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Fordham Center on Religion and Culture

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Call and Response: How American Catholic Sisters Shaped the Church since Vatican II

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Moderator

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JAMES McCARTIN: Good evening. Welcome. My name is Jim McCartin, Director of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture, and on behalf of the Center and our cosponsor, the Francis and Ann Curran Center for American Catholic Studies, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to Fordham University for tonight's event, "Call and Response: How American Catholic Sisters Shaped the Church since Vatican II."

To begin, three brief announcements.

First, if you are not already on our mailing list, before you leave tonight please take the time to sign up at the table on your way out.

Second, you have cards on your seats and pencils alongside them. Please make use of those cards to write out your questions for the panelists. When you have finished writing, and please write legibly — someone has said that tonight might be the first time we have an audience capable of writing legibly [laughter] — when you are finished, hold up the card and one of our student assistants will come and take it up to the front.

Third, perhaps most importantly, please silence all your electronic devices.

Now, who among us here tonight does not owe a debt of gratitude to American Catholic sisters? For many of us, it was sisters who introduced us to God and showed us how to pray; it was sisters who taught us to tie our shoes, to read and write, to paint or play piano, to know which specific atoms could combine together to create a molecule. Many of us were born into this world in hospitals administered by generations of sisters. Many of us as adults have turned to sisters for spiritual direction or theological insight, or have joined them in their ministry to the poor, the dying, to immigrants, to the marginalized. And some of us, perhaps, have simply known the dedication and competence of sisters from afar, marveling at the diversity of their expertise and leadership abilities. I suspect for all of us here in one way or another, but more likely in any number of ways, sisters have served as our teachers, as our guides, as our inspiration.

Tonight, among other things, we will explore some of the ways that sisters have earned our gratitude in recent decades.

When the Second Vatican Council closed in 1965, sisters took seriously the Council's commission that they should renew their religious communities from the inside out. This meant two things: first, exploring the original charism, the original mission of their congregations; and second, it meant finding new ways to make that mission come alive amid the challenges and opportunities of the contemporary world.

As a consequence, many took their congregations down new avenues in ministry. In some instances, entirely new orders emerged, inspired by the vision of the Council to carry the Gospel to all the world.

Of course, the transformation of religious life in recent decades didn't come without cost or controversy. Tonight our panelists will also address some of the difficulties and tensions that have surfaced as sisters have pursued their vocations in a diverse range of ways.

But in any case, I think it is fair to say that it is sisters, as much as anyone, that have shaped the face of the Church in the world today. Tonight we take note of that fact. We have represented here on stage a superb cross-section of the talents, ministries, and charisms that sisters have embodied since Vatican II. They are women of spiritual depth and they are experts in the fields of psychology, sociology, history, and theology, as well as the arts.

I want to note here that our signature banner for tonight was designed and executed by Josephine Niemann, a School Sister of Notre Dame.

So I can assure you of something that you already know — tonight's panel will be a treat. Now let me introduce our moderator. Christine Firer Hinze teaches theology at Fordham and directs the Francis and Ann Curran Center for American Catholic Studies. She is a specialist in Christian social ethics and Catholic social teaching, focusing particularly on issues related to family life, gender, and economics, as well as feminist ethics.

Hinze is the author of *Comprehending Power in Christian Social Ethics*, and she has served in leadership positions for the Catholic Theological Society of America, the Society of Christian Ethics, and the American Academy of Religion.

It is my pleasure to introduce to you Christine Firer Hinze.

CHRISTINE HINZE: Good evening. It's a special honor and delight for me to have been asked to moderate tonight's session. As a laywoman who grew up in the wake of

Vatican II, I have been formed and inspired by opportunities to work closely with religious sisters across the spectrum of renewal since Vatican II — IHMs, Adrian Dominicans, Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, Mercy Sisters of Alma, to just name a few.

As we begin, too, I'd like to ask, along with our panel, if those here who are members of religious communities, men or women, would raise your hands.
[Show of hands]

Wow! Okay. I'd like to extend a warm welcome and salute to you.
[Applause]

We are in the midst of many joyful radicals and courageous pioneers tonight. I use those words deliberately, to echo what Dr. McCartin said about the Vatican II call, because all of us by Vatican II have been called to be radicals, to go to the roots of what it means to be Christian. All of us have been called to go to the frontiers, to be pioneers in engaging the world and listening to the signs of the times for the Spirit's call. In all of that since Vatican II sisters have been at the forefront.

