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# Sisters in the Sacred Grove: Catholic Women Religious as Faculty Members at Public Universities


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## Sisters in the Sacred Grove: Catholic Women Religious as Faculty Members at Public Universities

### **Abstract**

This study addresses the lack of scholarly attention focused on educational contributions of Catholic women religious educators. Using a qualitative multiple case study, this research describes the academic experiences of Catholic sisters, or women religious, serving as faculty at public universities in the South. The study highlights issues related to gender, religious identity, environment, relationships, and experiences and perceptions of others as they pertain to the academic experiences of Catholic women religious. Implications of the study point to an underutilization of the outsider perspective which could potentially benefit the academy, as well as the need for diversity training in the academy. The study expands the knowledge base for subsequent research in the areas of Catholic women religious faculty members in higher education and religious identity of faculty members in higher education.

### **Keywords**

Case Study, Feminist Theory, Catholic Women Religious, Catholic Sisters, Women Faculty, Gender

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# Sisters in the Sacred Grove: Catholic Women Religious as Faculty Members at Public Universities

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*This study addresses the lack of scholarly attention focused on educational contributions of Catholic women religious educators. Using a qualitative multiple case study, this research describes the academic experiences of Catholic sisters, or women religious, serving as faculty at public universities in the South. The study highlights issues related to gender, religious identity, environment, relationships, and experiences and perceptions of others as they pertain to the academic experiences of Catholic women religious. Implications of the study point to an underutilization of the outsider perspective which could potentially benefit the academy, as well as the need for diversity training in the academy. The study expands the knowledge base for subsequent research in the areas of Catholic women religious faculty members in higher education and religious identity of faculty members in higher education. Keywords: Case Study, Feminist Theory, Catholic Women Religious, Catholic Sisters, Women Faculty, Gender*

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## Introduction

For centuries, Catholic sisters, more properly referred to as “women religious” (Saunders, n.d.), have carved out a unique space in societies where, free of the responsibilities of mothers or wives, they have been able to devote themselves to prayer and ministries such as education. In America, in particular, Catholic women religious have historically been cast in the role of educator. Indeed, the first congregation of Catholic sisters to settle in what would become the United States, were the Ursulines, an order dedicated to the education of females (Mahoney, 2002). A 1998 survey conducted by the Commission on Religious Life and Ministry found that education was the primary work of individual Catholic women religious and nearly 13,000 such women listed education as their primary ministry. The survey revealed that the largest number of women religious, approximately 20.6 %, was involved in education. The highest number was elementary school teachers, followed by administrators and principals, high school and college teachers, typically working within the Catholic educational system (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). Despite this long tradition of teaching, the educational contributions of Catholic women religious have received “limited scholarly attention” (Hellinckx, Simon, & Depaepe, 2009, p. 13).

It is not surprising then, that there are no statistics that describe the number of Catholic women religious serving as faculty at *public* institutions of higher education. Through our review of the literature it became apparent that studies do not exist which explore the experiences of women who both belong to a Catholic women’s religious order and serve as faculty at a public institution of higher education. Because of our location in the South, where Catholicism is a minority religion, accounting for only 12% of the population (Weigle, 2005),

we were interested in the ways in which the experiences of Catholic women religious faculty might be influenced by the culture of the South. Further, we sought to understand how the religious identity of such women might affect their experiences in a public university given the principles of the separation of church and state. While there is a body of research related to spirituality and higher education faculty (Astin & Astin, 1999; Lindholm & Astin, 2006, 2008), none of the research speaks to discrimination of female faculty based on their religious identity (e.g., a Catholic sister).

Even in the area of feminist scholarship, there is a scarcity of information related to the achievements and experiences of Catholic women religious. According to Jo Ann Kay McNamara, author of the first comprehensive history of female religious orders, as cited by Monaghan (1996), “Nuns created such professions as nursing and revolutionized other predominantly female ones, like teaching. And yet, when modern feminists write about the work of women in social service and teaching and all the rest, they rarely include nuns.” The need to bring to light the work and experiences of Catholic women religious, particularly outside the realm of Catholic higher education, was a major impetus for our research study.

This qualitative multiple case study was guided by the central research question: *What are the academic experiences of Catholic women religious faculty members at public universities in the South?* Academic experiences are defined as something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through (Merriam-Webster, 1998) in the higher education setting. To better understand these experiences, the specific sub-questions addressed the influences of women religious’ gender, religious identity, and the university’s location in the South, as well as women religious’ interactions with and perceptions by administrators/supervisors, faculty/colleagues, and students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

At its core, our research investigated women’s experiences. Hence, feminist theory, which “centers and makes problematic women’s diverse situations as well as the institutions that frame those situations” (Olesen, 2000, p. 216), was used to guide our study. Feminist theory takes gender domination within a patriarchal society as its theme (Creswell, 1998) while focusing on gender inequities that lead to social injustice (Sielbeck-Bowen, Brisolaro, Seigart, Tischler, & Whitmore, 2002). Given that our primary participants operated in the context of two significant historically patriarchal institutions, the academy and the Catholic Church, feminist theory was a fitting frame for our study. The aim of feminist research is “to correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position” (Lather, 1991, p. 71). Accordingly, our goal of making visible the experiences of a particular group of women was appropriate to a feminist research orientation.

We further focused our study through the use of a transformative paradigm which “places central importance on the lives and experiences of the diverse groups that, traditionally, have been marginalized” (Mertens, 2005, p. 23). The participants in this study were members of marginalized or minority groups in several ways. As female faculty, they belonged to a group marginalized in the halls of academe, an historic bastion of male intellect and influence. Their gender marked them with what Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) referred to as “outsiderness.” Additionally, in terms of religious affiliation, the women were minorities as Catholics in the South. Thus, the transformative paradigm was a useful framework for our study as we examined how the aspects of gender and religious identity affected the women’s academic experiences.

