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# The identity of American Catholic women religious: A qualitative study of identity narratives in an American apostolic religious community

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THE IDENTITY OF AMERICAN CATHOLIC WOMEN RELIGIOUS: A

QUALITATIVE STUDY OF IDENTITY NARRATIVES IN AN AMERICAN

APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

by

Annunziata Marcoccia

A Dissertation
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Narratives in an American Apostolic Religious Community

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**Abstract**

The Catholic Church has a rich history of women choosing to devote their lives to God and the Church through religious vocations. The theological shifts at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) affected the spirituality and lifestyle for many women religious. These changes renewed the identity of women religious and their role within the modern world. Over the past few years in the United States of America, the Vatican has conducted two assessments involving American women religious. The purpose of this study was to explore the identity of American women religious and to explore the impact of the current events within the Church on their identity with emphasis on their sense of generativity. The Listening Guide (Gilligan, 1982) was used to analyse the narratives of 8 American women religious from an apostolic congregation. The findings suggest that these women continue to identify with the principles of Vatican II. Specifically, they view themselves as mature, faithful women who serve God and others through the charism and ministry of their chosen vocation. Although they are upset by the recent attitude and actions of the Vatican regarding the Apostolic Visitation and the assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, they are united in their faith that the current tensions in the Church are creative. As such, they are able to thrive in the face of adversity, evidenced by how they have modeled their values of collaboration and collective discernment in their response to the Vatican. They discussed the importance of group cohesion that fosters individual spirituality within the collective identity. They also emphasized the ability to thrive despite criticism from the Vatican by maintaining their social identity in their daily activities. Finally, they embraced the possibility of an imminent transformation within the Church.

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**Introduction**

Identity has been a topic of existential intrigue since the beginning of Western philosophy and continues to be studied through the humanities and social sciences. Identity is often conceptualized as an ongoing, life-long process of self-discovery, yet it contains aspects of the self that tend to be stable across time and situations (De Levita, 1965). Identity is studied and defined in multiple ways, including biological, psychological, developmental, and socio-cultural influences on the individual and the different groups to which individuals belong. The current study examined identity through the lens of the sociocultural approach, which is the belief that identity is formed within the rules and context of a given culture or society. This approach purports that the language and activities available to people shape identity more than intrapsychic factors do. Mead (1934) proposed that people form self-definitions according to feedback received from others, and that the perception of others informs how individuals present themselves in future interactions. Because people may have many relationships that define the self, identity is a reflection of that individual's cultural and social experience. Identity is reformed or shaped when new relationships are constructed and when different feedback is received and processed. If a person's social context was to remain stable, then it follows that how that person defines the self would also remain stable (Kroger, 2007).

Inspired by Mead, MacKinnon and Heise (2010) take the symbolic interactionist position that language and the meaning derived from interpersonal interactions are essential components of how individuals construct reality and communicate their subjective experiences. These authors theorize that social institutions, roles, and the self are interrelated and interdependently influence identity. Figure 1 (see Appendix C) is a diagram of their theory organized at the macro-sociological, micro-sociological, and

individual levels of identity (MacKinnon & Heise, p. 7). Horizontally, the three layers represent macro-level sociological processes, micro-level sociological process, and individual-level processes. The essential component of this framework is the understanding that the self at the individual level, the roles at the micro-sociological level, and the social institutions at the macro-level, separately contribute to identity but are interrelated and must be examined as a system.

Identity at the individual level is multifaceted and complex. It involves genetic and biological factors combined with environmental factors and experiences that influence self-concept. In the current study, the participants at the individual level were women in the United States of America who experienced a call by God to enter religious life. This call was core to their self-concept and part of their individual identity. Following this call led them to the role of women religious (micro-level), which in turn informed their identity at the individual level. Several theories of individual identity development will be discussed in the second chapter.

At the micro-level, the focus of this study was on the identity of American[1] women religious. Changes within the "self" are assumed to be the result of changes in social structure (Serpe, 1987). Thus, personal identity at the individual level is both informed and modified by interactions with others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) at the micro-level, and particularly through interactions within valued social groups (Tajfel, 1982). Henri Tajfel (1982) proposed that intergroup relations or social identity is borne from an individual's awareness of their membership within a specific group, a strong inclination that being a member of the group is meaningful, and an emotional investment in the other members of the group and in the group itself. These are the essential criteria that

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[1] Throughout this document, 'American' represents citizenship to the United States of America.

contribute to the existence of a group in a psychological sense (Tajfel, 1982). However, there is also an external criterion that, in combination with the internal, psychological criteria, strengthens group (or social) identity and formally initiates intergroup behavior. That is, in order to truly exist, a group must also be given an external designation that validates the group as a real entity (Tajfel, 1982).

In the context of MacKinnon and Heise's (2010) theoretical framework, the external criterion is the macro-level social institution, or, for the purpose of the present investigation, the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church formally designated women religious as a valued social group and established the structure and spirituality that is the fabric of religious life. The patriarchal hierarchy under which the Roman Catholic Church operates provides a unique perspective for social identity development of these women who have chosen to dedicate their lives to God through religious life. There have been many changes and challenges for women religious in recent decades, including the changes of the Second Vatican Council[2] and the challenges that have surfaced due to the current Apostolic Visitation and assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the United States of America (discussed in the first chapter). These events have created increased tension between the Magisterium's[3] construction of the lifestyle and identity of women religious and the lifestyle and identity that women religious have developed through their own sense of self and purpose.

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[2] The Second Vatican Council was a meeting of the pope and bishops to discuss issues regarding the Roman Catholic Church in relation to the modern world. It is also referred to as Vatican II.
[3] The Magisterium consists of the pope and bishops within the Roman Catholic Church who are the authorities on Church teachings.

The purpose of the current study was to focus on the individual-level and the micro-level group identity of American women religious[4] as it is defined within the macro-level social institution of the Roman Catholic Church. Women religious have been generally neglected as agents of history, particularly in feminist literature (Rogers, 1998). However, women religious have much to contribute to history, psychology, and feminist research due to their unique vocation and life experiences. This research explored the often overlooked life-stories of women religious to understand how they integrate the many influences and relationships that shape their identity. This research also examined how these women negotiated challenging situations when their sense of personal identity conflicted with the identity imposed on them by the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church.

To examine women religious at the micro-level, individual level narratives of women who identify themselves as women religious were analyzed. In order to discuss the group identity of women religious, it is necessary to introduce the external creation of the group, as well as discuss the individual identity development of the women who populate the group membership. Therefore, the introduction is organized into three comprehensive chapters. The first chapter reviews the history of religious life, outlines the changes of the Second Vatican Council, and provides information about the current Apostolic Visitation and assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. The purpose of this first chapter is to establish the macro-level creation of the micro-level group and to orient the reader to the sociocultural context through which women religious have developed their identities. The second chapter deals with the concept of personal

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[4]Women in religious life are commonly known as 'nuns' or 'sisters'. The umbrella term for women in religious life is women religious with 'nuns' referring to women religious in cloistered orders and 'sisters' referring to women religious in apostolic orders.

identity, particularly identity development in women. The intention of this second chapter is to review theories of identity that pertain to the individuals who populate the micro-level group of women religious, and to provide the methodology through which identity will be examined. The third chapter contains a brief review of psychological literature on women religious as a group. This chapter highlights the need for continued research in the area of female identity development, particularly within the population of women religious.

CHAPTER 1

**Religious Life Before the Second Vatican Council**

Religious life has existed in the Christian tradition since the time of the Early

Church. Although the lifestyle has evolved and the theology of religious life has

transformed, Christian religious life has endured for two millennia. Cada, Fitz, Foley,

Giardino, and Lichtenberg (1979) outline five main eras of religious life:  (a) widows,

virgins, and desert monasticism (200 – 500), (b) monasticism (500 – 1200), (c) the

mendicants and communities of women (1200 – 1500), (d) the apostolic congregations

(1500 – 1800), and (e) the teaching congregations (1800 – Present). The transformations

made in each era reflect the political, theological, and social factors of that time.

Throughout this history, a recurring observation is that women religious have been forced

to adapt to the needs of the environment. It is suggested that women religious in the

United States today face the end of the fifth era and must, once again, adapt to the needs

of society in order to survive (Cada et al., 1979).

Christian theology and spirituality in the first few hundred years encouraged an

ascetic life of solitude in the desert. The wilderness was the place where Jesus had

retreated to purify himself against the Devil. The hermit lifestyle was in reaction to a

dualistic theology of good and evil whereby good resided outside of this evil world (Cada

et al., 1979). According to McNamara (1996), the goal for early Christians was

syneisactism, or the striving of a spiritual life, which was achievable by both men and

women. However, the notion that syneisactism was a viable goal for women quickly

faded as men gained theological power of superiority.

During these initial centuries (200-500 AD), virginity was considered the purest

female form acceptable to God because they were able to transcend the temptations and

evils of the body to live a pure spiritual life. Married women could achieve similar status once they became widows. Groups of widows and virgins became then the first consecrated groups of women religious. Some groups were contemplative and prayerful, whereas others ministered to the poor and needy. From the beginning of female religious congregations, there were women living religious lives in ascetic[5] solitude, contemplative communities, and communal ministries. The consecrated lives of these women gave them an alternative to marriage and motherhood: the opportunity to dedicate their lives to God. As these cloisters became more prevalent in the early centuries, lifestyle 'rules' became established stemming from a letter written by Augustine in 423 AD, which outlined rules such as common prayer, the sharing of common goods, daily routines, veiled dress, and obedience to cloister leaders (McNamara, 1996).

During the second era of religious life (500-1200 AD), Christianity spread throughout Europe, and as a result, more women were consecrated into religious life. Europe was under constant threat during the early Middle Ages; men were recruited into war, while their wives and children stood victim to foreign conquerors. This political unrest affected religious life in two ways: first, monasteries were built with high walls to protect and contain women religious, and second, many women joined the religious life for safety and security. Life inside the monastery was one of prayer, reflection, and attending to the children whose families were casualties of war (McNamara, 1996).

Benedictine Rule implemented in this era influenced the three main vows in religious life that still exist today: poverty, chastity, and obedience. Benedictine Rule was an integral component of religious life for those who were officially consecrated in order to make life in the monasteries sustainable (Padberg, 1984). A major shift occurred in the

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[5] The pursuit of spiritual goals and denial of worldly amenities and conformities

tenth century when monastic life was centralized and governed by a main monastery in France. This main monastery was closely tied to the Pope, and thus monastic life became more institutionalized. Monasteries gained wealth through the direct affiliation with the Papal hierarchy and the wealth obtained by the Church (Padberg, 1984).

The next era of religious life, the mendicant era (1200 – 1500), was generated in reaction to the demands of society. With urbanization, poverty and illness became more apparent, thus religious life regained the apostolic nature of Jesus and the early Christians. For example, the Franciscan and Dominican orders were founded specifically to minister to the sick and poor. This apostolic form of religious life differed from tradition in that they consisted of several monasteries spread throughout Europe, among which women religious could move freely. Also unique to this form was abandoning wealth and material goods, which had accumulated in many monasteries, in favour of orders begging for alms and charity in order to survive. This lifestyle met with resistance from the hierarchy at first, but was soon accepted as a new form of religious life (Cada et al., 1979). Unfortunately, the corruption caused by wealth and power contained within religious life was at its peak toward the end of this era, leading to the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century led to the criticism of monastic life for its perceived superiority and provided impetus for the fourth apostolic era of 1500 to 1800. Protestant Reformers questioned the virtue of virginity because it excused women from laborious duties of wife and mother. Poverty was seen as morally inferior and a drain on society. In response, the Roman Catholic Church held the Council of Trent[6]

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[6] The Council of Trent was a meeting of the Magisterium to discuss relevant theological and practical issues of that time period, specifically in reaction to the Protestant Reformation.

(1545-1563), which initiated major changes for communities of women religious. Prior to this council, women religious were permitted to make partial vows and work within local communities; however, the Magisterium at Trent imposed a rule that any woman in religious life must make full vows. Furthermore, all religious communities were forced to wear concealing habits and live rigorously structured lives in convents rather than within local communities (Ranft, 1998).

## Women Religious in the United States of America

Catholic women religious began working in the United States of America in the 18th century (McGuinness, 2013). At that time, the country was predominantly Protestant and did not have many established Catholic women religious congregations. From 1815 to 1965, religious life for women expanded in North America, especially in apostolic orders who worked in teaching, nursing, and social services. With European colonization, there was much need for sisters to provide education and healthcare to the settlers, as well as to meet the specific needs of Catholic immigrants. For instance, sisters established parochial schools[7] in order to provide education in a variety of languages for new Americans (Carey, 1997). Although there were contemplative orders established during this time, most congregations were created or came from Europe to provide apostolic work according to the unique needs of the growing country (McGuinness).

By 1929, it had become apparent that women religious needed to have professional and theological competence in order to complete their ministry in the modern world (McGuinness, 2013). To this end, Pope Pius XII encouraged women's religious communities to undertake formal education in health and education. As a result, the Sister Formation Conference was created in the early 1950s in the United States of

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[7] A parochial school is operated by the local parish

America to ensure that women religious would get the necessary theological and secular education that was appropriate for their ministries. Some sisters even achieved Master's and doctoral degrees. This call to higher education brought a new stress for women religious because they often completed the education on weekends and in the evenings in addition to their daily work and prayer (Neal, 1990). It was also challenging for these women to be accepted and respected in theology programs because theology was traditionally reserved for seminarians and members of the clergy. The first school that offered a theology program for women was St. Mary's College in Indiana in 1944 (Smyth, 2007).

The emphasis on education in the Sister Formation Conference was embedded within a renewal initiative by Pope Pius XII who requested that Major Superiors revise their formation process[8] to ensure their congregations were best able to meet the demands of their ministries and remain committed to prayer life and devotion to God (Neal, 1990). From this, the USA national organization of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR; originally named the Conference of Major Superiors of Religious Congregations of Women. They changed the name in 1971 to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious) was formed to reassess the religious life of prayer and ministry in the context of growing advances in technology and individualism. One of the issues discussed was the need to update the clothing of women religious to better adjust into new professional roles in the modern world. Moreover, there was a need to develop an updated theology to meet the needs of the world. Vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience required renewal in order to fully minister to the poor and disadvantaged as it

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[8] The formation process of an order is the preparation period prior to final vows. This period often involves education in religious life and the specific order, as well as discernment of fit for the individual.

is proclaimed in the gospels. It became clear to women religious and to the Vatican[9] that a renewed theology and spiritual application of that theology was necessary so that these women could carry out their missions of service to their communities, seek appropriate education, earn a living to help financially maintain their congregations, keep up with modern social transformations, and yet remain prayerful and pious (Neal).

By the 1960s many questions and concerns were surfacing for women religious, particularly the distinction between rules and theology. The life of women religious was strictly guided by the rules and regulations of monastic[10] life. Religious life was highly regulated, and sisters were often restricted in their activities, such as how many letters they could write to family and friends, and what they could read or watch on television. Some sisters felt stifled by the regulations, whereas others took these rules in stride as part of their vocation and dedication to God (Chittister, 2005). Reform was required for many traditions that were no longer contributing to the spiritual life of women religious. The foundation of these traditions often became lost and meaningless other than being an outward sign of obedience. For example, some practices believed to be outdated were the tradition of confessing "faults" openly to other sisters (such as spilling a drink or breaking a dish), not having permission to eat inside the homes of laypeople, or not having permission to attend important family functions such as weddings or funerals. As more women religious were being educated, more women questioned the value of religious life and their role within the modern world (Ebaugh, 1977). Due to the success of the Sister Formation Conference, many sisters were already familiar with the works of

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[9] The Vatican refers to the Magisterium and its institutional governing structures located in Vatican City, Rome.
[10] Monasticism is a style of religious life wherein spiritual endeavors are emphasized over worldly pleasures.

modern theologians and moralists who participated in the Second Vatican Council and, therefore, were challenged but receptive to incorporating the renewed Vatican II spirit into their vocations (Neal, 1990).

## Second Vatican Council

In 1962, Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council, but died shortly thereafter. Vatican II continued under the leadership of Pope Paul VI. One of the main documents that was written during this council, "Lumen Gentium" (Light of the Nations, 1964; Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, 9-17), declared that everyone is equally called to live a holy life, though women religious have chosen to carry-out this call to holiness through the vocation of vowed religious life (Smyth, 2007). In 1965, the document "Perfectae Caritatis" (Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life, 1965; Paul VI, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1-6) established three overarching goals of religious life: to reconnect with the foundation of each particular order and to be in similar spirit as the orders' founders, to attend to the development of the individual members within the congregation, and to adjust to living within the conditions of the modern world (Chittister, 2005). These goals underscored the need to reflect on both collective and individual identity. Pope Paul VI also sent out a letter stating the manner in which all of the changes should take place. The plan was to give congregations time to experiment with any changes before officially incorporating the changes into official constitutions. A follow-up meeting for each order would be held a few years later to review the outcome of the experiments or extend any changes that still required evaluation (Ebaugh, 1977).

Although women were not permitted to participate in the Second Vatican Council and, therefore, had no input as to the recommendations written into the Perfectae Caritatis, many women religious eagerly participated in the renewal process at the

congregation level. For many, dialogue and discernment in a collegial format was preferred over hierarchal communication within the congregations, and there was an open acceptance of responsibility that each sister held in making decisions regarding religious life (Smyth, 2007). Many sisters had university degrees, not only in religious studies but from a variety of disciplines, which influenced the energy and focus these women applied to implementing these changes because they understood the biblical and societal importance (Ebaugh, 1977).

Of all the changes that occurred as a result of the Second Vatican Council, perhaps the most obvious is the clothing of women religious. The theological shift toward modernity and immersion into the secular world required discarding the habit[11] (Smyth, 2007); however, the change was met with resistance by some who enjoyed the immediate recognition and the sense of uniformity that the habit provided (Carey, 1997). Some orders attempted to modify their habits and went through multiple versions of their habit before ultimately deciding to wear lay clothing (Kuhns, 2003). Another noticeable change emerging from the new theology was for women religious to revert to their baptized name instead of the name they took for religious life (Smyth). The political and social climate of the 1960s influenced the type and speed of changes made to the constitutions of women in religious life. Issues such as independence and choice - two major aspects of the feminist movement growing at the time - were incorporated into constitutions for religious women (e.g., clothing and name options).

In 1966, the number of women religious in the United States reached its peak at 181,000 members within 500 congregations and orders (McGuinness, 2013). Reasons for this included (a) the baby boom generation who were now finishing high school and

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[11] A habit is the name given to the traditional clothing of women religious.

deciding their career paths, (b) the fact that women in the religious life were well educated and held positions in schools and hospitals that were not yet available in the secular world for women, and (c) because it was an alternative for women who did not want marriage or children. Because there was an increasing demand for sisters to staff schools and hospitals (registration in Catholic schools increased throughout the 1950s), it was not customary for congregations to turn down interested women. Psychological screening or an evaluation of fit between new candidates and religious life was not routine. Furthermore, the candidates were often adolescents directly out of high school or still in high school and their reasons for joining may not have been ideal, such as escaping an abusive home or free education. Of course, some women joined because they felt a call to religious life (Carey, 1997).

Despite the hope of some women religious that they would gain equality with clergy within the Church through Vatican II changes, the Vatican remained patriarchal. For example, regarding female ordination, Pope John Paul II declined discussion of the matter in 1979 (McGuinness, 2013) ending any hope of ordained Roman Catholic women in the near future. However, due to the revised theology that religious life was not necessarily more holy than family life and that all people baptized were called to the same holiness, many women wished not to participate in the hierarchy of the Church (Smyth, 2007). Instead of becoming ordained clergy, women continued to pursue theology at the master's and doctoral levels. By 1980, 94% of American sisters held bachelor degrees, 43% had one or more master's degrees, and 2% achieved doctoral degrees (Wittberg, 1989a). Liberation theology[12] and feminist theology[13] exerted

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[12] Liberation Theology is a religious movement that began in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. Some key tenants in this tradition are that theology and poverty are interconnected and that issues of poverty must

influence on North American women religious, and women, both religious and secular, were becoming more prominent in theological teaching positions and in pastoral care, such as hospital or prison chaplains, and directors of spiritual retreats. The emphasis on theology education for women religious has reportedly been an influential experience for many sisters. For example, some women religious have noted the profound deepening of their spirituality due to the new theological understanding, and others reflect that the theology training helped them develop an integrated sense of identity as women religious. Furthermore, congregations discovered that their founding leaders often lived in small communities within the city or village to which they were ministering. This discovery encouraged them to reconnect with their order's roots and to immerse themselves within the world at large by moving away from the motherhouse and into society. There was also emphasis on re-establishing healthy relations between all Christians instead of the pre-councilor view of them as heretical (Smyth).

As previously mentioned, the number of present day women religious in the United States of America has drastically dropped to approximately 68 000 (Fox, July 6, 2010). The Second Vatican Council appears to mark the beginning of this decline in numbers for several reasons. Many sisters who entered religious life before Vatican II did not agree with or want the changes and subsequently left the religious life (Carey, 1997). Others left because of advances in women's rights; opportunities and choices that women had in society were more expansive in the 1970s than they were in the 1950s. Entering religious life was no longer the only way to receive an education or to serve God, as

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be adequately addressed. The perspective of those in poverty is emphasized. It incorporates political, economic, and social contributions to injustice (Gordon, 1996).

[13] Feminist theology, as developed since the 1960s in the West, "has focused on the cultural and religious dimensions, such as women's religious experience, inclusive language and symbolism, and postmodern debates on sexuality and difference" (Pui-lan, 2007, p. 141).

Vatican II celebrated married and single life, placing emphasis on the ability of the laity to serve God (Schneiders, August 7, 2009). Furthermore, institutional restrictions that once governed sisters' interactions, such as what they read and what they watched on television, were no longer employed in the post Vatican II era. Instead, these women were educated and had access to all information, which initiated their exit from religious life (Ebaugh, 1977).

Today, despite the decreased numbers and a great decline of resources and finances, congregations of women religious continue to plan for the future, maintain inclusive boundaries, and remain in solidarity with the poor and needy. It could be argued that these women are in denial of the disappearance of their lifestyle, but many appear to be realistic about the future of their order while maintaining strong spiritual devotion to their ministry. When women religious do speak out in exasperation, it is often regarding struggles of faith, prayer, theology, or spirituality (Schneiders, 2000). There have been several examples within the past few decades of differing opinions of religious life renewal and the application of religious vocations in the modern world. Specifically, there have been two controversial Vatican initiatives in recent years that will be explained in detail in the sections below.

### Current Events: The Apostolic Visitation

In December 2008, the Magisterium announced plans to initiate an Apostolic Visitation, which was an investigation of the quality of life and activities of women religious in the United States of America. In February 2009, the Vatican sent a letter to all Superiors General[14] in the United States, explaining that there would be three stages to the Apostolic Visitation. The first stage would consist of an opportunity for Superiors

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[14] Superior General is the leader of a religious order

General of American religious orders[15] to dialogue directly with a representative from the Vatican. In the second stage, a survey was to be completed by all American Major Superiors[16]. In the third stage, visitations would be conducted for selected congregations, followed by the submission of a confidential report to the Vatican at the conclusion of the investigation. Women religious who currently belong to cloistered, contemplative congregations[17] were not included in the investigation. Instead, only apostolic orders[18] were visited. The website from which this information was obtained, www.apostolicvisitation.org, was created by the Vatican for public access.

In response to the announcement of the Apostolic Visitation, letters were written by the Congregation of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR), founded in 1992 (www.cmswr.org), and by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), founded in 1956 (as mentioned in the previous section). Both of these groups are national organizations that contain leaders of congregations from a variety of religious orders in the United States of America. Membership in either of these organizations is voluntary. The letter written by the CMSWR was in full support of the Apostolic Visitation, calling it significant work. The letter written by the LCWR expressed surprise and confusion regarding the purpose and implications of the Apostolic Visitation, and requested further information regarding its purpose and procedure (www.apostolicvisitation.org).

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[15] Religious orders in this context are organizations affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church who follow a specific mandate depending upon the purpose of their foundation. For example, some orders focus on prayer, some focus on education, etc. They are sometimes referred to as congregations. Both religious orders and religious congregations fall under the category of Religious Institutes.

[16] A Major Superior is the leader of an order in a particular region

[17] Cloistered women religious live communal lives of prayer in a convent and do not work within their local community. Contemplative refers to a life devoted to prayer.

[18] Orders in which the main mandate is one of ministry, such as education or healthcare

The first phase of the Apostolic Visitation continued until approximately summer of 2009. The Superiors General were encouraged to dialogue with a Vatican representative and were also asked to nominate people to join the visitation team. The nominees were preferably sisters within their order, but any religious person was acceptable. The nominations would then be reviewed by the Vatican representative and the chosen team would join her during the visitation process of stage three. In order to be on the visitation team, they would be required to make a public profession of faith and an oath of obedience to the local Bishops (www.apostolicvisitation.org).

The beginning of the second phase was marked by a questionnaire sent to all of the Major Superiors in September, 2009, with a request that the questionnaire be filled out and returned by November, 2009. The questionnaire contained three parts. Parts A and B were sent to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) which has been conducting research in the Catholic Church for approximately 45 years. Part C of the questionnaire would be sent directly to a Vatican representative. Strict confidentiality was ensured and complete anonymity was promised for Part A, which consisted of survey questions regarding the women religious in each specific unit (referring to the congregation, province, monastery, etc.). The information requested included information such as the number of sisters within the unit, which stage they were in (e.g., postulants, novices, temporary and perpetual vows), what year the sisters entered or left the unit, where the sisters reside, the ministry of each sister, and any memberships to national or international organizations (e.g., LCWR, CMSWR, etc.). Part B of the survey contained many detailed questions divided into six categories: identity of the religious institute, governance of the religious institute, vocation promotion, admission, and formation policies (the process through which women discern whether or not religious life is right

for them), spiritual life and common life, mission and ministry, and financial administration. Part C of the survey requested some personal information along with the constitution of the unit and the formation plan for women who enter the order (www.apostolicvisitation.org).

The third phase of the Apostolic Visitation began in February, 2010. Twenty-five percent of the congregations that participated in the survey were selected for visitation. The Vatican representative stated that the selected congregations were chosen based on size, growth patterns, location, and primary apostolic work. It was pointed out that both diocesan (congregations who answer to the local Bishop) and pontifical right (congregations who answer directly to the Pope) congregations were included in the visitation (www.apostolicvisitation.org). Throughout the course of 2010, the visitations took place across the United States.

According to an interview with Sr. Mary Hughes, past president of the LCWR, the visitors were warmly welcomed in her community and it gave the sisters the opportunity to present their work and their lives to the visiting team (Wittenauer, National Catholic Reporter, February 18, 2011). However, there was a strong reaction of shock and anger when the announcement of the Visitation was first made, both within religious communities and among the American public who lauded the work of women religious. Many people, both religious and lay[19], appeared to question the intent of the investigation because the sisters were not consulted regarding the visitation process, nor were the sisters permitted to review the results of the investigation prior to the report being sent to Rome. Suspicion regarding the Vatican's motives arose and issues such as

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[19] The laity are members of a religious group who are not consecrated members (i.e., not clergy or men/women religious)

finances, property, power, and male dominance surfaced as possible explanations for the investigation (Cito, September 11, 2009; Schneiders, August 17, 2009). Furthermore, many sisters were angered by the amount of money and time needed for an unnecessary investigation and wondered why women religious found out about the visitation through secular media. Due to the confusion and anger, some communities chose to only partially complete the questionnaire or to not complete it at all (Fox, July 6, 2010). One sister said that her initial anger reaction was mostly due to the fact that visitors were required to take an oath of fidelity and make a profession of faith, and because no one was permitted to review the final report before it was submitted to Rome. However, she explained that her anger subsided and that her experience of the visitors was one of mutual respect and joy (Cunningham, January 14, 2011). Similarly, Sr. Marlene Weisenbeck, past President of the Leadership Council of Women Religious, stated that many sisters reported to her that the Visitation was a positive experience through which they found their "voices" by explaining to the visitors who they are and the good works they perform. Despite the reaction of sisters shifting from anger to hope, Sr. Weisenbeck stated that the investigation itself has always carried with it a threatening quality (Fox, August 30, 2010).

Sr. Sandra Schneiders, a prominent theologian and author of many published works on feminism and spirituality, also remarked upon the ability of women religious to use the Apostolic Visitation as an opportunity for growth and communication. She warned, however, against forgetting that the Apostolic Visitation was more like an inquisition because it was an "unwarranted surprise attack" and both "astonishing and unprofessional" (Schneiders, September 17, 2010). She reminds fellow sisters that it is not the Apostolic Visitation that has produced the positive outcome; rather, it is the

attitude and reaction of the women religious who have approached the process with openness and a willingness to turn the Apostolic Visitation into a positive experience. At the National Assembly meeting of the LCWR (2010), it was declared that the ability of many women religious to unite and participate in the Apostolic Visitation with respect and dignity provided an excellent model of how to cope with difficulties or discrepancies with the Church (www.lcwr.org).

**Current Events: The Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious**

As previously mentioned, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) is an association of women religious leaders within the Catholic Church. It was established in 1956 at the request of the Vatican. The original name of the organization was the Conference of Major Superiors of Religious Congregations of Women but changed to the LCWR in 1971. The organization consists of 1500 women religious who represent approximately 80% of women religious in the USA. The purpose of this group is to encourage systematic change in issues of social justice and oppression. The activities of the LCWR consist of daily work with people of all cultures, religions, classes, and sexual orientations, with whom many sisters stand in solidarity (www.lcwr.org). In 1992, a second national conference of women religious, the Congregation of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR), was formed due to concerns that the activities of the LCWR were becoming overly political and less obedient to the Vatican (Bethell, June 4, 2012).

In March 2009, a few months after the announcement of the Apostolic Visitation, the Vatican announced plans to conduct a doctrinal assessment of the LCWR. The purpose of this assessment was (a) to meet with the LCWR and ensure their activities and initiatives were appropriate (i.e., staying within the boundaries of moral teachings

promoted by the Magisterium), and (b) to assist the LCWR in any way. Specifically, the Vatican's main concerns were in regard to the speakers invited to lecture at general assemblies, reading materials sanctioned by the LCWR that discussed issues of homosexuality and female ordination, "radical feminism" that criticized the hierarchical structure of religious life, and a lack of attention to issues regarding the sanctity of life ("Vatican names archbishop Sartain to lead renewal of LCWR," April 18, 2012). In response to the announcement of the doctrinal assessment, the LCWR produced a public statement expressing a willingness to cooperate in the investigation but also disappointment in learning that it was an American bishop who reportedly requested the assessment ("LCWR officers statement on doctrinal assessment of LCWR," April 23, 2009).