We gather tonight to reflect on a fascinating, and still being written, period in the history of our faith, the decades since the Second Vatican Council.

As Dr. McCartin mentioned, during these years religious sisters in their various communities and works have been on the forefront of the work of renewal of Church identity and mission that the Council invited.

As the Council's emphasis on the universal call to holiness, the prophetic priestly and authoritative mission of all the faithful, took hold among U.S. Catholics, laypersons and religious sisters have found themselves companions and partners, as in our different ways we have sought to be responsive to what God is doing and requiring of us in our day.

The story of U.S. religious women in a reforming Catholic Church between 1965 and today has unfolded amid enormous changes, cultural shakeups, and contested new developments. Over these years, women in religious communities in this country have literally lived their lives on the front lines of issues and debates concerning gender and power in the Church and in society, concerning authority and freedom within the Church, and concerning the ways that individual Christians, sisters, and their religious communities are to discern and enact their Gospel charisms and missions.

As our panelists tonight will attest, these debates for these women have never been merely theoretical. They have been enfolded in their bodies, their lives, and relationships, in their communal processes of discernment, in their institutional struggles and decisions and commitments, and in the ways they have sought to practice their radical discipleship in this day and age.

Post-Vatican II sisters' experiments in radical communal women's forms of Gospel living have also made them not only beacons, but lightning rods for the Church at large. As all of us who read the news also know, their frontier work has at times drawn heat and created sparks.

We are fortunate tonight to have with us a panel of speakers who have not only studied and thought deeply about, but have deeply lived and are living, the drama of women's religious communities in the post-Vatican II era. Representing five different religious communities, different generations of sisters, and different professional fields and ministries, our panelists are uniquely positioned to shed light on the myriad ways that

American Catholic sisters have shaped the Church since the Council and to provide us insight on sometimes contested aspects of their current stories and future directions. We are grateful to them, and we look forward to a rich evening in this season of light, an evening of light, maybe some fruitful heat, but definitely grace.

As is our custom, I will first introduce each speaker and we will hear from each one of them for eight minutes or so. During that time, please remember to write and hand in your questions. At any time, raise your card up and we'll collect it. I will then invite the speakers to respond to one another briefly, and then we'll turn to audience questions.

Our first speaker is Sister Doris Gottemoeller, who is a Religious Sister of Mercy and currently Senior Vice President for Mission and Values Integration at Catholic Health Partners, a regional healthcare system serving thirty-one counties in Ohio and Kentucky. Gottemoeller previously served as the first president of the Sisters of Mercy in the Americas, an international institute formed from seventeen Mercy congregations established in 1991.

In addition to her role in promoting dialogue within the Church through the Catholic Common Ground initiative, she has held leadership positions at the United States Catholic Conference, the International Union of Superiors General, and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

She has advanced degrees in chemistry and theology, and in fact received her Ph.D. in theology from Fordham University.

Welcome, Sister Doris.

DORIS GOTTEMOELLER: Good evening.

My first reflection is this is such an interesting topic, I am so glad to be here. It's such a great story.

Our time is very marshaled here, so in my eight minutes I have organized my remarks this way: I want to talk about the impetus for change, the process of change, and some learnings from change — one, two, three.

Just to situate myself, I entered religious life in 1953. So that gives you the context. First of all, the impetus for change. The best-kept secret is that the changes women religious underwent began not with Vatican II, but at least a dozen years before that. In 1950, Pope Pius XII convened an international meeting of superiors general, men and women, and charged them with renewal in religious life, theological education, and professional credentials for those teaching and doing professional work, and the elimination of outdated customs and clothing that estranged them from those they served — the elimination of outdated customs and clothing, professional preparation, and education.

If you heard stories about that time, it was customary for women religious to enter a convent, go through nine months or a year of novitiate, and begin teaching school. Then they were on the twenty-year plan: it took twenty years to get a bachelor's degree, going on Saturdays and summers. That was just no longer defensible. So the Holy Father said that we had to begin a new way of doing this.

However, that resonated very deeply with a lot of American women religious leaders, and they formed what was called the Sister Formation Movement. That would be the topic of a whole other evening. The Sister Formation Movement promoted the spiritual and educational and professional development of women religious. And, I would dare say, all

of us on the panel are the fruit of that, and probably all the women religious in this call are the beneficiaries of that moment. So we can't say enough about that.

