Religious Life in the U.S.: A Vocation of Border Crossing

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Apostolic religious women in the U.S. have recently been in the media spotlight, due to the visitation of women religious communities and the investigation into the theology of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious by the Vatican Curia. Attention has also been given to the responses from religious women's groups, as well as from laity, from around the world. Since the Second Vatican Council, religious women have tried to interpret the spirit of the council and construct a new way of apostolic religious life. Throughout this process, one of the most challenging and thought-provoking issues has been the identity of religious women in the U.S. This theme has often been mentioned, in conjunction with the vocation crisis, as something which signifies the decrease in membership.¹

Some scholars argue that religious women have lost their sign as consecrated women, in regard to their nature of “being separate” from the world.² In this argument, the main cause of low membership is the lack of signage or visibility, which is very often explained as the veil and habit. Here, the identity of women religious is equated with the habit and/or certain customs. Other scholars explain the decrease in membership from a socio-political perspective, in that women have more professional opportunities due to feminist advances, so that they do not necessarily seek a religious life. But most often, the main cause of the decrease in vocation is seen as the women religious’ identity crisis, which questions the contemporary understanding of the three vows.³ In such a discourse, the identity of women religious is considered a static entity rather than a dynamic process. This essay offers a suggestion for how the religious women’s identity can be constructed and, in so doing, explores the meaning of religious life in the U.S. With such an exploration, we can address the identity of women religious in the U.S. as border crosser and their vocation as border crossing.

In this endeavor, I will first explore the process of identity construction, employing the concepts of the “empty signifier” and the “master signifier” by psychological theorist Jacque Lacan, and argue the identity of US women

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² In order to understand current critique and questions for the contemporary women religious in apostolic community, see Apostolic Religious Life in America Today: a Response to the Crisis, ed. Richard Gribble, C.S.C. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011). Also see Sandra Schneiders’ explanation on the decrease of religious vocation in That was Then...This is Now: The Past, Present and Future of Women Religious in the United States (Notre Dame: St. Mary’s College, 2011). These two represent different perspectives.
religious as border-crosser, examining the early history of religious life in the U.S., and applying it to the current multicultural global setting.

Identity Construction

In linguistics, meaning or signification is produced when communication happens between a sender and a receiver through a signifier. In this dynamic between the two parties, the signifier functions as a tool for delivering meaning, and the signified results in the delivered meaning or signification. Very often, the signifier is a language, within which are embedded body language, facial expressions, and clothing. The identity of religious life—which is deeply related to the meaning of religious life—exists in the process of producing the signification. In other words, religious women express their meaning of life, which can be translated as their identity as a whole, by integrating their values and faith. Women religious send to the world their messages—whatever they are—through their language (including speech, body language, and clothing), missions, and action. As such, the signifier is related to the whole system of religious life.

In order to understand the process of identity construction, Lacan's concepts of the “master signifier” and the “empty signifier” are very helpful. A strong connection between the signifier and the signified is expressed as such that “without this fundamental duality of signifier and signified, no psychoanalytic determination is conceivable.”4 Additionally, the “master signifier” represents those with whom the subject—who is one or a group in the process of meaning production—most deeply identifies and who, accordingly, has a key role in the way the subject wants to give meaning to or communicate with the world. Applying this notion to the words “vowed religious life” as the “master signifier,” we sense that the words “religious life,” in fact, conveys the ideals of religious life. Thus, the lifestyle of women religious—including their ministries and activities, as well as their statements—signifies their identity and becomes the medium through which women religious communicate with the world.

Importantly, the function of the “master signifier” lies in its efficacy: the “master signifier” stimulates the subjects to reorient their lives and, with respect to all other signifiers, to structure their sense of identity. Thus, the words “vowed religious” as the “master signifier” reorients the life of women religious and strengthens them to continue their journey. For example, when women religious (as individuals or as an institution) reflect on their identity, the phrase “the life of women religious” can function as the master signifier and guide them to reflect on questions such as, “Am I on the right path as a women religious?” or “What is the right decision for me or for the community to make at this moment of life?” In this way, the “master signifier” serves as a measure to orient religious life in their community, as well as to serve the world.