The results of the assessment indicated that there are several doctrinal problems within the LCWR general assemblies, addresses, and occasional papers issued by the LCWR. The response of the Vatican to these doctrinal issues was to appoint a team of bishops to oversee the following aspects of the LCWR operations for up to five years: to revise LCWR statutes, to review and approve LCWR publications and guest speakers at general assemblies, to create revised formation programs for leaders, and to review organizations associated with the LCWR. ("Vatican names archbishop Sartain to lead renewal of LCWR," April 18, 2012).

In response to the published findings of the LCWR assessment, the LCWR leaders encouraged its members to pray and discern the appropriate response to the Vatican. Although many members expressed disappointment in the actions of the Vatican, the majority wanted to continue being a leadership group for women religious in the USA, and requested that the Vatican remain open to dialogue with the LCWR about

reconciling the disparaging views on issues of morality between the Catholic Church and in the global community. While respect and dialogue were important, they also acknowledged that their response would need reconsideration should the Vatican force them to compromise their values and mission (i.e., being a voice for the marginalized in society; "LCWR statement on meeting with archbishop Sartain," August 13, 2012). The delegated bishops and the LCWR leaders met in August, 2012 and again in November, 2012 to discuss the issues raised in the doctrinal assessment. The LCWR President stated that the bishops were "open" and "cordial" throughout the discussion ("Statement from archbishop J. Peter Sartain and Florence Deacon, OSF," November 12, 2012). Regarding the LCWR's response to the Apostolic Visitation, they declared that the ability of many women religious to unite and participate in the Apostolic Visitation with respect and dignity provided an excellent model of how to cope with difficulties or discrepancies with the Church.

## Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the history and current issues that challenge women religious in the United States of America. In order to properly understand the context of religious life, it is important to provide a brief overview of the history of women religious (micro-level) throughout Catholicism (macro-level). The history of women religious in the Catholic Church, along with the recent changes of Vatican II and the current Apostolic Visitation/LCWR assessment are particularly important to highlight because they shed light onto the relationship between the Catholic Church and women religious. The lifestyle of women religious in the United States of America has drastically changed in the past several decades and there are various opinions regarding how these changes should be applied to religious life. The theological,

spiritual, and political changes that women religious have endured likely influence the development of their identity because they have been forced to re-evaluate their roles as consecrated members of the religious life. One of the primary goals of this research project was to examine how sisters view the Apostolic Visitation and LCWR assessment, and how they negotiate personal and group conflicts with the Magisterium. Specifically, I examined in greater depth the internal conflict that exists between the sense of identity that women religious have developed and the external identity that is imposed or fostered by the Magisterium. The next chapter discusses identity development at the individual level with specific emphasis on identity development in women.

CHAPTER 2

**Identity Development**

The purpose of this chapter is to review the development of identity using several established psychological theories, specifically focusing on Erikson's (1968) identity theory, Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory, and Gilligan's (1982) identity development of women. These theories pose questions that pertain to the current study.

**The Psychosocial Theory of Identity Development: Erikson**

Erik Erikson was one of the first theorists to study identity across the lifespan. He outlined three components of identity, which represent the psychosocial approach to identity development: a) biological identity, which is comprised of physical features, the body, and genetics; b) personal, psychological characteristics, such as interest and defenses that make each person unique; and c) the culture or society that makes up one's environment in which the biological and psychological components are expressed. Erikson believed that an important challenge throughout adolescence and adulthood is to integrate all three components in a meaningful way, particularly for vocational choices (Kroger, 2007).

Erikson (1968) conceptualized identity formation as a lifelong process that contains several stages depending on age. In each stage, there is a specific conflict that must be resolved. The resolution tends to appear along a continuum that ranges from complete inability to resolve the conflict to healthy resolution. The resolution of the previous stage(s) will also influence the conflict and resolution of the following stage.

The last three of Erikson's eight stages occur in adulthood. Intimacy versus Isolation (19 to 40 years) concerns the ability to engage in authentic connections with others. If only surface relationships are achieved, a deep sense of isolation may ensue.

The next stage occurs in middle adulthood and is referred to as Generativity versus Stagnation (40 to 65 years). In this stage, individuals are compelled to take care of the next generation, ensuring they have left an indelible mark, either through children or through creative productivity. If this does not occur, the individual continues to solely satisfy the needs of self and will likely feel dissatisfaction. The final stage is Integrity versus Despair (65 years to death), which refers to the culmination of all previous stages, resulting in great wisdom. There is an internal sense of responsibility for and acceptance of one's life, and a deep love and appreciation for others. Furthermore, there is a sense that one's life had purpose and dignity. If integrity is not reached, then despair ensues due to the realization that life is coming to an end and the road to integrity has already passed (Erikson, 1968). Recent research indicates that the three adult developmental stages are not as discrete as originally theorized. Instead, people tend to experience conflict in these three domains at varying intervals throughout their adult lives (Melia Perschbacher, 1999).

**Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory was developed by Henri Tajfel in the 1970s to study group processes and intergroup relations (Hogg, 1995). The primary research agenda was to explain group membership and intergroup behaviour, particularly as it pertained to stereotyping, prejudice, and ethnocentricity. At the very base of any group are individual members who populate the group. There is a dynamic interaction between the group and the individual because each individual must have a sense of his or her identity which is both independent of and influenced by the group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Although people have individual identities, people also have a number of roles and group memberships that partially define the self. As mentioned in the introduction, group

membership and its salience to self-identity depends on categorizing oneself into the group, drawing meaning from membership to the group, and experiencing emotional connection to the group (Tajfel, 1982). The parameters around the group identity, such as attitudes and activities of the group, are partially determined by individual self-constructs within the group. In this regard, the attitudes and activities of the group (the ingroup) becomes normative and is judged in a positive manner given that it is based on self-concept; the attitudes and activities of other groups (the outgroups) is looked upon less favourably (Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004).

There may by multiple social identities that one person subscribes to throughout life (Amiot, Sablonniere, Terry, & Smith, 2007). Because the ingroup is so closely tied to self-identity, motivation is high to compare and maintain group differences. People are better able to self-categorize into a social group when there are clear distinctions between the ingroup and the outgroups. By understanding the parameters of the ingroup, they are better able to understand individual identity (Gundlach, Zivnuska, & Stoner, 2006). In this way, ingroup identity can become stagnant with norms and attitudes that reflect the values and culture of the individuals who populate the group. These attitudes and activities may be judged negatively by outgroups (Tajfel, 1982). It was found that when people are participating in their social group, they are more motivated to become competitive with outgroups compared to the competitiveness found on an individual level (Tajfel, 1982). Furthermore, perceived threat from outgroups tends to enhance the cohesion of the ingroup, provided that there is adequate social support within the ingroup and an ability to deal with the external threat (Stein, 1976).

**Personal and Social Identity of Women Religious**

Regarding the Eriksonian stage of identity development relevant to women religious, the primary focus of this study was on the identity conflict arising at the generativity versus stagnation stage. The main goal of this stage in adulthood is to pass on one's legacy to the younger generation, traditionally through family or work. Women religious in the 21st century are facing the seemingly inevitable fact that there are not many new recruits to their congregations. Their social identity (i.e., their specific congregation and/or their identity as women religious) and way of life is under imminent threat of folding. Furthermore, the reforms that many of them strongly support, such as the theology that they are in service to God along with and equal to the laity and that their place is immersed within the modern world, are arguably under attack by the very Church that promoted these changes in the first place. The danger of personal and social identity dissolution could be conceived as a threat to the generativity of their life's work and the spiritual path upon which their lives have been dedicated. If these women are indeed experiencing a conflict of generativity versus stagnation, it is critical to examine their perception of the conflict and how they are able to resolve it.

**Historical Perspective of Identity Development in Women**

A major criticism of identity research is that much of the research supporting identity theories was quantitative research conducted using male participants. It has been argued that women have been systematically ignored in much of early identity research (Hekman, 1995). Traditionally, women's development was considered to be the same as, or in some cases even inferior to, that of men in the traditional psychoanalytic theories (Josselson, 1987). However, feminist researchers purport that the psychology of women is more than merely examining how women differ from men, as this would imply that all women are alike. Josselson (1987) suggested that conscientious research should examine

the individual differences that exist among women, similar to what has been done in research with men. Furthermore, the study of women must go beyond the study of different roles that women fill. For example, two women who have completely different career and family paths may both have healthy identities. It is suggested that women's intuitive ability with emotional connection to others is often not valued compared to the value placed on dominance and logic, particularly in Western culture. The result is a silencing and under-appreciation of female identity (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

As mentioned, in the 1960s and 1970s, most of the research in psychology was conducted using predominantly male samples, which led to questions regarding whether conclusions can be applied to women. Belenky and colleagues (1986) went further to suggest that little is known about how women seek, interpret, understand, and share knowledge, which is central to understanding the development of women. How do they conceptualize truth and authority? In other words, what is the epistemological development of women? To answer these questions, they conducted interviews with college women from a variety of programs and found that the concept of "voice and silence" was a predominant theme for how these women described their sense of self, their sense of connection or isolation from others, and their intellectual and ethical development. The authors noted that a typical metaphor used for knowledge is a visual metaphor, such as "the mind's eye." This metaphor connotes that we see life as an objective observer, that we remove ourselves from the experience. Alternatively, a listening metaphor, which requires an interaction between the speaker and the listener, cannot be divorced from subjectivity. The concept of 'voice' had been previously discovered by other researchers as well and is extensively outlined by Gilligan (1982) in

her research of moral development in women. 'Voice' is a feminist construct used in narrative analysis to elucidate the subjectivity and perspective of marginalized people, including women (Krumer-Nevo, 2009).

A research application that elucidates the need to understand the relational quality of women's experiences occurred in the study of moral reasoning. Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) theorized that there are universal truths regarding right and wrong and that anyone who has advanced thought and education will arrive at the same truths. In order to have the capabilities of high levels of moral thinking, it is necessary to apply abstract, objective reasoning to moral dilemmas. This theory of moral development has been heavily criticized by Gilligan on the grounds that Kohlberg used almost exclusively male samples to inform his theory, therefore, the "truths" identified by male participants may not be representative of "truths" perceived by women. Furthermore, she criticizes the very notion of empirically discovering moral truths that can be universally applied to solve moral dilemmas. Gilligan studied narratives of adolescent girls and women, arguing that it is human nature to integrate identity, life experiences, and moral development into narrative life stories. She rejects the notion of universal moral reasoning based on objective truths that, according to Kohlberg, are discovered through a sense of self that is both mature and autonomous. Indeed, the sense of self and morality described by Kohlberg are based on a patriarchal, empirical, Western tradition that had excluded the voices and experiences of women for centuries. Gilligan called for a paradigm shift in which empirical research abandon the notion of objective observations of truth and instead pursue research that entails subjective relational listening to others. Gilligan's goal was to shift the scientific quest for observable facts toward an epistemology based on entering into relationship with the participants wherein the researcher is listening to

the voices of women who do not necessarily operate within the current theories of male identity development (Gilligan, 1982; Hekman, 1995).

In her research on moral development in adolescent girls and women, Gilligan (1982) discovered that it was uncommon for women to separate identity and moral reasoning. They often described their sense of self as embedded within relationships, and as such, described their morality as caring for others, taking responsibility for the needs of others, and maintaining connection with others. This is not a new discovery; for centuries women have been described as typically caring and relational in nature. In contrast to Kohlberg, Gilligan does not conceptualize the caring, relational nature (whether female or not) as inferior. Instead, she uses analogies of voice, dialogue, and music to conduct and interpret the research. She explains that the women in her studies defined morality in the same way as Kohlberg: based on universal principles that can be applied to seek justice and uphold the rights of the individual. However, many women also uphold the value of relationship and include a voice of caring and connection in their moral reasoning. When describing the dialogue between the objective justice morality and the subjective caring morality, she uses the musical metaphor of a double fugue, referring to the interplay of melodies within music. These distinct melodies are fully developed and adhere to musical rules of rhythm and harmony, yet they are contrapuntal in nature, meaning they are both independent and interdependent, both dissonant and complimentary (Hekman, 1995). Although a connection with others and the value placed on understanding context has been found among women more generally, there are no clear-cut gender delineations. For example, it was found that among men, those who incorporated relationships with others as an integral component to identity also endorsed

a morality based on responsibility and context rather than impartial judgment (Lyons, 1983).

A longitudinal study was conducted by Brown and Gilligan (1992) in which they entered into dialogue to listen to the narratives of adolescent girls starting from approximately 7 years old until approximately 18 years old. Throughout the span of their narratives, it was evident that relationships and maintaining connection with others was an important part of identity and healthy development. When the girls were first interviewed, they spoke of interactions with others in which they expressed their feelings, even if the feeling was anger and addressed an interpersonal conflict. However, when these same girls were entering adolescence, the researchers heard a new voice beginning to emerge. This voice was one of social expectations that the adolescent girls began to incorporate into their narratives. These expectations involved gender norms for middle-class, Western women, such as being selfless, kind, and meek. Although these girls noted conflicts in their relationships and had opinions that they would have likely expressed when they were younger, they now explained the duty to refrain from expressing themselves completely in order to fit into societal norms and maintain interpersonal connections. The authors describe this phenomenon as avoiding relationship in order to sustain relationships. In other words, instead of expressing the self within the relationship and attempting conflict resolution, these adolescent girls were remaining silent in order to maintain the relationship and avoid conflict. This is viewed as an unhealthy and dangerous psychological process because it leads to a sense of loss of self and perpetuates social norms of female subordination (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

An additional consideration for research on women's identities is to critique gender differences and avoid making sweeping generalizations. In a review of gender

identity research, Enns (1991) offered multiple perspectives and important criticisms of gender differences. Enns suggested that psychological research on women should not ignore individual differences or dichotomize men and women into stereotypes that promote the subordination of women (Lerner, 1988 as cited in Enns, 1991). Research on female morality and identity is intended to contribute to a fuller picture of human psychology, not to create separate, uncrossable boundaries of female and male psychology. Rather than developing gender polarities in identity and moral development, research must emphasize that different styles and themes may emerge simultaneously within the same person (Carlson, 1972; Doherty, 1973). Furthermore, one of the main criticisms of narrative research on female development is that the participants in these studies cannot represent all women, nor can the findings be compared to men because the samples are strictly female (Enns, 1991). In contrast to the previous thinking on moral reasoning and gender differences, there is evidence that, when variables of education, class, and work history are controlled, gender differences in moral reasoning disappear (Luria, 1986; Greeno & Maccoby, 1986). Also, further studies have found that male and female participants use both styles of moral reasoning (Donenberg & Hoffman, 1988; Ford & Lowery, 1986).

The conclusion that many researchers have drawn regarding female identity development largely point toward a fundamental priority placed on connection and relationships for women. This emphasis on relationship has implications for the current study because women religious, as is true for many people, are interpersonally engaged in a variety of relationships. The Apostolic Visitation and LCWR assessment appear to have created tension between the multiple relationships and connections women religious hold as valuable. For example, their desire to be connected to the people to whom they

minister may be limited given the rules and restrictions of the Magisterium, particularly on issues of morality such as right to life or sexual orientation issues. There may also be complications or shifts in identity regarding the connection these women feel to the Catholic Church to which they have dedicated their vocation. One could imagine difficulties arising if some women want to continue to nurture their identity as women religious, yet also feel the need to separate or individuate. Is it possible to satisfy individual identity needs and still feel connected to a vocation that places value in collective identity and sameness?

Gilligan's groundbreaking work on identity through her research in moral reasoning provided the basis for examining the identity of women religious in the present study, particularly because morality is such an integral component of identity in religious life. Considering the development of identity and morality among women that is often enriched with multiple voices expressing both separation/justice and connection/caring, it would be valuable to listen to the narratives of women religious for various reasons. These women stand in solidarity with people in need, even when those people make decisions that are contrary to Catholic moral teachings, such as women who have had abortions. Additionally, women religious have attempted dialogue with the hierarchy regarding female clergy, and they are actively involved in creating and maintaining healthy dialogue among other religious groups. Furthermore, these women have dedicated their lives to the service of God and others, a value that is strongly emphasized within Christian morality and was encouraged during Vatican II when the sisters were asked to immerse themselves into relationship with the modern world. However, they must carry out this service to others and their deep Christian relationship with the modern world while operating under the authority of a patriarchal hierarchy that appears to apply

universal moral truths to moral dilemmas in society, such as when Sr. Margaret Mary McBride was excommunicated by Bishop Thomas Olmsted for consenting to a life-saving abortion for a patient at a Catholic hospital **(**Clancy, May 18, 2010). Much of what we know about the identity of women religious comes from religious text, which often celebrates women as self-sacrificing and docile (Brock, 2010), seemingly perpetuating the silencing of women's voices within religious life. However, there may be differing opinions between the religious hierarchy and women religious themselves regarding their personal and collective identities. The question is then, how do women religious negotiate the tension between their internal voices of separation and connection, of justice and caring, of hierarchy and equality, of self and collective? How do they resolve conflicts between the needs of the people in their ministry and the demands of the Magisterium or their specific congregation? What is the identity of women religious who have chosen a life of service to others and God while pledging a vow of obedience? These questions are especially relevant given the decreasing number of current women religious, as it allows for a unique opportunity to listen to their narratives and explore the orchestration of their voices to hear their representation and resolution of these complex issues. To borrow Gilligan's musical analogy of double fugue and counterpoint, we have the opportunity to participate in a performance by a world-class symphony orchestra at Carnegie Hall, and it is only available for a limited time.

## Chapter Summary

The preceding chapter provided an overview of major approaches to identity research with more specific attention to identity research with women. The sociocultural influences on identity development, as described by MacKinnon and Heise (2010), is a model that conceptualizes identity as operating at the macro, micro, and individual levels

of society, with all three levels being interdependent. In the first chapter, the current political climate at the macro and micro levels between the Magisterium and women religious in the United States of America were discussed, as well as individual insights into how some sisters are reacting to the Apostolic Visitation and LCWR assessment. The three-level model of identity is helpful in understanding the complexities of identity development and the different levels at which identity development can be studied. The current project examined identity at the individual and micro-level, as well as some of the macro-level factors that affect identity at the other levels. This is in keeping with MacKinnon and Heise (2010) who state that identity at any level is affected by the individual, micro, and macro-levels of sociocultural influences.

At the individual level, Erikson is one of the first to theorize that identity development continues through adulthood. The stage of generativity versus stagnation may shed light on identity processes that occur for women religious as the majority of these women are in mid-to-late adulthood. At the micro-level, Tajfel's (1982) social identity theory purports that individual and social identities are interdependent and dynamic. Therefore, the dramatic decline in the number of new recruits leading to a possible decline in the social identity of women religious presents a real conflict in identity and generativity, particularly because passing on traditions to future generations is a primary goal at this identity development stage. Of particular interest is how women religious view and cope with the fact that their current social identity may not exist in the future or may not continue to carry out the original apostolic ministry in the future. In addition to dwindling numbers, it appears that the Magisterium is questioning the lifestyle of women religious in the United States of America by issuing the visitation and

assessment, which again, creates tension in terms of the social identity and generativity of the lifestyle and ministry to which these sisters have dedicated their lives.

This chapter also reviewed a paradigm shift from quantitative to qualitative research in investigating the identity and moral development of women. Gilligan's (1982) research on the moral development of women indicated that women tend to incorporate context and understand the viewpoint of others when settling conflicts, rather than applying universal rules to the situation. Further research was extended to investigate the development of identity in adolescent girls and it was found that connection with others and relationships were integral components of the self. This view of self was linked to the moral development that incorporates context into conflict resolution and values responsibility to others.

When conducting research using an all-female sample, special considerations regarding the psychology of women are at the forefront and sensitivity regarding the feminist issues that the sample have had to face both politically and privately must be paramount. In studies that investigated the epistemology of knowledge and identity in women, particularly in the work of Josselson (1987) and Belenky and colleagues (1986), it was found that central to identity for many women is relationship and connection with others. An approach to research suggests that it is important to listen to the voices of women within their narratives in order to hear information that may have been overlooked using methods and methodologies that aspire to objective truths (Gilligan, 1982). Emphasis is placed on the importance of being in relationship with the participants and entering into dialogue in order to gain a fuller picture of the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes that occur regarding female morality and identity development. It is imperative to conduct responsible research in the proposed study given the female

sample, and given their history of being silenced throughout Church history and arguably throughout the process of the current Apostolic Visitation and LCWR assessment. The goal was not to enter into the research as an expert who will test theories in order to extend objective truths, but rather to enter into relationship with these women and to begin a journey through their narratives and listen to how they integrate the many voices that are speaking, suggesting, shouting, and silenced.

CHAPTER 3

**Studies of Women Religious and the Current Study**

Few studies in psychology focus on women religious, particularly women religious in the United States of America. Of these studies on women religious, several have been analyses of the changes and consequences of Vatican II (e.g., Gonsalves, 1996). Several other studies have examined mental health issues of women religious (e.g., Brandthill et. al, 2001; Dura-Vila, Dein, Littlewood, & Leavey, 2010). Only a few studies have examined identity and identity development of women religious. This chapter will review the pertinent literature on women religious with focus on sisters in the United States of America. The purpose and research questions of the proposed study will then be outlined and discussed.

**Studies of Women Religious**

Many studies have examined the changes of Vatican II and the effects these changes have had on women religious, particularly studies that were conducted shortly after the changes were implemented. In a study of sisters living in South Texas, it was found that the changes of Vatican II promoted independence and a holistic development of the sisters that included new job opportunities and lifestyles. With these changes also came new financial difficulties and less emphasis on conforming to group identity. These changes were similar to the lifestyle changes and opportunities that were becoming increasingly more available for all women during this time period (Briody & Sullivan, 1988). Using observation and interviews of a small team of sisters, Hess (1971) examined how the changes in lifestyle since Vatican II have affected the personal lives of these sisters and the life of their community. The sisters reported that it seemed difficult for parishioners to become accustomed to sisters out of habit and sisters having needs of their

own. The sisters noted that they were taught to suppress emotions, both in their childhood and in pre-conciliar religious life. However, part of the reform of Vatican II was to encourage sisters to become active thinkers, actors, and speakers within the Church and in their communities. They commented that this type of change was not always welcomed by their superiors, clergy, and parishioners. However, the sisters welcomed this renewal as a chance for self-exploration as individuals (Hess, 1971).

Other studies regarding women religious have focused on the recent phenomenon of decreased numbers due to women leaving religious life and few new recruits. One explanation for the decreased numbers is that women religious no longer understand their role in the Church or in the community. Finke (1997) suggested that there are fewer new recruits to religious life because women now have more opportunities in secular life that were previously only available in religious life, such as education, careers, and social activism. Due to the changes of Vatican II, the lifestyle for religious women no longer provides a stable group community (depending on the congregation), which was also an enticing part of religious life. Thus, argues Finke, the trade-off for women is no longer beneficial, especially due to the high price of poverty, chastity, and obedience that women must pay to enter religious life. The congregations with the most new recruits are contemplative congregations. These communities live in convents, wear habits, and uphold traditional, often pre-conciliar values of religious life (Stark & Finke, 2000).

The feminist values held by American sisters were examined in a study by Wittberg (1989b). Twenty-four sisters were interviewed from New York, Ohio, and Michigan who were from congregations that were labeled as moderately progressive. Some of these women identified publicly as feminist while others did not. The sisters were employed in schools, hospitals, inner-city services, and pastoral services. Many of

the sisters expressed support of feminist issues, such as preserving the rights of women in the workforce and upholding equal rights between men and women. However, some expressed hesitation to label themselves as "feminist" because that label often carried with it an automatic pro-choice stance. They also expressed concern regarding some extreme Right to Life campaigns that contradicted some of their feminist beliefs. There were also mixed opinions regarding the shift toward inclusive language (e.g., using gender-neutral nouns) in mass and religious literature, ranging from those who did not care at all to those who were deeply offended. Some sisters expressed desire for the Church to ordain women whereas others rejected the hierarchy structure completely and did not want to take part in it. A noticeable trend was that the sisters who had entered a male-dominated workforce were more likely to align themselves with feminist beliefs. Altogether, the sisters reported doubt in the realization of many Vatican II renewal goals. It is suggested that future research further investigates the development and application of feminist values in American sisters (Wittberg, 1989b).

Some researchers chose to examine the cultural changes within specific congregations to explore the effects of Vatican II and how sisters have incorporated changes on a community level. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd, a congregation whose ministry is to service troubled adolescent girls, was studied to examine the changes that have occurred in the socialization process of their novices (women who are in the formation process and have not yet professed permanent vows). Some of the main differences between pre and post Vatican II renewal pertained to the development of identity. The novices were encouraged to develop their individual identity by entering the workforce or attending higher education before entering the religious community. They were also encouraged to maintain secular friendships. They were given permission to be

in a state of "search" and were reassured that it is normal to feel insecure and doubtful, and that it is not sinful to change their mind. In other words, there was emphasis on allowing women the time and space needed to develop and reflect before making their vows to ensure that they are not entering rashly or under false pretenses (Eisikovits, 1983).

In her dissertation, Gallivan (1994) examined the influences that women religious perceive as affecting their adult identity. She conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 sisters between the ages of 43 and 65 who were members of five different orders. Using content analysis, several themes surfaced. The main influences on identity development were the changes from the Second Vatican Council that promoted autonomy and independence, and egalitarian relationships built upon mutuality. This lifestyle was contrasted with pre-conciliar attitudes that promoted identities developed through communal growth, dependency, and hierarchical relationships. Another major factor that influenced identity was the theme of relationship, whether it was relationships with other sisters, relationships with mentors, relationships with the community they minister to, or relationships with God. This finding is consistent with other research indicating the importance of relationship in identity formation in women (Gallivan, 1994).

Using a grounded theory approach to the analysis of the life-stories of elder women religious, it was found that themes pertaining to generativity and integrity were present throughout the span of the participants' life journeys. Regarding generativity, the specific theme that contributed to this construct was their service to others through their ministries. This service to others, which was present even in early adulthood, was one of the factors that contributed to their sense of integrity. The results supported a continuous model of identity formation rather than a stage model whereby themes of generativity and

integrity are present in early adulthood and are re-affirmed throughout changing life events (Melia Perschbacher, 1999).

Hoffman and Medlock-Klyukovski (2004) conducted an ethnographic study of three communities of Benedictine sisters. The culture of this congregation since the Second Vatican Council has been generally liberal, as shown through progressive changes made to their constitution that were denied by Rome. Another conflict with the Vatican occurred when one of their more published sisters, Sr. Joan Chittister, was nearly disallowed to be a guest speaker on behalf of Women's Ordination World Wide by Pope John Paul II. Throughout the Benedictine communities, there are varying levels of struggle between those who desire loyalty to the Church and those who express values that are not celebrated by the Church, such as feminist ideals. In previous studies, it was found that there are four different ways through which the Benedictine sisters negotiate tension between the conservative identity of the Church and their own liberal identity: decision making, community, ministry, and ritual. The purpose of the ethnographic study was to explore the rituals that the sisters use to create change in their community that best matches their identity (Hoffman & Medlock-Klyukovsky, 2004).

The results indicated that there are three main ways that the Benedictine sisters use rituals to resolve conflict and promote change. The first is by giving women leadership roles during liturgy. For example, many expressed anger that they are not permitted to perform priestly duties that involve the Eucharist, and they consider this to be exclusionary, disempowering, and hierarchical. However, they preside over their own services that do not include the Eucharist, preach their own homilies, and select the readings and hymns. The second ritual used is the inclusion of symbols throughout services that promote equality. For example, they use inclusive language, such as

replacing "Father" with "Creator", or "Son" with "Redeemer", and "brothers" with "brothers and sisters." Whenever possible, they set up the service such that the pews surround the altar, and they ask the priest to sit among them in order to clarify that the assembly is the celebrant, not the priest. Finally, the sisters make a point of honouring female saints and praying for women-specific needs. The sisters reported that not only do these changes help ease the tension between their progressive sense of identity and the traditional Roman Catholic identity, but it also promotes change within the surrounding community who are often invited to participate in their services (Hoffman & Medlock-Klyukovsky, 2004).

More recently, Brock (2010) studied sisters in Australia and New Zealand to examine their ability to overcome the traditional stereotype of sisters as self-sacrificing women who serve God and the Church. The main question in this investigation was whether sisters could be considered oppressed or agentic. Brock argued that although a woman's identity is constructed according to multiple factors, the main source of identity is prescribed for women religious by the Church. In studying several Church documents using Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine the discourse of female identity and the identity of sisters, it was found that the Church often endorses women as self-sacrificing, docile, and nurturing in nature. Interviews with 43 sisters from 14 different apostolic orders were also conducted. Out of these sisters, all but one participated in the focus group component of the study. Each sister was asked to describe in writing her life as a sister. During the interviews and the focus groups, each sister was given a copy of her own response which was used as a springboard for discussion. Discourse analysis was used for the interviews. Emphasis was placed on themes of power, opinions of truth, self-discipline, and the way sisters related to the identity of women religious as constructed by

the Church. The data was then coded according to the 'truths' that surfaced throughout the religious texts. Specifically, the coding categorized from which 'truth' the sisters spoke and whether they endorsed this truth or resisted it. Brock also reflected on her own position within her research. She reported that she is both an outsider as a psychologist and an insider as a sister herself and then reflected on how both roles affect her discussions during interviews and her interpretation of the data.

The results from the analysis of religious texts suggest a construction of sisters who are called by God to be self-sacrificing workers of the Church. Some of the participants aligned themselves with this view of sisters whereas others reported feelings of powerlessness against the identity imposed by the Church regardless of their capacity to resist and live through their own sense of identity. Many of them portrayed themselves as autonomous and agentic in their identity and daily decisions. For example, some sisters exercised self-determination regarding their occupation, education, and independent living. This resistance to Church authority is sometimes unwelcomed among fellow sisters, leaving some to feel unsupported and devious. Thus, sisters were able to experience a sense of freedom to exercise agency over certain aspects of identity and expressed psychological benefits from this freedom, but only with an accompanying consequence of alienation from the Church and their community. Brock concluded that even though sisters operate in a highly patriarchal system that carries with it oppressive constructions of what it is to be a woman and a woman religious, sisters can still thrive as autonomous individuals through their rejection of 'truths', and reconstruct the self as a woman and a sister outside of the oppressive discourse of the Church (Brock, 2010).