During the course of the pilot study for this research it became apparent that the academic experiences of one of the participants were also greatly affected by the marginalization of other groups with whom she interacted in the course of performing her work.

Mertens (2003) stated that within the transformative paradigm “diversity is recognized as being socially constructed such that its meaning is derived from society’s response to individuals who deviate from cultural standards” (p. 145). The central theme of the transformative lens is a concern for the lives and experiences of marginalized groups, including women, racial/ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, and the poor (Mertens, 2003). According to Hill Collins (2000), human solidarity and social justice are the essential values that underpin transformative/emancipatory research. Transformative researchers believe that the paradigm frames bases of diversity so that the defining characteristic is considered one dimension of human difference rather than a defect (Mertens, 2003). Because of its emphasis on diversity and marginalized groups, we found the transformative/emancipatory lens most useful in situating this study.

### **Researcher Context**

At the time of this study, I (the first author) was a doctoral candidate and the second author was a member of my dissertation committee with extensive experience in qualitative research. My interest in the experiences of Catholic sisters in higher education was the result of two factors: my desire to learn more about my faith and my affinity with women leaders in higher education. A few years before beginning this study, I converted to Catholicism and felt a great need to soak up as much information as possible about the Church. I joked that I wanted to catch up with “cradle Catholics,” born into the faith who had the benefit of years of exposure to Church teaching and Catholic tradition. I was also developing my scholarship which was concerned with women leaders in higher education, how they achieved positions of authority, how they dealt with obstacles to their career goals, and how they advanced their careers. On the advice of a faculty member who suggested that for my dissertation I should research something that I loved and could live with for a long time, I combined my interest in my faith and in women leaders in higher education to form the basis of this study. Thus, my investment in this study was both personal and professional. I viewed this study as a way to educate myself on two subjects that were meaningful to me, my faith and my scholarship. The investigation of these two topics has given me personal satisfaction and has helped me to advance as a scholar. Additionally, this study has served as a launching point for my career as an academic in which I now teach and research leadership with a focus on feminist and social justice issues. I also take pride in sharing the story of the three primary participants through this study. Their work, like much of the work of Catholic sisters, is not widely known. To bring attention to their life’s work fills me with joy.

### **Methodology**

#### **Case Study Design**

To explore the academic experiences of the women religious faculty members we used a qualitative multiple case study approach. Our interest in how individuals interpret their experiences and what meaning they attribute to those experiences (Merriam, 2009) guided us to a qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative research requires the researcher to gather and intently study materials that have meaning, both significant and ordinary, in the lives of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). For this study, we were fortunate to have access to a great deal of materials to inform our research, including personal experience, reflection, interview, text-based documents, physical artifacts, and observations. Observing and interacting with participants in the field is another hallmark of qualitative research (Creswell,

2013). Thus, our desire to study participants in the setting in which their experiences occurred compelled us to select a qualitative approach for this research.

Our need to understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 2014), namely the academic experiences of women religious faculty, led us to select case study as the preferred method of research. According to Schwandt (2015), a case is “a local phenomenon, situated in a relatively specific, well-defined social context” (p. 26). The cases in this study were the academic experiences of three women religious faculty members, bounded by time (February 2005 to April 2006) and place (the geographic boundaries of the research sites in the South). As we sought to describe the participants’ academic experiences, descriptive case study was the particular type of case study we selected for the research. Further, because we included three primary participants and their accompanying experiences in the study, a multiple case study was necessary to fully explore the phenomena (Yin, 2014).

## Participants

This study complies with Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards and was granted IRB approval from the institution with which we were affiliated. We used purposeful sampling in order to intentionally select primary participants who might help us understand women religious’ experiences in the academic setting. As suggested by Yin (2009), we purposefully chose primary participants to show different perspectives on these experiences. Thus, our three primary participants represented different universities and academic disciplines, and were at different stages in their academic careers. We selected one of the primary participants based on the recommendations of a female professor and a Catholic woman religious who were aware of her work as a faculty member at a public four-year university in the South. The two other primary participants were selected based on the recommendations of priests in their diocese who were aware of the women religious’ work as faculty members at public four-year universities in the South. Each of the three primary participants were women religious who had either previously taught at or were currently teaching at public universities in the South. The women were given the pseudonyms “Mary,” “Judith,” and “Anne.” Additionally, the research sites were given pseudonyms to help preserve the anonymity of both the participants and the research locations. Each of the women religious is the focus of a separate case study in this research.

Mary was employed as a faculty member in education at State University, a public four-year university in the South. The primary research site for Mary was State University. A secondary research site was a branch campus of State University where Mary occasionally taught courses. Judith previously worked as a faculty member in English at Rural University, a public four-year university in the South. At the time of this study Judith was employed as a faculty member at Preparatory School. The primary research site for Judith was her residence, Holy Cross Monastery. Anne was employed as a faculty member in family medicine at University Hospital. The primary research site for Anne was University Hospital and a secondary research site was a rural medical clinic, County General, where Anne saw patients and supervised medical residents.

In order to provide diverse viewpoints on the academic experiences of the women religious faculty members, secondary participants were selected for each of the three case studies. These secondary participants included one administrator/supervisor, two faculty/colleagues, and three student participants per each case. These participants were selected from a list of individuals recommended by the women religious faculty members. Because of the length of time that Judith had been gone from Rural University, securing an individual to serve in the administrator/supervisor secondary participant role for her case was

not possible. The death of a supervisor and career moves of other administrators meant that the perspective of an administrator/supervisor was not available in Judith's case.

