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Sisters of Providence Formation

Emily Hughes Dominick

The last few newsletters have been organized around a single theme. Last fall we focused on schools sponsored by the Sisters of Providence and in the spring, we used the Providence schools of nursing as the focal point. These themes have provided a nice framework from which to assemble a history and in so doing, to highlight some of the primary source documents that we hold in the archives.

This time around we decided to use a theme more inwardly focused. Rather than looking at those institutions sponsored or staffed by the Sisters of Providence community, we've chosen to look at the community itself. And more specifically, the process by which women are initiated into the community through a process known as

formation.

The steps of formation sound straightforward: a woman makes application, enters the novitiate, takes vows, and becomes a sister. But these steps open up a whole host of questions. There are the basic questions of vocabulary: e.g. What is the novitiate? What are vows? And there are questions about the content of each of these steps: e.g. What is involved in the necessary discernment along the way? To complicate matters, the process has undergone changes over time as the community has updated the constitutions governing their practices.

As you can imagine, this is a large topic that we can only begin to explore in this space. But, through this issue, we hope to demystify some of the ques-

tions surrounding entrance into religious life.

Within the pages of this newsletter, you'll find a quick primer on formation vocabulary as well as an article comparing the formation process of yesteryear to the process now. In "SP Spotlight" we profile Sister Martin who worked for over four decades in the novitiate introducing religious life to young sisters. "Picturing Providence" details one of the stages of formation paying close attention to the ongoing changes within the Church. You'll also find a list of recommended sources for more information on this topic. Mostly, we want this to be an introduction to the topic as well as a way to highlight some of the archival sources that are located right here at Providence Archives. §

Formation: Then and Now

Loretta Z. Greene

How does a woman become a Sister of Providence? The process of discernment and formation reflect societal structures and has changed over time with the most sweeping changes in the 1960s.

Prior to this time, most women entering the Sisters of Providence religious community ranged in age from 17 to 30. Many entered right out of high school, while others entered with work experience,

nursing degrees or a college education. Many already knew the Sisters of Providence as their teachers or by their parish and hospital work.

The application process was simple and included a letter requesting permission to enter, a one-page application form, a physical, and a character reference from the parish priest. Once accepted, the young women entered at one of



Costume beads, pectoral cross and silver ring received by Sisters of Providence at various stages of formation prior to the 1960s.

three times each year: generally February, July or November.

The Western novitiate was at Mount St. Vincent, Seattle, *continued on page 3*



SP Spotlight: Sister Martin Lefrançois

Emily Hughes Dominick
Associate Archivist

While many sisters could be selected to represent the formation period for the Sisters of Providence, Sister Martin stands out because of her long tenure as “sub-Mistress” in the novitiate in the west. She spent an astounding 43 years in this role with the primary duty of introducing postulants to religious life.

The seventeenth in a family of eighteen children, Sister Martin (nee Evéline Lefrançois) was born in a small village outside Montreal. At the young age of 14 she first decided to enter religious life but had to wait until the age of 16 to enter the novitiate at the Providence Asile in Montreal as a postulant.

Plagued by poor health from an early age, Evéline was

Name in Religion:

Martin

Given Name:

Evéline Lefrançois

Number in Religion:

848

Date of Birth:

May 2, 1870

Entrance to Novitiate:

May 29, 1890

First Vows:

April 8, 1892

Date of Death:

August 1, 1955



dismissed from the novitiate due to illness after ten months time. She recovered and made another entrance one year later but this was short-lived, too, as she again fell ill and was sent home. Finally, in 1890, after regaining her health yet again, Evéline asked for re-entry into the community and was this time sent west to the House of Providence in Vancouver, Wash., to make her novitiate. Evéline happily went west, pushing ever forward, determined to fulfill her strong desire

to become a religious.

After making vows in 1892, Sister Martin was sent to work with the Native American children in Yakima and then Tulalip. She spent eight years at this work leaving only when the school in Tulalip was closed in 1901. She returned to Vancouver to care for the orphans at Providence Academy. Then in 1907, Sister Martin was named as sub-Mistress at the novitiate then located at the Academy.

It was in this position that she remained for a great majority of her life serving under five Mistresses of Novices, in two locations (she helped move the novitiate from Vancouver to Seattle in 1924). In this time Sr. Martin helped form over one thousand young sisters at the novitiate.