**Conclusion**

The main focus of psychological studies on women religious has been the effects

of Vatican II changes on the lifestyle and mental health of women religious. The other main focus of research in this area has been an examination of the reasons for the decline in the number of women religious. Only a handful of studies have focused on the identity development of women religious and the influences that shape their identity. The lack of research in this area is unfortunate given the major changes in the lives of women religious over the past 50 years. The most recent study (Brock, 2010) of identity in a group of women religious in Australia and New Zealand examined religious documents and the discursive analysis of sisters who either endorse or resist the patriarchal construction of women religious as self-sacrificing servants of the Church. However, a social constructionist perspective of how sisters negotiate tensions between an externally imposed identity and an internal sense of identity is important in order to examine how sisters operate in a patriarchal social institution. Given the finding that identity development for many women is often embedded within relationships, it is important to listen for representations of these relationships within identity narratives. The discourse analysis of the sisters' interviews in the Brock (2010) study was interpreted in accordance to coded themes that emerged from the Foucauldian analysis of the Church's construction of women religious in religious texts. In my opinion, it is necessary to listen to how the sisters construct their view of the Church's construction of women religious, as well as how they relate to this construction and the effects of this construction on their identity. Furthermore, the investigation of generativity is relevant for women religious in this developmental stage, yet these studies are lacking in the literature. Thus, the current study builds upon previous research of women religious in important ways: it (a) used identity narratives to give voice to American women religious in order to investigate their identity, and (b) included a unique emphasis on generativity, all (c) within the socio-

political context of the Vatican's Apostolic Visitation and LCWR assessment.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore the identity of women religious in one Roman Catholic, apostolic community in the United States of America. The socio-political context in which these identities are formed is embedded in rich Catholic Church history, including the changes of Vatican II and the recent Apostolic Visitation and LCWR assessment. Therefore, the framework used to study identity was borrowed from the MacKinnon and Heise (2010) model that suggests identity must be understood at the macro-sociological, micro-sociological, and individual levels. Although the study examined identity at the individual and micro-sociological levels, this model will help guide the exploration of macro-sociological influences. Additionally, given the developmental stage of many women religious, generativity was specifically explored.

**Research Questions**

1.  How do American women religious construct their identity, how do they construct the Magisterium's view of their identity, and how do they negotiate any tensions that may exist between these two constructions?

2.  How do American women religious experience generativity?

**Expectations**

The goal of the study was not to approach the sisters with a priori hypotheses to test a theory. Instead, the goal was to understand the participants' construction of identity as it relates to current events in the Catholic Church and the changes that took place at the Second Vatican Council, as well as their relationship to others, themselves, the Magisterium, and God. I assumed that the participants would have previously reflected on their lives and their identities as women religious, particularly in light of Vatican II

changes and the current Apostolic Visitation and LCWR assessment, and that the Catholic Church has a major influence on identity development of women religious. I also assumed that, even though women religious are high in collective identity, there would be a variety of ways in which the individual participants construct their relationship with the Magisterium and how they negotiate any perceived tensions. Additionally, I expected that women religious whose order has a history of outspoken, progressive members would have narratives that contain tension between the Magisterium and their identity. This assumption is based on the tension that has recently surfaced between the Vatican and women religious in apostolic orders (i.e., the Apostolic Visitation), as well as the diverging reaction of the CMSWR and the LCWR to the assessment of the LCWR, with the former responding favourably and the latter responding disapprovingly.

Regarding generativity, I expected that women would have experienced the conflict of Generativity versus Stagnation. For example, if many American women religious are facing the extinction of their particular congregation, then generativity is compromised because they cannot share their wisdom and lifestyle with a younger generation of like-minded women religious, their community, or the Catholic Church. This may be especially true for progressive sisters who have fought for change within the conservative Church.

CHAPTER 4

**Method**

**Epistemological Position**

The purpose of qualitative research is to describe experiences or explain events to find meaning. It is not used to predict variables as is often the case with quantitative research. There are many possible qualitative approaches to research depending on the philosophical assumptions and epistemological position of the researcher and of the project. This study was conducted using a social constructionist epistemology which presumes that the experiences and reality of the participants are constructed through language and embedded within social and cultural structures (Willig, 2001). As such, no singular knowledge or fact emerged from the data. Instead, the study assumed a relativist position that presumes participants had idiosyncratic interpretations of the events that have shaped their lives, which are in turn woven into their personal narratives. Narratives are a means of accessing the inner psyche of participants through the story they tell about their experiences (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2007). The content of the story is influenced by social, cultural, and psychological factors that may be conscious or unconscious. Their story may also be influenced by a collective identity that is specific to their vocation, order, or community (Murray, 2003).

A social constructionist, relativist position assumes a methodology that is value-laden and inductive in its design (Murray, 2003). This methodology and the study itself is in-keeping with a feminist ideology which promotes research that incorporates the influence of power dynamics between researcher and participant, highlights the importance of language, and understands individual experience as embedded within a larger social, political, and cultural context (DeVault, 1999). Consistent with a feminist

ideological orientation, I sought to address the power I possess in the role of researcher. I incorporated my personal reflections throughout this research endeavor, particularly during the data analysis where my beliefs, values, and life-history influenced my understanding and interpretation of the data. To address the feminist ideal of giving agency to the participants by respecting the language they use to construct their own identity, I created space for their 'voices' through narrative inquiry and used an inductive, bottom-up method of data analysis in which general conclusions are drawn from specific examples.

**Narrative Approaches to Identity Development**

In quantitative research, few variables are examined across many people; qualitative research involves few people but examines many variables. The goals of qualitative research are to uncover underlying themes found in narratives and to offer a constructivist approach to identity rather than the distant, positivist approach of quantitative analysis (Kroger, 1997). The aim of this study was to address how women religious represent and integrate self-identity (individual-level) and collective identity (micro-level) in the context of the Catholic Church (macro-level) into a coherent narrative. Narrative analysis of life stories and conflict resolution is one approach to the study of identity development. As research increasingly suggests, studying the language used by women in their narratives may be essential to understanding the broader picture of female identity development (Kroger, 1997). This type of identity formation analysis suggests that people shape their identity according to their experiences and life stories. It is insufficient to examine isolated factors that contribute to identity, such as personality traits, social class, or personal values. Rather, identity is shaped according to how the individual weaves the concept of self throughout his or her life story; it is the integration

of all components of identity instead of examining identity in parts or even the sum of all parts. In order to study narratives, the researcher must interpret each narrative and therefore plays an important role in the analysis. Furthermore, narrative analysis using female participants is often indicated, particularly when the participants have been systemically and politically silenced throughout history, as is the case of women religious.

The rest of this chapter provides a brief description of the participants, the process of creating the research questions, the procedure for recruiting and interviewing the participants, and a detailed explanation of how the narratives were analysed.

**Sampling**

Random sampling is the gold-standard sampling procedure in quantitative research. When random sampling is achieved, it is assumed that the sample will follow normal distribution patterns required for statistical significance testing. The results have greater generalizability because the sample is considered representative of the population being researched (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). In qualitative research, random sampling is typically not desired, depending on the research question and the methodological orientation. Much of qualitative research is focused on a particular phenomenon or shared experience among a specific group of people. As a result, qualitative research often requires 'purposive sampling' in which the researcher decides who would have the necessary perspective or experience to address the research question(s) (Abrams, 2010). The sample I required to best answer my research questions was a group of participants who a) are apostolic women religious in the United States, b) are members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), and c) were visited during the Apostolic Visitation. It is likely that women religious who meet these three conditions are

liberal/progressive in their values and would be more likely to experience tension with the conservative Magisterium. Additionally, only sisters who entered religious life prior to Vatican II were interviewed. One of the expectations of this study was that the changes of Vatican II may have influenced identity formation in women religious and served as the context within which the Apostolic Visitation and LCWR assessment are best understood. This participation criterion created some homogeneity in the experiences of the participants that influenced their identity and their relationship with the Catholic Church. The identity conflict of generativity versus stagnation is typically studied in mid to late adulthood and is applicable even to elderly women religious because their vocation is life-long. The target number of participants for the study was approximately 6-12 based on the finding in qualitative studies that saturation tends to occur after approximately 6-12 interviews (i.e., there are no new emerging themes in the narratives; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

**Participants**

The participants in this study belong to a well-established Catholic religious congregation in the United States of America. The specific community within the congregation was selected for several reasons. First, they are apostolic and members of the LCWR. The community has an extensive history of involvement in the LCWR, including many women who have occupied specific positions within the organization. Second, this community has members who live independently as well as in the Motherhouse[20], wear modern clothing, and address themselves using their given names rather than their religious names. These were taken as signs that they have incorporated at least some of the visible changes of Vatican II into their vocation. Third, although the

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[20] A house or centralized convent of a religious community

general position of this congregation along the conservative/progressive continuum is not explicitly stated, the congregation has a reputation of being progressive in their behaviours and attitudes, which likely affect how the sisters construct their identity and how they view/respond to conflicts with the Catholic Church. The community has gained a reputation as progressive due to its governance structure, emphasis on education for its members, involvement with the LCWR, and published works by some of its members. The congregation was originally established with a teaching mandate, specifically teachers of immigrant Catholic families. In recent decades, they have adopted a mandate to meet the changing needs of the modern world, including an emphasis on environmental issues, pastoral care in hospitals, parish ministry and spiritual direction, and social services for the poor. They also have a strong missionary presence in several countries throughout the world. The founders of the congregation emphasized individual prayer and spiritual freedom while contributing to the collective through caring for each other and the world. The congregation is comprised of approximately 375 sisters and 120 associate members[21]. Of the vowed members, approximately 200 live in the Motherhouse where the median age is 84 years old. Regarding the governance structure, the community has an elected leadership team who assume office for a 6-year term. It is imperative to note that, despite the community's progressive attitudes and activities, each sister within the congregation may have her individual opinions that may or may not be congruent with the views of the collective. It is also imperative to note that studying the narratives of participants from this congregation does not provide a comprehensive representation of the voices of women religious within this community. However, it does provide an intimate perspective from women religious who are privy to the inner

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[21] Associate members are lay men and women who are officially associated with the community.

workings of their religious community, and who tend to have high collective identity cohesion in general.

Two other religious congregations were contacted and invited to participate in the study. These two congregations were selected based on the sampling criteria discussed above. However, additional selection was based on the general perception of these congregations along the conservative/progressive continuum. The religious community who granted recruitment permission is considered to be progressive. The other two communities are considered to be conservative and neutral by several sources that I consulted (i.e., the sister who participated in the initial interview discussed below, a Canon Lawyer in the United States, and an American sister who is the novitiate formation consultant for multiple religious communities). The community that has the conservative reputation differs from the other congregations in several ways. For example, they wear habits, refer to each other using their religious name instead of their given name, and belong to the CMSWR rather than the LCWR. The original intention of interviewing sisters from these congregations was to gather information from potentially alternate perspectives regarding the research questions. This procedure is common in qualitative research and is generally labeled 'theoretical sampling and negative case analysis' (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992). One of these congregations did not grant permission to recruit within the community. The other congregation emailed an invitation to participate to its members but decided to withdraw after one week because none of its members responded to the invitation. The leadership team of this congregation suggested that its members were quite busy and had heavy workloads as the reason for not responding. At that point, I decided to abandon this component of the sampling procedure based on several factors. First, theoretical sampling and negative case analysis is suggested for

grounded theory research projects that ascribe to a realist[22] position. It is suggested in qualitative research that the sampling criteria, along with other criteria used to evaluate the quality of the research (described later in this chapter), are based upon the specific methodology and epistemological position of the researcher (Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000). Because I assume a social constructionist, relativist epistemological position in this study, the criteria used to evaluate sampling quality is achieved by providing as much detailed context of the sample as possible, as well as clear explanations as to why the sample is relevant to the research questions. This evaluation of sampling quality is labeled 'situating the sample' and is appropriate given the epistemological nature of the study (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). Furthermore, given the scope of the research project, conducting interviews in multiple congregations who would potentially provide completely alternate perspectives is equivalent to multiple dissertations. For these reasons, I decided that focusing on one religious community was methodologically and academically sufficient to satisfy the research questions. Interviews with other religious communities who may provide alternate perspectives would be advantageous in follow-up studies.

**Procedure**

The idea for this study was generated from an interest in religion and psychology, and the realization that the Vatican was conducting an investigation of American women religious. The original idea was to conduct a phenomenological study regarding the reaction of women religious to the Apostolic Visitation. Before beginning the project, an interview was conducted with an American sister in order to get 'plugged-in' to the issues

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[22] A realist position "maintains that the world is made up of structures and objects that have cause-effect relationships with one another" (Willig, 2008, p. 13).

and reactions from the perspective of an insider. This step is often important in qualitative research when attempting to gain access into 'hard-to-reach' populations. In order to gain access to these populations, it is often necessary to build connections with individuals who already have access to the desired population, called 'key informants' (Marshall, 1996). Additionally, it may be necessary to obtain recruitment permission from the 'gatekeepers' of the population, such as pertinent agencies (Abrams, 2010). For my research, I required permission from the leadership team or Major Superior of relevant religious congregations. I had the good fortune of connecting with an American sister who belonged to a congregation that met the sampling criteria of my research. This connection was made through a professor in the psychology department at the University of Windsor. I conducted an informal interview with this sister which lasted three hours. It was audio-taped live and transcribed at a later date. During the interview and when reading the transcription, it became apparent that the effects of the Apostolic Visitation could not be studied in isolation. According to the perspective of this particular sister, the Visitation was one of many conflicts between the Magisterium and women religious (e.g., the LCWR assessment), both on a systemic level and on a personal level. The sister was kind enough to share many of her experiences throughout her life as a woman religious. Without disclosing details of her story, it is sufficient to report that although she felt shock and anger regarding the visitation, she quickly dismissed the issue. She reported that she was able to do so because she had already resolved her personal tensions with the Magisterium. She explained that she had previous experiences with certain members of the church hierarchy that left her feeling betrayed and severely hurt to the point that she considered leaving the Catholic Church completely. Thus, her reaction to the Apostolic Visitation could only make sense in the context of her entire experience as a woman

religious. Other themes that surfaced throughout the interview were obedience, power struggles and leadership styles, conservative versus progressive approaches to theology and spirituality, the identity of a woman, and the identity of a woman religious. Throughout all of these themes, she presented the views of the Catholic Church, the mixed views among women religious, and her personal views.

It was this initial interview that provided impetus for the current study of the identity of American women religious in the Catholic Church. Specifically, she illuminated many relevant issues that currently affect her role as an American woman religious which informed my research questions. Thus, my research questions are intentionally informed by the experiences of this particular sister, along with the information presented in the media and my own personal interests. In addition to informing my research questions, the sister in the initial interview offered to help me gain entrance into her religious congregation by allowing me to explain to her leadership team that she endorsed my research project.

Once the project obtained ethical approval, the President of the religious congregation received an initial email regarding the purpose of the study and a request to disseminate an invitation to participate in the study to her congregation (see Appendix I). When permission was granted, each sister within the congregation received the purpose of the study and an invitation to participate with my contact information (see Appendix J). The sisters who responded to the invitation to participate in the study received an email or telephone call to set up an interview appointment. Each participant was asked demographic questions regarding her current age, race, ethnicity, age at which she entered religious life, occupation, and residence location. The participants completed the semi-structured interview that I personally conducted. The interviews were audio-taped

live and transcribed in full by a paid professional. After analysis, the results were sent to each sister so that she could review the interpretations and express any thoughts or feelings regarding how she was represented (see Appendix L). Once the study is completed, the sisters will have the option of retaining a copy of the audio-taped interviews and/or transcriptions for their archives. I will keep the audio-taped interviews and transcriptions in a secure location for seven years before destroying the material, as per the University of Windsor research ethics guidelines.

Given the highly political nature of the research topic, it was essential that the participants in the study felt as comfortable as possible in sharing private opinions that may not be congruent with Catholic doctrine. The identity of the congregation from which the participants were drawn was protected to the best of my ability in order to minimize the risk of the participants being looked upon unfavourably within their congregation or within the Catholic Church. As such, the President of the congregation was offered that the name of the order could remain confidential, and she agreed to participate in the study under the condition of complete anonymity. The consequence of this anonymity is that the full richness of the congregation's culture and history cannot be explored, thereby eliminating some of the potential macro and micro-sociological level analyses or discussions. However, confidentiality remains the supreme value in protecting the well-being of the participants. The President of the religious community was given a copy of the 'Participants' section of this document to approve the level of identity disclosure in the description of the religious congregation (see Appendix M).

**Participant Demographics**

There were 12 women religious who responded to the invitation to participate in the study, but only 8 were interviewed (out of the other 4 women, 3 of them lived out of

town and either could not access a computer or did not feel comfortable conducting an interview through the computer, and 1 sister had a scheduling conflict). One of the 8 participants was the sister who initially agreed to be interviewed in the preliminary stage of the research process. Four of the interviews were conducted at the community Motherhouse, and the remaining four interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants. For one participant, the interview began in her parish but then moved to her home. Conducting interviews in the participants' natural setting is a common strategy used in qualitative research methods (Abrams, 2010). The length of the interview ranged from 1 hour and 7 minutes to 2 hours and 35 minutes.

The age of the participants ranged from 69 to 88 years old. Every participant entered religious life prior to the Second Vatican Council (this was a participation criterion), ranging from 1941 to 1961. Each participant was born in the United States of America but had ancestry from Europe. One participant had a professional degree, four had master's degrees, and three had doctorate degrees (one of which had multiple master's degrees). The occupations of the participants were teaching, nursing, and roles within the church such as pastoral or liturgical ministries. Five of the participants were retired, but they remain active within their community. Table 1 displays the demographic information for each participant (see Appendix A).

In qualitative research, the researcher often endeavors to conduct the amount of interviews required to reach the saturation level. Saturation is achieved when there no longer appears to be new major themes emerging from additional interviews, although it is often difficult to be sure when this level is achieved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The general plot-lines of the 8 narratives were very similar. Certainly, their general sentiments and attitudes regarding identity, the Magisterium, and generativity were highly similar.

However, each participant contributed idiosyncratic information that greatly contributed to the results of this study. I attempted to recruit more participants by contacting the President of the community and requesting that she re-post an invitation to participate in the study (see Appendix K), but I did not receive further interest. Although I believe that I achieved saturation pertaining to the main answers to the research questions, I also believe that additional participants would have added to the richness of the findings in this study.

**Interview Schedule**

In a semi-structured interview, standard questions were posed to each participant. These questions were designed to be entry questions that led to further discussion depending on the individual answers of each participant. Each question had follow-up questions, or prompts. The prompts for the first two questions addressed their relationship with the Catholic Church, their congregation, and God, particularly any conflict that exists in these relationships. The prompts for the third question pertained to the concept of generativity. Employing a semi-structured interview is suggested when conducting qualitative, narrative research. It is also suggested that the interviewer begin with value-neutral and open-ended questions, and then utilize prompts to gain more specificity. This purpose of this approach is to give participants adequate opportunity to use their own language and to address the issues most germane to their narratives (Smith, 2003).

Each participant was asked the initial question in the interview schedule. The timing and wording of the other questions differed depending on the participants' responses and discussions. Many participants addressed the other questions before they were posed. Each participant was informed that the format of the interview was intended

to emulate a conversation rather than a pure question-answer format. The interview schedule is outlined below.

- How would you describe your identity as a woman religious?

   Prompt: What does being a woman religious mean to you?

- In your opinion, how does the Church describe the identity of women religious?

   Prompt: Who does the Church say you should be as a women religious?

   Do you agree? If not, how do you resolve this difference?

- How has your identity changed since you entered religious life?

   Prompt: What were the effects of the Second Vatican Council on your sense of identity as a woman religious? How has the Apostolic Visitation and/or LCWR assessment affected your sense of identity as a woman religious? How has being a woman religious affected your spiritual life?

- How has the recent decline in the number of women religious affected your sense of identity as a woman religious?

   Prompt: Do you feel your vocation has had purpose or made a difference?

- What has it been like for you to participate in this interview with me today?

   The qualitative tool I used to analyse the narratives is called the Listening Guide, developed by Gilligan and her colleagues (2003). The method and analysis is outlined and discussed in detail below.

**Data Analysis: The Listening Guide**

   The listening guide is a method of analysing narrative data, based on the study of morality by Gilligan (1982), and was systematically developed in a research project on adolescent girls. This original research took place in a school with girls ranging from approximately 7 years old to approximately 18 years old. The girls participated in

interviews every year and the listening guide was developed to analyse these narratives (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). The goal of narrative research when analysed using the listening guide is to hear how the participants represent the many relationships that exist in their narratives through the use of 'voice.' The concept of voice, as discussed in the previous chapter, has been used in feminist literature for decades because it is a way of hearing discourse that is often silenced by the White, middle-class, male-dominant social norms and language. The voices within the narrative might be found in what is said, in what is not said, in pauses, or in unfinished thoughts. Voice is important for several reasons. The concept of having a voice means that the needs, perspectives, or opinions of a person or a group of people are being heard, understood, and addressed. Voice is also a medium for the use of language. The language one chooses is often a reflection of intrapsychic functioning, as well as a reflection of societal norms and values. These norms and values are components of a morality that is male-constructed, especially within the context of the Catholic Church. Finally, voice connects the inner experience (e.g., thoughts, feelings, perceptions, memories, physical experiences, etc.) with others and the outside world. Voice is one of the main ways that people connect with others and the world, and they do so through the use of language which is culturally constructed. Therefore, voice is considered relational and political by nature (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

In narrative analysis it is important to note that the participants are speaking about previous or current relationships in their lives and/or society, and are sharing this narrative in relationship to the researcher. The researcher, then, becomes a part of the story and will influence how the story is told or what is and is not stated. Moreover, the researcher becomes the listener, not only during the interview, but also during analysis.

The researcher must acknowledge the role and relationship with the participant and interpret the data keeping in mind personal subjectivity. Brown and Gilligan (1992) write that as soon as the researcher hears the narrative of a participant, the researcher can no longer claim objectivity because she or he is automatically hearing and interpreting the narrative in a unique way. It is also important to note that, no matter how relaxed or friendly the narrative conversation may appear, the conversation is still taking place within a researcher/participant dynamic which consists of a naturally occurring power imbalance. This power imbalance may affect the information disclosed by the participant. It also places responsibility on the researcher to interpret and reconstruct the findings in a sensitive, non-abusive manner (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

In recounting the research process with the adolescent girls, Brown and Gilligan (1992) noticed that their original plan of interviewing all participants with the same set of questions in order to maintain uniformity and tighter research control was no longer applicable. It was decided that the only way to really understand the experience of the participants was to follow the participants in the conversation, even if it meant abandoning the pre-planned questions. Once this adjustment was made, the conversations became rich and gave space to the multiple voices, explicit and implied, that constructed the experiences of the participants. They concluded that the Listening Guide is a general means of entering into relationship with the participant and the narration rather than a rigid analytical tool. In addition to being a relational tool, it also stems from an inherently feminist approach to research because it was developed as a means of hearing voices that are often silenced in our culture of male-dominated social discourse (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). This method of narrative analysis was appropriate for my study due to the history of women religious being silenced within a male-dominated Church that has the privilege

of constructing the language used in official teachings and texts. Furthermore, it emphasizes the significance of relationship which, according to Gilligan, is particularly important when conducting research with women, and was especially valuable in the population of women religious because there is increased collective identity. Finally, it coincided with my social constructionist and relativist epistemological position because I specifically listened for the social/cultural/political influences within the narratives and framed the findings within the context presented by the participants.

When interpreting the data according to the Listening Guide, it is suggested that the researcher read the text a minimum of four times. The purpose of this is to hear all of the different voices that comprise the narrative. Gilligan often used musical metaphors throughout the interpretation of the narratives. She described the different voices as different melodies arranged in different ways to create a polyphonic orchestration, and the Listening Guide as a way of tuning in. As such, instead of reading the transcript of the narrative, the researcher goes through a series of "listenings" (Gilligan et. al, 2003). During the first listening, the researcher is listening for the basic plot of the story. This includes the people involved, the setting, what is happening, why it is happening, when and where it is happening, and so on. The goal of this listening is to attend to the words being used, the metaphors chosen, the emotions present, the inconsistencies or contradictions, the shifts in tones and pauses of speech, and the use of first or third person speech. While reading the narrative for the first time, the researcher is encouraged to track her or his reaction to the story, including perspectives, emotions, conjured memories, and reactions. It is suggested that the words of the narrative be placed in one column of a worksheet and the reactions or interpretations of the researcher be placed in a second column. Although it may be impossible to note all reactions or understand why

certain reactions are conjured, this reflexive process is intended to help the researcher understand where certain interpretations surfaced and why (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008).

In the current study, all but one interview was transcribed by a professional. Once transcription was completed, I listened to the interview while following the document visually. During this process, I edited any identifiable information, and recorded the general plot and my reaction to the interview in separate files. For the interview that I transcribed personally, I did not participate in the first listening until the transcription and editing was completed.

In the second listening, the goal is to hear how the narrator describes herself. To do this, the reader is to extract every statement that includes the pronoun 'I' along with the verb and any meaningful words that accompany it. It is suggested that the researcher use a coloured pencil to underline all of the 'I' statements because it draws attention to the frequency of the pronoun and the emotional valence that follows. Furthermore, highlighting the 'I' statements can guide the reader toward changes in the pronouns used which often signifies a different voice surfacing within the narrative (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). The 'I' statements are then placed consecutively underneath one another so as to create an "I poem," as first described by Debold (1990). The following is an example of an "I poem" taken from part of an excerpt of a participant in a research study on women whose mothers suffered with depression. The excerpt is a narrative of a participant who was recalling her childhood experiences.

> And then I think you know everything kind of went underground for me and I stopped talking to people....Hmmm. I think when there is a mental illness in the house and it's and there...can be...and some of it can be out of control that hmmm a lot of families tend to isolate and that I think is what my family did and hmmm besides I didn't have anything to talk about. What was I going to say? My mother is a raging maniac? Or or she's she's a rock and I can't talk to her. It's not something you share with people at school. (Gilligan et. al, 2003, page 163).

This is the "I poem" taken from the above narrative (Gilligan et. al, 2003, page 163):

> I think
> I stopped talking
> I think
> I think
> I didn't have anything to talk about
> What was I going to say?
> I can't talk

By isolating the 'I' statements, the representation of the participant herself becomes much clearer. The "I poem" in this narrative reflects a girl who presents herself as silenced and unable to speak about her negative experience with her family.

Once the interviews were printed, I performed the second listening by underlining the 'I' statements and compiling them into an "I poem." I then wrote my commentary regarding the content of the poem in a separate file. Given the highly collectivist nature of religious life, I decided to also conduct an analysis of the participants' "We poem." The purpose of this was to ascertain the direct representation of the collective because it appeared integral to the identity of the participants. The "We poems" were collected using the same method as the "I poems," and were then analysed with my commentary in a separate file.

These first two listenings provide an entry point into relationship with the narrator and the story she is telling. The reader can hear how the participant presents the characters in the story, the world, and herself. Furthermore, the reader acknowledges how she or he identifies with the story, the characters in the story, and the participant (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

In the third listening, the researcher's ear is attuned to voices within the narrative depending on the initial research questions. This listening may involve reading through

the text multiple times, each time listening for a single voice. It is recommended that a different coloured pencil be used to underline the unique voices, keeping in mind that the same words may be heard through more than one voice. This listening lends itself particularly well to the musical analogy of counterpoint melodies. Each voice, like a melody, will have its own notes and rhythms, and at times the melodies will be harmonic, other times dissonant (Gilligan et. al, 2003). An example of what to listen for is how the narrator describes her relationships and social networks (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). Are the relationships reciprocal? Is there unresolved conflict? Is the narrator's voice being heard within these relationships? Does the narrator allude to power dynamics? Does she silence herself with unspoken feelings, or speak of confusion and disconnection with others or herself (Brown & Gilligan, 1992)? The focus of this reading is hearing the narrator in relation to others (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008).

Another important voice to listen for is the gender-laden voice that speaks of conflicts, subordination or silence, along with voices that seem empowered and free. How does the narrator speak of cultural or societal norms and how does she relate to them? It is important to listen for voices that describe the male-dominated cultural construction of women as self-sacrificing, nurturing, and submissive as acceptable characteristics for women, particularly within relationships. If this theme is heard within the narrative, it is important to listen to how this theme is constructed and how the participant reacts to it (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). The goal of this reading is to listen for micro-level processes that occur within macro-level sociological and cultural structures (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008).

The unique voices that the researcher chooses to listen for will partially depend on the research questions. Regarding the current study, the external construction of women

religious is particularly salient in Catholic teachings and sacred texts (Brock, 2010). The unique voices that were especially listened for were the voices of the participants' identities as women religious, the representation of the Church's construction of their identity, and the voice that reacts to this construction. In regard to the research question concerning Erikson's generativity stage of adult identity development, there was special attention placed on listening for voices that spoke about the future of women religious and how the sisters construct the meaning and purpose of their life's work. It is noted that the research questions may not have been salient for each participant depending on the individual narrative. When this was the case, it was necessary to hear different voices in accordance with the experience of the participants (Gilligan et. al, 2003). It was imperative that the interview and analysis process allowed space for any voice to emerge if it was indeed a part of the sisters' experience.

The fourth step in the Listening Guide is to integrate the interpretations of all four (minimum) readings. The goal is to explain what was learned about the research questions, along with the process and evidence through which it was learned. Once again, the research questions may be modified throughout the process even at this final integration stage. The important component to integration is communicating the complexity of how the plot, characters, self, and voices all relate to each other, the narrator, and the social structures in which they are embedded (Gilligan et. al, 2003).

The Listening Guide has been used as an analytic tool for narrative research in several studies. As mentioned, it was first developed by Brown and Gilligan (1992) in a sample of adolescent girls. Other studies examining narratives have used this process, including the investigation of sexual desire in adolescent girls (Tolman, 1994), the experience of anger in girls and women (Brown, 1998), girl's and boy's friendships

(Way, 1998), and experiences of depression in women (Mauthner, 2000). To date, the Listening Guide has not been used to analyse the narratives of women religious.