### Primary Participants

**Mary.** Mary was the oldest child in a large Catholic family living in the North. Mary was educated in Catholic schools where she came to greatly admire the Catholic sisters who taught her. When she turned 18, Mary joined the convent and the family of Catholic women religious she had so admired during her childhood. Mary experienced happiness among these women religious in the welcoming and supportive environment they had created. She quickly found herself at the head of a classroom, often teaching sixty or more children. Mary and her fellow women religious relied on each other to provide the support and expertise necessary to excel as educators. Mary's time was so devoted to educating children that there was little time to advance her own education. Indeed, it required ten years of Mary taking college courses during the summer, on the weekends, and in the evenings to complete her undergraduate degree.

Eventually the education of children was no longer a challenge for Mary. She yearned for a different experience. Mary lobbied her religious superiors to be allowed to study for a Ph.D. and after some time they relented. A few years later Mary received her doctoral degree in education from a prestigious West Coast university. Thus, Mary became "Dr. Mary." Her religious order had no position for someone with Mary's area of expertise at their own colleges, but she was able to secure a faculty position at a large Catholic university in a different part of the country. Mary spent a number of years working alongside other Catholic sisters and priests, in Catholic higher education.

After a time, however, Mary felt a calling to teach in some place she was really needed; somewhere she wouldn't feel like she was just one of a number of Catholic religious. Mary answered an employment advertisement for a public university in the South and was hired. Immediately, however, Mary began having negative experiences at State University. Male faculty routinely made sexual jokes at departmental meetings. Students were reluctant to take a course from a Catholic woman religious. A number of faculty expressed resentment at the idea of a Catholic woman religious teaching at a public institution. In addition, Mary experienced a sort of culture shock due to her immersion in the culture of the South. She was branded a "Yankee" by colleagues and was told that it was "more important to be nice than it was to be right." On top of these experiences, Mary felt a profound sense of loneliness at being separated from her religious community and began to question her decision to come to State University.

Mary struggled with how to continue her work, which she considered a ministry, at State University, in spite of her negative academic experiences. Over time things began to improve for Mary. The unwelcoming atmosphere in Mary's department had changed for the better as harassing male faculty members moved on to other institutions. Mary's reputation as a caring professor with high academic standards became more prominent and more important to students than her religious identity. While there were still faculty on campus who believed that a Catholic woman religious didn't belong at a public institution, Mary had persevered, becoming a political activist by spearheading and aiding efforts to promote diversity at State University. These efforts had their detractors, but they also won Mary support among faculty and administrators who admired her passion for social justice.

Even the culture of the South, which Mary had at first found so foreign, became a source of joy for her. She relished the tendency of Southerners, and especially students, to talk openly about their religious beliefs. Mary also came to understand the expediency of "being nice" in the culture of the South in order to achieve her goals. She realized that nice words went a long

way in enlisting the aid of others in her causes. While she still lived a lonely life in the absence of her religious sisters, Mary visited with them as often as her busy professor's schedule allowed. She also had these sisters visit her when they were passing through town.

Ultimately it was Mary's deep and abiding belief in "doing the ethical thing" that kept her at State University in the face of negative academic experiences. Many times, she wanted to leave, but doing so would have meant that she had not been true to her ministry; that she had not changed things for the better. Leaving State University would have meant that others who came after Mary would experience the same kinds of discrimination, a thought she found intolerable.

**Judith.** Judith was born and raised in a European country where Catholicism was the predominant religion. In studying history and the lives of saints, Judith became intrigued with the idea of balancing one's life with work and prayer. As a young girl, she considered joining one of the many convents in her country run by a particular religious congregation. However, the fact that these women religious led cloistered lives, apart from society, did not appeal to Judith.

After finishing high school at age 16, Judith set her sights on joining a monastery in the southern part of the United States run by the same religious order of Catholic sisters who had taught her in high school. Judith's parents knew her to be an independent young woman with a taste for adventure, but it was hard for them to let her go. Still, they had always wanted their children to be able to live their dreams and did not want to hold any of them back. Also, realistically Judith's parents knew that it would be five to seven years before Judith took her final religious vows and they harbored the secret thought that she would not stay in the monastery that long. The monastery was situated in a Southern state where Catholics comprised a very small percentage of the population. Thus, it was considered mission territory. Despite this, Judith was drawn to the monastery because of its religious order's mix of contemplative life and active ministry.

For many years, Judith was happy serving in her order's ministry of teaching at the primary and secondary levels. Eventually however, she became restless. Though her religious superior pointed out that none of the order's ministries required a Ph.D., Judith nonetheless received permission to study for one. She attended a land-grant university in the South where she received a doctorate in British literature. For the next fourteen years Judith worked in higher education, beginning as an adjunct professor, serving for a time as a campus minister, and ending as an assistant professor. During her career in higher education, Judith worked in a variety of institutions, including rural, suburban, urban, Catholic, and historically black colleges, all in the South.

At her last institution, Rural University, a public four-year university where Judith was an assistant professor in the English department, she felt pulled between the academic world for which she had been professionally trained, and the spiritual world for which she had joined a religious congregation and taken vows. Judith struggled with the decision of whether to continue on the path towards tenure at Rural University or to follow her desire to live once more in community with her religious sisters.

Judith enjoyed teaching English to the students at Rural University. The camaraderie she shared with the colleagues in her department was a delight to her. She also appreciated her unique situation as a Catholic woman religious on the campus of a public four-year university in the South. Judith said she used her religious identity to be a sign of the Gospel to those she encountered on Rural University's campus.