Besides training in religious life, Sister Martin taught the young sisters such practical skills as mending clothing and ironing garnitures. She was very exacting but also very gentle. Though quite small in stature, her presence was large. She was appreciated

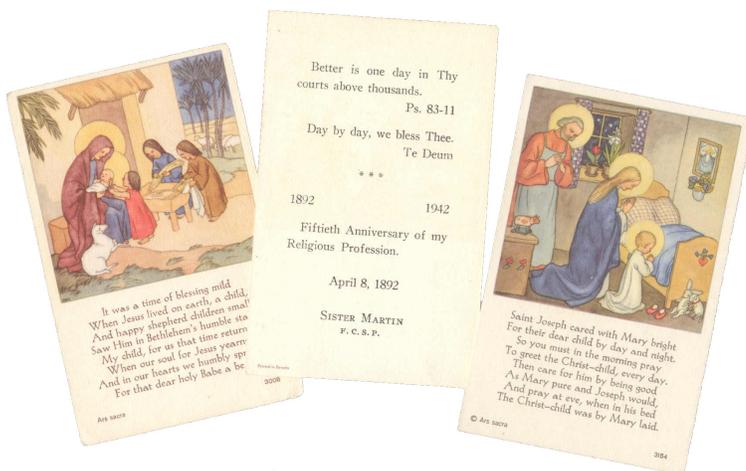
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verbatim

Your religious life will be rich and beautiful if you only make it so. The way to make it so is to begin well. [To] begin well means to give yourself to God, heartily and completely, with all the love of your heart. Give yourselves to God entirely and with great joy, great expectations, expecting that once you have done that, happiness is yours.

-Sister Martin
Conference for
Postulants,
April 21, 1950



Holy cards prepared by Sister Martin with the assistance of a novice on the occasion of 50 years of religious life. In her necrology, it is written: “Instead of having the cards printed, she had a novice type the dates with a simple legend on the back. In this way she taught a lesson of poverty, simplicity, and industry.”

PICTURING PROVIDENCE

Peter F. Schmid, Visual Resources Archivist

A column highlighting archival photographs and other resources that provide visual documentation of the Sisters of Providence. Contact Peter at 206-923-4012 or peter.schmid@providence.org.

A Ceremony of Change

In this photograph of First Profession, the novices receive their pectoral cross from Seattle Archbishop Thomas Arthur Connolly, assisted by Monsignor John P. Doogan at Providence Heights, Issaquah, Wash., 1964. Note the headdresses of a professed sister placed on trays in front of the novices, which were blessed as part of the ceremony. The novices processed out of the chapel, donned the headdress and processed back in wearing the habit of a professed Sister of Providence.

The photograph illustrates both tradition and modernity. The ceremony and religious habit had not changed much since the early days of the religious community. The Mass was still in Latin. But the chapel, completed just a few years earlier, is adorned sparingly with modern, abstract art that reflected the sensibilities of the times, and was vastly different from the beautifully cluttered