**Guidelines for Quality Control in Qualitative Research**

As previously mentioned, the criteria used to evaluate the quality of qualitative research depend on the epistemology of the researcher and the methodology chosen for analysis (Madill et. al, 2000). As such, I will use the guidelines provided by Elliott and colleagues (1999). These guidelines are suggested when conducting qualitative research that is phenomenological in nature (Willig, 2001).

1. Owning One's Perspective. It is imperative that the researcher makes explicit the epistemological position and theoretical perspective of the study, as well as personal expectations, biases, and values, both at the outset of the study and as these issues arise throughout the research process. I discussed my epistemological position and theoretical perspective in the introduction and methods section. I also included my personal reflection in the methods section (below), as well as disclosed my reaction to the participants' narratives and the biases I might introduce to the analysis.

2. Situating the Sample. The researcher is charged with the task of providing background information on the sample chosen for the study to ensure that it is relevant to the research goals. I was able to discuss the general characteristics of the sample and why they were appropriate participants for this study. However, my inability to fully disclose the rich history and culture of their religious community for confidentiality purposes poses an unavoidable limitation to evaluating the quality of my sample.

3. Grounding in Examples. The researcher should provide excerpts of the participants' narratives that illustrate the author's interpretations so that readers can understand how the author came to certain conclusions. This keeps readers informed and gives them opportunity to critique the interpretations of the researcher. In my results section, I supported each conclusion I made with direct excerpts from the participants' narratives.

4. Providing Credibility Checks. One of the ways in which credibility is evaluated in qualitative research is by providing the participants opportunity to read through the results and give feedback regarding the accuracy of the author's analysis. I endeavored to ensure credibility in two separate ways. First, I provided the leadership of the religious community the excerpt of my methods section in which I described the sample (i.e., the religious community). Second, I provided the entire document to the participants and asked for feedback regarding the accuracy of how I represented their voices throughout the document.

5. Coherence. The author must adequately address the scope of information in an organized manner that incorporates theoretical framework to aid in comprehension, but also addresses the nuances of findings that are essential in qualitative research. To achieve coherence, I provided the overarching framework of my study in the opening paragraphs and carried this framework throughout the document, even when introducing new ideas and theories. Simultaneously, I gave space to caveats and information that was peripheral to the theoretical framework.

6. Accomplishing General vs. Specific Research Tasks. The researcher is to distinguish between general research goals (e.g., general understanding of an event) and specific research goals (e.g., studying a specific case). If the goal is

general, then the researcher must show that enough information about the event has been collected. If the goal is specific, then the researcher must show systematic analysis of the case. In both types of goals, limitations must be noted. I have clearly stated the general research goal of studying the identity of American women religious. I have achieved this goal by interviewing several women religious who discussed a wide variety of factors that contribute to their identity. I will discuss the limitations of my study in the next section.

7. Resonating with Readers. The material should be presented in a manner that is consumable to the readers and extends the readers' understanding of the phenomenon. I have attempted to define all terms that may be foreign to non-Catholic readers. I have also given voice to an understudied population which will likely offer new perspectives to readers.

**Personal Reflexivity**

As noted earlier, it is essential that I reflect on how my own values, experiences, thoughts, feelings, and identity affect the research (Willig, 2001). I was baptized and raised Roman Catholic, and I continue to practice my faith through prayer, weekly church services, and parish community activities. I attended a Catholic elementary and high school. I have many positive experiences with my local Catholic community and consider my faith to be an integral component of my identity. My mother was a sister in the United States for 14 years prior to her marriage and children. She was a Sister of the Congregation of St. Joseph's in Illinois where she was an elementary school teacher. Throughout my life, she has fondly shared many stories of her experiences as a sister and states that she is very grateful for that time in her life.

I consider my views regarding many moral issues as often in line with the progressive sisters who seem to make up the majority of women religious in the United States, at least according to the public statements and writings of sisters who belong to the LCWR. Knowing this about myself, it was important that I tried to make all of the participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences with me, especially when their beliefs were more conservative. I felt, and continue to feel, some anger toward the Magisterium due to the injustices that I believe exist in the hierarchy, which includes how they handle certain moral issues and how women religious fit into the Church structure. I engaged in several activities in order to avoid as much as possible projecting my own biases, such as consulting with multiple colleagues, revising several drafts of this document with my biases in mind, and reflecting on my biases to increase self-awareness.

CHAPTER 5

**Results**

The results section will begin by outlining the general plot-line, the I Poems, and the We Poems as they represent the first, second, and third listening, respectively. These sections are designed to provide an overview of the narratives, the salient self-concepts (individual identity), and the salient group-concepts (collective identity). Table 2 displays a summary of the research findings that are reported in the current chapter (see Appendix B). Subsequently, the results section will be divided into three sub-sections in response to the first research question: the identity of the participants, how the participants perceive the Magisterium's view of their identity, and how they negotiate the differences between these two identity constructions. The second research question regarding generativity will be discussed in the third sub-section.

**General Plot-Line**

The first listening of each transcript requires the listener to focus on the general plot-line of the narratives and on the personal reactions that arise. Most of the participants followed a similar plot-line throughout the interview. Each interview began with the general question of how they described their identity as a woman religious. Several of them commented that this was a difficult and overwhelmingly broad question (e.g., "Oh glory, what a question!"). In general, they started with a definition of their purpose or role as a woman religious, often involving personal characteristics, God, service to others, and their community of women religious. They often discussed the differences between their entry into religious life and the changes that occurred during the Second Vatican Council that brought them to where they are now. For several of them, part of this discussion addressed the vows they have taken and how the definitions of obedience, chastity and

poverty have evolved over the course of their lifetime. All of the participants discussed the different forms of ministry they have pursued during their life as women religious.

During most interviews, participants touched upon the subsequent questions in the interview schedule before they were asked, requiring only some clarification. Therefore, questions were not posed in the same order for each participant, depending upon how the participant replied. When asked the question about how the institutional church perceives the identity of women religious, all participants described a discrepancy between the Magisterium's view of them and their constructions of who they actually are. The general topics discussed were the differences between men and women, the differences in governance structure, and the topics of the LCWR assessment and the Apostolic Visitation. For most, their response to these discrepancies was elicited by the interviewer. The sisters all generally spoke of how they envision the continuation of their faith and their congregation (generativity). Several of them spoke of the evolution of humanity in general and how that affects their congregation. There were times when issues of morality were very much intertwined with the discussion of the Magisterium or the discussion of the future of their faith. For most participants, they reported coping well with the hurt and/or anger that was provoked by the Magisterium, particularly regarding the findings of the LCWR assessment. One participant was visibly more hurt by the state of her Catholic faith (e.g., she became tearful during the interview). All participants described immense pride, integrity, and love of their life, God, and their vocation as women religious.

There were two exceptions to this general plot-line. One participant, in addition to discussing the above issues, reported several discrepancies she has experienced between her opinions and spirituality and those of her congregation. She also described a major

source of her faith formation that was somewhat separate from her life as a woman religious. Another participant spoke at length about her career and her childhood. She spoke on similar themes as those discussed by other participants, but often elaborated with detail about her job placements.

**Personal Reflection on the Identity Narratives**

When listening to the plot-line in the first listening, my reaction often mirrored my reaction during the interviews. I thoroughly enjoyed these interviews because the women were quite upfront with their experiences and their opinions about the Magisterium and their lives as women religious. I found myself cheering for them as I heard how they have triumphed over conflict. I was surprised by their ability to move on from the obstacles that the Magisterium has presented them, and how they continue to behave with dignity and respect instead of retaliating. I was somewhat surprised but also excited to hear the very liberal stance regarding theology, spirituality, and moral issues that many of them uphold (i.e., an emphasis on evolution, enhancing theology through science and social science, and respect for individual conscience). At some points, I found myself in want of more drama (for a more sensational dissertation, perhaps?). At other points, I found myself in disbelief of the ugly reality that some of the participants presented. In every interview, and especially after the first listening, I was always left with a sense of hope and inspiration that these women are leaders within the faith and are themselves excited for a positive future. They all spoke of a positive shift in the direction of the Catholic Church and I am relieved to hear it. For two participants who have views that are at times contrary to my views, I recognized my disagreement and really tried to put my views aside to listen to their voices.

The structured method of the Listening Guide helped me be mindful of my own perspective, the way it has influenced my interpretation of the sisters' voices, and my telling of their stories. Specifically, during the first listening of each narrative, I documented my personal reactions to the participants' narratives. I also consulted with colleagues when I noticed that my personal reactions were informing decisions of what should be included in the results section. For example, there were several comments made by the participants in response to the Vatican that were comedic and highly provocative. My reaction to these comments was sheer delight, as I reveled in their down-to-earth and at times crass reactions to the Vatican – which were not dissimilar to my own reactions. In considering how to represent the women, I found myself struggling with these portions of their narratives. On the one hand, I wanted to draw attention to their candor, which reinforced my own 'let's-stick-it-to-'em' attitude; on the other hand, I was fearful of bringing trouble upon the sisters by exposing these comments, and felt an impulse to protect them by excluding these particular comments. With my colleagues, I discussed the reasons for including such statements (i.e., coping with humour and its link to resilience), and the reasons not to include such statements (i.e., the risk of inadvertently creating a distasteful 'exposé of the shocking things nuns say' document). I came to the conclusion that these provocative statements were expressed to me with confidence that I would use appropriate discretion in my analysis. I did not want the shock-value of their comments to obscure the main content of the analysis, but I also wanted to avoid treating the participants with condescending fragility when, in fact, they are autonomous adults capable of regulating the content they choose to communicate. To regulate their right of expression would be dangerously similar to the Vatican's history of patronizingly controlling the voices and experiences of women religious. Nevertheless, I

determined that the risks of detracting from the participants' main messages by including these comments outweighed the benefits of discussing the adaptive qualities of candor. Therefore, I felt it was ethically responsible to omit these statements from the analysis. This is an example of my personal reflection process that I hope facilitated the appropriate identification and discernment of my personal reactions in order to reduce the risk of misrepresenting the participants' voices.

Another ethical issue that I came across in this study surfaced after the first listening of several interviews. During the interview, often when speaking about personal opinions that are contrary to doctrine, several participants commented that they should not really be telling me their opinion, or that they were not sure how much to reveal to me. One of the participants even started whispering when she was sharing an opinion that did not favour the Magisterium. When I brought the whispering to her attention, she stated that she did not want to get her congregation in trouble by sharing her opinion with me. The hesitation that I heard in many participants has left me feeling uneasy about sharing their opinion if any identifying information can be linked to them, including information that would be obvious within their own congregation, such as previous positions within their community. As such, there are times when I use direct quotes from the participants without revealing the specific speakers in an attempt to respect their anonymity and trust in me as the researcher.

**I Poems: Confident and Energetic Self-Concept**

The "I poem" and "We poem" are designed to provide a view of the participants' individual and group self-concepts by listening to the verbs that follow the pronouns I or we. The majority of the "I poems" followed a similar structure. When the participants were speaking directly about their identity, many had rich, confident, active "I poems"

that revealed a strong sense of self. The following is an example of an "I poem" from AM

demonstrating a strong sense of an active self:

> I was very mature
> I had so much responsibility
> I experienced
> I entered
> I pushed for them
> I was pushing
> I got it
> I had a lot of experiences

A second example is offered from the "I poem" of participant Buckwheat:

> I felt freer
> and so then I did
> And I really enjoyed – and I really enjoyed the – what I was doing
> And I look back and I keep saying all of it is who I am today. Every piece of it is who I
> am today
> what would I have lost if I hadn't had what happened to me
> I'm good (laughs)

There was one exception to this pattern, which happened to be Lee, the participant who

was visibly more hurt by the current tension within the Church and the current status of

the Catholic faith among many Americans:

> I guess I don't…
> that's why I chose this
> I mean, I think…I don't see myself as any great shakes. I just feel that I am called and
> whatever I can give, that's what I give.
> I think
> I think that
> I can't do this.
> I think
> maybe some person with great gifts wouldn't have the same call I have, you know, but I
> recognize I can't do everything, so I have to always call on God.

This "I poem" demonstrates a humble sense of self, which is not necessarily a surprise

given that humility is highly regarded in the Catholic faith. However, her "I poem" is

more pessimistic in its overall tone, and at times it is clear that she is hurt and in

emotional pain.

By contrast, when the participants spoke about the Church's perception of women religious, the "I poems" became stark and frequently included the phrases "I think" and "I mean." This may reflect the difference in the content of what was being discussed. When the participants were speaking directly about their identity, their "I poems" were rich in content compared to when they were speaking of people or issues that are distant from their identity. The following is an example from participant JK of this switch in "I poem" from having rich content to distancing the self from the content being discussed:

<div align="center">

I -
- I don't know
I think
but I don't think
Um…I just – I don't think
I mean
that's how I sometimes – that's what I feel
I know
I mean
I'm trying to think
I just write it off. I don't pay attention to it
I don't – yeah, I'm not going to hate my -
I think
I think

</div>

These sections of the "I poems" were typically ways in which the participants clarified that what they were saying was only their opinion. The main content of what they were discussing was not central to their sense of self.

**We Poems: Unified, Strong, and Flexible**

The "We poems" of the all the participants were quite rich in content, reflecting confidence and fellowship. It was clear that the participants all feel very much that they belong to the collective and often see the collective as a main component of their identity. The "We poems" tended to match the portion of the "I poems" that pertained directly to the participants' identities. There were less opinion-based portions of the "We poems"

compared to the "I poems", thereby making the "We poems" shorter in general. The

following are examples of typical stanzas of the "We poems."

Military Avenue:

>                    we are not nuns
>              We're almost the opposite now
>            we are different. So we're called sisters
>                    we lived all together
>          We have a tradition of educating our women
> we knew the need for effective relationality and we shape our governance by consent and
>                            dialogue
>                          we created
>                           we meet
>               we have compensated or we have adapted
>                 we just don't have the convents
>                      we've compensated
>                we belong to um these small groups

AM:

>                          We need
>                        We are equal
>                  we have a long way to go yet
>                        we've worked
>  we as a community have worked for justice, worked for peace, worked for racial equality
>                    We've done that all along
>           we tried to follow the… work for the common good.

In the examples above, the participants were clearly stating their identity as women

religious within their congregation. However, in many sections of the "We poems" the

participants were discussing how American women religious have responded to the

Apostolic Visitation or the LCWR assessment:

JK:

>                           we are
>                        we just go on
>     we live out of an integrated faith and an integrated commitment
>                it's not something we just conform to
>           we have a tremendous respect and love for each other
>                 the love we have for one another

Others spoke of We as being a part of the human race:

Buckwheat:
<div align="center">
we learn to live in community here<br>
we all can live in community<br>
we all live together on this globe<br>
when we say<br>
but that we're all living in – that's God's church, that we are all one, yeah, yeah, yeah<br>
we as human beings, we've been evolving, evolving, and what are we evolving into, who knows<br>
we are evolving. And we don't know. I don't think we know
</div>

From these examples, it is clear that the participants feel closely connected to a collective identity that is positive, united and growing. The We often referred to a variety of relationships in each poem, such as their congregation, women religious in the USA, women religious in general, Catholics in general, Americans in general, and human beings in general. Thus, they do not appear to be rigid or isolated in their identity with the collective. Furthermore, while their sense of collective identity appears strong, their sense of individual identity was also confident and often separate from the collective identity. For example, most of the content from the "We poem" did not come directly from the question of identity, but rather throughout the discussion of their history as a congregation, their reaction to current events, and the future of their faith. One participant, Buster, did not include many statements of identity in her "We poem." Instead, her "We poem" was mostly superficial with statements of previous activities rather than direct statements of identity. This may be more related to her general narrative style rather than a reflection of the proximity of her identity to her congregation, because her "I poem" was also lacking in depth at times. The majority of her substantial We statements occurred when she spoke of the future of her congregation:

<div align="center">
we're still doing what the Spirit leads us to do<br>
we have been blessed<br>
we paid for piano lessons
</div>

we came back
we were a – we were a community of codependents at that time
we spend our lives taking care of others

Regarding Lee, the participant whose "I poem" sounded less optimistic and more subdued, she appears to successfully cope with her current struggles through the collective, and she gains strength from this part of her identity:

we go
we've been speaking
we can't seem to communicate
we're all praying very hard
we can communicate
what it is what we're saying
what we try to do is prepare ourselves for what's coming. That's why we have speakers
we're all mature women
we know how to interpret things

Her verbs are active and she speaks confidently about who they are as women religious. There were no "We poems" that were found to lack a sense of shared beliefs, goals, fellowship, and respect for one another. The degree of unity is not surprising given the nature of religious life. What was not necessarily expected but apparent was to have "I poems" that were just as rich and core to their identity as the collective. Historically, religious communities fostered a communal spirituality wherein members of the community were unified in mind and spirit, as well as shared any goods that belonged to the collective. As a result, the use of personal pronouns was explicitly discouraged in religious congregational constitutions (Bondy, 2007). The inclusion of the 'I' within the 'we' was a direct product of Vatican II efforts to incorporate individual identity within the collective. Therefore, the very existence of an "I poem" within the narratives of the participants in this study indicates that they have incorporated this particular language into their daily conversation. Furthermore, it designates a shift in group identification to cognitively include the self within the collective identity.

## Research Question 1a: How Women Religious Construct Their Identity

The question of identity was posed to each participant, specifically asking "what is your identity as a woman religious?" This question thus addressed both who she is (individual, or "I") and her identity as a woman religious (collective, or "we"). In other words, each participant was asked about her individual identity within the context of her group identity. It is interesting to note that one participant misheard the initial question. She began to answer the question "what is your identity?" by discussing personal characteristics (e.g., self-confident, optimistic, normal) and was somewhat confused about the question. However, once the question was repeated, she replied "that is a very, very profound question" and proceeded to discuss her identity as a woman religious. Most participants attempted to summarize their identity in one or two sentences, but the conversation of their identity tended to expand several topics, such as their history, the changes they have made since Vatican II, their vows, and their ministries, all in the context of working with and for the people of God.

### Identity Statements: Dedicated Workers

Each participant's initial response to the question of her identity as a woman religious is summarized below:

> *I'd first start with I'm a woman, called to religious life of -- with vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience ... as such, ah, in that position after formation and training, I was called to the ministry of teaching. It's always a ministry, and as in our particular congregation, your ministry always fits into what -- whom -- who it is we say we are, and that is that we are urged by Jesus Christ to work for the poor and the oppressed and the abandoned and to work for justice and sustainability.* (AM)

> *Well, I'd say someone with a single -- singleness of purpose in life and yet I think some -- somewhat obvious commitment to God and, ah, very much oriented towards serving other people, yeah, especially poor people, but anybody.* (JK)

*My identity as a woman religious is I've given my life to God through the congregation and serving, you know, the reign of God, thy kingdom come, I guess ... identity. Boy, that's really hard ... but I guess I see my life as ... given to God out of great gratitude.* (Lee)

*I would say one who has had the adventure of Vatican II, um, and had great adventures throughout my religious life, always feeling that my, um, choice of life -- I don't want to say lifestyle but choice of way of life has encouraged my best gifts.* (Marmaduke)

*I would describe myself as a ... a contemporary woman religious who has chosen to live in the vowed life of celibacy and obedience to the spirit and poverty or what we call more commitment to the common life. Um all of that vowed lifestyle made to enhance a ... a life devoted to a union with God and the service of people in this time and place.* (Military Avenue)

For Sister B, her initial response is one of uncertainty, indicating she does not often reflect upon this question. She says:

*Boy, what a question. (Long pause). (Sighs) ... I don't think of myself that way exactly. It's sort of like you don't reflect on the clothes you wear because you're wearing them, and you don't think about the vows you took because you're inside them, and it doesn't -- ah, it's not part of your -- it's absorbed into the way you live, so, um, I'm obviously a woman, and I am a religious, but in the 21st century church, that is still finding its meaning.* (Sister B)

However, after some discussion, she says:

*Um, so the original question how do I feel about my -- or how do I describe being a woman religious, um, I guess what I see in it now is I'm a woman who is at the service of the church and its role in the world of transforming the world. That's who I am. And I own that and I do it every day. It's grounded in prayer, it's grounded in my relationship with God, it's grounded in my basic talents, because I am a teacher and I use that gift and all of the education the congregation has given me to bring people to faith or to bring them to a more alive faith and kind of inspire them or encourage them to go out into the world and be an authentic Christian in a world that needs that witness.* (Sister B)

Buckwheat and Buster were the only exceptions to this pattern. They did not answer this question in a summary of a few sentences. Instead, they answered the question by summarizing their life journey and the changes that have taken place

both individually and as a collective that have resulted in who they are today.

As evident in these brief explanations of their identities as women religious, the immediate response to the initial question contained the themes of dedication to God and dedication to serving God's people. However, there are multiple components that make up their identity and therefore required detailed analysis. Given that each listening represents a voice heard within the narrative, I conducted several listenings to answer the question of identity, including the voice of their relationship with God, their relationship with women religious, and their relationship with the laity. These voices are embedded in the context of Vatican II renewal and discussed below.

**Identity Through Relationship with God**

Several sub-themes emerged when listening to the participants' descriptions of their relationship with God. Perhaps not surprisingly, all participants framed their decision to enter religious life as a call from God. Some of them were in romantic relationships and were prepared for marriage and family, but decided that the call to enter religious life was too great and this dissuaded them from marriage. Others described the call as something that came suddenly and without question. All of the participants came from Catholic families or attended Catholic schools or parishes as children. Although most did not discuss their childhood in detail, it is evident that the participants were raised having a relationship with God.

**Identity through relationship with God: Prayerful.** It is difficult to discuss the participants' relationship with God in isolation of other topics because they report that their love of God and relationship with God is the basis for all that they do. Most of the participants stressed that their prayer life is essential to their life and their vocation as women religious. They explained that religious life is the means through which they

come to know God and the self, and this helps them to be the best version of themselves in order to work with God's people. For example, Military Avenue stressed that she is both apostolic and contemplative in her relationship with God: "I see myself as a very contemplative active ministerial woman because contemplative is you know that search for God, that living in God, aware of the presence of God everywhere, so I want to be called contemplative too." Several participants discussed that they have trust that God will provide the gifts and materials required to do the work that they are called to do in the world. This trust in God is rooted in their prayer life where the gifts of God are revealed to them. Participant JK described it as "kind of an abiding union with God that -- you know, that life -- I don't have to worry. I'll get the gift of the strength that I need to do whatever I need to do." The strength obtained through their relationship with God is essential to their committed perseverance in their apostolic work with God's people.

The relationship with God was not linear for all of the participants. Buster stated that while she was adapting to the changes of Vatican II, she went through a period when she was "spiritually starving" due to a lack of prayer. She said that she was struggling and felt very disconnected from God, others, and herself. As a result, she started to isolate, and it was her spiritual director who encouraged her to grow in her spiritual life. She decided to join community prayer and increased her individual prayer. She now feels very connected and close to God. Similarly, Sister B's prayer life was stagnant toward the beginning of her vocation. She explained that prayer and connection with God is very much alive in her congregation, but stated that her relationship with God was sparked through prayer that occurred outside of her congregation.

**Identity through relationship with God: Active in ministry.** Many participants explained that the relationship they have with God urges them to work with the poor and

oppressed in the world. They noted that this was one of the main changes of Vatican II: to immerse themselves into the modern world. Additionally, another major theological shift was that everyone was called to love and serve God just like those in religious life. Therefore it is essential to understand one's gifts from God and know how to use those gifts for the good of the world. Furthermore, this is the goal for all Christians, no matter which life-vocation they have chosen. Participant AM described it as the main motivation for her life "because that's what Jesus Christ said to do, and every Christian should do that, but I took vows in order to work together with a group of people to do that." Therefore, married, single, and religious (the vocational options for Catholics) all have an equal level of holiness in their relationship with God and are called to live full, love-filled lives of service. AM explained that ministry is integral to her identity and the identity of the congregation because "ministry always fits into what -- whom -- who it is we say we are, and that is that we are urged by Jesus Christ to work for the poor and the oppressed and the abandoned and to work for justice and sustainability." Participant JK also emphasized the importance of following local and world events, calling the evening news her "second holy hour of the day." Each participant highlighted that her relationship with God and her chosen vocation helps her to fulfill her life-long call to service and ministry.

**Identity through relationship with God: Committed to updated religious vows.** Some of the participants discussed their relationship with God in light of the vows they took as women religious, as well as how the changes of Vatican II required a re-understanding of their religious vows. For these women, this new conceptualization coincided with their changing relationship with God. For example, Military Avenue discussed how the vow of chastity has grown to mean something different than it did when she first entered religious life:

*But celibacy took on a whole much more positive sense of not just being chaste or not being married, not having children. Now it was a love of God uh, that offered my whole heart to God in a kind of very very deep freedom and mobility to be with God and for God in ways that no other woman who is married could be, or a single.* (Military Avenue)

Similarly, the participants' understanding of the vow of obedience shifted from a blind obedience of whatever Mother Superior said to do, to "obedience meaning really listening to the will of God through discernment" (Marmaduke). Military Avenue also described a new understanding of obedience as more of a personal discernment when she stated that she "was called to be obedient to the movements of the Spirit within me." The participants who spoke about their religious vows stated that their vows are well integrated into their lifestyle and into their relationship with God, to an extent that the vows are rarely in the forefront of their minds. Instead, they are an integral component of their identity and relationship with God.

**Identity through relationship with God: Advocates of spiritual and theological growth.** Participants described that their relationship with God has evolved since they first entered religious life. They attributed this growth to the theological shifts of Vatican II and to general growth and maturity throughout their lives. The growth has occurred as individuals, but also as a congregation. It seems that there was a point, likely prior to the Vatican II changes, when the relationship between women religious and God was somewhat mediated by the institutional church, at least in doctrine and moral issues. However, the participants described shifting some of their theological views and expanding their views on moral issues to include aspects of other disciplines such as science and social science. They developed their own ideas and beliefs about God that made sense to them based on what they know about scripture and their own individual spirituality. Many participants stressed the ability of women religious to form their own

opinions rooted in their relationship with God and their theological training. Marmaduke gave an interesting account of the evolution of the congregation's relationship with God:

> *Early on in the community ... God was a bit of a judge. And then in our novitiate when we were learning to pray, the image of God changed and it was very Jesus-centric, but Jesus as primarily one of love and God as one of love, not this punishing or counting even, not punishing, counting. And then with Vatican II ... what was the phrase -- was coined preferential option for the poor. God has a preferential option for the poor ... More recently I've moved into the universe story and the cosmological -- well, the cosmosis of the whole shebang, but I still maintain a very clear notion that there is a transcendent creator ... so I certainly have what is rooted in me is belief in God, but as we learn more and science becomes the partner with theology -- it's really wonderful ... And psychology, the social sciences, what they have brought to my understanding of theology.* (Marmaduke)

Military Avenue described her shift in relating to God as moving toward a more private revelation, similar to the spirituality that emerged from the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. She said,

> *The whole frame of my life as a sister was to become an ardent follower of Jesus and his liberating mission. And it was no longer to become a wonderful sister. I grew with my congregation to say a good sister is one who like Mary hears the word of God and RESPONDS to it. And we respond to it like Jesus who lived and worked in service.* (Military Avenue)

One sister, Buckwheat, discussed how she has a strong relationship with God, but has noticed that it is closely tied to a deeper connection with humanity as a whole. Others also spoke about this deeper consciousness and how it connects with scripture, with current intellectual thought, and with the people they interact with in the modern world.

Some of the participants spoke about the need to return to a simpler lifestyle that imitates the lives of the apostles. They acknowledged that the Vatican II call to immerse into the modern world was a large step in this direction. As AM explained, the ministry of women religious in her congregation "is done because of the word of Jesus. You see, it's what we are urged to do, and it's sort of like -- it thrills me because it's just what the

apostles were urged to do! And we're doing it!" Buckwheat stated specifically that she does not understand why the institutional church feels the need to exclude people, or why people make distinctions between religions and opinions. She wonders "why isn't there room for all of us in God's house and the church? There should be room for everybody. Jesus didn't exclude somebody because they thought differently than he did, you know?" She argued that God accepts all people and wants everyone to see the unification of humanity.

**Identity through relationship with God: Faith-filled.** Nearly every participant expressed hope and trust in God that the issues occurring in the church currently would resolve to produce a better, more inclusive version of religious life. AM specifically believed that "nothing happens by chance, none of this investigation is by chance. God permits human beings to do what they're going to do and then he brings good out of the mess they make." This trust in God and the Holy Spirit extended beyond problems within the Catholic Church. Lee described her faith in the power of the Holy Spirit regarding global issues:

> *How I see my life is being attentive to the Spirit that I think is very alive in the world, and there's so many things that can be depressing (laughs), the news, you know, whatever. I mean, there's a lot of tragedy in the world, but the basic underpinnings of it, to me, is very hopeful that, ah, you know, Jesus came and sent us the Spirit and his message, and his whole meaning is important to the way I see things, and I would just like to...I have always wanted to share that with other people through the works that I have done. (Lee)*

The unfaltering faith in the guidance of the Holy Spirit is one of the main factors contributing to the sisters' perseverance within the Catholic Church despite the current tensions. More about this will be discussed in a separate theme.

Only one participant, Military Avenue, discussed a time in her life when her relationship with God was ruptured due to feelings of pain and anger directed at the

Catholic Church. She described her struggle in her relationship with God when going

through personally difficult times:

> *Ohhh, it was pretty black. I mean it was pretty dark because I was of a faith*
> *tradition that would say you can't shout and scream at God, telling God how*
> *wrong all this is or. So what you do is you tend to become depressed in your own*
> *spirituality too. So I was in a pretty dark space with God or. When I say dark*
> *space, I mean just heavy - where are you, why is all this happening? All the*
> *questions that um, you know, are important, and I I I would ask them, but um, it*
> *was like at that point I realized that the healing that God was going to bring to*
> *this affair was going to be mediated by psychology and counselling and school.*
> *Self-knowledge. And that was a great gift.* (Military Avenue)

Thus she repaired her relationship with God through reflection and self-awareness, and

emerged from this dark period with God into a deeper union and understanding of herself

and her relationship with God.