After teaching there for a few years however Judith began to experience a longing to live in community again with her religious sisters. Judith was getting older and she wanted to return to the familiarity and comfort that her order's monastery gave her. The academic world



of “publish or perish,” of tenure and promotion, was too competitive for Judith. She realized that to succeed in higher education on a scholarly level she needed to make academia the focus of her life. Yet academia could not compete with nor could it replace what had been the core of Judith’s life since she was a teenager—living in community and prayer life.

Judith’s values would not allow her to continue as a faculty member at Rural University under false pretenses. In other words, if she was not going to pursue tenure with the intention of staying at Rural University indefinitely Judith felt she needed to resign her position. After much prayer and reflection Judith returned home to the welcome companionship of her religious sisters at Holy Cross Monastery and took a position as a faculty member teaching English and theology at Preparatory School, a Catholic college prep boarding school near the monastery.

**Anne.** When she was a junior in her Mid-western high school, Anne felt called by God to join a woman’s religious congregation. At the age of 18 she chose to join the same order of women religious who ran her Catholic high school. Anne appreciated the spirit the sisters had and their teaching mission appealed to her. Anne’s Italian-American parents and extended family did not approve of her decision to enter the convent. As the oldest girl, they had made other plans for her, namely a suitable marriage, followed hopefully by many children. Gradually Anne’s family came to accept her decision.

Anne attended one of her order’s colleges in the Mid-west where she received a bachelor’s degree in science. In the late 1950s Anne was assigned to teach science at a Catholic high school for black children in the South. During this time of segregation Anne and her fellow religious sisters lived in a poor, black area of their city. Anne recalled the time as a very happy and fulfilling one for her as she taught the bright and eager students.

During the 1960s when the diocesan Catholic schools began to be integrated, Anne made the decision to teach in an all-black public school. She later left the area for a few years to pursue a master’s degree in science in the Southwest. Then during the early 1970s, Anne’s religious sisters persuaded her to attend medical school. She didn’t think she was cut out to be a doctor, but understood the need in her mostly black community for affordable, quality health care. At the age of 35, Anne was the oldest student in her class. She received a medical degree with a specialization in family medicine from a southern medical school.

At the request of a bishop in a neighboring southern state, Anne opened a medical clinic there in one of the poorest geographic areas. She and her fellow religious sisters operated the clinic for 16 years. Feeling the need to blend her love of teaching with her experience in medicine, Anne took a position with University School of Medicine in the Department of Family Medicine at University Hospital. Initially her duties included administration, teaching, supervision, and seeing her own patients. When University Hospital took over County General, a rural hospital that was comprised of a nursing home and two clinics in a neighboring county, Anne felt she was where she belonged. She now had the opportunity to teach medical residents and serve an impoverished rural population. This was where Anne’s heart was, training young doctors to administer quality health care with compassion to an underserved population in great need.

Anne had found a home in the South. The inclusive environment of her workplace, fostered by administrators and supervisors who held values similar to Anne’s, suited her. She appreciated the diversity among her colleagues and students. Anne did not encounter any apparent prejudice or discrimination in either the academic or health care setting based on her identity as a Catholic religious woman. Occasionally individuals were curious about Anne’s faith and her mission. She gladly took these opportunities to share information about the Catholic Church, its teachings, and women religious.

Having a small community of fellow women religious with whom to live was important to Anne's contentment. Anne shared meals and a prayer life with these companions. Rather than coming home alone at the end of the work day, Anne was able to return to the care and friendship of women who understood her values and joined her in her religious mission.

## Data Sources

As required in case study tradition (Yin, 2003) we used multiple sources of data collection, including formal interviews, participant observations, document analysis, and reflective journaling to gather rich textual data. Data was collected over the course of 14 months and included 60-minute, open-ended individual interviews for each of the primary and secondary participants. A total of 20 interviews were conducted for this study. The Catholic women religious faculty members were asked to keep a reflective journal of their academic experiences with the expectation of an average of three entries per week for a six-week period. We conducted one-hour observations of the Catholic women religious in their academic settings for a total of 7 observations. Finally, documents ranging from e-mails, memos, and letters to university policy statements were analyzed. The primary research question throughout the data collection process was, "*How do participants describe the academic experiences of the Catholic woman religious faculty member?*"

## Data Analysis

We first conducted a within-case analysis of each case, then a cross-case analysis, searching for similarities and differences in the academic experiences of the women religious faculty members. For each of the three cases during the within-case analysis we examined the data looking for common themes. We then used these overarching themes and resulting sub-themes to create a picture of the academic experiences particular to the Catholic women religious in the three cases. The cross-case analysis is employed in order to understand the phenomenon, in this case, the academic experiences of the primary participants. Stake (2006) maintained that the phenomenon was better understood "both in its commonality and in its differences across manifestations" through cross-case analysis (p. 40). Accordingly, we grouped the data from all three cases and conducted a systematic review of the similarities and differences contained there. Finally, we compared the themes and sub-themes of the three cases to create a more encompassing picture of the academic experiences of the Catholic women religious as a group.

Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that "coding is analysis" (p. 56). We reviewed interview transcripts on a line-by-line basis and used an open coding system to hand record key ideas and concepts. We used in vivo coding (Creswell, 2013, p. 185) in an attempt to code the data by employing the participants' own words. In vivo coding was also used with the reflective journals and to a lesser extent with the observations and documents.

By way of analysis we coded the textual data which spoke to the study's research questions and grouped it into categories, a process Stake (1995) referred to as categorical aggregation. These categories were then combined into overarching themes which represented the Catholic woman religious faculty member's academic experiences. Following Stake's (1995) recommendation, we developed naturalistic generalizations from the data analysis that will allow audiences to learn from the case itself or to learn from the case by applying it to a population of cases. Perhaps most importantly, we embedded detailed description (Creswell, 2013) about the case in the research study.