How, then, do we know the “master signifier” conveys the ideal meaning to the receiver? Also, how do religious women ensure that the “master signifier” becomes the signified, which the subject desired or even forced? Unfortunately, it is impossible for the subject to convey or share the same meaning with the world as with the receiver. Lacan calls this ongoing process of meaning production and identity construction the “empty signifier.” As with all of Lacan's key formulations, this notion also emphasizes that the “master signifier” is actually the “empty signifier” or “signifiers without a signified.” What Lacan's account of the “master signifier” thus emphasizes is the gap between the signer and the signified.5 Applied to the religious life, the words “women religious” as the “master signifier”—which guarantees and provides a stable identity—becomes ambiguous, and the meaning becomes an

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enigma for the members themselves as well as for other people in the world.\textsuperscript{6} As such, the “empty signifier” indicates the vague characteristics of the once produced meaning, while the “signifiers without a signified” underscores that identity exists not as a status, but as an ongoing process.

In addition, Lacan argues, in line with his emphasis on the decentered self, the ongoing and usually unquestioning use of these words represents how the construction of sense depends on the transferential supposition that “others are supposed to know.”\textsuperscript{7} In other words, by being a decentered self, meaning is given by others. Lacan argues that what is efficient in generating our belief in—and identification with—this elusive “thing” is a conviction that other people know with certainty. In my understanding of Lacan’s “empty signifier,” the other or the world gives meaning to religious life, after which the deeper meaning—by decentering ourselves and dialoguing with others—is then produced.

Here, two things need to be considered. The first is our initial certainty about the nature of such obvious things as “women religious” (women religious may even be vexed when asked by someone). Its certainty in meaning is constantly on the move and, thus, “the master signifier” should always be examined. As long as the religious community or an individual religious woman consistently ask the meaning of the master signifier, this process will lead to listening to others about the meaning they receive from others.

Along with Lacan, the “empty signifier,” the symbols or any other medium through which women religious convey their identity, suggests that only when women religious are congruent with society, and thus given meaning, can they find the meaning of life or their identity. It is a paradoxical truth that the more they want to convey the meaning of religious life, the more they must give up control and, instead, be open to society and wait for whatever is given to them. Thus, by looking at and listening to contemporary society, they can receive a more vital meaning and identity.

In summary, the “master signifier,” in this case the phrase “the life of women religious” in the U.S. indicates the idea of identity and, accordingly, has a key role in giving meaning to the world. The phrase “the life of women religious” has importance in reorienting and structuring their own identity. However, the phrase “the life of women religious” can also become an “empty signifier” or signifier without meaning, which suggests that the phrase no longer has a general or universal meaning for people. As time passes, the phrase “the life of women religious” means something increasingly ambiguous.

Furthermore, Lacan would argue that the meaning of the phrase “the life of women religious” depends on “what others think of them,” rather than on what they think of themselves. In other words, the meaning of life or the identity of religious life is given by others. In the concept of the “empty signifier,” the meaning of the life of women religious or the identity of women religious is not to be given to others, but given by others. It is a paradoxical truth that in emptying oneself as Jesus did, one gains life. As such, it is extremely difficult to say that the identity of women religious depends on their visibility in terms of wearing veils. Rather, it depends on their relationship with the world, with which women religious have endeavored to work. The choice to wear or not wear a habit, and the resulting reaction to it, can also be a part of the process of identity construction. The identity of women religious in the U.S. is contained in the process of being shaped and reshaped. As such, it is better to glimpse the identity of women religious through their experiences in terms of a relationship with society, rather than through prescribed documents and dogma, or through their habit.

\textsuperscript{7} Sharpe, \url{http://www.iep.utm.edu/lacweb}.
Religious Life as a Vocation of Border Crossing

It is reasonable to say that the identity of women religious depends on their relationship with the other or the world. As many theologians have suggested, for a paradigm shift in the identity of religious life, the most desirable model is one which is both open to the transformative process and dialogical with the world, focusing on the signs of the times. Sandra Schneiders claims that women religious in the U.S. have worked hard to live the transformative process. Since the Second Vatican Council, women religious have tried to reach the world and, through their service, have created a bridge between the world and the Church.

Emphasizing the role of a bridge, from a sociological perspective, Diarmuid O'Murchu uses the concept of liminality in explaining the nature of religious life in contemporary society. The concept of liminality crystallizes the situation as being located in-between, between two different cultural areas. I believe this concept fits well today in explaining the vowed women's religious life in the U.S. The religious and the religious community do not belong to this world yet live in the midst of it. This kind of living, which is sustained by the charism, exists in liminality.

Liminality is characterized as being situated at the margin, so that it has the closest access to other dimensions. Fundamentally, living the liminal life is the act of bridging and, very often, border crossing, if much attention is given to action and movement. Gloria Anzaldua in her book, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, defines the liminal person as one who is situated in an “in between” space and lives in this process. Because liminal people have left comfortable homes, the bridge—which represents the process—becomes “home” for them. Applying the concept of the bridge to women religious in the U.S. suggests both keeping the essential elements of religious life, while still continuing to move with the flow of society.