**Identity Through Relationship with Women Religious**

The call to religious life that every participant reported appears to have an integral

role in their lives. Nearly all sisters noted overtly that when it comes to apostolic work in

the world, it is "better to be in a community than out there doing it alone" (Buster). They

explained that no matter what vocation they chose in life, they would be committed to

God's work in the world. However, choosing to belong to a group of women with similar

commitment to the love of God has enriched their apostolic work. Buckwheat described

the importance of working as a collective:

> *The gift I find today is being in a community that, as one, we can speak out*
> *against injustice and morality, against issues of our day. More than to myself*
> *individually doing it, I have to live it out as much as I can, you know. I do it every*
> *day, but it's a gift of community, that we're able to do this as a whole, and I*
> *experienced that deepening within us over the years of really more and more*
> *coming together as one.* (Buckwheat)

Although the sisters enjoy the current level of collaboration, this was not always

the atmosphere, particularly when they entered religious life. They explained that

religious life was based on a hierarchical structure whereby Mother Superior had the final say and each sister was to obey her. Furthermore, their days were quite structured with prayer and work, and most of their activities were completed in silence. Only one sister stated that she did not enjoy the rigidity of this lifestyle. The other sisters reported that they tended to not question this style of religious life because it was the only model available to them at the time. They were aware that this was what religious life would be and felt very happy and comfortable with this lifestyle.

**Identity through relationship with women religious: Educated, mature, enthusiastic, and grateful.** When the theological and practical changes of Vatican II emerged, there were a variety of reactions within this group of participants. They all exclaimed appreciation that their congregation was involved with the education emphasis of the Sister Formation movement that occurred in the 1950s, resulting in congregation leaders who were well-educated in theology and scripture study, and who ensured that they were also well-educated. The advantage that their education gave them is that they were able to understand the theological and biblical reasons for making so many changes. For most of the sisters, "it was a wonderful time and all these new documents were coming out and all this new stuff was coming out from council and we were studying it, right as it came out, so it was an exciting time" (Lee). However, there was a major period of adjustment post-Vatican II for women religious. Sister B noted that "it was a terrible time of tension and stress" because there were some sisters who were gladly welcoming the changes while others were more reluctant to accept the changes. In the larger scope of women religious in the USA, it was after Vatican II that many women religious left their vocation to pursue careers or married life. This also occurred within the participants' congregation, they noted.

The overall consensus of the participants was that the changes of Vatican II provided an environment wherein the identity of women religious was brought to the forefront and each sister was asked to reflect on her identity, adjust her role to follow their original charism, and become immersed in the modern world. For AM, it very much coincided with her vision of religious life. She stated,

> It's a joy to me to talk about my dream, um, and my -- my -- my just ... marvelous experience of being brought from monastic into ministerial life and to talk about the life of the church, and we are the church, you see, and so we have a very important role, each one of us, to make this church be what Jesus wanted it to be. (AM)

In this statement, it is clear that she feels her work more closely resembles the life of Jesus, and she recognizes the call for all Christians to carry out their role in the church of God. Military Avenue also explained the significance of the Vatican II changes in her identity as a woman religious:

> I was born in the womb of Vatican II spirit, and then and so to my congregation for the most part. So it is true that I'm very influenced by that and that spirit was meant, was marked by encouragement to loving dialogue, collegial listening from one level to another. Respecting a subsidiarity. Do it local if you can. You know, you don't have to look to Rome for ... all of it, those were like principles that were given in Vatican II in the written documents. And we we absorbed them and we made them the a congregational lifestyle and a mode of operation. And I'm so grateful because the congregation taught me how to do that. (Military Avenue)

**Identity through relationship with women religious: Collaborative**. Every participant mentioned or elaborated on the congregation's governance structure. It was with pride that the sisters discussed the manner in which they conduct business. Inspired by Vatican II, they decided to break-down the hierarchical structure of an appointed Mother Superior and adopt a more democratic governance structure. When making decisions about community priorities or how to carry-out the mission of the congregation, "we do it in a very collegial way and a very more democratic way, listening to

everybody, and then we choose some people in leadership to carry that out" (Lee). Military Avenue summarized the process of decision-making by the leadership team. She said that the sisters educate themselves on the subject at hand, engage in small-table discussions, and then send a representative to the leadership team at which point "the leadership team listens to all of those and then they kind of … they unify the statement and it's almost like the congregation confirms it." The manner in which this process is carried-out is through "the contemplative style of dialogue" (Sister B), meaning that the sisters begin the process with prayer and quiet reflection, and then focus on listening to each other as the base of their collaborative discernment.

As briefly mentioned above, all of the participants reported that their congregation placed emphasis on education. This point was elaborated upon by several of the sisters. The fact that many of the sisters have advanced degrees in theology or advanced degrees in non-religious subjects, assured them that "we were never brainwashed, because when we were in our college classes, we were taught critical thinking, um, research, good speaking skills, so all of that part of us was being developed" (Marmaduke). Education was highly valued as a fabric of their identity and enabled them to address the needs of their community. JK stated that she "was fortunate to be in a community that wanted us to be educated, kept up to date on what was going on in the church, you know, educated us in liturgy and in all kinds of things, social justice." While some of the participants entered religious life with a university degree, most of the sisters received all of their post-secondary education and graduate education with the support of the congregation.

Two of the participants discussed the vow of poverty in detail. They both defined the vow of poverty as, at least in part, a simplistic lifestyle. Everything that the women own is shared with the entire congregation. Even salaries are given back to the collective

in order to address the financial needs of the entire congregation "so that everybody takes care of everybody else" (AM). They explained that each sister discerns how much she needs from the communal finances, which is then discussed with and approved by the leadership team. Military Avenue noted that this vow is meant to be non-judgmental of the needs of others, and requires trust that the congregation will meet the needs of all its members. She explained the vow of poverty as "like a school of spirituality where you're taught to be non-judgmental. You're taught not to make your ego identity based on what you have. You have to be simple with what you have and care for it, steward it." Although Military Avenue stated that this particular vow can be a struggle at times, she and the other participants who spoke of vows reported that these are deeply entrenched in their identity and are a source of joy in their lives.

**Identity through relationship with women religious: Supported as individuals and as a group.** The overriding theme for each participant was the love and support they felt from their congregation. They all expressed pride in the work they do together, not only because of the final result of their ministries, but also the collaborative nature of their daily living. They expressed that they have been encouraged to be a cohesive, inclusive group of women, and yet "we have let each woman be herself, fostered that" (Sister B). This emphasis on individuality includes the recognition that each person has God-given gifts to share and unique interests that will enhance the life of the congregation as a whole. JK joyfully exclaimed that "even people who might differ tremendously even on theological things or political even, they go to the end of the earth for each other" due to the love and respect they have for each other. The participants expressed that the importance of individuality was one of the shifts after Vatican II. Whereas the pre-Vatican II modality of religious life expected members "to kill our

personalities" (Buckwheat), the new version of religious life espoused that "you really need to look at yourself" (Buckwheat) when affirming one's commitment to God through religious life. The level of support, education, and apostolic works inspired Military Avenue to state "I would never be the woman I am if I had not been born from my congregation." Similarly, Sister B, despite disagreeing with the congregation at times, reported that "I am so proud of us and who we've been and the great women that have been part of us, and the accomplishments of this congregation are amazing." Finally, AM summed up the balance of individual and collective values within the congregation when she said there is a sense of "wholeness, and there's -- as well as being part of the community. Everybody has such respect for one another and love for one another. And no, there's no envy, no nothing, because everybody has an equal chance to develop their abilities." Thus the relationships developed among women religious are core to their identity and to their apostolic works, yet these relationships promote the growth and flourishing of individuality.

A theme that emerged for one participant (Sister B) was her disagreement with the general direction of her congregation regarding two main perspectives held by the congregation. She said that her congregation is going through a phase of cosmic spirituality whereby the prayer life of the congregation often reflects a broad sense of global consciousness and an evolution of humanity toward God. Sister B described her preference for a more traditional modality of prayer, but instead, "it's not speaking to God. It's reading or reflections, nice thoughts, songs that are nice, community-building songs, but they don't really reflect my Catholic faith." The other point of contention between her opinion and the attitude of several congregation members pertained to the

masculine language found in scripture, liturgy, prayer, and hymns. This was troubling to her because it offended her sense of art and tradition. She explained,

> *The point they were making is that language shapes law, and that's true, absolutely true, so use of male language was keeping us in bondage to the hierarchy and to patriarchy. We had to abandon it so that we could get free and have a more liberated way of being in the world. I understand the concept, but poetry is poetry, and if you try to eliminate all the masculine pronouns, I mean, that's not what poetry is about.* (Sister B)

She noted that she was not the only sister with this perspective and felt that her congregation was improving in its attempt to listen to the needs of each member and arrive at a more inclusive form of prayer and worship.

There were some unique themes that emerged for only one participant regarding her relationship to women religious. For example, JK discussed that her congregation instilled the value of discipline even though the lifestyle contained less rigidity. She also noted that "there's a certain bond among the sisters that have served in overseas missions" and attributed this bond to having a shared experience of learning a new language and culture to broaden one's respect for God's people.

**Research Question 1b: How Women Religious Construct the Magisterium's View of Their Identity**

When I first endeavored to listen for the voice of the Institutional Church, I attempted to listen for it to the exclusion of the participants' reaction to this voice. However, it became clear that these two voices were intertwined throughout the narrative and could not be listened to separately. For the majority of participants, a large portion of the voice of the institutional church was heard within the participants' reactions to this voice. There were also portions of the narrative in which these two voices were clearly distinct but followed a call-answer pattern between the voice of the Vatican and the

participants' reactions. This interplay between these two voices represents the counterpuntal voices (the general direction and interplay of two distinct voices) often found when using the listening guide, as described by Gilligan et al (2003). For the sake of clarity, these voices have been separated and are discussed below with the voice of the institutional church in the first section and the reaction of the participants in the subsequent section.

**Who Women Religious Ought To Be: Compliant, Uneducated, and Good**

Several participants distinguished between themselves and the other group of women religious in the United States, who belong to the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR). They explained that this group of women is obedient in a traditional manner, "so no surprise that the officials in Rome who don't care for Vatican II would find more comfort with these women" (Marmaduke). Marmaduke explained that "one is the good girls and we're the bad girls," and elaborated, "well, on the one hand if they're good girls, they're submissive and holy and regulated, under control. I think the official church has a very dim view of our types and scheming and dreaming how to put us down." Military Avenue outlined her perception of the Magisterium's expectations of women religious. She stated that "many of them still see us as the very compliant, obedient sisters living in their parishes and running their parish schools for $500 a year," and that they are "working under a former paradigm of religious life and a paradigm of authority as though just because they say it, they can put us back into the can again" (Military Avenue). In other words, her view was that the Magisterium wants women religious to return to communal life within convent walls where they carry-out their vocation in a manner similar to the pre-Vatican II era.

Several participants discussed that there are many bishops who respect women religious and encourage their identity trajectory. For example, Lee said that "there are many wonderful bishops in the church, we loved the church, and they invited us to really become adult Catholics, mature, study, you know, and teach the laity." However, the main perception is that

> *The church describes us as a very special group of women within the church, um, I can't think of another word other than ruled by the church that, um, has to do a lot with rules and regulations and ... under their authority definitely, definitely ... telling us what to read, who not to listen to, um ... yeah.* (Buckwheat)

The expectation to be obedient and under the authority of the Magisterium is emphasized by the church leaders specifically because they are *women* religious, according to the participants. Many expressed that, because they are women, they are expected to be subservient, uneducated, and "little girls" (Marmaduke), and that church authorities "think of religious as uneducated women who need to be told what to do" (JK). AM described her view of how the Vatican conceptualizes women religious and then offers what she thinks the Vatican would prefer:

> *And so I would say they're not used to articulate women, they are not used to anybody not saying, Yes, Father. But let's have a dialogue about that, let's talk about that idea. They're used to saying, 'This is the way it'll be and that's the way it'll be', and there's no conversation.* (AM)

At one point in her narrative, Marmaduke pretended to be the Magisterium lecturing women religious by saying that they were bad little girls "and the worst thing you did was go to school." In other words, through this perspective, women religious are supposed to remain uneducated and rely on the Magisterium for rules and direction rather than thinking for themselves.

**Who Women Religious Are Instead: Disobedient, Disloyal, and Lost**

As alluded to in the previous section, all of the participants expressed that the Vatican does not have a positive view of their identities. Although they indicated that there are many bishops who endorse the trajectory of their identities, they stated that Magisterium does not favour their lifestyle or many of their decisions. Specifically, several participants indicated that the Vatican perceives them as disobedient and so caught up in the world that they have lost their faith. They are viewed as overly educated with a lifestyle that is too far removed from the traditional lifestyle of women religious, which is considered to negatively affect their spiritual life. For example, JK believes the Vatican disapproves of them at times and thinks that "because we're educated and experienced and we're -- use initiative that we wouldn't be fervent nuns." Lee also relayed that she sensed the Vatican feels threatened by them and that "they're fearful that we'll lose our faith or that we'll, you know, be the cause of other people losing their faith." Buster warned that "they get all flowery about, you know, our ministry and all the good works we've done and all this kind of stuff, but I mean, it's a very kind of dismissive approach" rather than truly respecting them. The participants perceive the Magisterium as questioning their post-Vatican II lifestyle. For example, Military Avenue stated that "they chastised the sisters that perhaps we had become too democratic," "they take issue with the very way we define ourselves as Church, as religious women. Um, they feel that we have taken ourselves I think, out of the connection to their obedience structures," and that "sometimes they will mock us, you know for being, everything so relative." The general consensus was that the participants viewed the Vatican as disapproving of who they have become as women religious.

Much of the content discussed by the participants regarding their identity according to the Magisterium was informed by the recent Apostolic Visitation and the

LCWR assessment. In particular, there were several points made explicit by the Vatican in the LCWR assessment that conveyed their disapproval of women religious' conduct and identity, such as their description of some sisters as "radical feminists." Other examples include their disapproval of some of their keynote speakers at their assemblies and some of the political activism they have chosen to pursue that contradicts doctrine. Some of the participants expanded on this report by expressing their interpretations of the implied message from the Vatican. Marmaduke, for example, felt the Vatican was communicating that women religious need to prove their innocence because they are "guilty of being educated, of not being obedient, of forgetting who is boss, all the stuff -- you know, all the patriarchal stuff. That was -- that's our sin." Buckwheat communicated her bewilderment that,

> *Somehow across the ocean, they don't understand that, this newfound freedom that we are adult women, that we can think and -- and make decisions and we can -- we can live our life fully and be faithful to our vows, to be really faithful to our commitment.* (Buckwheat)

They view the Vatican as assuming that women religious are floundering in sin and spiritual confusion, and that they need the Vatican's leadership and guidance to find their way back to God and the Church.

As already noted, the participants disagree with the perception of their identity as disobedient, disloyal, and in need of direction from the Vatican. The following section describes how the participants negotiate the tension between their identity and their perception of how the Vatican views their identity.

**Research Question 1c: How Women Religious Negotiate the Tension Between These Two Constructions**

The participants' responses to the current tensions between the Vatican and women religious in the United States were often interwoven throughout the identity narratives. At times, their responses came spontaneously while other times I specifically asked how they cope with the discrepancies between their identities and who they perceive the Vatican wants them to be. The conclusion is that indeed, they are able to carry-out their vocation in a genuine manner despite the current tensions. Below are descriptions of the strategies used by participants in their journey of coping with conflict between them and the Magisterium.

**Reconstruction of the Magisterium**

Interwoven throughout the identity narratives were the participants' perceptions of the Vatican, as well as their views of the current apostolic visitation and LCWR assessment. Their ability to formulate their opinion of who the Magisterium are compared to who they ought to be was one of the coping methods used to negotiate the tension. How the participants view the current leadership within the institutional church is discussed below.

**Reconstruction of the Magisterium: Unknowing and misunderstanding.** Throughout the narratives, each participant offered her opinions about the Vatican and the current state of the institutional church. One clear message that each participant relayed was that the Vatican does not understand American women religious. As previously discussed, the participants identified that their governance structure operates in a manner that is quite distinct from the hierarchy of the Magisterium. They saw this difference as one of the key points of divergence that contributes to the Magisterium's inability to understand American women religious. AM reported, "we're so used to really collaborative and, what will I say, open discussion about things where you have all

different sides, then you come to a good remedy for whatever. We're so used to that, but they're not!" Buckwheat drew a similar conclusion regarding the divergent governing styles between women religious and the Magisterium:

> *We treat each other very gently. We look at the gifts, say, you know, we're grateful, we realize you have the gift of this and so on and so forth, and you're not called -- I mean, it's just -- it's beautifully done, beautifully done, yeah. And I remember one day years ago when we first started doing this thinking to myself, 'Wouldn't it be wonderful if this would hop across the ocean and they would get this new way of being together through talking with each other and, you know, electing each other and in a new and different way.' Well, haven't caught it yet (laughs). Haven't caught it yet. (Laughs).* (Buckwheat)

Buster reported her frustration that "bishops never really understand what women religious are trying to do." Marmaduke echoed Buster's sentiments and added that "they are so afraid of dialogue because they assume it means we want to change your minds, so they won't go near it." Several participants echoed the sentiment that "right now they are personally so out of touch with the American Church which is well educated and it is feminist in its own way. And is social justice sensitive. They are very out of touch" (Military Avenue). Other common themes were that the Vatican refuses to listen to women religious and that many of them are not as educated as some women religious. Buster viewed them as stuck in an archaic mindset and that "they can't cope with this new type of looking at earth and the world and people and the equality of all people, of all being." Sister B highlighted that it is not only the Catholic Church that suffers from an inability to adapt to changes in the modern world. She explained,

> *If you look at the broad spectrum of religions in the world, every single one of them has a wing, so there's a sort of a disease among the human race right now of clinging to a kind of literal certainty about something or other that makes them feel safe but shows a lack of human development, a lack of the capacity for nuance or for understanding situations and doesn't appreciate the importance of the subject having as much to say as the superior.* (Sister B)

There was doubt in some of the participants that the Vatican will ever be able to understand American women religious and adapt to the needs of the modern world.

The assessment of the LCWR was often viewed as an example of how the Vatican does not understand the identity of women religious. Most of the participants commented that the conclusions drawn by the Vatican regarding the LCWR's conduct was based on information that was taken out of context. Buster light-heartedly summarized her opinion of the Vatican regarding their understanding of women religious when she stated "they don't know whether it's raining or Tuesday." In other words, while it was frustrating to them that the Vatican does not seem to understand women religious and refuses to listen and learn, there is also a dismissive approach that many of the participants use in conceptualizing the ignorance of the Vatican and coping with the accusations made by the Vatican.

The participants described the Vatican not only as disconnected from the identity of women religious, but also disconnected from the needs of the laity. They explained that the men who make decisions on moral doctrine do not have life experiences nor do they work continuously with those who have the life experiences that pertain to the doctrines. For example, issues regarding life are very much stressed by church doctrine as a primary moral obligation, which affects sexual orientation, use of contraception, abortions, and access to health care. The major doctrinal document discussing contraception, *Humanae Vitae* (1968; Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, 14), was created despite the advice of experts in the field. While creating the document, Pope Paul VI gathered a commission of experts in the fields of science and social science in order to address the issue of contraception with awareness and education. However, according to two of the participants, he decided to ignore the results of the commission, opposed any use of

contraception, and declared it a universal rule. Sister B discussed this document within the political climate post-Vatican II. She stated:

> *There was a huge change after Paul VI put out Humanae Vitae, because that encyclical which prevented birth control, artificial birth control, put a huge brake on people's sense of expectations of change, and one of the reasons he wrote what he did and did not accept the recommendations of the commission that he had had studying the question -- they said yes, it should be allowed -- was because it would change Church teaching and people wouldn't believe in any of the teachings of the Church if they didn't -- if they were told that this was no longer necessary. So it was that...sudden stop to a forward momentum that some people, including Cardinal Ratzinger, now a pope, they were frightened. They thought the Church was going out of control and that brakes had to be put on.* (Sister B)

According to this viewpoint, the condemning of contraceptives was at least in part a political tool to exert power over the laity and slow down the momentum of the Vatican II changes throughout the world.

The tendency of the Magisterium to ignore or not consider advancements in science was raised by several of the participants. They pointed out that science has not yet been able to answer the question about when precisely life begins, and that the hierarchy does not have authority or knowledge to make an enforced declaration about it. Furthermore, the celibate men in the hierarchy are not able to connect with the laity's experience of family, nor do they appear to be listening to the struggles and opinions of the laity regarding these complex moral issues. Thus they continue to stand by their doctrines of morality despite the knowledge that many devout Catholics, including some theologians, disagree with their position. Lee stated that "castigating the gays and all that going gung-ho about this gay marriage and all that. I mean, (sigh), that turns young people right off because it's like condemning people for something they can't even -- it's not their fault." Marmaduke added to this sentiment by stating that the Vatican is

"foolish" and undermining its own authority through their refusal to listen to the people they are supposedly serving.

According to the participants, the Vatican's unwillingness to adequately listen to the needs of the laity affects their ability to be helpful regarding issues of morality. They suggested that the moral reasoning of the Vatican is rule-based, and that the context, individual circumstances, history, and consequences are not taken into consideration when applying morality to everyday life. Instead, a blanket moral rule is declared and must be followed by anyone who claims to be a practising Catholic. In this regard, it appears to the participants that the Vatican is unwilling to engage in dialogue or remain open to new findings in science and social science to guide their understanding of moral issues. This is in contrast to what Lee considers to be divine because "the Holy Spirit is leading you into the truth which is always changing and growing and moving." In discussing a stagnant Church, Military Avenue said the following:

> *I don't believe um, the Church ah as we know it, and as the church authority now, the institutional church as we know it now, it it really doesn't believe that it can change in its doctrine. And so divorce, divorce and remarriage will never be accepted. Homosexuality and its action will never be accepted. Civil unions will never be accepted. Contraception will never be accepted. Despite the fact of all of the new information we have on all of those issues from the new sciences, the Church I think is taking the position that things do not change. Those doctrines don't change. And so as it was, it always will be. And sisters have taken change too far.* (Military Avenue)

Lee also commented on this theme by noting that it is important for the hierarchy to uphold values and standards, "but you don't throw them down somebody's throat." She also emphasized that "the rules never saved anybody, and that's right there in the scripture. The rules do not -- you know, a law does not save you." In other words, the

amount of importance placed on these rules by the hierarchy is not in keeping with the scriptures or with the message of Christ.

**Reconstruction of the Magisterium: Power-hungry.** The participants described the Magisterium as exerting power over women religious given their rank in the institutional hierarchy. One of the general implications of the Vatican II changes was that the power and authority that historically belonged to the institution was decreasing due to the theological shifts. For example, everyone was called to an equal holiness and witness to God, religious groups were being asked to conduct their governance locally whenever possible, and in general, "they invited us to really become adult Catholics, mature, study" (Lee). This shift from absolute power to allowing Catholics to think for themselves was perceived by the Vatican as "a threat, so they use authority" (AM). Marmaduke echoed the view that the Vatican feels threatened and is resorting to abusive power:

> *I mean, their reactions bear the marks of fear ... And you watch it, they're so afraid of losing this power which is getting to be more and more like a windmill, and they have these terrible fear reactions. Unfortunately, they do have a ton of power, so they can come down on the flies with the swatter that's ten times what they need.* (Marmaduke)

Other participants referred to the Apostolic Visitation and LCWR assessment as coercive, oppressive, and "like a sniper's attack" (Military Avenue). The power tactics to exert control over the disobedient American women religious were readily identified by the participants in this study. Marmaduke was particularly suspicious of the Magisterium's true intention regarding the Apostolic Visitation and LCWR assessment. She warned that,

> *But everything about that was insidious and it just had no good and it was you are guilty, try proving yourself innocent. I wouldn't -- well, because I felt the evil was palpable. The stuff that's going on now is just this more intense manifestation of what's been going on since 1970s. They are just so angry with us and, uh, that we got educated and stood up.*
> (Marmaduke)

JK was especially astounded at the audacity of the Magisterium to interfere with the information that the LCWR is obtaining through their conferences. She wondered,

> *Why does the -- the Holy Office or whatever group that is think that they can tell us what kind of speakers we can have at our conferences? Of course we know what the Church teaches on same-sex marriage, for example. But they're so terrified we have a speaker on same-sex marriage to explain why it might be something normal. You know.* (JK)

She had the same reaction regarding the Magisterium's teaching on contraceptives:

> *Pro-life, another thing about abortions, they're hung up on abortions. How do they know that's a pastoral issue? Should be decided by the pastor, the priest, the doctor, the person, the family, not to have a -- you know, some kind of law that you can't break. How do you know?* (JK)

Lee discussed her disappointment in the general attitude of many clerics who tend to be "prophets of doom" rather than pastoral. She recalled feeling nourished by the Church in her past, but said that now they emphasize rules and dismiss the "cafeteria Catholics." She elaborated by explaining,

> *What some of these clerics are saying is so negative. It is not the good news. You know, every time you go to the liturgy, the priest is supposed to break open the word, break it open so you can hear the good news. It's not just all bad news, what you should be doing, what you -- how awful people are. No. That isn't lifting you up. That isn't inspiring you to manifest Christ in the world.* (Lee)

Marmaduke agreed with the general sentiment that the Church does not understand the lives of the laity and fail to connect with them on a meaningful level. She predicted that "they're daily losing their own authority by the way they ignore the truth and that people sense that." According to Sister B, the tendency to become abusive with power is endemic to all religions and poses a problem for its followers. She stated:

> *People who love power or who are used to coercive methods find people that fight against that, ah, annoying and obnoxious, and so there are spies*

> *out there in the Church who have a very restrictive view of what the Church should be and Catholicism.* (Sister B)

Other adjectives that the participants used to describe the institutional church throughout the narratives included: "vindictive", "superficial", "stupid", "two-faced", "bloody", "rigid", "condescending", "coercive", "horrific", and "sick with the disease of hierarchy." It is clear that, in part, the participants described the Vatican using strong, negative adjectives and often with violent metaphors, such as "now we're getting cut off at the knees" or as using "strong-arm tactics" to impose their will.

      **Reconstruction of the Magisterium: Sexist**. Another theme was the participants' perception of the Vatican as sexist at times. The majority of participants perceived the Vatican as trying to keep women religious quiet and under control. Regarding the ordination of women, Buster commented that "the whole position of the Church that you can't even DISCUSS the problem of women's ordination, I mean, that's definitely sexist because it's not theological." Others found offense in the Vatican's presumption that they have authority over what women religious discuss, read, and who they have as guest speakers, especially in the context of the LCWR assessment. AM raised the issue of the Affordable Care Act in the USA and how the LCWR was in support of this act contrary to the position of the American bishops. She reported that the women were "getting slammed for doing that, not doing what the bishops did, followed their lead. You can't think for yourself." As previously discussed, the participants viewed the Vatican as wanting women religious to have stereotypically female characteristics (e.g., submissive, nurturing, pious, etc.), and as willing to silence any woman who does not fit the traditional description. They alluded to the general maltreatment of women by the Magisterium due to traditional stereotypes and sexism. For example, "when they say

things like, 'that woman,' that terminology has a very negative connotation. 'Oh, that

woman.' 'Oh, her.' " (AM). These participants viewed the Magisterium as continuing to

believe that "the role of women has always been under the male domination"

(Buckwheat)" and as unmotivated to change this power imbalance. Military Avenue

provided a summary of feminine versus feminist theology:

> *Um … a feminist self-appreciation, or a feminist consciousness sees the egalitarian nature of male and female. Secondly, it criticizes, it - out loud, when it is not being respected. And at times to survive as a feminist, you get together with other feminists and you pray or you celebrate in a way that allows you to be a critically happy woman in the Church. So feminist and feminine spirituality are two different animals. Feminine sees a complementarity. So the more traditional is a meek, mild, obedient, lovely, sweet person who sees that ah ah complimentary men's strength to women's, you know, weakness. Or the male thinker that's his natural attribute and the woman is the heart of the family. Um, a feminist rejects that mode and says we are not complementary; we each have equal human natures. (Military Avenue)*

Military Avenue noted that many American women religious follow the feminine

spirituality and view male/female traits as complementary. She said that these women

religious tend to belong to contemplative orders and carry out their religious vocations in

a manner that is similar to pre-Vatican II religious life. Marmaduke also referenced the

differing style of religious life among women religious in the USA. She noted that

members of the Magisterium who have never accepted the changes of Vatican II tend to

"find more comfort with these women" due to their traditional values and lifestyle.

**Reconstruction of the Magisterium: Not what Jesus would do.** Aligned with

the theme of perceiving the Vatican as violent or abusing power was the general

consensus that in some ways, the Vatican is not behaving in a Christ-like manner.

Participants described the Vatican as not following in the footsteps of Jesus regarding

some of their interactions with women religious and the laity. Lee recalled that Jesus was

welcoming toward everyone, particularly tax collectors and prostitutes. The participants emphasized that Jesus' morality was based on love. Marmaduke stated that "they have amnesia, and they've forgotten the Gospel" because "Jesus would not tell a woman who's had three children, her husband's out of work, you know, all that, 'oh, no, you must conceive.' It was just -- it's compassion and love." She and Military Avenue stressed that the law of love is not relative, despite the hierarchy's accusation of the LCWR that their moral reasoning was often relative. Similarly, AM implied that the Vatican needs to model the Gospel in their daily conduct. She urged them to "let me hear more about what Jesus said to do! Re-examine what it is you're doing and the way you're doing it against that backdrop! Don't just teach a scripture and then not live it!" Thus, despite being accused by the Vatican of not following doctrine at times, it is the Vatican that the participants accuse of not always behaving in a manner that reflects the Gospel or Christian teachings.

**Reconstruction of the Magisterium: Leadership divided.** All participants noted their awareness that not all of the institutional church comprised leaders who disapproved of their identity. They conceptualized the leaders as being either for or against Vatican II changes. For example, several participants noted that during the time of Vatican II and even several years afterward, there was a sense of hope and optimism about the future of the Catholic Church. They said that there were conferences and retreats where religious men and women gathered to discuss issues and dialogue with each other. Military Avenue explained:

> *Some men who were moving on with Vatican II got it right away. And those priests supported us very much. Um, and for a while there was energy in the American Church, and uh, bishops, and so on because they had recently come back from the Vatican Council and that spirit was quite alive and. But I would say um, when, under the papacy of um, John Paul*

> *II, um, there's quite an effective return to more of an old fashioned*
> *perception of who the sister is.* (Military Avenue)

Other participants pointed out that when Pope John Paul II came into power, the

emphasis on change and collaboration shifted to one of centralized authority. They

claimed that bishops were being carefully chosen to ensure strict obedience to the Pope as

the Church slowly leaned toward a more conservative, pre-Vatican II power structure.

