New Blackfriars

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Comment: Women Religious

Kathryn Hulme (1900-1981) wrote a best selling novel published in 1956. The title of the book was *The Nun's Story*. Hulme derived the story line of the book from her acquaintance with Marie Louise Habets (1905-1986). Hulme met Habets in Germany in 1945. Prior to their meeting, Habets had joined the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary, founded in Belgium in 1803. She joined that Congregation in 1926 (as Sister Xaverine). In 1933 she was sent to work as a nurse in the Belgian Congo (now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo). But she applied for a dispensation of her religious vows just before the end of World War II.

Hulme's *The Nun's Story* ended up being turned into a movie (with the same name) directed by Fred Zinnemann in 1959. It stared Audrey Hepburn ('known' as Sister Luke), Peter Finch (as a skillful and religiously skeptical surgeon), Edith Evans (as the reverend Mother Emmanuel, Sister Luke's major superior), and Peggy Ashcroft (as a religious superior acting on behalf of Mother Emmanuel so as to oversee Sister Luke in her nursing work in the Congo). Zinnemann's film was well reviewed. It was nominated for eight Academy Awards and was a major box office success in its day. It also presented an accurate picture of what a nun was (or was supposed to be) when Marie Louise Habets became one.

The Catholic Church today distinguishes between 'nuns' and 'religious sisters' — members of the second group currently being more numerous than members of the first. Generally, nuns are now only women in perpetual solemn vows who confine themselves to a single enclosure. Some of them devote themselves entirely to a contemplative life. Some of them mix contemplation with more 'outgoing' concerns. By contrast, religious sisters take perpetual simple vows and can be moved around by their religious superiors. They also engage in multiple 'external' activities, which are often referred to as 'apostolic'.

It makes sense to say that present day nuns run to type, even though the groups to which they belong have different traditions (as, say, do the Benedictine, Cistercian, Carmelite, Dominican, and Poor Clare nuns). But religious sisters do not run to type and often engage in a wide range of public activities. Consider, for example, the sisters now commonly referred to as 'the nuns on the bus'.

These are American sisters from different religious congregations who, since 2012, have been literally touring on a bus throughout the USA while advocating for social justice. They have been

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recommending changes when it comes to matters such as immigration laws, anti-poverty initiatives, child care, minimum wage, voter engagement, and health care reform. The force driving the nuns on the bus is *Network*, which is a collection of religious sisters founded in 1971 with the aim of encouraging political activism. A leading light in *Network* has been Sr. Simone Campbell, whose political position is nicely summed up in a statement she made in 2018 in which she said (at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago): 'We don't need more high-end condos. We need housing for ordinary folks. And it's wrong in the richest nation in the world that we have people without health care'. US Presidents Obama and Biden have publicly acknowledged that Sr. Campbell and her associates did an enormous amount to facilitate the passing of the US 2010 Affordable Health Care Act (often referred to as 'Obamacare').

Would all religious sisters now agree with people such as Sr. Campbell? No. Lots of religious sisters have no interest in political activism, and some of them would say that it is not their business to promote it. Some of them would also distance themselves from religious sisters who have striven to help people who have been convicted in civil courts. Here I am thinking of the sisters who taught me when I was yet to become a teenager.

I kept up with many of them and, much later on in time, got some of them to watch the 1995 film *Dead Man Walking* (directed by Tim Robbins). That movie (just as acclaimed as was *The Nuns's Story*) portrayed how Sr. Helen Prejean (still a figure to be reckoned with) befriended and tried to help a prisoner on Death Row in the Louisiana State Penitentiary. I thought that the sisters with whom I was watching the film would have just loved it. But they seemed not to like it at all. One of them quietly said to me: 'She is not our kind of nun'. So, it would be wrong to group religious sisters together while assuming that they are all doing or believing the same thing.

A famous philosopher once said that we cannot take the word 'game' to be something neatly definable. There is nothing common to all that we call 'games'. And there is nothing common to all that we might call 'religious sisters'. They all subscribe to the Creeds of the Catholic Church. That much (I assume) they definitely have in common. But they also seem to differ in many ways when it comes to acting on that subscription. Some work in colleges and universities. Others do not. Some are prolific authors. Others are not. Some teach children or act as nurses. Others do not. Some work exclusively with the poor or the sick or the drug addicted. Others do not. Some are politically vocal. Others are not. Some wear religious habits. Others do not. Some live in convents. Others do not. Some are theologically conservative. Others are more liberal or questioning. And so on.

Is such diversity a good thing? Some would say that it is not. Such has been the line taken by several American bishops who have had

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critical things to say in recent years when it comes to some religious sisters in the US (including the nuns on the bus). But the diversity to be found among religious sisters, whether in the US or elsewhere, is not *obviously* a bad thing. It might be thought of as interesting, well worth exploring, and something from which to learn.

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