The borderland where two frontiers encounter each other is a space for transformation and empowerment, in spite of danger. Border towns are known for violence, yet the so-called borderland is a place where all kinds of marginality can meet and create newness. For example, the border towns between the U.S. and Mexico spawn new cultures and new languages. The process of creating borderland is the action of border crossing. Thus, border crossing as the nature of the life of women religious symbolizes movement toward a new direction, toward the other in terms of gender, ethnicity, class, culture, and age. The early history of women religious in the U.S. shows this vocation of border crossing.

The Early History of Women Religious in the U.S.

Considering identity as an ongoing process, the concept of border crossing goes well with the identity of women religious in the U.S.. Border crossing indicates a series of risky and dangerous actions, yet also includes great opportunities to gain, transform, and challenge certain cultures. It functions to bridge two different cultural entities and is a process of constant movement. Very often in the action of border crossing, two different cultural values are embraced in one person and create a third cultural space, called the borderland. Seen through the lens of the border crossing process, the identity of the women religious in the U.S. is clearly visible within its history.

We can demarcate three timelines in the history of religious women in the U.S.: (1) From 1727 to 1917—The beginning of the sisters’ apostolic ministry to the 1917 Code of Canon Law; (2) from 1918 to 1963—From the 1917

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Code of Canon Law to the Second Vatican Council; and (3) Post-Second Vatican Council to now. The first period is when the immigrant sisters founded mission in the U.S. The second period is when religious women in the U.S., under the 1917 Code of Canon Law, experienced a great increase in numbers but became more domestic and became American-only congregations. As a consequence, the women religious lost their identity as border crosser. The third period emphasizes the effort to create a new model of religious life. The section below focuses on the first time period (1727-1917), which shows many characteristics of the identity of US women religious as border crosser, and formulation of which is an ongoing process.

First, the beginning of religious life in the U.S. parallels the immigration history of Europeans to the U.S. Many religious community chronicles show that the first group of sisters crossed borders by ships and launched their apostolic work in the U.S. These religious women were immigrants who served immigrants. Mark Massa explains how exposed the sisters were at that time to anti-Catholic sentiment, especially in relation to many poor immigrants from European countries. According to Massa, Catholics were generally considered suspicious, and convents became easy targets for anti-Catholic groups. Since 1727, when the first twelve Ursuline sisters from France arrived in the U.S., women religious from various communities have been diligently working here, in the U.S.

Research on the early history of women religious in the U.S. shows that these immigrant women founded education systems, hospitals, and social work in the U.S. and, in so doing, helped lift anti-Catholic sensibilities and helped Catholic become integrated into American society. In this way, the “nuns’ work built bridges into the larger community.” In other words, women religious connected the immigrant Catholic Church to American society. As a result, approximately 25 percent of US population is now Catholic. The writings of the early years of these women record that they were fighting anti-immigrant policies, all the while serving the people. During the Civil War, these religious women served wounded soldiers regardless of their affiliation. Some turned their convents into hospitals, and others took over disease-ridden public hospitals, such as the cholera-plagued Union facility. Their selfless service disarmed the bias against Catholicism. The sisters who were foreigners served the people and, in this way, lived their vocation of border crossing. This life of border crossing laid a firm foundation of Catholic faith in the U.S..

Second, the early history of women religious showed the characteristics of border crossing in terms of race and class. Two Catholic sisters—Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange and Saint Katharine Drexel—each founded an order to help African Americans and battled racism within their own Church. Sr. Mary Elizabeth Lange, who was a French-speaking Creole from Haiti and of partially Jewish heritage, struggled with her own hybrid ethnic identity. From this struggle, she tried to form her own order of Catholic sisters with women of color who would educate impoverished people of color. In this early time period, women religious participated in the struggle of race and class, claiming equality and fighting for the freedom to pursue religious vocations. This border crossing action stood against the Church, which admitted to classism within its community. Because it was impossible to create a community with various ethnicities, Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange wanted to found a religious community for women of color.

15 Fialka, Sisters, 7.
16 Fialka, Sisters, 6.
17 Fialka, Sisters, 9.
18 Fialka, Sisters, 107-109.
As well, in the struggle to empower the black community, African American congregations wanted to be independent.19 In her letter, Sister June Fisher of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, an African American congregation of women religious, articulated her concerns in regard to filling the position of the residence director of Xavier University, a historically black college in New Orleans. Sr. June lists that the qualities of a person for this job should be as follows: one who comes to learn and not to teach, to become aware of and not to impose, one who comes to receive, and not to give in condescension, a “with” attitude, not a “for” attitude.20 Amy Koehlinger contends that sisters who identified with African American neighborhoods learned from their struggles for liberation, which helped them to recognize their own oppressed status in the Church.21 Thus the border-crossing action of the early nuns stimulated them to be aware of their own marginalized situations.