Pope Benedict XVI was an even greater extension of this conservative swing of the

Vatican, according to the participants. Nevertheless, American women religious did not

stop renewing and continued to develop and grow in their Vatican II identity and

apostolic works, resulting in a divide between the Magisterium and women religious.

Many expressed feeling misunderstood and punished for obeying what the institutional

church had asked them to do at Vatican II. As they stated it,

> *And so we renewed … and that's what they were telling us to do from*
> *Vatican II.  That's why this is so crazy what's happening in the Church*
> *now, because you're going backwards. They're kind of just … dissing*
> *Vatican II, it wasn't that important, or da-da-da-da, you know? Going*
> *backwards, I would say, you know, is how I experience it anyway. (Lee)*
> *Basically we did what we were invited to do by Rome (laughs), and now*
> *they -- they're unhappy with us, but we did -- they -- it was their idea to*
> *form the LCWR!* (Buckwheat)

Lee and Buckwheat were among several who voiced concern that the Magisterium is

going in the wrong direction. Buster described Pope Benedict XVI as leading the Church

back into Egypt, referring to the Biblical story of Moses who followed God's direction to

lead the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land (*Exodus* 12:40, Revised

Standard Version Catholic Edition). However, the participants also noted that they

continue to be supported by many bishops, priests, and theologians who believe in the

Vatican II renewal and encourage the current identity of American women religious.

**Reconstruction of the Magisterium: Pitiful.** A noteworthy pattern in the emotional reactions of the participants was their ability to process the initial feelings of surprise and anger to arrive at a level of compassion for the Magisterium. They reported feeling sorry for the very people who are scrutinizing them. It appears they were able to arrive at the emotional state of compassion by recognizing the limitations of the Magisterium and the inability of its members to remain open to the movements of the Holy Spirit. The shift in affect from anger to pity and compassion empowers the participants to continue in their apostolic mission and contributes to their ability to cope with conflict. For example, Marmaduke explained,

> *I have kind of a healthy detachment from that -- from that part of Church. I love the Church, but I don't care for at all some of the public officials, and I've -- in my best moments, I have compassion on their fear. In my worst moments I say, 'What do they know?' (Laughs) And worse (laughs). (Marmaduke)*

Military Avenue relayed a similar message regarding how she emotionally copes with the conflict:

> *And there are more times in my life when some of these statements come out or something and I will just mentally say "poor things. You don't have a clue what you're talking about." It's not disdain. It's a little bit of cynicism and it's, sometimes it it is judgment for being so ignorant of what they could find out. And then sometimes I just feel so sorry for them. That they call forth my my prayer, my compassion. But they never ever, that compassion never stops me for seeking justice in this situation. Great injustices have been done to us by words they've said about us, they've misrepresented us.* (Military Avenue)

Likewise, Sister B explained her reaction to the Apostolic Visitation and LCWR assessment:

> *I'm not mad at them. I know that they're creatures of the environment and the choices that they've made. Some of it is sinful, maybe a lot of it, some of it is ignorance, some of it is fear, um, some of it's ambition, but (sighs) God is bigger than all that.* (Sister B)

JK reasoned that "I'm not going to hate my -- get all upset and angry at the leaders, waste my energy on that kind of thing." Instead, she remains committed to her vocation and continues with forward momentum.

**Moving Beyond the Vatican**

Another main theme that stood out while listening to the identity narratives of the participants was their ability to rely on themselves and each other rather than the Vatican for approval. They outlined several reasons for this independence which are discussed below.

**Moving beyond the Vatican: Self-sufficient due to education.** The participants displayed confidence in their identity and have been assertive in their reactions to the Vatican regarding the apostolic visitation and the LCWR assessment. Although it has not always been present, there is self-sufficiency in their identity, resulting in a diminished need of Vatican approval. As mentioned, they struggle with the Magisterium's treatment of them as if they are uneducated and in need of theological lecturing. They expressed having the same level of doctrinal understanding as the bishops and would prefer discussions about doctrinal issues rather than being reprimanded as if ignorant. The education that the participants received has enabled them to critique the teachings of the Magisterium and assert themselves by reminding the Magisterium, "well, the more educated they became … you know, people think, and then they say, 'Well, now let's talk about this. You can't just tell me what to do, you know' " (Lee).

Many participants expressed skepticism that the Vatican was genuinely concerned with the quality of life for American women religious when they conducted the Apostolic Visitation. Instead, they wondered if the purpose of the visitation was to distract from the pedophilia scandals among the men, find out how much money American women

religious have, and exercise their authority over the lives of women religious. Some participants expressed greater levels of suspicion that the Vatican was secretly scheming behind the scenes, as evident in their lack of collaboration with women religious and their refusal to allow the final report to be viewed or discussed. Many of the participants adopted an attitude of "We have nothing to hide! Come and see" (AM) and commented that "our attitude was we were not defensive around it, trying to defend what we're doing. We claimed what we're doing. We claimed who we are and what we're doing not in the sense of defending them" (Buckwheat). A similar reaction was expressed toward the LCWR assessment. They stated that the Vatican "must have thought we were going to roll over and say 'yes, Father,' but that's not going to happen" (Sister B). Lee insisted that women religious do not need a spiritual lesson from the Vatican on prayer. She exclaimed,

> *You can't tell us ... you know, we've got -- we're going to oversee your prayer, the kind of prayer you're going to have. That was one of the things. I mean, we're mature women. You can't tell us how to put our prayer together. We know the scriptures. We know the morning and evening prayer.* (Lee)

Similarly, JK professed,

> *they don't know that they're dealing with people who are very educated, more educated than most of the bishops, and they're just as committed to the church and to liturgy and to everything else, the teachings of the church, so they're going to -- they're not going to be as -- just conform to some law.* (JK)

The participants were adamant that they do not seek the approval of the Magisterium because they are educated, experienced, and capable of conducting themselves in a manner that reflects Christian teachings and scripture.

    **Moving beyond the Vatican: Direct, personal connection with God.** Several women made it clear that no matter what happens to them or to their life as women religious, nothing can diminish their relationship with God and prevent it from growing.

As Marmaduke put it, "if I can look God in the eye and look myself in the eye, it's really all that matters." The Magisterium is no longer the gate-keeper of holiness, thereby allowing the woman religious to decide for herself, within her relationship with God, the integrity of her actions and lifestyle. Buster pointed out that the center of her faith is God regardless of what is occurring within the Catholic Church:

> *One of the things that I have developed in my spirituality over the years is a very, very, very deep commitment to and conviction about the Eucharist[23] as the center of my faith, and the mystery of what the Eucharist is is not about who is standing behind that altar.* (Buster)

Buster minimized the importance of clerical presence in the consecration of the Eucharist in relation to the continued disapproval of female ordination by the Magisterium.

The shift in the definition of vows, particularly obedience, significantly reduced the power embedded in the Magisterium. In the traditional definition of obedience, women religious were obliged to obey their Mother Superior, who was obliged to obey the Superior General, who was obliged to obey the local Bishop, who was obliged to obey the Pope. Thus, the chain-of-command directly descended from the Magisterium. However, the current definition of obedience for the participants emphasized obedience to God, especially the Word of God spoken internally through prayer and individual relationship with God. Therefore, the participants believed they were to remain spiritually open to God's will within their personal faith, as well as remain open to the advice and guidance of their community leaders. They stated that, because their leadership values collaboration and dialogue, decisions are respectfully discerned together and true obedience to God and the community is achieved. Unlike the traditional definition of

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[23] The Eucharist is the sacrament performed during the Catholic mass of the transubstantiation of the Body of Jesus. This sacrament can only be performed by ordained clergymen.

obedience, the current definition reduces the reliance on the Magisterium and increases the importance of individual conscience to obtain holy obedience. As Sister B explained, the word 'obedience' comes from the Latin language, meaning 'to listen to.' Therefore, according to the participants, when women religious listen to their leaders and to God speaking within their hearts, they are actively listening instead of passively following orders from authorities.

**Moving beyond the Vatican: Ministry prioritized over institution or doctrine.** Serving God's people is foundational to the identity of women religious. As such, they are immersed in the needs and moral challenges of the laity. The participants stressed the importance of context and individual differences when helping people discern moral dilemmas. For example, Buckwheat discussed that "we are gifted with intellect, emotions, and feelings to make decisions, and sometimes we make bad decisions. Hopefully we learn and as part of our -- our growing into wholeness - that we make bad decisions." She goes on to discuss how a woman might be faced with different challenges in her decision-making process based on her past, if she was sexually traumatized, for example. Many other participants indicated that circumstances and differing consequences must contribute to the reasoning process of morality. They discussed that they have worked side-by-side with marginalized and oppressed populations, and they are witnesses to the complexities of moral issues that universal rules do not address. Furthermore, the manner in which moral reasoning is implemented is different for some of the participants compared to the Vatican. For example, Military Avenue reported that when a member of the laity reaches out to her for guidance, she does not solely preach the Catholic position regarding that issue. Instead, she asks the person thought-provoking questions, listens to the complexities of his or her dilemma, and allows room for the

individual to come to his or her own conclusions. She explained using a scenario of a

woman who was contemplating having an abortion:

> *You come to me, we talk, we talk long times, we try to discern options, I*
> *try to help you get in contact with structures that might support you. Um,*
> *and I weep with you if you have to take that decision. But I don't judge you*
> *… I would have advocated for life in every way creatively I knew. But*
> *never to the point of manipulating her or making her feel like dirt … It's*
> *her decision. Yeah. And I would I would say that through the experience, it*
> *was a well discerned … she had looked at both sides. She had weighed*
> *what it is.* (Military Avenue)

In this example, Military Avenue displayed a collaborative, non-judgmental discernment

process in which the woman is responsible for examining all factors involved in the

decision before drawing conclusions. In this manner, the woman is growing in her

relationship with God and her role as a mature Catholic.

The voice of moral reasoning that empowers the laity and encourages them to

discern moral issues in prayer and consultation is not only heard within the participants or

women religious in general. It is also heard in the official Vatican II teachings of the

Church, called "*sensus fidelium*," or "sense of the faithful." (Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*,

12). This teaching advocates for the laity to discern God's will through their lived

experience in conjunction with the teachings of the Church. It does not necessarily mean

that the opinion of the Catholic majority should become doctrine. Rather, it is "the sense

of the faith that is deeply rooted in the people of God who receive, understand and live

the word of God in the Church" (International Theological Commission, 2012, p. 649).

Church doctrine also upholds the primacy of individual conscience and proclaims that it

is the responsibility of the faithful to formulate well-educated, prayerful decisions

regarding issues of morality (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1783). AM provided an

example of *sensus fidelium* and the primacy of individual conscience: "98 percent of the

Catholic women use contraceptives because they have primacy of conscience, and because they have -- they have a sense of -- if -- especially if they grew up in a family of 15 kids, 20 kids, 11 kids, 8 kids -- too many!" Marmaduke elaborated on the notion of individual conscience by explaining that sensus fidelium also impacts dogma on a systemic level. She stated that the official teaching of the Church claims that "dogma keeps -- is dynamic and it keeps evolving and adjusting to times, although you haven't heard that recently. If something is given by the Church and in 30 years the people have not accepted it, it loses its authority." In other words, she described that if the Church declares a dogmatic moral law, there is a 30-year grace period wherein the Holy Spirit will work among the faithful to implement the law. However, if that time period expires and the majority of the faithful are not inspired by the Holy Spirit to incorporate this practice into their spirituality, then the teaching is no longer considered official. This discrepancy between Vatican II teachings and the current attitude of the Papacy was highlighted by the participants to show how American women religious are being reprimanded for doctrinal concerns despite their adherence to official Church teachings.

**Moving beyond the Vatican: Definition of Church.** In addition to their education and sense of obedience, another reason why women religious are less dependent upon Vatican approval is because of their redefinition of "Church." A prolific point made by every participant was that the institutional portion of the Church is only a governance structure and that the true Church also includes God's people. AM explained that "we are the Church, you see, and so we have a very important role, each one of us, to make this Church be what Jesus wanted it to be." Marmaduke echoed this redefinition and added "so they can't put us out, and we will continue." When this re-conceptualization of "Church" occurs, the power of the hierarchy is somewhat reduced

and placed into the hands of the millions of Catholics who make up the Church. This shift

in power was brought to the surface during the Second Vatican Council and directly

relates to the change in theology that everyone is called to equal holiness and is

encouraged to develop a mature, educated, personal relationship with God and the

Universal Church (Catholic Church: Documents of Vatican II, 1963-1965). For this

reason, several of the participants noted that the Vatican cannot destroy their identity or

their commitment to the Church. Buckwheat stated this clearly:

> *But right now at my age, I say there's nothing they can take from me (laughs).*
> *They can't take my faith away from me. They can't take away the God I believe in.*
> *I'm sorry, I'm committed to this for a lifetime. You can't take that away from me,*
> *you know ... You can disagree with me. You can't take that -- like, this thing*
> *about excommunicating, you can't excommunicate me from God, I'm sorry*
> *(laughs). Doesn't happen.* (Buckwheat; ellipse added).

Thus, the Church is not synonymous with the Magisterium. Sister B cautioned, however,

that although it is true that the Church is God's people, it includes the hierarchy and must

be taken as a whole in order to work collaboratively together toward unification.

**Coping Through Relationship with Women Religious**

Given that the identity of the participants is largely constructed through their

relationship with women religious, it was important that they relied on each other as a

coping resource. The following sections outline how the participants negotiated the

tension with the Magisterium through their relationship with each other.

**Coping through relationship with women religious: Bonding.** The participants

reported a general progression of emotional reaction to the recent actions of the

Magisterium that began with anger, moved through some sadness or resistance, but

eventually concluded with perseverance and determination to continue the apostolic work

of God in the modern world. One of the consequences of being scrutinized as a whole

through the Apostolic Visitation and the LCWR assessment was that it provided

opportunity for American women religious to dialogue with each other about their

reactions to the Vatican. Furthermore, it created dialogue about deeper issues, such as

their identity, the way they have carried-out the changes of Vatican II, the merits of their

apostolic works, and the future of religious life.  In reaction to the criticisms of the

Magisterium, women religious "have bonded together tighter than ever before"

(Buckwheat) and depend on each other to cope with the feelings of injustice and

resentment. For example, women religious have been able to process their feelings with

each other and have discovered that "the only way to harness the anger is to get together

with others who are also angry and try to find the gospel in it or find God in it"

(Marmaduke). Through the bonding process, they discovered that "we don't have any

division in my knowledge of, like, some sisters saying, 'we absolutely have to do exactly

what the Church says', and over here saying, 'well, we got to adapt it' " (JK). Bonding

also helped the participants to "just go on with our life" (JK). Military Avenue elaborated

on the bonding process in her reaction to the Apostolic Visitation and the LCWR

assessment:

> *And when I would get with the sisters, I would, you know, I would hear again how the Church, the "Church stuff", the terrible new Roman Missal, and isn't that terrible about what they're doing about the … whatever. And I'd say "isn't that terrible?! Those … can you believe it?! Those bums!" or "can you believe beep beep beep beep beep beep!" I'd get angry and I'd realize that they have no right to do this! And, and I'd go back to teaching, and I'd … well I'd just hope to God that's … I mean, who gives a shit about that? And I'd just once again, put my heart and soul into this. I think that's what most sisters have done. (Military Avenue)*

Through bonding, the participants relied on each other as emotional and instrumental

coping resources.

The collective unification of confidence and perseverance in their identity and ministry allowed what Buster considered to be a historical trend that "what I see religious women doing, you know, is what women have done forever in a patriarchal society. You say 'yes, yes', and then do what you damn well please." Furthermore, this bonding among women religious has expanded to the laity who has also taken offense on behalf of women religious. The support of the laity has reassured the participants in the sense that it "helps you realize people perceive injustice has been done. This is not, these are not mental disorders that we have within ourselves" (Military Avenue). The outrage and support in forms of petitions, news articles, and telephone calls reassured these women that their work is appreciated and necessary. AM expressed her delight in the reaction of the laity:

> *Even the laypeople, I mean, thousands upon thousands of laypeople have sent letters, they have signed petitions with -- there are 57,000 nuns in the LCWR, and they got a petition signed by 57,000 people to bring to the bishop in charge of this thing, which shows that those people are the ones we trained according to Vatican II. You see, so they have a mindset that's Vatican II, and they can't understand why this is happening to us. They've worked with us! They know!* (AM)

The support from the laity bolstered the participants' voices of resilience against the accusations that they are not accurately reflecting Jesus' work among God's people.

**Coping through relationship with women religious: Affirmation of identity through conflict.** One of the consequences of the recent criticism of American women religious by the Magisterium is that American women religious have been forced to discuss the topic of identity with one another. They have created opportunities to reflect on the theological journey that the changes of Vatican II have provided, including who they were in the past and who they are today. They said that even though the visitation was a distraction from their daily work and a waste of time and resources, they welcomed

the visitors with respect because "It doesn't bother us. We're not going to change anyway. We're just going to go on living our life fervently" (JK). Nevertheless, some participants have a quiet concern that the secret document compiled as a result of the Apostolic Visitation may resurface in the future at a time that is convenient for the Vatican.

Similarly, when confronted with the assessment of the LCWR, the members collaborated and discussed issues of identity and brainstormed possible courses of action. Indeed, the participants reported pride in the reaction of the LCWR to the assessment because they did not submit to the aggressive tactics of the Vatican. Instead, they have responded by inviting the Vatican into dialogue about the doctrinal issues that concern the Vatican. They have asserted themselves without resorting to aggression in a manner that models the very collaborative style that they claim to use in their governance. The reason for the support and pride of the participants is twofold. First, the LCWR dialogued about how to proceed with their response to the assessment. AM stated that "the LCWR meeting was a perfect example of collaboration and contemplative consideration of the issues at hand, and then practically a 100 percent assent to the decision of what would be done by the leaders." Second, the leaders then responded to the Vatican with respect, integrity, and attempts to dialogue in an effort to work within the Catholic Church instead of either submitting or leaving the Church. Sister B described her delight in the response of the LCWR, as well as the development of identity that was imperative in thriving despite the Magisterium's criticisms:

> *Regarding the assessment, I read it when it came, and I said some of these complaints are legitimate and I've mentioned them in this. Our spirituality in some ways is wonky, and leadership the way it operates right now allows people a lot of wiggle room while they experiment with their spirituality, so they don't say to sisters "thou shalt not," which is an appropriate use of leadership, I think, because obedience is "to hear together," and unless you allow the other person to really speak, there's*

*no mutual listening, but we also don't know how to speak directly to an issue quite often, and that's one of the things I've been watching as, you know, my years in the coordinating council. The leaders that -- that we have had in the recent years have a clearer sense of a kind of bottom line of what they want to happen, and the way they approach dealing with -- like, describing a bottom line is to enter in dialogue with people so that it's like together in a contemplative dialogue setting we find a truth beneath all the fights that we didn't know we had, and it has changed us, so the people in Rome -- and there's some people in the United States -- who have not had this experience and can't even imagine it are coming at us out of an authoritative model. They don't know the conversation and dialogue and patience work, and I think they must have thought we were going to roll over and say "yes, Father," but that's not going to happen. So my initial reaction when that came out was I hope we don't just say no, because if we do that, we'll close a door which could have become a door to teaching them a new way, and what the LCWR has done is said, 'We want to talk,' so they have answered my prayer or God has answered my prayer, and that's really been from a consensus of the women religious in the country because they came having listened, listened to their sisters, so that's been a blessing, and I think it's going to change the Church. I do.* (Sister B)

This hope was common among all of the participants who prayed that the Vatican would listen with an open heart and mind to the perspective of women religious.

**Coping Through Relationship with God**

Just as the participants used their relationship with each other as a coping resource, they also used their relationship with God to help them endure the current conflict. The following sections describe how the participants found comfort, hope, and strength through their relationship with God.

**Coping through relationship with God: Trusting.** Nearly every participant expressed hope and trust in God that the issues occurring in the Church currently would work themselves out to produce a better, more inclusive version of religious life. AM specifically believed that "nothing happens by chance, none of this investigation is by chance. God permits human beings to do what they're going to do and then he brings good out of the mess they make." This trust in God and Holy Spirit extends beyond the

problems within the Catholic Church to problems on a global level. Lee described her faith in the power of the Holy Spirit:

> *How I see my life is being attentive to the Spirit that I think is very alive in the world, and there's so many things that can be depressing (laughs), the news, you know, whatever. I mean, there's a lot of tragedy in the world, but the basic underpinnings of it, to me, is very hopeful that, ah, you know, Jesus came and sent us the Spirit and his message, and his whole meaning is important to the way I see things, and I would just like to ... I have always wanted to share that with other people through the works that I have done.* (Lee)

The unfaltering faith in the guidance of the Holy Spirit is one of the main factors contributing to the sisters' perseverance within the Catholic Church despite the current tensions. They professed their faith in the grace of God that the suffering and tension experienced in the present Church is necessary and meaningful. The hope is that the movement of the Church as a result of this tension will be in the direction that God plans, even if they are not alive to see the plan unfold into fruition. For many of them, it is their trust in God that allows them to continue their ministry within the Church while feeling secure about the integrity of who they have become and their reaction to the hierarchy. AM noted that "our congregation is not acting in fear, but that's because we believe in the Holy Spirit, that this unrest and this tension is creative, it is going to create something much better, much better." Buster explained that it is not always obvious where the Holy Spirit is leading the Church and joked that, "The Holy Spirit knows what She's doing with the Church and She ain't telling the Vatican (laughs)." There was a sense among the participants that who women religious have become, at least in their congregation, was closer to the example set by Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament. According to them, this close resemblance to the early Christians (e.g., working and living with the poor, small-group governance, looking similar to the people they serve, living simply) is proof that they are heading in a Godly direction and have carried out the changes of

Vatican II as guided by the Holy Spirit. This answer to Jesus' call to mission gives them a sense of confidence in the face of the current criticisms from the Vatican.

Some participants experience inner strength through their relationship with God by remembering "this is experiencing the cross (Lee)" of Jesus Christ (referring to his suffering and death when he was crucified). They are able to relate their current struggles with the suffering of Jesus. By doing this, they know they are not alone and that God will give them the strength to endure and persevere.

**Coping through relationship with God: Perseverance and the voice of a new era (Research question 2: How do women religious experience generativity).** The following subsection describes the participants' experience of the second research question: how do women religious experience generativity? Their replies are included in this section because their confidence in the generativity process is a key component of their ability to cope with tension with the Magisterium.

The topic of generativity was explicitly asked about during the interview, although several participants spontaneously discussed it throughout the interview. Generativity was an issue that each participant had been contemplating in the past, and it appeared that they all had discussions with other women religious about generativity. In fact, within the congregation, this issue had been discussed as part of the agenda in several meetings, both in small-group discussions and by the leadership team. In general, there was an acknowledgment that religious life in the United States is changing and that the future is very uncertain. There was a mixture of responses to this fact which will be discussed below.

The overriding point that the participants made was that religious vocations in general will continue to prosper in one form or another, just as they have thrived

throughout Church history. There is a sense that "anybody who has a real religious vocation, that there's a -- something in them that won't be satisfied by ordinary life. They want some prophetic dimension to their life" (Sister B). The transitional phase of religious life from what these women lived to whatever form comes next is a common thread throughout the history of religious life. Buster explained that,

> *Religious life has been through periods of great flourishing and great falling off, okay? Religious life has always existed in the Church. Religious women have always existed in the Church under many forms, consecrated virginity, associations of widows going all the way back to the first century. I have no worry that there will be religious vocations. There are religious vocations out there.* (Buster)

JK noted that when it comes to the recent lack of religious vocations, "we're talking in the United States of America, but other places in the world are in different stages" and that the struggle of generativity is not necessarily a global concern.

There was a mixture of emotions regarding the current transitional period of religious life in the United States. AM was delighted at the prospect of religious life returning to a former version of itself that more closely resembles religious life during the days of early Christianity. She shared her dream for religious life:

> *My dream is that the next pope we get will be what I call a peripatetic pope. He will not reside in Rome. They can turn that over for the poor to live in and have a nice church there for the people to go to, but a peripatetic Rome that travels around the world to all the church communities in every country and get to get a feel for how the Church has evolved within that culture and then that -- that that culture will be allowed to sort of form how the word of Jesus and the works of Jesus will be done in that milieu, and the pope will be very knowledgeable about it, and if he has to have a home base, make it back in Jerusalem, and just go back there where Jesus died and where he rose and just have a little hut there and not 25 servants and a secretary and all of that. Now they have computers you can talk to. Just talk to the computer and let it do -- let it translate into many languages for you. (Laughter) Anyway, that's my wild dream.* (AM)

AM was not the only participant who had high hopes for the future of religious life. Many expressed the need for religious life to take on a new form from its current functioning because it no longer makes sense within American culture. What may be required in the new form of religious life is "to create a new model that would be more inclusive and less influenced by a patriarchy" (Marmaduke) because "It will never be what it was … religious life was based on hierarchal structure. The Holy One is the Pope, cardinals, bishops, priests, came down to religious women, and of course marriage was the bottom of the totem pole" (Buckwheat). However, this hierarchical model of religious life no longer fits with the theology of Vatican II or with the social awareness of power structures that has developed in the USA.

The transformation of religious life, although necessary, was still experienced as a loss for Buckwheat. She explained that even within her lifetime as a woman religious, the lifestyle and form of religious life changed significantly from when she entered to what it is today. She elaborated on her sense of loss by stating, "it's evolution. Evolution is always about losing in order to gain, to develop into something different. But you lose what was here before into something new and different, but it's that in between part that can be painful." Thus, the sense of loss is part of the natural evolution of life, but the fact that religious life is transforming and changing does not bother her. What concerns her is how to ensure that the laity is perpetuating the values of her congregation, particularly those who work within the Motherhouse in positions that used to be occupied by women religious.

Lee was quite distraught at what she fears is a lack of faith in the younger generation. She explained that in her family and among many youth that she encounters, the Catholic Church is not an important component of their spiritual life. Although she is

sad about this, she understood the reason why so many youth have left the Church. She explained,

> *I have very strong feelings about these things because I care a lot about the Church. I care about, ah, you know, the passing on the faith, passing on the faith to the next generation. They are not going to -- they are not going to get it! They aren't getting it! They're turning away. The young people seem to be walking away. They don't like the way the Church treats women, so they just -- they don't -- they haven't found the beauty or the -- how nourishing it is ... it's heartbreaking that people are walking away, that the largest group of -- the largest group of religious people, the size of the Catholics are the non-Catholics, the Catholics that have walked away. (Lee)*

Lee was tearful during the interview about her disappointment that her own family members experience the critical, exclusionary version of the institutional church instead of the warm, pastoral Church that she experienced as a woman religious.

Buckwheat commented on the generativity of the laity, but framed it within the inevitable evolution of human beings. She explained that,

> *We learn to live in community here, which is the hope and dream for the globe that we all can live in community. I mean, to me, that's God's dream for us. We all live together on this globe, all together as one. When we say 'I believe in one holy, Catholic apostolic,'[24] that's my dream of the world, not Catholic necessarily, but that we're all living in -- that's God's Church, that we are all one. (Buckwheat)*

This sentiment was shared by Military Avenue who commented on the larger picture of religious life within the context of Church history. She suggested that at some point, "we'll be so much closer to the truth. And if it's not the same articulation of the truth, it will be that we will have a unity in our diversity. You know, that's a unity too. It's non-judgmental." Thus, it is evident that there are a variety of emotions in reaction to generativity of vocation and faith, from excitement to sadness, but the overall sense of the

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[24] This quote is in reference to a creed of what Roman Catholics believe. The creed is recited at every mass.

participants is that change is inevitable and that it is occurring both for religious vocations and for the laity at large.

Military Avenue also spoke about the disparity between new recruits in her congregation compared to more conservative congregations. She said that these young women who are choosing to enter highly structured, pre-Vatican II forms of religious life, who wear the habit and become Brides of Christ, remind her of her first few years religious life. She stated that nostalgia emerges when she sees these women, but she wonders if they will follow a similar path of growth and transformation that many women religious experienced in her lifetime. She noted that it might be an authentic form of spirituality for them even though it was not authentic for her or for many of her peers. Instead of criticizing their choice of religious vocation, she once again prayed for a sense of unity within the diversity.

Regarding their specific congregation, the participants had similar feelings and opinions about their process of transformation. They recognized that they have very few new recruits and that their congregation will not be able to function the way it did in the past, if it survives at all. Several reasons were offered for the drastic change in new recruits. The main reason noted by the participants was that the purpose of their congregation was to develop education facilities for immigrant families who moved to the United States of America. As JK explained it,

> *We were founded for a certain thing, we did it well, we did it so well we don't need it anymore. We meet the need and now the need is over. So all these people that are educated, they're doing what we were doing and they're married at the same time and they have families.* (JK)

She also pointed out that large numbers of religious women were needed to operate schools and hospitals, but large numbers of them are no longer needed for the mission

work of today. According to Sister B and Marmaduke, another main reason why current recruitment into their congregation is currently low is because of the congregation's transformation after Vatican II. On a national level, many women religious left religious life for a variety of reasons, both due to the changes themselves (e.g., married life held in equal holy status as religious life) and due to the changes occurring within American culture (e.g., more opportunities for women). During the decades that followed Vatican II, the process of education and adjustment affected the identity of American women religious and their ability to recruit new members, particularly within the participants' congregation. Marmaduke explained that "there was a time when we weren't so sure what we did stand for, and during that time we weren't recruiting or trying to attract because we weren't sure it was a -- you know, and 300 left. That was a little demoralizing." She stated that they were not entirely sure of the future of their congregation which made it difficult to recruit others. Similarly, Sister B struggled with inviting women into the congregation to become a sister because "I had no clue what that meant. I wasn't -- I mean, I knew what I was. I knew I had followed what God asked me to do, but I couldn't say to them, 'Come and see our life,' because our life was still, like, molten." Now that they have grown and developed a mature sense of spirituality, and now that they have a better sense of who they are and how they operate, she is confident in extending an invitation to new recruits.

The new form that their congregation will take is still unknown to the participants. They identified several factors that must be considered throughout the transformation process. For example, they noted that they have not changed the criteria for entering their congregation. They still expect their recruits to be educated and well-discerned in their decision to join religious life. However, they stated that there is a wider age-range in the

new recruits and that they are more educated than the recruits of their era. Moreover, the spirituality of the new recruits and the history of their faith are different from the participants' spirituality and faith journey. Admittedly, their congregation cannot rely on previous methods of formation because,

> *We have no experience in bringing people into the new Church. We know what it was like to run a novitiate in the medieval model … we have not approached the spirituality of these people as it actually is, and we are not going to form them to who we are now, I don't think. We have got to pay attention to what -- what is in them already.* (Sister B)

To this end, the congregation has already displayed flexibility and openness to new possibilities as evident in their incorporation of associate members. Associate members are people (women, men, married, single, gay, straight, etc.) who want to be part of the congregation and contribute to the apostolic works, but do not want to take full vows. Even the form of recruitment has been updated; most of the new recruits, according to several of the participants, discovered the congregation on-line.