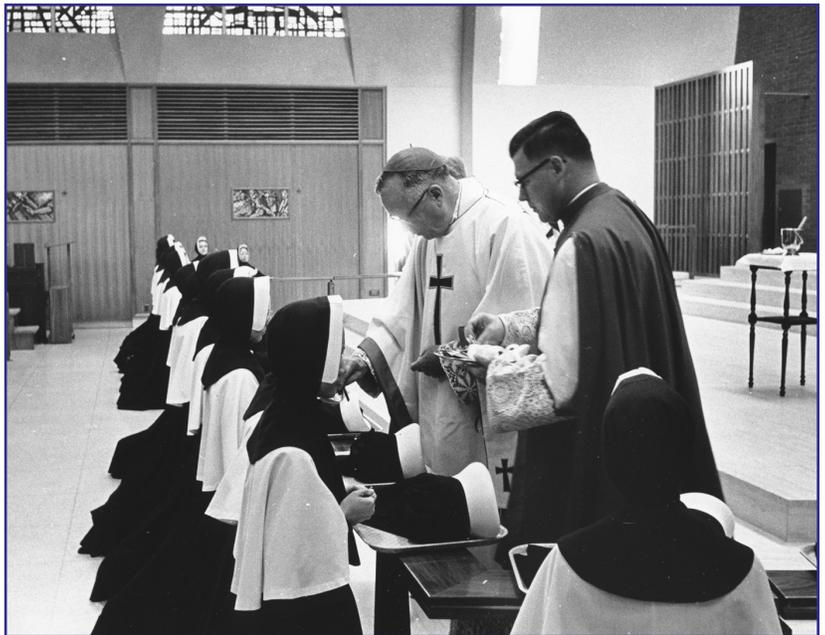


Image #FD.1964.1

look of the traditional Catholic chapel. And, as this ceremony took place, the Second Vatican Council was underway in Rome, which would bring tumultuous change to the ancient church – change which may have prompted some of these very same novices to reconsider religious life. In fact, Archbishop Connolly was between trips to Rome; he participated as a Council Father in Session One (1962), Two (1963), and Four (1965) of the Council.

Monsignor Doogan, who was born at Providence Hospital in Seattle, had a long history with the Sisters of Providence. He worked as an elevator operator at the hospital and was serving as a driver for the sisters when he entered the seminary. The day after his ordination as a priest, he celebrated Mass at Mount St. Vincent. He served alongside Sisters of Providence in various ministries, and served as Chaplain at the Heights from 1961 to 1966. §

Formation

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and lasted two years: 6 months as a postulant and 18 months as a novice. While at the novitiate, the young sisters were secluded from the world. Their structured day included prayer, Mass, a ministry and classes about religious life, the Constitutions, Christian doctrine, and music. A quiet conducive to reflection

was kept all day except during a scheduled recreation hour or special occasions.

It was not uncommon to have 10 novices in each profession class in the West. After professing First Vows the novice became a professed sister and was sent on mission, making Final Vows three years later.

A Sister was visibly distinguishable in the various stages

of formation. She received a special religious habit as a postulant, novice, and then professed. A novice received the costume beads and pectoral cross when she made First Vows. At Final Vows, she received a silver ring.

Major changes in formation began in the 1950s and in some ways paralleled societal changes, those related particularly to psy-

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Did you know...

In the earliest years of the community, the Sisters of Providence only took temporary vows which they renewed annually on the feast of Our Lady of Compassion (Friday in Passion week). The first perpetual profession (or final vows) took place on August 6, 1868. Since that time, final vows have been taken by Sisters of Providence after a period of years of professing temporary vows.

News from the Archives

FROM VOLUNTEER TO SUPERVISOR

While Mother Joseph Province welcomes the new Provincial Council/Leadership Team, Providence Archives staff happily welcomes their new supervisor and Team liaison. Sister Judith Desmarais is no stranger in the Archives.

In 1976-1977, as a young

sister, Sister Judith volunteered in the Archives creating inventories, sorting photographs and organizing historical records. For the past two years she has entered data into the newly designed Sisters Biographical Database.

The Archives is fortunate to have a supervisor who is so familiar with archival operations. §



Archives staff saying goodbye to Sister Judith Desmarais as volunteer in December of 2009.

A NEW VOLUNTEER

At the end of November, Providence Archives welcomed Sister Virginia Miller as a volunteer. She dove right in helping with a major sorting project of Marketing and Communications publications from the Oregon Region. Since then,

she has worked on several other projects, including filing ministry materials, and culling and organizing news clippings about various Providence institutions.

No job has proven too intimidating or large for Sister Virginia. We all appreciate her can-do attitude and her overall pleasant demeanor. §

NOW ON EXHIBIT

In the last weeks of 2009, staff of Providence Archives installed an archival exhibit in a newly designed exhibit case at the System Office campus in Renton. The exhibit case is located on level one of the Gamelin Building just around the corner from Vancouver Room A (beneath the portraits of Mother Bernard Morin, Emilie Gamelin, and Mother Joseph).

The current exhibit focuses on the Sisters of Providence

Sister Martin

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for her depth of spirituality and for her understanding nature which was especially welcome to those women just entering the community. She is remembered as being “very calm, very quiet, and very wise.”

She retired to the infirmary in 1950 but stayed actively involved in the formation process by writing vocational letters to Catholic colleges including Gonzaga and Seattle Universities. She also never tired of hearing about the incoming postulants and the newly professed sisters. Sister Martin died at Mount St. Vincent on August 1, 1955, at the age of 84 after 65 years in religion. §

and their educational ministries over time and contains artifacts, photographs and mementos. Beginning with the foundation of Providence Academy in Vancouver, Wash., in 1856, the Sisters of Providence sponsored or staffed over forty schools across Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho, Montana, and Alaska.

