However, as they started to build big mother houses and big institutions, this became increasingly difficult to do because they had investments in a particular place. You can't move a massive piece of property.

**Q:** So how did Vatican II affect this relationship?

**A:** Before then, a lot of the tensions that marked the early years had been worked out. Frankly, the 1917-18 Code of Canon Law constrained the freedom of sisters. Active sisters were not officially recognized by the Vatican until 1900 with a papal bull called *Conditae a Christo*. Some warrants were issued which were incorporated into the 1917 code. But this meant that rules were much more rigid. There was more flexibility when the sisters were outside of official structures.

Also, what we think of as tradition really only goes back to 1917. There were 1,900 years of Church before it, and there was about a 100-year period between then and the Second Vatican Council.

Ironically, a renewal in sister formation began about 10 years before the Council. I think Mary Ann Hinsdale is going to talk a lot about this. In 1951 Pope Pius XII told sisters that they needed to update their professional credentials and even their habits. When the sister formation started in the 1950s, sisters were becoming more educated not only in their

professional engagements—teaching, nursing, whatever—but also in spirituality, psychology, sociology, and theology. When the Second Vatican Council came to the United States, sisters were already familiar with many of the new ideas that the rest of the Church was just beginning to hear about. They were prepared.

**Q:** One last question, and I guess it's a big one. Can you speak a bit about the particular public theology of women religious? Much of the past work that you mentioned was geared toward Church laity, and the nuns were teaching Catholic immigrants.

**A:** I just want to qualify one thing. Going back to Mother Seton and women in New Orleans, there have always been non-Catholic women.