The overarching belief regarding generativity was that the future of religious life is in the hands of God who will guide it into an important direction. AM professed that the current tension within the Church is creative and imperative for the future of religious life. She stated that "I think a whole new wonderful thing will happen. Maybe not in my lifetime, because God doesn't work in minutes and seconds, but a whole new thing will emerge." For many of the participants, it is this trust in God that eliminates anxiety regarding stagnation and brings hope that their values and achievements will not only carry into the new generation, but will take on new forms that meet the emerging needs of the modern world. Thus, their belief in God's plan for the generativity of women religious, particularly within American society at large, enhances their confidence that they will thrive once the crisis subsides.

**Been There, Done That**

One of the reasons why the participants were able to cope with the current conflict with the Vatican so effectively was because they had previous experience with this type of tension, either personally or historically as a group. For example, Buster noted that "the history of the foundresses of religious communities, especially active religious communities, is a history of conflict with bishops" (Buster). The historical conflict between church authorities and others is reassuring for Lee who recalled that even when it came to Jesus, "they rejected him. They misinterpreted … right? And they did it to Joan of Arc. They've done it to so many saints, I mean, you know. Who are we? We aren't going to be spared" (Lee). Regarding the current conflict between the Vatican and the LCWR, women religious "have gone this circle so many times … each time it gets worse, and this is the worst" (Marmaduke; ellipse added), yet their ability to overcome the conflict and persevere despite the tension continues to improve, especially as the confidence in their identity grows.

One participant, Military Avenue, discussed personal conflict with church authority that she experienced during her career. She recalled feeling so shattered by the conflict that she considered leaving the vocation.  However, as time passed, she came to the following conclusion:

> *I will NEVER give anyone or any institution my power like I did before. That it could so devastate me. And so it was like, um, you know, yes the Church was horrific in what it did, and I almost let it suck all the life out of me til I reclaimed myself and said "you'll never do that to me again."* (Military Avenue)

When subsequent conflict with the Vatican occurred, she was able to recover quickly and without feeling as emotionally overwhelmed. Therefore, she feels equipped to cope with the current conflict between American women religious and the Vatican.

**Chapter Summary**

The identity narratives of the participants revealed self-concepts that were confident and active, as well as collective self-concept that was flexible yet strong. The participants viewed themselves as women who have dedicated their lives to God and to service of God's people through ministry within their chosen vocation as sisters. Through their relationship with God and with other women religious, they have grown as individuals and as a group to become mature, knowledgeable Catholics who are immersed in the challenges and triumphs of the modern world. They have embraced the renewal of the Second Vatican Council and take pride in the impact they have on American culture. Although there was a time when they were not certain of their identity, they now feel confident in who they have become as individuals and as a collective.

The participants expressed a discrepancy between who they are, who they think the Vatican expects them to be, and who the Vatican says they are. Influenced by previous interactions with the Vatican, the current apostolic visitation, and LCWR assessment, the participants perceive the Vatican as wanting them to be obedient, subservient, and meek. In other words, they are expected to embody the stereotypical female and traditional nun. Instead, they perceive the Vatican as viewing women religious as rebellious renegades who are in need of reprimand and leadership. Nevertheless, the participants described coping with the current challenges in a manner that has allowed them to transcend the immerging conflict of the divergent identity constructions. They have their own views of who the Vatican are compared to who want them to be. Due to their identity growth and maturity over the decades, they do not rely on the approval of the Vatican and feel confident in their choices despite criticisms. They find strength in each other and their faith in God's plan for women religious and the

Church. Finally, they look forward to the future and what the next era of religious life has in store for women religious, particularly in the United States of America.

To close this chapter, I chose to include one final quote from Military Avenue that summarizes her capacity to thrive throughout the current conflict with the Magisterium. She stated:

> *Um, we have followed this path. I believe in the process that took us … I believe in the process that took us through all of that change. And I believe in the happiness of my own life. And the sense of meaning that I have. I'm celebrating 50 years of being a sister and I am delighted to tell people that. So, um despite the resistance of the bishops I'm sometimes like, 'oh my God, here they go again!' I try to let my, um, my validation of my own lifestyle be more important than their criticism of us, of me. That's how I survive it.* (Military Avenue)

CHAPTER 6

**Discussion**

**Research Question 1a: The Identity of American Women Religious**

The goal of the study was to gain a better understanding of how American women religious construct their identity, how they construct the Magisterium's view of their identity, and how they reconcile any differences between these two identity constructs. The secondary goal was to explore the sisters' experience of generativity versus stagnation given the lack of new recruits to American apostolic orders.

The sisters interviewed in this study discussed many components of their identities as women religious. They began by describing their individual identities, emphasizing their life missions to love God by serving God's people. This call to love and serve God was so integral to their individual identities that they chose to dedicate their lives to God through the vocation of religious life where they could belong to a committed group of women with similar life goals. In other words, their self-concept of being called to a life of love and service by God was actualized through their vocation of religious life. The role of women religious, therefore, perfectly aligned with their individual identities. Through their relationship with God and women religious, they described themselves as faithful, active, educated, mature, and grateful servants of God.

In the introduction, the symbolic interactionist model of identity (MacKinnon & Heise, 2010) was outlined. In this model, there are three levels of interaction that affect identity: the macro-sociological, micro-sociological, and individual levels. This theory purports that identity is influenced by individual characteristics, group affiliations, and cultural context. Within these components of identity, language, affect, and behaviours contribute to the systems and roles that influence each individual. The identity of the

participants can be understood with the symbolic interactionist framework and through the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982). The social group labeled women religious (micro-sociological level) was externally established through the approval of the Catholic Church (macro-sociological level). During the Second Vatican Council, the Magisterium encouraged women religious to incorporate the theological, spiritual, and practical changes into their constitutions and daily lifestyle. Women religious as a group were internally populated by individuals (individual level) who were called by God to serve others through this vocation. They incorporated the Vatican II changes into their lifestyle and ministries. Specifically, the changes they experienced were becoming educated in theology and scripture study, reshaping the governance structure of their congregation from hierarchical to collaborative, immersing themselves into the modern world by interacting on an equal plane with the laity, and emphasizing their personal relationship with God. As the women religious were becoming exposed to these new values and attitudes, they were also growing as individuals and incorporating the values and attitudes into their individual identities. Thus, over the decades, the self and group identities have become solidified due to their enmeshed values, beliefs, attitudes, and activities, yet the group allows for individual growth and development.

**Social Identity Theory: Group Development**

In social identity theory, groups are developed through two separate processes: establishment of the group from an external source, and the internal population of the group by individual members (Tajfel, 1982). Once a group is established, the next tasks are to develop and maintain its social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to Cameron (2004), group identity development is represented by three components: 1) cognitive centrality or "the amount of time spent being a group member," 2) ingroup

affect or "the positivity of feelings associated with membership in the group," and 3) ingroup ties or "perceptions of similarity, bond, and belongingness with other group members" (Cameron, 2004, p. 241). These features recall the psychological criteria of social identity described by Tajfel (1982).

From a psychological standpoint, to identify oneself as a member of a group, an individual must express an awareness of one's commitment to the group, judge the group as meaningful to one's life, and invest in the group emotionally (Cameron, 2004). In the present study, there was an overwhelming sense of centrality of group membership for the participants. There was unanimous discussion about how each participant was "called" by God into religious life in order to fulfill her individual purpose: to serve God and God's people. The second factor that must be internally present for individual members of a social group is ingroup affect. This factor involves how the individuals feel toward their membership to the group (Cameron). The participants abundantly reported that they felt gratitude toward their religious community and discussed their love of both individual members of the community, and how the community functions as a whole. The third component of internal group development according to social identity theory is labeled ingroup ties. This factor is measured by the amount of cohesion expressed by members of the group and how much they feel a part of the group (Cameron). The participants expressed a sense of belongingness to their community due to several aspects of community behaviour. Specifically, they noted that the apostolic work they perform as a community allows each member to contribute to the service of God's people. Furthermore, some discussed the educational efforts of their formation process, as well as their governance structure that led to their ability to fully embrace Vatican II theology.

Some participants also noted that the vow of poverty encourages the sisters to share their material possessions and live as a collective when appropriate.

According to the participants, one of the key aspects of their identity is that their congregation has encouraged each member to develop her individual identity while simultaneously forming their identity as a collective. The shift in the collective identity, as discussed in the introduction, began with the emphasis on education through the Sister Formation movement and continued with the renewal of Vatican II. According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), the activities and attitudes of the group are partially determined by the individual identities of its members. Conversely, as the activities and attitudes of the group are developed, its members grow in understanding themselves. This reciprocal relationship between the collective and the individual was celebrated by the participants in their identity narratives. They reported with pride that they allow each member to be herself while contributing to the collective and moving forward as a cohesive whole. Social identity theory suggests that when a group is faced with substantial identity shifts, its members must re-organize their self-concepts in order for integration of the new social identity to occur (Amiot, Sablonniére, Terry, & Smith, 2007). Indeed, the participants reported that their individual and collective identities were being shaped both simultaneously and congruently.

Returning to the symbolic interactionist model (MacKinnon & Heise, 2010), Figure 2 (see Appendix D) represents the group identity development process, as described by the participants, during the Second Vatican Council time period. As the diagram displays, there was a shift in the identity of women religious led by the Magisterium (macro-level). The shift of identity at the micro-level inevitably influenced identity at the individual level, such as promoting a personal relationship with God,

revising their religious vows, and promoting education. In this regard, the group and individual identities had a dynamic and integrated relationship, bolstering the strength of each identity, and creating group cohesion in the social identity. The identity transformation at the micro and individual levels occurred in tandem with an American culture that was becoming more educated, advanced in social awareness, and independent in their spirituality as well. Thus, during the time of Vatican II, all three levels of identity, in conjunction with the laity, were harmonious.

## Research Questions 1b and 1c: Construction of Identity by the Magisterium and How Women Religious Negotiate the Tension

The participants in this study have been members of their religious community for over 50 years. They have all expressed delight in their chosen vocation and plan to remain members of their community for the entirety of their lives. However, they have encountered several challenges along their spiritual journey as women religious. For example, when asked how they perceive that the Magisterium constructs their identity as women religious, and asked how they deal with any discrepancies from their own construction of identity, the participants outlined the challenges they are currently facing. The topics of the Apostolic Visitation and LCWR assessment did not require prompting during most of the interviews. Throughout their discussions, the overriding voice heard throughout the narratives was the voice of thriving, the ability to not only overcome adversity, but to achieve personal growth as a result (Carver, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

### Thrive Theory

Thrive theory derives from literature on resilience (Carver, 1998). When a threat or stressor is encountered, many people are affected both physically and psychologically.

Their general level of functioning becomes disrupted, at least temporarily. However, most people are able to 'bounce back' and re-establish their previous level of functioning after the threatening event subsides. The ability to effectively re-establish healthy psychological functioning in the face of adversity is referred to as resilience (Newman, 2005). There are several variables that are linked to resilience because they serve as buffers to stress or improve the reaction to stress, leading to enhanced adjustment (Rutter, 1987). These variables are called protective factors and include psychological and environmental variables, such as emotional functioning, cognitive abilities, socioeconomic status, and social support (Madsen & Abell, 2010). Protective factors directly affect the resilient outcome and interact with other variables throughout the process of adversity leading to resilience (Rutter, 1987).

Thriving essentially extends resilience by suggesting an individual not only regains healthy functioning, but undergoes positive changes which results in surpassing pre-stressor levels of functioning (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). According to Carver (1998), thriving is 'turned on' in the context of stress. Thriving can be achieved in two main ways. Firstly, thriving occurs when the person who experienced stress becomes desensitized to the threat and can therefore cope with the threat more effectively the next time that same threat is perceived. Secondly, positive changes in emotional functioning can be achieved by improved recovery potential which occurs when the person is affected by the same threat, but is able to recover more quickly (Carver, 1998).

Carver (1998) also outlines three potential factors that can aid individuals in thriving, in contrast to individuals who would struggle after a stressful event. The first factor is that people who have experienced a crisis acquire pertinent skills or knowledge that enables them to learn how to overcome the threat, or to become flexible in coping

with the crisis. Another factor is gaining confidence in the ability to cope with the crisis, often stemming from the skills and knowledge gained in the process. The final factor is a strengthening of personal relationships, particularly with others who have experienced similar crises and have coped successfully (Carver, 1998).

In the present study, the disparity between the identity of American women religious and what the Magisterium expects their identity to be has been a source of conflict and a potential threat to the sisters' social identity. The ability of the participants to survive this threat and achieve a level of functioning that surpasses previous levels is the manifestation of thriving (Carver, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The ability to thrive stems from protective factors found in their identity (e.g., education, collaborative governance structure, redefinition of vows, and their personal relationship with God), the skills/knowledge and confidence they have gained from previous conflicts with the Magisterium and decades of growth (e.g., reconstruction of the Magisterium, independence from Vatican authority, and coping through their relationship with God), and the strengthening of personal relationships they have fostered through collaboration with other women religious. Specifically, the conflict has resulted in opportunities for women religious to discuss the issue of identity as individuals and as a group, which in turn has fortified their sense of identity. Through these discussions, they have increased confidence that their actions are theologically and scripturally based. This allows them to continue ministering to the laity with renewed spirit and strength. They have also grown in consciousness about the identity of the Catholic Church which incorporates the laity, religious members, and ordained clergymen. Therefore, they are empowered to voice the need for transformation of the Church as led by God, and to respond to the Magisterium

in a manner that models the transformations they are seeking by inviting them into respectful dialogue.

**Social Identity Theory: Group Maintenance**

The main factor contributing to the current tension between the Magisterium and American women religious is divergent opinions about how to apply the teachings of the Second Vatican Council to religious life. The disparity between the Magisterium and women religious has resulted in two separate social identities: the macro-level identity of the Magisterium (outgroup) and the micro-level identity of the women religious (ingroup). The social identity of the Magisterium, according to the participants, is growing increasingly conservative, rule-oriented, and hierarchical in its attitudes and governance. Furthermore, they stated that the Magisterium expects that women religious will also adopt these parameters of identity and group values and behaviours. However, the sisters have continued to renew their faith within the Vatican II model of spirituality and ministerial life.

An example of how the differing group identities between women religious and the Magisterium manifests is through the beliefs and behaviours regarding moral leadership. As vowed members of the Catholic Church, members of both groups are in the delicate position of representing the Church and Church teachings while fulfilling their call to be a voice for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. The challenge surfaces when complex issues of morality arise because the two groups have different styles of moral leadership. Specifically, the Magisterium emphasizes dogma and has explicitly criticized some women religious, namely the LCWR, as behaving in ways contrary to Church doctrine. Indeed, the participants provided several examples of women religious

voicing the complexity of a moral issue and being reprimanded for disagreeing with the position of bishops (e.g., regarding the American Affordable Care Act).

In response to this accusation, the sisters in this study insisted that they are well aware of the Catholic Church's teachings on moral issues and have no intention of rebelling against those teachings. However, they discussed the necessity of allowing people to draw their own moral conclusions based on education, discernment, and obedience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They spoke of understanding that in any moral dilemma, it is important to consider the context and the consequences of the decision, and that part of their role as ambassadors of the Church is to encourage growth and maturity in the spirituality of the laity. They endorsed the importance of individual conscience whereby a well-discerned individual decision, stemming from faithful conscience, trumps dogma. They declared the necessity of upholding their values and educating others based on these values, but not at the expense of prohibiting others from choosing their own path. This is a different approach to the dissemination of moral values than the rule-based approach of dogmatic teaching whereby the rules must be universally applied without question. However, the dogmatic approach is a common approach to teaching morality in the institutional church, thereby creating tension between the Magisterium and women religious. Thus, the divergent approaches to moral leadership between the Magisterium and women religious can be attributed to differences in the beliefs and attitudes within their social identities regarding moral leadership.

There are two key aspects to social identity that are congruent with the identity of the participants in this study and may help to explain the thriving success of women religious: superordinate groups and flexible prototypes. The Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) submits that if the ingroup identifies with a larger

group, known as a superordinate group, then there is less intergroup prejudice or discrimination. The participants often identified with the laity, which would be considered a superordinate group. Furthermore, the model proposes that the ingroup is more likely able to identify with a superordinate group when there is high ingroup cohesion and security in identity (Amiot, Sablonniere, Terry, Smith, 2007; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). The participants reported an ability to work with the laity and minister to them, even when the values or behaviours of the laity did not coincide with their own values or behaviours. It is possible that their identification with God's people at large enables them to negotiate the divergent values such that the differences are respected yet social identity is maintained. The women religious as a collective are able to situate themselves within the larger context of God's people, resulting in harmony between their ingroup (women religious) and the superordinate group (God's people). This aspect to their social identity may contribute to their style of moral leadership and to their ability to maintain this style despite criticism from the Vatican.

The concept of group prototype is also relevant to the identity of women religious and their ability to thrive. Any ingroup has a prototypical member that fits the ideal identity of group membership. It is suggested that if ingroups incorporate some flexibility within their prototypes, then they tend to be more inclusive and stable because there is room for individual differences (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999; Waldzus, Mummendey, Wenzel, & Weber, 2003). The participants in this study declared that their congregation permits its members to dissent from the majority. In fact, they emphasized that their collaborative governance structure encourages divergent opinions to be heard. There are certain aspects of their identity that are non-negotiable (e.g., commitment to God, ministry, and each other), but the prototype of what that looks like remains flexible.

Finally, it is known that threats from an outgroup can enhance the cohesion of the ingroup if there is sufficient social support (Amiot, Sablonniere, Terry, Smith, 2007; Stein, 1976). Additionally, people are more likely to be competitive or assertive with an outgroup if they belong to an ingroup (Tajfel, 1982). Both of these points fit with the identity of women religious. They reported that the current tension with the Vatican has enhanced their identity because they have come together with a unified voice to stand-up to the threat and continue working in ways that are congruent with their identity despite the Vatican's disapproval.

**Religious Coping and Cultural Generativity**

Regardless of the Vatican's attempts to intervene and regain control over the identity of women religious, the participants in this study declared that they will not succumb to these power tactics because they have gained insight and feel empowered that their ministries are blessed by God. Moreover, they are living lives of integrity that do not require approval from the Magisterium in order to be 'holy,' nor do they believe that expressing a different perspective from the Magisterium constitutes 'sinfulness.' They no longer seek Vatican approval on internal matters (e.g., their group identity) because they believe that women religious are of equal status with the Magisterium, and that together, along with the laity, they are building the Kingdom of God on Earth. Instead, they trust and rely on God to guide them, particularly in the face of challenges. This is a common reaction to distress in religious coping literature. Religious coping occurs when people use their spirituality or religion in order to cope with stressors (Pargament, 1997).

Religious coping has been linked to many mental health benefits, particularly in health research, but it has also been linked to maladaptive adjustment to stress (Bickel et al., 1998; Cardella & Friedlander, 2004; Pargament, 2002; Yangarber-Hicks, 2004). The

reasons for this discrepancy are vast, but there appear to be generally positive and negative styles of religious coping that lead to healthy and maladaptive outcomes, respectively (Greene et al., 1999; Pieper, 2004; Sherman, Simonton, Latif, Spohn, & Tricot, 2005). Other factors, such as intensity of religious affiliation and type of stressor also contribute to the variety of mental health outcomes (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). The women in this study described their reliance on God to empower them to perform God's work in the world. According to religious coping research, this partnership would likely contribute to higher levels of life-satisfaction and well-being (Pargament, Tarakeshwar, Ellison, & Wulff, 2001; Ross, Handal, Clark, & Vander Wal, 2009).

Indication that American women religious are thriving is found in the participants' discussion of generativity. Kotre (1984) reviewed four types of generativity that he discovered through narrative analyses: biological (procreating), parental (nurturing the offspring in one's likeness), technical (passing down of occupational knowledge), and cultural (continuation of meaning/purpose in life). Cultural generativity is considered the most powerful and important because it transcends individual life-stories to a communal purpose that will bear a mark in history (Kotre, 1984). The participants in the current study discussed generativity in three domains: the future of their congregation (parental), the future of American women religious as a whole (technical), and the future of Catholicism (cultural). These three domains coincide with all of the above-mentioned types of generativity with the exclusion of biological generativity. The women reported feeling very content with the integrity of their lives and are thrilled to pass their identity (values, lifestyle, attitudes, behaviours, etc.) to the new generation of women joining their congregation. They are aware that the charism of their congregation may need to be modified given the changing needs of their community

(e.g., education for immigrants in parochial schools no longer exists). Although some acknowledged a sense of loss regarding their beloved community, there was resounding joy that they fulfilled their vocational missions. The participants sensed a stirring in the hearts of American Catholics, laity and religious alike, of something burgeoning on the horizon. It is not known exactly what might unfold in the near future of the Catholic Church, but they are certain that the direction is being guided by the Holy Spirit and is part of a divine plan. Only one sister felt a void of nurturance and love in the Catholic laity, but even she expressed faith and hope in the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Thus, there is a strong belief among the participants that the values embedded in their identity as women religious, many of which spring from the theology of Vatican II, will thrive in the next generation of Catholics. This type of generativity corresponds with cultural generativity (Kotre, 1984).

The proclamation of faith that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church and that the current tensions are creative and necessary for growth and improvement is another example of religious coping. Specifically, the participants appear to be using benevolent religious reappraisal, which is the tendency for people to attribute negative life events to God in order to find meaning or purpose in the suffering. This style of coping is linked to adaptive functioning when people have no influence over the stressor or if the stressor is beyond their control (Gall et al., 2005; Thombre, Sherman, & Simonton, 2010). It allows people to hope that there is a purpose to their suffering and that the stress is essential to God's benevolent plan. The participants have faith that even though their community or their chosen vocation in life may become extinct or drastically change, God is leading the Church in the right direction and that change is necessary.

**Conclusion**

The influence of the Magisterium on the social identity of American women religious has greatly changed since Vatican II. Figure 3 (see Appendix E) represents the current tension between the identity of American women religious and the Magisterium, as described by the participants, using the symbolic interactionist model (MacKinnon & Heise, 2010). Recall that in Figure 2, the entire system of identity was congruent during the Second Vatican Council such that the women religious within the Catholic Church were able to work together to love and serve God and the laity. In Figure 3 depicting the participants' perception of the current tension within the Church, there is a discrepancy between the macro-sociological and micro-sociological level of functioning. Instead of the Magisterium contributing to the call of women religious to serve God, it appears that it is an obstacle that the sisters must cope with or overcome while completing their ministries. They are immersed in the world as the Vatican II model asked them to be, but the Magisterium is critical of their social identity. However, the macro-sociological level influence does not completely change the identity at the micro-sociological level or the individual level as it did during Vatican II, because the social and individual identities are highly integrated and therefore strong enough to transcend the criticisms.

The participants stated that a primary source of confidence that they are living holy lives, despite the criticisms of the Magisterium, is that their lives reflect the lives of Jesus and the Apostles. For example, they described in detail the differences in governing values that exist between their community/the LCWR and the institutional hierarchy. They expressed the need for the Vatican to change what they considered to be its archaic, authoritarian style of leadership which they felt borders on oppressive at times. They insisted that the current mode of operation stifles growth and disconnects the laity from

the Church through judgmental attitudes that condemn and exclude people rather than fostering spiritual relationships with God and others. The participants admitted that they are not certain about how to attain this shift in the attitude and leadership of the Magisterium. They did express certainty about the effectiveness of their own collaborative form of governing and the positive consequences it has on their relationship with each other. Furthermore, they expressed confidence that the best way to demonstrate the benefits of collaboration and dialogue is by modeling conflict resolution that reflects Christian values of compassion and respect. They professed hope that the current tension within the Church will lead to transformation in the leadership style of those in power. Specifically, they stated that one of the consequences of the tension is that it raises awareness within the laity that they have the power to facilitate necessary growth within the Church, that the power of the Magisterium is not absolute and that, in fact, the Church is comprised of the institutional leaders, the vowed religious, and the laity. In essence, they are modeling for the laity how to campaign for justice within the Church and how to assertively stand up to the Magisterium without compromising Christian or personal values found in their individual and social identities. In this regard, the conflict created by the Magisterium provides impetus for potential, wide-spread organizational change. Thus, they are using the very source of oppression as a vehicle for empowerment and revolution.

## Limitations

There are several limitations of this study. The decision to conduct qualitative research was appropriate given the feminist approach to the question of identity development. However, qualitative research involves several considerations:

1. As the researcher conducting interpretive narrative analysis, it is important to note my influence during the interview process as well as the interpretation of the data. It cannot be argued that my interpretation is an absolute truth regarding the identity of the participants in the study. Instead, the results reflect the voices that I heard within the narratives. These voices were influenced by factors related to the participants, factors related to me, and factors related to the relationship between myself and the participants.

2. The goal of the study was not to approach the sisters with a priori hypotheses to test a theory. The goal was to understand the participants' construction of identity as it relates to their relationship with the current events in the Church and the changes that took place at the Second Vatican Council, as well as their relationship to others, themselves, and God. It should be cautioned that what is represented here may not be static as these relationships are not fixed.

3. The sample of women selected cannot represent American women religious as a whole. The participants belong to one congregation in the United States. Furthermore, the sample is somewhat of a convenience sample due to their geographical location. This congregation is an apostolic order with a history of outspoken, progressive, educated members which affects the culture of their particular congregation. Having said that, each sister is considered unique and she may have various values or opinions that differ from the majority of members within the congregation. However, qualitative research is not designed to obtain generalized information. On the contrary, the goal is to understand the experiences of the individual participants, and as such, each narrative is inherently valid.

4. For the sake of confidentiality, the name of the congregation to which the participants belong remains anonymous. This limits the ability to situate the experiences of the participants within the context of their congregation's culture and history.

5. There are unconscious, genetic, and environmental components (such as early life experiences with family and friends) of identity that likely affect one's construction and development of identity. These components were not analyzed in this study due to the social constructionist approach.

## Implications and Future Directions

This study has several contributions to offer. Expanding the knowledge of identity development and construction, including the experience of generativity, was one of the main goals of the study. The results highlighted the importance of generativity in bringing meaning to one's life. Specifically, cultural generativity, the contribution made to a societal goal, value, or lifestyle that is congruent with individual identity, may help to create a sense of integrity and reduce stress in the late phase of adulthood.

The main contribution of this study was discovering how this group of women religious have maintained their identity and negotiated the conflict that has surfaced between them and the Vatican. It was discovered that these women are not only maintaining their identity, they are thriving as a group and have experienced empowerment through the affirmation of their identity and through the manner in which they have responded to the conflict. They have exercised political activism by inviting the Vatican to discuss the pertinent issues rather than responding aggressively or passively.

They are able to respond in this manner because of their capacity to transcend what they perceive to be the oppressive nature of the current conflict.

One of the key elements contributing to the participants' ability to thrive is the relationship between the identity of women religious as a group and the identity of the individuals who comprise the group. The identity of women religious was renewed during Vatican II. Part of this renewal involved an emphasis on individual identity. The participants were encouraged to develop their own relationship with God and others while simultaneously developing their identity as a group. Since Vatican II, their leadership facilitated the development of independent identity by creating space for individual talents, ideas, contributions, and opinions to influence the identity of the collective. Thus, by the time the current conflicts arose, the identity of women religious as a group and as individuals was well-developed, integrated, and connected with God, enabling them to thrive as a unified voice against the criticisms of the Magisterium.

The results also underscore the importance of identity integrity. The sisters in this study set an example of how to operate in a collaborative governance structure within a larger hierarchical patriarchy. The women religious continue to operate with the organizational dynamics that match their spirituality, such as the value of dialogue, collaborative discernment, mutual respect for autonomy and collective harmony, openness to growth in their faith, and service to others. They persevere in their goals despite disagreements with the institutional church and are attempting to work together, along with the laity and with God, to resolve the conflict.

Finally, this study augments the psychological literature of women religious in the United States which is lacking in depth despite the unique research opportunities with this population. There is also a cultural piece to this study regarding the effects of the current

Apostolic Visitation and LCWR assessment on the identity of American women religious that contribute to the socio-political climate of the Catholic Church in America. According to this group of women religious, this is a turning point within the history of the Catholic Church. Regardless if revolutionary changes occur or not, American women religious have already affected the fabric of American society through their previous and continued apostolic works and ministry to the Catholic laity and society at large.

The future research directions that stem from this project are the need to listen to the perspectives of women religious who have more conservative values or who belong to cloistered congregations, and to listen to the perspective of the laity. Regarding cloistered women religious, it would be interesting to explore their identity development since Vatican II and to explore their experiences with the current state of the Catholic Church. Are they experiencing the same discrepancy in approach to moral leadership? Are they concerned with the generativity of the Catholic faith? How do they frame their individual identity within their collective identity? How do they view a more liberal order? Regarding the laity, it would be important to understand the process through which they navigate demands from their desire to follow Christian morality and the complex contexts and relationships that are affected by moral decisions. Does the Church encourage them toward mature moral reasoning? Do they have concerns for the generativity of their faith, and if so, do they feel empowered to create the changes they hope for? For those who hope for the faith to continue in a conservative direction, do they see American women religious as secularizing the faith and compromising the integrity of Catholic values? The manner in which people incorporate their faith into their identity and how this faith guides their behaviour is an exciting aspect of psychology that continues to evolve according to the political climate of culture and society.

As noted by Rogers (1998), women religious are a rare source of rich narrative information from historical, psychological, and feminist perspectives. These women have much to offer given their experience of choosing to operate in an overtly patriarchal system that has undergone vast changes, particularly within the context of the many recent cultural and social changes that have occurred within the United States. Historians predict that religious life is in the beginning stages of evolution into a new era. According to the women religious in this study, the Catholic Church is on the verge of a major shift in American society. Whether or not other countries or cultures are experiencing a similar burgeoning of Church life will certainly affect the forward momentum of change. The future is unknown, particularly with the recent retirement of Pope Benedict XVI and the election of Pope Francis. In the meantime, the women religious in this study are transcending the criticisms that challenge their individual and social identities. They are thriving above the conflict through their faith that the door to dialogue will be opened, the needs of the laity will be considered, and the challenges that have plagued the Church for decades will be addressed. Regardless of the future actions of the Vatican, American women religious continue to be leaders within the Church, creating an atmosphere of open discussion and collaboration to achieve global unity within diversity. Through their attitudes and actions, they are able to discern and actualize their individual and social identities as women religious.