This is the first of many exhibits to come. The space will be used for rotating archival exhibits relating to the history of Providence Health & Services and the Sisters of Providence. Exhibits will rotate between Providence Archives’ reference room, Mount St. Joseph in Spokane, and Renton. §

Memories

Wanted

What do you remember about your novitiate experiences? Would you like to share your memories with Providence Archives staff? Call or email to set up an appointment to be interviewed about your experiences.

Do you have pictures, artifacts, scrapbooks, or mementoes that you’d like preserved in the archives? Consider donating your materials to Providence Archives.



Sister Virginia filing papers in the Archives.



For more information...

Visit: Providence Archives, Seattle, Washington, houses a collection of historical materials about the formation process. Contact the archives for access.

See: Artifacts, photographs and mementoes are now on exhibit in the Reference Room at the Archives.

Read: To learn more about Religious Life find these books through the religious community library:

-  *From Framework to Freedom: A History of the Sister Formation Conference*, Marjorie Noterman Beane
-  *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life*, Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM
-  *Vision: 2010 Catholic Religious Vocation Discernment Guide* (VocationGuide.org)
-  *Catholic Sisters in Transition: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, Marie Augusta Neal, SND de Namur
-  *The Way We Were: A Story of Conversion and Renewal*, Joan Chittister, OSB

A Formation Primer: Vocabulary of the Formation Process

CANDIDATE: A person in the early stages of discerning a religious vocation. Previously called **postulant**.

FINAL VOWS: The making of a permanent commitment within a religious community through vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Also known as perpetual vows.

FIRST VOWS: The making of a temporary commitment within a religious community through vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Also known as temporary vows.

FORMATION: The time and process in the life of a person who is preparing for profession of vows in a religious community or ordination as a deacon or priest. During formation, a person is initiated into the life and ministry of the community.

HOLY HABIT: The rite of transition from a postulant to novice prior to the 1960s. Also known as Entrance to the Novitiate. This term refers to the religious habit received at this step in the process.

NOVICE: Following the period of postulancy, the postulant is received as a novice and becomes a formal member of the community, but has not yet taken vows.

NOVITIATE: The period of time of preparation undertaken by a postulant and novice. Also, the physical location where religious training takes place.

POSTULANT: A person preparing to be admitted as a novice into a religious community. Postulancy was the first stage of religious life before becoming a novice. Now called **candidate**.

PROFESSION: In a religious community, the act through which women and men consecrate themselves to God by professing vows, usually of poverty, chastity and obedience, although there can be others depending on the community. Profession is normally made initially for a certain time and is called First (temporary) Vows, and then later for life, called Final (perpetual) Vows.

VOCATION: From the Latin verb *vocare*, meaning "to call," a vocation is a calling to a way of life (rather than to a particular job).

VOWS: Men and women commit themselves to God and to the service of the Church by public promises called vows. Ordinarily, members of religious congregations profess the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Formation

continued from page 3

chology, sociology, and spirituality. Today, a woman discerns a vocation for 1-2 years through prayer, retreat, and community contact. The internet, vocation magazines, personal contact, and advice from clergy are primary sources of information. The women entering today tend to be older. The community restricts women younger than 20 from entering and caps the upper limit at age 40, though exceptions can be made. Those entering are encouraged to experience life, attend college and work before entering.

The application itself is a 50-page dossier that includes an autobiography, reflections on her personal spiritual life, and résumé of work and education experience. A psychological assessment and physical are also

required. A woman enters as a Candidate for 1-2 years, lives in community and learns about religious life. The novitiate, which lasts two years, is an in-depth exploration of the call to vowed life, including prayer, study and ministry. These years are not as secluded and are more personally structured than they once were. The process of making First and Final Vows is largely unchanged, though the scheduling is more flexible. Now, the time from First to Final Vows can last anywhere from 3 to 9 years.

While most Sisters today choose not to wear the religious habit, they still receive symbolic representations of the religious commitment including a Providence pin received as a novice, a pectoral cross at First Vows, and a silver ring at Final Vows.

It is impossible to ignore



Providence pin, pectoral cross and silver ring currently received by Sisters of Providence at various stages of formation.

the fact that smaller numbers of women are entering religious life. One reason for this decrease is the significant growth in opportunities for women in the church and society to serve the needy. On average, one new candidate enters the Sisters of Providence community in the United States per year, including transfers from other communities. §

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