Interview transcripts, which accounted for the largest set of data, were supported by reviews of reflective journals, documents, and observations. We systematically searched the

journals, documents, and observations, looking for data that corroborated the themes that emerged from the coded transcriptions. The emergence of complementary information added to our certainty that the data were credible.

QSR, qualitative data analysis software, was used in this study for data storage, management, and analysis. The software allowed us to amass all of the textual data in this study and to tag parts of it as codes, themes, and sub-themes. The matrix and vector features of QSR assisted us in relating the themes to each case and in comparing the themes across cases, based on the count of text units, or sentences, coded to each theme. This showed the extent to which various themes factored into the academic experiences of the Catholic women religious.

## **Validation Strategies**

Creswell (2013) viewed validation as “a distinct strength of qualitative research in that the account made through extensive time spent in the field, the detailed thick description, and the closeness of the researcher to the participants in the study all add to the value or accuracy of a study” (p. 250). Following Creswell’s recommendation that researchers engage in at least two validation procedures in any given study, we included five validation strategies in our methodology: prolonged engagement and persistent observation; triangulation; member checking; clarification of researcher bias; and rich, thick description.

In order to understand the culture of the research sites and to build trust with the participants, we devoted 14 months to field work. This extended time frame allowed us to engage with participants frequently and to undertake numerous observations in support of the study. Immersion in the field also enabled us to make decisions about what was important to the study and adjust the focus of the research as needed (Creswell, 2013).

Triangulation requires the researcher to examine declarations or assertions from multiple angles (Schwandt, 2015). This can be accomplished by careful review of evidence from several sources. In this study, we inspected the data acquired from interviews, reflective journals, observations, and document analysis to identify major themes as they related to the academic experiences of the Catholic women religious faculty members. We were able to triangulate information when we found evidence from multiple sources in support of the same theme.

Member checking involves research participants in the study by having them review findings for credibility (Creswell, 2013). This can happen at various stages in the research process, from data collection to data analysis. As a member check in our study, we sent copies of interview transcripts to all participants and asked them to confirm that the documents were accurate, both in what the participants had said and in how the interviews had been transcribed.

An ethical consideration of the research was inherent researcher bias. As Merriam noted (2001) all information in a study is filtered through the researcher’s unique worldview, thus influencing the final product. In order to alert the reader to potential biases, we attempted to clarify our individual biases as researchers. For example, the fact that both female researchers are employed in higher education may have positively influenced the participants in their interactions with us. Additionally, one of us is Catholic, a fact freely shared when asked directly. This may have positively influenced the primary participants particularly, in their interactions with us.

Thick description (Geertz, 1973) is fundamental to most qualitative research. This feature allows the reader to decide whether transferability of information presented to other settings is appropriate (Creswell, 2013). Our goal in providing as much detail as possible through thick description was to give the reader a sense of what the Catholic women religious faculty members experienced in the academic setting.

## Results

Six common themes emerged across cases with differences noted at the sub-theme level: values, perceptions, environment, religious identity, gender issues, and relationships (See Table 1).

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes\* derived from the academic experiences of a Catholic woman religious faculty member across three cases.

Values	Perceptions	Environment	Religious Identity	Gender Issues	Relationships
Work-related	Catholic women religious	Character of the academy	Advantages	Female professors/physicians	Students
Education as a ministry (M)	Positive perceptions	The South	Disadvantages	Gender equity	Faculty/Colleagues
Academic vs. spiritual (J)	Negative perceptions (M)	Effects (M)	Characteristics	Male dominance (M, J)	Administrators/Supervisors
Healthcare access (A)				Sexual harassment (M)	Patients (A)
				Discrimination (J)	

\*In instances where a sub-theme emerged for only one or two participants, we noted in parentheses which case(s) the sub-theme belongs to. The letter in parentheses is the first letter of the participant's first name.

A = Anne

J = Judith

M = Mary

### Values

Values were the things that the women religious deemed important or of worth. All three women shared a common sub-theme of work-related values, in which education, knowledge, and learning were considered of the utmost importance. Anne's supervisor commented "You know, it's obvious from the first time that you meet Anne that education is a critical value in her life." Judith appreciated education for her students as well as for herself, saying "I love to learn and to teach and genuinely enjoy literature, so the real challenge with something you love is to try to communicate it to others so that they too will learn to love it." Each of the women demonstrated their values by modelling behaviors they wanted their students to adopt. In Mary's case, one example was her willingness to modify student assignments in response to their personal circumstances. A former student explained, "It was more important to her that we get a quality experience out of what we were learning than it was for us to rush and throw something together by a due date." Anne consistently reported to work hours earlier than required, a fact not lost on her students, while Judith sought ways to make literature more accessible and meaningful to her students in order to get them excited about learning. The women religious modelled behaviors they valued as a way to transmit those values to their students.

Beyond the common sub-theme each case revealed its own unique sub-theme; for Judith, it was *academic versus spiritual values*, for Anne it was *health care access*, and for Mary it was *education as a ministry*. Judith struggled with her desire to teach in higher education versus her need to live once more in community with her religious sisters. She recalled,

It was a bit of a dilemma because I was on the tenure track at Rural University and I didn't feel that you could accept if you didn't intend to stay there indefinitely. So, it sort of put me on the spot.

While her colleagues believed that Judith melded these two facets of her life together effortlessly, Judith felt conflicted. Ultimately Judith made her decision to leave Rural University based on the fact that while she had been trained professionally for a career in academia, spiritually she had devoted her life to God.