**Glossary of Religious Terms**

*Apostolic Orders*: Religious orders in which the main mandate is one of ministry, such as education or healthcare.

*Apostolic Visitation*: The name given to the investigation of the quality of life of American women religious by the Vatican.

*Asceticism*: A lifestyle in which worldly pleasures are forbidden in exchange for spiritual growth.

*Associate Members*: Lay men and women who are officially associated with the religious community sampled in this study.

*Cloistered, contemplative orders*: Cloistered women religious live communal lives of prayer in a convent and do not work within their local community. Contemplative refers to a life dedicated to prayer.

*CMSWR*:  The Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR) is a national organization of American women religious approved by the Vatican in 1992.

*Council of Trent*: The Council of Trent was a meeting of the Magisterium to discuss relevant theological and practical issues of that time period, specifically in reaction to the Protestant Reformation.

*Eucharist*: The sacrament performed during the Catholic mass of the transubstantiation of the Body of Jesus. This sacrament can only be performed by ordained clergymen.

*Feminist Theology*: Feminist theology, as developed since the 1960s in the West, "has focused on the cultural and religious dimensions, such as women's religious experience, inclusive language and symbolism, and postmodern debates on sexuality and difference" (Pui-lan, 2007, p. 141).

*Formation Process*: the preparation period prior to final vows. This period often involves education in religious life and the specific order, as well as discernment of fit for the individual.

*Habit*: The name given to the traditional clothing of women religious.

*Laity*: Members of a religious group who are not consecrated members (i.e., not clergy or men/women religious).

*LCWR*: The Leadership Conference on Women Religious (LCWR) is a national organization of American women religious approved by the Vatican in 1956. Their mandate is to encourage systematic change in issues of social justice and oppression.

*Liberation Theology*: Liberation Theology is a religious movement that began in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. Some key tenants in this tradition are that theology and poverty are interconnected and that issues of poverty must be adequately addressed. The perspective of those in poverty is emphasized. It incorporates political, economic, and social contributions to injustice (Gordon, 1996).

*Magisterium*: The authorities on Roman Catholic Church teachings, consisting of the Pope and bishops.

*Major Superior*: The leader of an order in a particular region

*Monasticism:* Religious life that emphasizes the renouncing of worldly pursuits in favour of spiritual pursuits.

*Motherhouse*: A house or centralized convent of a religious community.

*Parochial School*: A school that is operated by the local parish.

*Religious community*: A religious community is a specific branch of a religious order or religious congregation. For example, some orders/congregations have satellite communities in multiple cities throughout the United States.

*Religious orders and Religious congregations*:  in the context of this study, religious orders are organizations affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church who follow a specific mandate depending upon the purpose of their foundation. For example, some orders focus on prayer, some focus on education, etc. They are sometimes referred to as congregations. Both religious orders and religious congregations fall under the category of Religious Institutes.

*Second Vatican Council or Vatican II*: The Second Vatican Council was a meeting of the Magisterium to discuss issues regarding the Roman Catholic Church in relation to the modern world.

*Sensus Fidelium*: "Sense of the faithful – expression of the sensitivity and capacity of all the faithful, who through their baptism share in the gifts and guidance of the Holy Spirit, to appreciate and discern the practical meaning that revelation and the Christian faith has in the contemporary world." (Bretzke, 1998, p. 114).

*Sisters*: Sisters are women religious who belong to apostolic orders. Nuns are women religious who belong to contemplative orders. Sisters may or may not be cloistered. Nuns are typically cloistered.

*Superior General*: The leader of a religious order.

*Vatican*: The Vatican refers to the Magisterium and its institutional governing structures located in Vatican City, Rome.

*Women Religious*: The umbrella term for vowed women in religious life, commonly known as nuns or sisters.

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**Appendix A**

Table 1: Participant Demographics

| Participant | Age | Year Entered | Level of Education | Previous and/or Current Ministry/Occupation | Ethnicity/Cultural Background |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AM | 88 | 1941 | MA - Education | Education, Mediator, Writer | American with Irish/Scottish background |
| Buckwheat | 86 | 1945 | BA - Nursing | Nursing, Education, Pastoral Ministry | American with German/Irish background |
| Buster | 74 | 1956 | MA - Education | Education | American with Irish background |
| JK | 73 | 1947 | PhD – Political Science/History | Education, Missionary Leadership, Administration | American with Irish background |
| Lee | 72 | 1961 | MA – Religious Studies | Education, Pastoral Ministry, Spiritual/Novice Director | American with German background |
| Marmaduke | 71 | 1958 | MA – Theology | Education, Leadership & Community Organization, Spiritual/Novice Director | American with Irish/Scottish background |
| Military Avenue | 69 | 1961 | PhD - Theology | Education, Theology Consultant | American with Irish background |
| Sister B | 70 | 1960 | MA – Education, Religious Studies, Doctorate of Ministry | Education, Pastoral Associate | American with European background |

**Appendix B**

Table 2: Summary of Findings

| Research Question 1a: How Do Women Religious Construct Their Identity? |
| --- |
| • Identity Statements: Dedicated Workers<br>• Relationship with God<br>    o Prayerful<br>    o Active in Ministry<br>    o Committed to Updated Religious Vows<br>    o Advocates of Spiritual and Theological Growth<br>    o Faith-Filled<br>• Relationship with Women Religious<br>    o Educated, Mature, Enthusiastic, and Grateful<br>    o Collaborative<br>    o Supported as Individuals and as a Group |
| Research Question 1b: How Do Women Religious Construct the Magisterium's View of Their Identity?<br>• Who Women Religious Ought To Be: Compliant, Uneducated, Good<br>• Who Women Religious Are Instead: Disobedient, Disloyal, Lost |
| Research Question 1c: How Do Women Religious Negotiate the Tension Between These Two Identity Constructions?<br>• Reconstructing the Magisterium<br>    o Unknowing and Misunderstanding<br>    o Power-Hungry<br>    o Sexist<br>    o Not What Jesus Would Do<br>    o Leadership Divided<br>    o Pitiful<br>• Moving Beyond the Vatican<br>    o Self-Sufficient Due to Education<br>    o Direct, Personal Connection with God<br>    o Ministry Prioritized Over Institution or Doctrine<br>    o Definition of Church<br>• Coping Through Relationship with Women Religious<br>    o Bonding<br>    o Affirmation of Identity Through Conflict<br>• Coping Through Relationship with God<br>    o Trusting<br>    o Perseverance and the Voice of a New Era (Research Question 2: How Do Women Religious Experience Generativity)<br>• Been There, Done That |

**Appendix C**

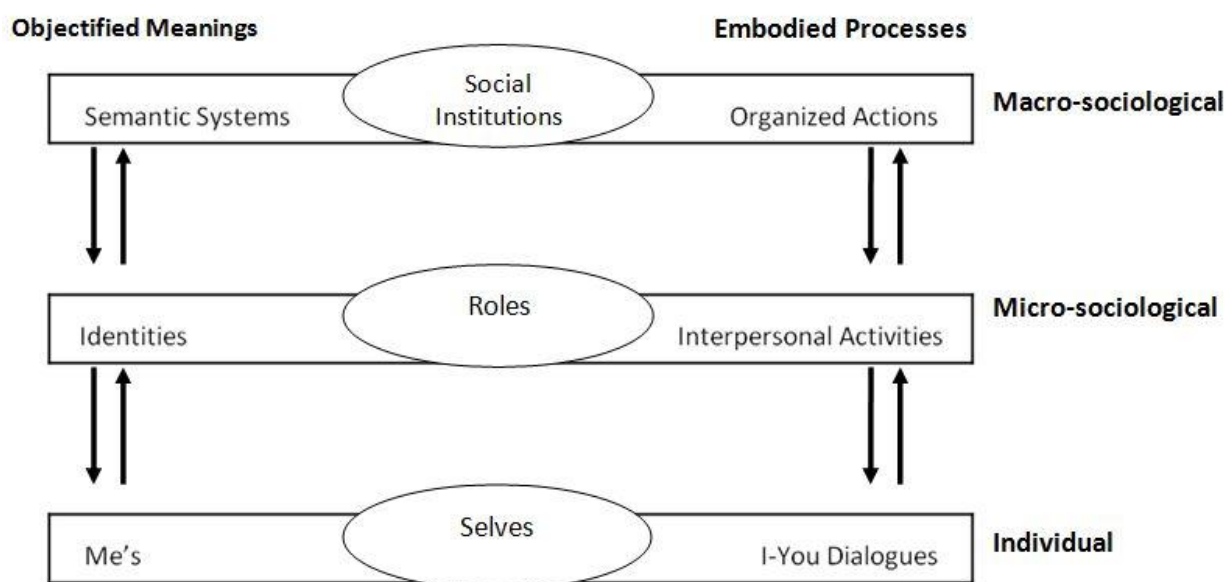Figure 1: Symbolic Interactionist Model (MacKinnon & Heise, 2010)



Figure 1 is a diagram of the macro-sociological, micro-sociological, and individual levels of identity

**Appendix D**

Figure 2: Identity Development Process During the Second Vatican Council
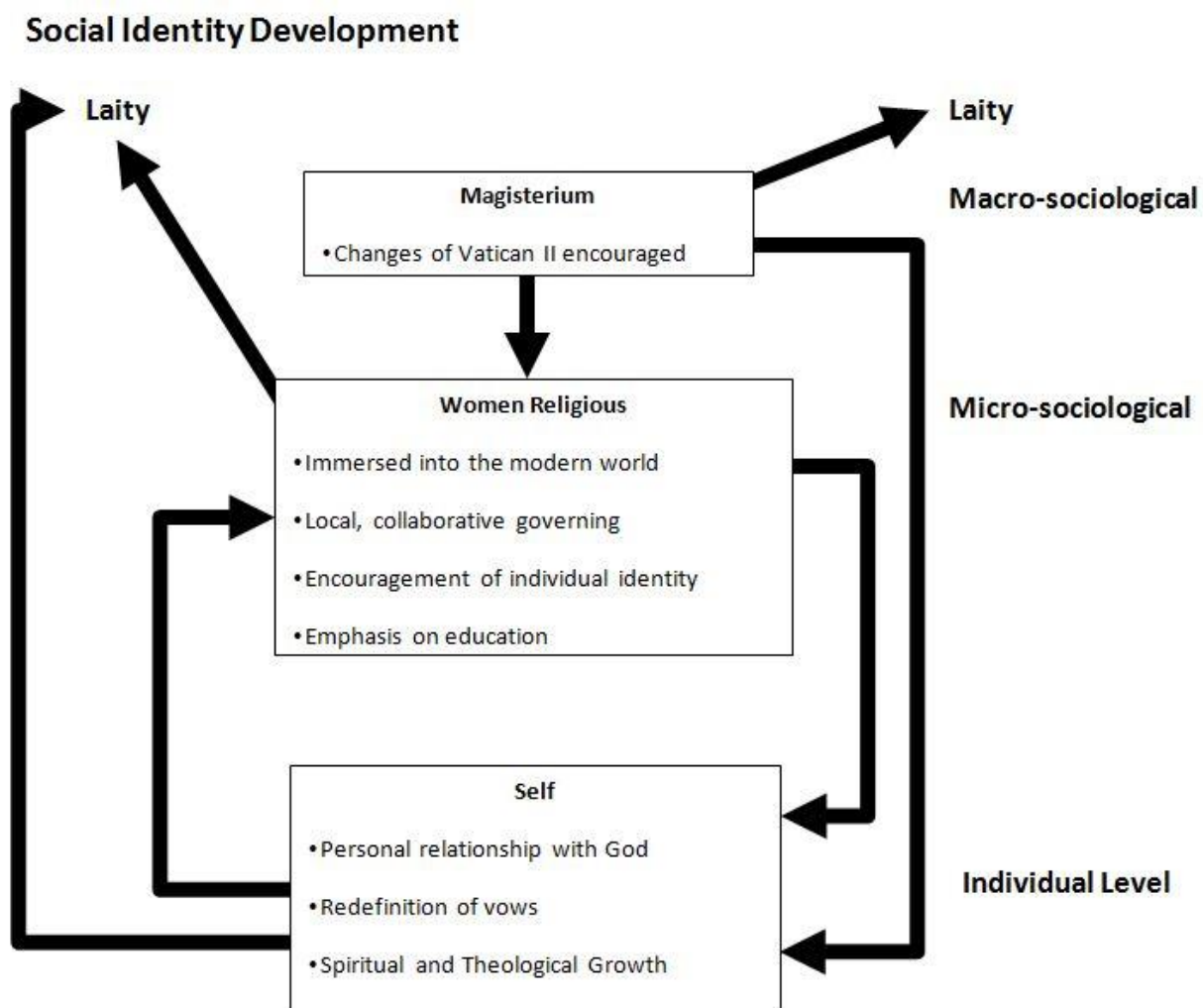
## Social Identity Development



Figure 2 depicts the Social Interactionist model of identity (MacKinnon & Heise, 2010) for women religious during the Second Vatican Council when group identity was in the development phase.

**Appendix E**

Figure 3: Current Identity Maintenance and Thriving Process

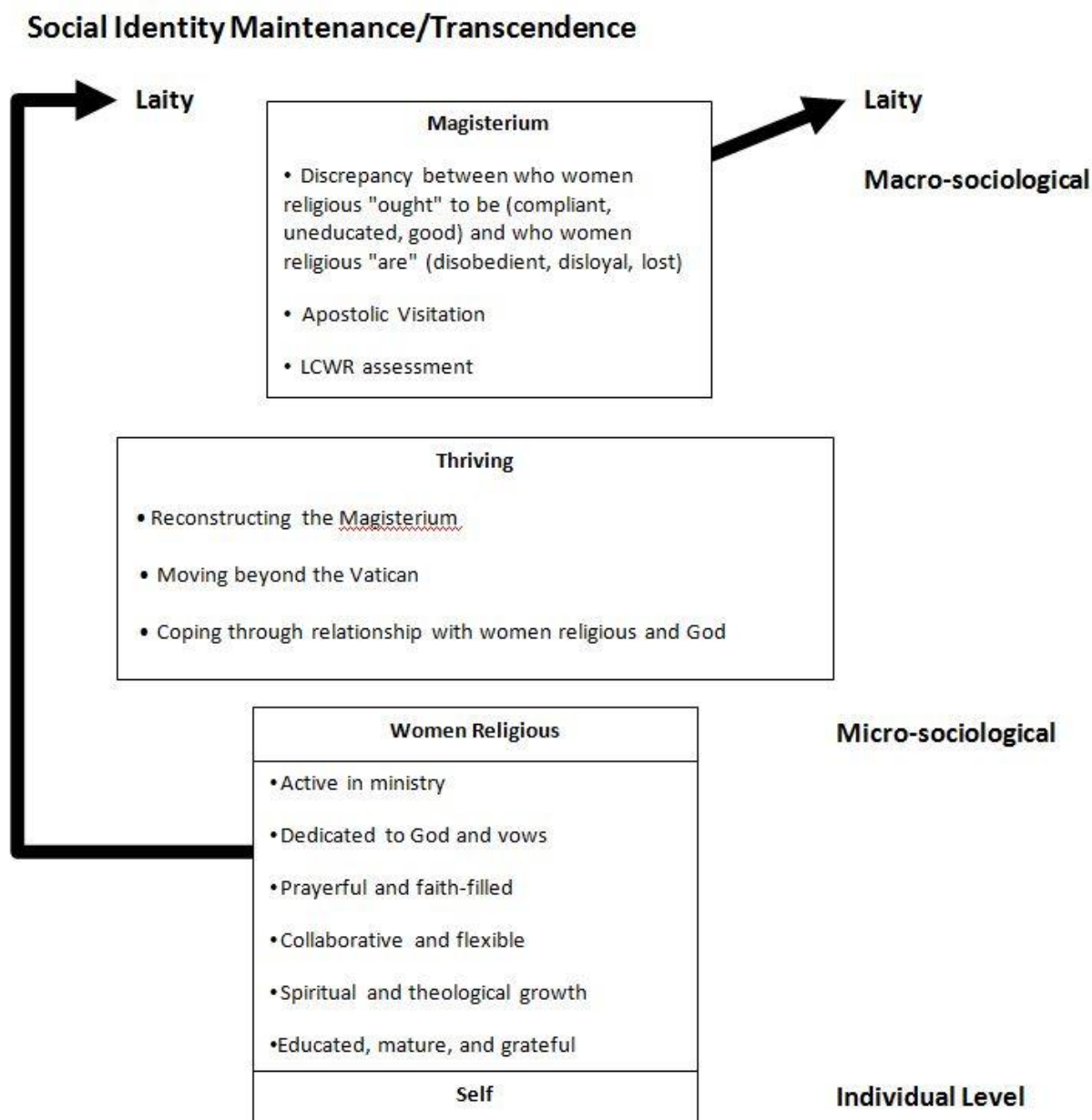## Social Identity Maintenance/Transcendence



Figure 3 depicts the Social Interactionist model of identity (MacKinnon & Heise, 2010) for women religious during the time of data collection when group identity was in the maintenance phase and American women religious were experiencing conflict with the Magisterium.

**Appendix F**



University
of Windsor

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: The Identity of American Women Religious: A Qualitative Study

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Annunziata (Ann) Marcoccia, M.A., under the supervision of Dr. Ken Cramer from the Psychology Department at the University of Windsor. The results of this study will contribute to Annunziata Marcoccia's PhD dissertation requirements.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact:

Annunziata (Ann) Marcoccia           or           Dr. Ken Cramer
(519)969-6158                                              (519)253-3000 ext. 2239
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PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the identity of American women religious. Specifically, this study will explore how women religious construct their identity and how the changes and challenges within the Catholic Church, including the Second Vatican Council and the recent Apostolic Visitation, has influenced this identity.

INCLUSIONARY CRITERIA

In order to participate in this study, you must have entered religious life before the Second Vatican Council.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:
1. Participate in a 1-2 hour interview.
2. Create a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality throughout the research process.
3. Provide feedback to ensure the interview content accurately reflects your perspectives.
4. Retain a copy of the study in the community archives (if you provide consent). A personal copy of the study will also be available upon request.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There is potential for the content of the interviews to cause some emotional distress given the personal nature of identity and life experiences. You will be given the time and space to process any emotional difficulty during the interview. However, if at any point you feel uncomfortable, you may choose not to answer a particular question or withdraw from the study.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The potential direct benefit to you as the participant is that you will be given a chance to discuss your identity and life's work, along with the challenges and triumphs that you have faced within the Catholic Church and within your community. Participation in this study has the potential to provide a forum in which your voice and perspective can be heard.

There are several potential benefits to the scientific/scholarly community. The first is an expansion of the literature on women religious, particularly regarding the identity of women religious and the effects of the multiple changes and challenges within the Catholic Church. The second potential benefit is the contribution to the literature on identity development in middle to late adulthood given the lack of studies exploring this stage of identity within the religious community. The third potential benefit is to your religious community if you choose to store the data in your archives as a part of the community's history.

COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study will not be monetarily compensated.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission.

The first procedure to ensure confidentiality and anonymity is that you will be asked to create a pseudonym to be used throughout the study. Any detailed personal information gathered in the interviews will not be used without your permission or will be slightly altered so that you cannot be identified.

I will conduct the interviews in person. However, the interviews may be transcribed by a Certified Shorthand Reporter (CSR) who is professionally bound by confidentiality and will delete the interviews once transcription is complete. Please indicate below if you grant or withdraw permission to use a professional to transcribe your interview. Please note that if you choose to withdraw permission, there will not be any consequences regarding your participation. In other words, your interview will be transcribed by me instead of by the hired professional.

Yes, I give permission for my interview to be transcribed by a professional _____

No, I do not give permission for my interview to by transcribed by a professional _____

At the completion of the study, all materials obtained throughout the research process (e.g., names, personal contact information, consent forms, transcripts) will be stored in a locked cabinet in the office of the dissertation advisor, Dr. Ken Cramer, at the University of Windsor. If you choose to contribute the study to the community's archives, it will be stored according to your community's policies. You will be asked to give consent to retain a copy of the final document for your community's archives during the feedback process (after you have reviewed the results of the study).

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

At any point during the research process, you have the right to withdraw your participation. This means that even after the interview, you may choose to withdraw your participation or place limitations on the information included in the analysis. There is no penalty for participation withdrawal. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your interview will be deleted.

FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

Once the results are drafted, you will be asked to give feedback regarding the accuracy of the interpretations made to ensure that your perspective is appropriately reflected. You may request an electronic copy of the study once it is completed. You will be asked to provide consent for the study to be retained in your community's archives. A reader friendly summary of the findings will also be given to each participant. The results will be available by September, 2013.

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications, and in presentations.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:  Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; e-mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study The identity of American women religious: A qualitative study as described herein.  My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study.  I have been given a copy of this form.


_____
Name of Participant (Please Print)


_____          _____
Signature of Participant                                                                   Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.


_____          _____
Signature of Investigator                                                                   Date

**Appendix G**

University
of Windsor

CONSENT FOR AUDIO TAPING

Name:_____

Title of the Project: The Identity of American Women Religious: A Qualitative Study

I consent to the audio-taping of my participation in the interview for this study.

I understand these are voluntary procedures and that I am free to withdraw at any time by requesting that the taping be stopped.  I also understand that my name will not be revealed to anyone and that taping will be kept confidential. Tapes are transcribed and filed by number only and store in a locked cabinet; the electronic files of the transcripts will be filed by number and will be stored in password protected folders on a private server. The audio taping will be deleted once the interview is transcribed and verified. Your name will not be associated with the audio-tape or transcript, and a pseudonym of your choosing will be used throughout. All identifiable information will be destroyed after 5 years.

I understand that confidentiality will be respected and that the audio tape will be for professional use only.


_____            _____
Signature                                   Date

**Appendix H**

University
of Windsor

Interview Schedule

In a semi-structured interview, standard questions will be posed to each participant. These questions are designed to be entry questions that lead to further discussion depending on the individual answers of each participant. Each question has follow-up questions, called prompts. The prompts for the first two questions will address their relationship with the Church, their congregation, and God, particularly conflicts that exist in any of these relationships. The prompts for the third question will pertain to the Eriksonian concept of generativity as a developmental task of identity. Employing a semi-structured interview is suggested when conducting qualitative, narrative research.

- How would you describe your identity as a woman religious?

  Prompt: What does being a woman religious mean to you?

- In your opinion, how does the Church describe the identity of women religious?

  Prompt: Who does the Church say you should be as a women religious? Do you agree? If not, how do you resolve this difference?

- How has your identity changed since you entered religious life?

  Prompt: What were the effects of the Second Vatican Council on your sense of identity as a woman religious? How has the Apostolic Visitation affected your sense of identity as a woman religious? How has being a woman religious affected your spiritual life?

- How has the recent decline in the number of women religious affected your sense of identity as a woman religious?

  Prompt: Do you feel your vocation has had purpose or made a difference?

- What has it been like for you to participate in this interview with me today?

**Appendix I**

Invitation to Participate and Recruitment Permission

Dear Sr. ____,

My name is Annunziata (Ann) Marcoccia. I am a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at the University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario. As part of my program requirements, I am conducting a dissertation study entitled "The identity of American women religious: A qualitative study" under the supervision of Dr. Ken Cramer. The purpose of this study is to explore the identity of American women religious. Specifically, this study will explore how women religious construct their identity and how the changes and challenges within the Catholic Church, including the Second Vatican Council and the recent Apostolic Visitation, have influenced this identity. This study has been cleared by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Windsor, Canada.

Participants (approximately 12) who volunteer to complete the study will be asked to engage in a 1 to 2 hour interview with me as the primary investigator. The participant will be asked to describe who she is as a woman religious. She will also be asked to comment on how changes and challenges within the Catholic Church have affected her identity as a women religious, particularly the changes of Vatican II and the more recent Apostolic Visitation. Although there are specific questions that will be asked, each interview will be different depending on her responses and the topics that surface. Other than the content of the interview, the other personal information she will be asked to disclose is demographic information, such as the year she entered religious life, her education level, her occupation, etc. There is an inclusion criterion that participants must have entered religious life prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962). Each participant will be asked to create a pseudonym in order to ensure confidentiality throughout the research process. Once the interviews are analysed, all participants will be asked for feedback to ensure that the interpretations made are an accurate reflection of their perspectives.

The interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. Once the study is completed, all confidential materials will be stored in a locked cabinet in the office of my supervisor, Dr. Ken Cramer, at the University of Windsor for five years. It is possible for your community to retain a copy of the study for your archives if it is permit ted and if the participants agree to this retention of information. It is my hope that the information regarding this study and an invitation to participate in the study be distributed throughout the community email server. I am also open to other suggestions of how to recruit participants if email service is not recommended or practical. I spoke with Sr. ____ in the community who suggested that I first contact the leadership team in order to inform you of the study and to seek your advice on how to best recruit participants.

If you grant me permission to recruit participants within your community, the Research Ethics Board requests an official letter stating your permission. If you decide to grant

permission, I will send you the address of the Research Ethics Board at the University of Windsor.

I have attached a copy of the information form, consent forms, and interview questions so that you get a clearer picture of what is being asked of the participants. You have the option of keeping the identity of your community confidential throughout the study. At present, the consent form contains an option for participants to request their community remain anonymous. However, your leadership team can decide if you want to keep the identity of your community confidential or if you would rather leave it up to the participants to decide their level of anonymity.

If you have any questions, concerns, suggestions, or comments, please feel free to contact me at home: (519)969-6158 or my cell: (519)562-1020 or through email at marcoc3@uwindsor.ca.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration,

Annunziata (Ann) Marcoccia, M.A.
Doctoral Candidate in Clinical Psychology
University of Windsor, Windsor, ON

**Appendix J**

Recruitment Email

Dear _____,

My name is Annunziata (Ann) Marcoccia. I am a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at the University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario. As part of my program requirements, I am conducting a dissertation study entitled "The identity of American women religious: A qualitative study" under the supervision of Dr. Ken Cramer.

The purpose of this study is to explore the identity of American women religious. Specifically, this study will explore how women religious construct their identity and how the changes and challenges within the Catholic Church, including the Second Vatican Council and the recent Apostolic Visitation, has influenced this identity.

In order to participate in this study, you must have entered religious life before the Second Vatican Council (1962).

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to engage in a 1 to 2 hour interview with me as the primary investigator. The content of the interview will involve your narration of who you are as a woman religious. You will also be asked to comment on how changes and challenges within the Catholic Church have influenced your identity as a women religious, particularly the changes of Vatican II and the more recent Apostolic Visitation. Although there are specific questions that will be asked, each interview will be different depending on your responses and the topics that surface. Other than the content of the interview, the other personal information you will be asked to disclose is demographic information (e.g., the year you entered religious life, your education level and occupation, etc.). You will be asked to create a pseudonym in order to ensure confidentiality throughout the research process. Once the interviews are analysed, you will be asked for feedback to ensure that the interpretations made are an accurate reflection of your perspectives.

If you are interested in participating in the study, or if you have questions, comments, or suggestions, please contact me at home: (519)969-6158 or by cell: (519)562-1020, or email me at marcoc3@uwindsor.ca.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Annunziata (Ann) Marcoccia, M.A.
Doctoral Candidate in Clinical Psychology
University of Windsor, Windsor, ON

**Appendix K**

Email to Recruit More Participants

Hi _____,

Thanks again for allowing me to recruit participants in your congregation. I have really enjoyed the interviews and I am excited to get to the analysis stage. I have 4 interviews completed and 4 scheduled in late October. My target number is 12, so I was hoping that you could distribute the message I've posted below to the congregation. Is that possible?

Thank you for your time. I hope you and the other members of the Leadership Team are enjoying your new roles!

Ann

Hello _____,

My name is Ann Marcoccia and I am a student at the University of Windsor, Ontario, completing my doctorate in clinical psychology.  In the summer, you received an invitation to participate in my study entitled "The identity of American Women Religious: A qualitative study." Thank you to everyone who has already participated in the study and to those who have expressed interest in participating. I have completed 4 interviews and I have 4 interviews scheduled for late October. My target number of participants is 12 (so close!). The study involves an interview that takes approximately 1 - 2 hours. I will come to your location of choice if you live in the area, or we can consider conducting the interview over Skype if you live abroad. Once I have analyzed the data, you will have an opportunity to review my results to make sure that your perspective is accurately reflected. Your identity and the identity of your congregation will remain confidential.

If you are interested in participating in the study, feel free to email me at **marcoc3@uwindsor.ca**, or call me at **780-224-1320**. I will be in the area from October 31st to November 4th. If those dates do not work for you, please let me know and we will consider other dates.

Thank you for time, consideration, and continued support.

Ann

**Appendix L**

Invitation for Participants to Provide Feedback Email

Hi _____,

I hope you are enjoying the summer. I submitted a draft of my dissertation to my committee. Now it's a matter of waiting for them to suggest any revisions/edits. I'm hoping for a September defense date.

In the meantime, I've attached the entire document for you to read through if you choose. There is certainly no obligation, but if you want, please feel free to give me feedback. If you want to just read through the results to be sure that I've adequately reflected what you communicated to me, the results section begins on page 76. Your pseudonym was _____.

If you could get back to me by the end of the month, I would appreciate it.

Thank you!
Ann

**Appendix M**

Invitation to the Leadership Team to Review Level of Disclosure

Hello _____,

I am writing you to give you an update on the status of my research project. I am in the editing/revision process with my dissertation committee. I have attached a segment of the document that pertains to the identity of the religious order. My priority is to protect the confidentiality of your congregation, but I also need to provide some information about who my participants are. Please review the excerpt and let me know if the level of disclosure is appropriate.

Thank you for your time. If all goes well, I will defend my dissertation in September.

Ann

**Vita Auctoris**

Annunziata Marcoccia was born in Windsor, Ontario in 1981. She graduated from Holy Names High School in 2000 and attended the University of Windsor, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Psychology with Honours in 2004. From there she obtained a Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology at the University of Windsor in 2007 and a Doctor of Philosophy in Clinical Psychology in 2014. She is currently working as a clinical psychologist in Edmonton, Alberta.