Finally, early women religious in the U.S. lived the vocation of border crossing in terms of mobility. As prospectors and pioneers moved further West in the U.S., women religious also went and educated the children. Most of sisters took long journeys for mission on ships, cargoes, and trains. In the case of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary (founded in Longueuil, Canada, in 1844 for the Christian education of children and young girls), twelve sisters arrived in Portland on October 21, 1859, after months on the sea. The amount of trouble undertaken by the sisters was beyond the scope of most women of the time. According to the chronicles of the Holy Names sisters, they often suffered from motion sickness but their great sense of joy and prayerfulness for the mission was remarkable.22

Unlike the Church’s general ideal of religious life as monastic, these nuns were active and mobile. In this period of time, mission was the primary value to those nuns, and whenever they had conflicts with the hierarchical church—often the bishops—they left for new mission. In this way, the women religious in the U.S. lived the vocation of border crossing, challenging the stable and cloistered life which had been forced by the Church.23 The great durability and capacity of mobility was one of the elements that constructed the identity of women religious in the U.S..

Re-Invitation to the Vocation of Border Crossing

For the past fifty years, since the Second Vatican Council, women religious in the U.S. have tried faithfully to renew their religious life. The whole movement of women religious in the U.S. can be called a process of Ressourcement, Development, and Aggiornamento, which literally means going back to the source, real change in substantial continuity, and adaption to the changed conditions of the contemporary world.24 Schneiders’ claims that religious life in the U.S. has moved into the world and has worked in the world.25 In this radical movement, women religious have situated themselves at the borderland, having moved from residing inside the Church to inside the world. Given this change, how can the vocation of border crossing be applied to contemporary society in a multi-cultural context?

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20 Sister June Fisher to Sister Margaret Ellen (Mary Peter) Traxler, type written letter, July 26, 1969, series 4, Box 3, National Catholic Conference of Interracial Justice-Marquette University Archives.
21 Koehlinger, The New Nuns, 239.
23 Regarding the history of the institutional church’s restriction upon women religious of the cloistered life, see Clarence J.S. Gallagher, “The Church and the Institutes of Consecrated Life,” Way Supplement 50 (Summer 1984): 7-9.
24 Schneiders, Buying the Field, 599-600.
25 Schneiders, in her book Buying the Field, emphasizes the shift the direction from inside to outside since the Second Vatican Council.
First, the vocation of border crossing can be actualized in relation to immigrant communities. Just as the early immigrant women religious became the bridge between US society and the immigrant Catholic Church, non-immigrant women religious can become the bridge between immigrants and the current American society.

Second, some early sisters struggled with the race issue and tried to found communities for women of color. In the mid-twentieth century, as racial injustice grew less acceptable in the U.S., Catholic women religious were among the first to speak out and jump into action: Sisters of many congregations marched in the streets in Montgomery, Alabama, and registered voters in Georgia; they provided education for children of color who were turned away from churches and schools; they ministered to immigrant communities; and they defended the rights of Native Americans to keep their land and maintain their cultures. Yet, racism within communities of women religious was still prevalent.26 Most women religious preferred to maintain white communities than to reflect the multicultural reality around them.

Finally, women religious need to seek mobility internally and externally in a global sense. The scope of service should be global, just as the foreign nuns came to the U.S. to serve the poor in the nineteenth century. At the same time, sisters should be equipped with a multicultural or global mentality. For this level of vocation of border crossing, we need a conversion. This attitude can be summarized in what Korean American theologian Anselm Min calls “not solidarity with others, but solidarity of others.”27 Solidarity with others assumes that we are at the center and go to the margin, standing there for the other. Solidarity of others presumes that there is no center or margin. In this paradigm, everyone has some kind of marginality and is in solidarity of others; everyone cooperates with and supports one another. In this kind of society, there is no authority or hierarchical leader. The call of the vocation of border crossing is to live with others in community, through which women religious will be given a new identity by the very world that they are continuously transforming.

Women religious in the U.S. continue to live the vocation of border crossing and their identity continues to be shaped and reshaped. From their deep and intimate relationship with the world, women religious in the U.S., as border crossing people, will be transformed and will transform the world. Hopefully, this new and post-conciliar transformation can bear fruit in their identity as border crossers and in their vocation of border crossing.