The sub-theme that was unique to Anne's case was *health care access*. Anne felt very strongly that all residents of her state deserved access to affordable, quality health care. That so many people suffered in poor health because of a lack of access to doctors, hospitals, and financial resources was an outrage to her. Anne said, "I think it's a sin. It's a blot on our country – 49 million people without insurance."

The sub-theme of *education as a ministry* emerged in Mary's case. Mary referred to her work at State University as "a ministry" on numerous occasions. She viewed her teaching, research, and service, and her efforts to promote diversity – as a ministry in the same way that working with the poor and the sick was a ministry for many of her religious sisters. Through her ministry at the university, Mary mentioned feeling like she "had something to offer," and that she could "make a difference."

## Perceptions

Perceptions were conceptualized as how one understands something and is understood. Within this theme, all three women shared sub-themes of *Catholic women religious* and *positive perceptions*. Mary had an additional sub-theme of *negative perceptions*. In all of the cases, student participants reported that their perceptions of Catholic women religious had been shaped by popular culture and the media. As an example, one of Judith's students admitted, "I expected somebody to be wearing a habit and to be rapping your knuckles if you were misbehaving in class." However, the majority of faculty and supervisor participants in all of the cases had interactions with Catholic women religious prior to meeting Mary, Judith, or Anne. As a result, these participants had perceptions of women religious that were based on experience as opposed to images portrayed in the media and popular culture. Anne's supervisor, Elaine was taught by women religious in elementary and secondary school. She recounted her experiences with Catholic sisters, saying,

They are people who are completely committed to the vocations and the vows that they have taken and that when they do something it's all for the right reasons, that it's not for self-indulgences, it's not for self-reward, it's not for glory, it's not for admiration.

Within the sub-theme of *positive perceptions*, the three primary participants were perceived positively in a number of ways. Social justice was a value participants closely associated with Mary, as illustrated when one of her colleagues said, "In my opinion, she's sincerely committed to social justice and has worked hard to bring the university community farther along in that way." Positive perceptions extended to both Judith and Mary were that they were seen as instructors with high standards and expectations for above-average work. Judith's student recalled that "She had a reputation of being hard core, tough." Anne's supervisor and colleagues viewed her as an "excellent physician" and "patient advocate" with many years of experience.

Mary's assertive, inquiring manner resulted in the *negative perceptions* sub-theme in her case. Her colleagues at State University resented Mary's probing questions and perceived her as wasting time that could otherwise be spent on research activities. One colleague offered, "She asks really hard questions that I think make other people uncomfortable." These negative perceptions of Mary were limited to faculty/colleagues and did not extend to student participants or administrator/supervisor participants.

## Environment

Each of the primary participants shared in common the sub-themes of *character of the academy* and *the South*. Mary had an additional sub-theme of *effects of the environment*. Anne's experiences showed the character of her academy to be welcoming and accepting. Her department was led by a woman whose values were similar to Anne's. In addition, the department had hired a diverse faculty and encouraged a diverse student body, as acknowledged when the chair stated "Our number one value here in this department is diversity and tolerance." The character of Judith's academy was created in the regional institution of Rural University. Judith's students were distinct in that they came from rural backgrounds and were often older and first-generation students. Judith felt more vulnerable employed in the public university than she had in Catholic schools. Her student recalled a conversation in which Judith had said

"In teaching in a Catholic school, she felt she had greater support from the administration. That if something happened they would back her up, which wasn't always the case in public education. You always felt like you might have to defend yourself. You couldn't just assume the support."

Mary's early years at State University revealed it to be an institution characterized by resistance to change and hostility towards diversity. Mary described how faculty who engaged in efforts to promote diversity on campus "got threatening notes and letters," which made some of them, particularly those who were not tenured, "very scared." *Effects of the environment* that Mary suffered included self-doubt, depression, and emotional and physical exhaustion. At various times she asked herself, "How do I get out of this?", and "What did I do wrong?" Mary acknowledged that her "pressure cooker" job contributed to the negative mental and physical effects that she suffered.

The fact that none of the three women religious were born or raised in the South, yet all worked in institutions located in the South, gave them unique perspectives on the culture of the area. Mary struggled to learn the "right" way to communicate in the South. She elaborated,

Here in the South there is a way to talk that I have found very difficult to learn. It has to do with making sure before you say something that might sound a little negative, that you say something positive first. In the South people tend to be more indirect.

Anne found that despite her Italian-American heritage she felt a connection to the African-American community, which made up the majority of her client base. She said "I'm very comfortable in the African-American community. They're comfortable with me for whatever reason and I just really enjoy them. I enjoy their culture." Judith referred to herself as "being something of an unknown quantity" in the South because of the general lack of familiarity with Catholicism and women religious in the area. She asserted "I do think that being a woman religious in the South is hugely different from being up North because there isn't that kind of ease of acceptance." Mary noted that it was common practice for Southerners to speak openly about their faith and for students in particular to quote Scriptures in order to support an argument. She explained "It's just normal in the South and in the Bible Belt for student to bring up their faith, or church, or offering their prayers for people and situations."

## Religious Identity

Religious identity encompassed the religious features, both physical and behavioral, that were associated with the Catholic women religious. Three sub-themes of *characteristics*, *disadvantages*, and *advantages* emerged. Characteristics included indicators which signaled to others the participants' identity as Catholic sisters. For all three women, regardless of the fact that they did not wear a recognizable habit, students knew about their religious identity even before taking a class. Referring to Mary's religious identity, a student said, "Well it did affect my perception of her. I don't see how it could not. I found myself looking for covert, overt, whatever displays of her religious beliefs. I was looking for it to shine through our conversations, through the topics of the class, through the discussion, through the activities."

Because none of the three women wore a traditional, recognizable religious habit, they were able to keep a low profile, to the extent that most people would not know their religious identity, had their reputations not preceded them. None of the pushed their religious beliefs on others, including students, patients, colleagues, and supervisors. A faculty member recalled this about Judith, saying "She was not, in my experience, particularly interested in talking about religious issues at all. She was much more comfortable talking about intellectual, literary, sometimes political ideas."

There were many advantages that went along with the women's religious identity. Participants perceived their single, childless state as one advantage of being a Catholic woman religious faculty member in higher education, because they could focus more intently on their professions. Anne's colleague explained, "They're able to focus more on their work and not be tied down to worrying about what they're going to have to eat when they get home or whether their children need them." Their extensive educations were also viewed as advantages for both Anne and Judith. Anne also cited the "sister companions" her congregation had assigned to live and work alongside her as an advantage because these women shared her life and kept her spirits up during difficult times at work. In Mary's case, her experience in the male-dominated Catholic Church was seen as an advantage because it prepared her to deal with the male-dominated department in which she found herself working at State University; it gave her a "feminist sensibility," according to a colleague. Additionally, all three women were perceived to have strong value systems and a genuine concern for people, which were advantageous to them in their academic settings. Participants in Anne's case spoke of the comfort she gave to others as well as her ability to treat the whole patient, including their spiritual needs, when necessary. A student of Anne's noted "Someone who's been trained to give spiritual comfort can be just as soothing as any kind of medicine."

Disadvantages emerged as obstacles or impediments for Catholic women religious faculty members in public higher education including negative attitudes toward Catholicism. Judith explained, "I didn't want someone saying, hey, she gave me a bad grade, so I don't like the Catholic Church." Faculty viewed the additional time demands of a woman religious as a potential disadvantage of her religious identity. Mary's colleague elaborated, "I would think that the time demands on them to make tenure and also to work as part of their particular order might be difficult. Because in essence they have two jobs."

## Gender Issues

Gender was a conception of male or female, as related to social and cultural difference, rather biological difference (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). All three primary participants had in common the sub-themes of *gender equity* and *female professors*. In terms of gender equity, many of the secondary participants maintained that the gender of the three Catholic women religious did not influence or affect their interactions with these women. One of Judith's colleagues noted

“I can honestly say that it [gender] had no effect whatsoever on the way that she and I got along.”

*Female professors* was a sub-theme on which most participants spent some time reflecting. Judith admitted that the fact that she was a female probably aided her hiring at Rural University, saying “They were trying to do the affirmative action, so in that sense gender helped.” Judith’s students saw her as both a role model for women in higher education and as a strong woman who was not overtly feminist. Mary was also described as a strong female professor who did not fit into the prescribed feminine roles in her male-dominated department. Anne brought the added dimension of female physician to the sub-theme of female professor. Her femininity was described as being advantageous, as when a student commented “For me as a female resident, a female faculty member has always seemed more approachable.” Anne said of female professors/physicians “They’re better listeners. They’re more sensitive to diversities, cultural diversity, the impact of social pressure on patients.”

Judith and Mary shared a further common sub-theme of *male dominance* at their institutions. Judith saw this reflected in the lack of females in leadership roles at Rural University. She felt that students “have more respect for men at the university level” than for women. Mary was resented by men in her department for her assertive nature. She was frustrated by the experience of making a statement in a departmental meeting and being ignored, only to have a male colleague say the same thing minutes later “and everyone will think it’s the greatest idea since sliced bread.”

Mary’s case additionally revealed a sub-theme of *sexual harassment*. This harassment manifested itself in unwelcome behaviors in her department such as inappropriate behavior by male faculty towards female students and sexual jokes about nuns made by a male colleague in Mary’s presence. She recounted angrily “And I told him I’d appreciate it if he didn’t tell jokes like that. I thought they were offensive to women, not just sisters.” While Judith did not experience the blatant sexual harassment that Mary did, she did encounter gender discrimination on her campus, in which “students assumed that men were automatically more highly educated than women.” Judith bristled at being called “Mrs.,” rather than “Dr.,” while her male counterparts were all addressed as “Dr.” Thus, *gender discrimination* was a sub-theme unique to Judith’s case.

## Relationships

Relationships were conceptualized as the ways in which individuals connect. Within this theme, all three women religious shared three sub-themes of *students, faculty/colleagues,* and *administrators/supervisors*. In addition, Anne had a fourth sub-theme of *patients*. Mary, Judith, and Anne shared relationships with their students that went beyond the contractual relationship of teacher and student. Olivia, a student of Anne’s recounted that when, as a medical resident, she went through a divorce, Anne “became a confidant, a friend, and an advisor at that point, instead of strictly a teacher.” Anne and Mary would also pray with students over academic or personal matters if asked to do so. Mary described when a student asked if she would pray for him.

And I said, sure, I’ll be glad to pray with you. And so, I started offering my kind of verbal calling on God to bless this young man, etcetera, and I was very surprised when he started speaking in tongues. I knew he belonged to a very charismatic kind of group. Anyway, that was an interesting experience. And I don’t think he would have asked any of our other professors to do that.



Judith and Anne enjoyed relationships with their colleagues that were both professional and social. Ben, a former student of Judith's and an instructor of English at Rural University where Judith taught said "Many of my colleagues were her colleagues and everyone still speaks of her with great affection. You still hear stories about Judith shared around the department sometimes. They're very fond of her here." Wanda, a colleague of Anne's, maintained her relationship with Anne even though she had changed employers, saying "She's a good person. When I need a friend to just bounce something off of I feel like I can do that."

Mary's relationships with colleagues were in her own words, "complicated." One of Mary's colleagues said "our relationship is complex," while another explained "...even when we've had knock-down-drag-out battles about issues we've disagreed with politically within the college, that doesn't matter. That doesn't end a relationship. It's just part of what you do as faculty members, you disagree about political issues." For her part, Mary acknowledged an uncertainty on the part of her colleagues with respect to her motives, saying, "I think most faculty really do not understand me, my intentions, my personality, or even my reason for being here."

With regard to supervisors, Anne and Mary had good relationships with their administrators, a department chair and academic dean, respectively. Anne's supervisor said "I look on her much more as a colleague than I do as someone I supervise." The two had worked together since the late 1970s and each had been through medical school at a time when not many women attended medical schools. Thus, they had many experiences in common. Mary's supervisor had once been a fellow faculty member in her college at State University. He acknowledged "kind of a personal" relationship with Mary as well as a professional relationship, based in part on his wife and Mary belonging to the same church parish. Judith spoke critically of an administrator's lack of action to correct unfairly low salaries saying, "Unfortunately I think a more aggressive head of the department would have done something about that." Similarly, Mary did not hesitate to go directly to administrators at State University over issues of social justice. With one administrator in particular, Mary said "I felt I was quite bold in speaking with him, but I think he has come to expect it. He seems to trust me, and trust some of my insights."

In addition to having relationships with students, colleagues and supervisors, Anne also had relationships with those she provided healthcare, giving rise to the sub-theme of *patients*. A student of Anne's thought that she had very good relationships with her patients, which were more a partnership than the traditional doctor/patient relationship. She elaborated, "She gives the patient lots of autonomy. They're the boss. She doesn't push treatment that they don't want to do."

## Discussion

This research reveals the experiences of individuals who are minorities, or outsiders, on several levels. All three primary participants were members of a minority group as female faculty in higher education, an arena historically dominated by males (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988; Marschke, Laursen, Nielsen, & Rankin, 2007). The outsider status of the women, established by gender, was reinforced by the fact that they were all unmarried (Casper & DePaulo, 2012; Wilson, 2004) and that none of them were born or raised in the South, where they worked. Perhaps the most important minority, or outsider status, common to the women was their identity as Catholic women religious. This unique identity made them one of a very small group of women who served as both members of a religious community and a professional field.

Although the collective experiences of the women religious indicated that gender issues in the form of discrimination, wrongly held attitudes, and inappropriate behaviors were still a

concern for women in higher education, they did not create insurmountable obstacles. Rather, the women sought to correct these issues or to continue their work in spite of them. In addition, none of the women allowed the environment at her public university to prevent her from doing her job. Finally, religious identity was at the core of being for the primary participants. It was not possible to separate the woman from the woman religious in her own mind, or in the mind of her students, colleagues, or supervisors. Before the women were professors or physicians they were women religious and after they ceased to hold professional titles, they would still be women religious.

The fact that all three women religious in this study presented their religious identity in an understated manner raises interesting questions. Is it necessary for female faculty to keep one's religious identity a private matter in order to achieve success in the university? If the women religious had been more aggressive in promoting their religious beliefs in interactions with supervisors, faculty, students, and patients, would their experiences have been more negative? If the women's religious identity had been more visible (i.e., if they had worn full, traditional religious habits) would they have been perceived less positively by those with whom they interacted in the academy? Extending this line of thinking, one might ask, what are the academic experiences of female faculty in public higher education with visible religious affiliations? For example, what are the academic experiences of a Muslim female faculty member who wears a headscarf at her university? Does success in the academy require, to some extent, the sacrifice of public acknowledgement of one's religious identity or affiliation?

Limitations of the study included a focus restricted to the academic experiences of Catholic women religious faculty members and to public universities in the South. Due to the interpretive nature of qualitative research, as researchers we may have introduced our biases into the analysis and interpretations of the findings. Further, owing to the nature of qualitative research, the results of this study are not generalizable.

### **Significance of the Study**

One implication of this study is that the unique outsider perspective of the women religious could benefit their institutions by encouraging new ways of operating that might be more inclusive of diversity. As feminist scholar Sara Ahmed so aptly notes, outsiders bring added value to the academy: "But think of this: those of us who arrive in the academy that was not shaped by or for us bring knowledges, as well as worlds, that otherwise would not be there" (Ahmed, 2017, pp. 9-10). Rather than viewing an outsider status as a negative, Klein (2004) described how such individuals are able to maintain an outsider perspective as "outsiders on the inside" of their organizations. In the case of the women religious, they brought with them a wealth of experience, talents, and strengths that could be used for the benefit of their university community. Supervisors and administrators, as well as faculty, could learn from these women how to view their institution and the work it supported through the lens of an outsider. This alternate view of the academy could prompt them to adopt new ways of communicating, interacting, teaching, and learning that might be more inclusive of diversity, in keeping with the transformative paradigm which frames bases of diversity so that the defining characteristic is considered one dimension of human difference, rather than a defect (Mertens, 2003).

Another implication of the study is the need for improved diversity awareness in public higher education. The women religious featured in this research presented very different models of professional women than most of their supervisors, colleagues, and students were familiar with. In some instances, this led to individuals' perceptions of the women based on stereotypes regarding Catholic sisters. Indeed, one of the disadvantages associated with religious identity for the women in this study was the negative associations people had for them

based on their negative stereotypes of nuns and sisters. However, what the participants found when they actually interacted with these women led them to characterize the women much more positively than they had the stereotypes. Thus, ongoing diversity training in the academy would assist students, faculty, and administrators by making them aware that diversity in its various forms can help the institution by adding to the perspectives, experiences, viewpoints, talents, and strengths upon which it can draw.

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