One fruit of that, a very key fruit for our discussion tonight, is that the Sister Formation Movement, beginning in the early 1950s, created a whole generation of religious exposed to developments in theological, liturgical, and biblical studies, which led up to the Council. If you can picture this, when the Council was announced in 1962, suddenly you had a generation of younger members who were eager for the message.

Then, moving on to the Council itself, the impetus for change, *Lumen Gentium* devoted Chapter 6 to the important contribution of apostolic religious life to the Church in the context of the universal call to holiness, which was a whole different context for us. No longer were we the only ones called to holiness, but everyone in the Church was called to holiness.

Then the Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life in 1965 charged us with two simultaneous processes: the continuous return to the sources of our identity — the Scripture, the Bible, and the inspiration of our founders — and an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times, the so-called *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*.

But, going into a little more detail, the Council also said that: "The manner of living, praying, and working should be suitably adapted to the physical and psychological conditions of today's religious, and also, to the extent required by the nature of each community, to the needs of the apostolate, the requirements of a given culture, the social and economic circumstances anywhere, but especially in missionary territories. "The way in which communities are governed should also be reexamined in the light of these same standards.

"For this reason constitutions, directories, customs books, books of prayers and ceremonies, and similar compilations are to be suitably revised and brought into harmony with the documents of this sacred Synod. This task will require the suppression of outmoded regulations."

Can you grasp the scope of that? This was mandated to congregations with dozens and hundreds of years of history, and we would go back to the source and update everything. Furthermore, "Successful renewal (of communities) and proper adaptation cannot be achieved unless every member of the community cooperates." So this wasn't an activity for the leaders; this was an activity for every member. Heady stuff.

Two years after the Council, the Vatican published norms for the implementation of this. So that's the impetus for change, the process of change.

Every congregation was charged to hold a special chapter of renewal— a chapter is a legislative and electoral meeting — within two, or at most three, years. That chapter was to be preceded by a consultation of every single member. Some of these congregations had thousands and thousands of members. Every single person was to be consulted in preparation for these special chapters of renewal.

The fruit of the chapter was a preliminary or experimental rule or constitution, and we were to enter into a period of experimentation, which was to take until the second chapter after the next ordinary chapter — so perhaps as much as twelve years. At the end of that time, we were to submit to the appropriate authority a new constitution. Now, that was the process. The new constitutions would be approved by Rome or by the local bishop, depending on whether it was a diocesan or pontifical community.

That launched us into a process of ongoing chapters, assemblies, workshops, consistent with mutually responsible, self-governing, mission-oriented communities. Skills of dialogue and group facilitation were developed and, more recently, in the last ten or fifteen years, processes of merger and reorganization.

Do I have time for a few learnings from all of this?

As we look back on all of this, I think the first thing that can't be said too often was that our change was an act of obedience to the Church. Now, it was also true that our leaders understood the need for it and were preparing for it. But when people suggest, as some popular writers have, that we were in a state of defiance of Church authorities, we were mandated. You heard the scope of the mandate.

Secondly, the concept of experimentation was flawed from the start. Everyone was supposed to participate, according to the document. There was no control group. Now, in any social science experiment you have a hypothesis, you experiment with a new group, and then you have a control group, and after the period of experimentation is over you look at the results.

Well, if after three or five or seven years of going outside without a companion, wearing a modified habit of contemporary dress, driving a car, the results weren't quite what had been desired or anticipated. It was impossible to return to the *status quo ante*. We had already changed.

And furthermore, the ensuing years coincided with a period of enormous change in society and culture — the women's movement, antiwar movement, globalization (for us that meant sending 10 percent of our members to Latin America), postmodern sensibilities — which were all part of the signs of the times.

My final sentence is women's religious life somehow inspires a temptation to nostalgia or selective memory. But it's good to go back and hear the whole picture sometimes.

CHRISTINE HINZE: Our next speaker, Sister Mary Johnson, is a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur and a sociologist who is currently a Visiting Professor at Trinity Washington University in Washington, D.C. At Emmanuel College in Boston she is Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies, and she holds research associate status at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. She coauthored the book *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice*, the groundbreaking national study of the young-adult generation in the Church. Her latest book, written with Sister Patricia Wittberg and Mary Gauthier, is a study of sisters who have entered religious life in the U.S. since Vatican II, and it is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

Sister Mary.

MARY JOHNSON: Thank you, Christine, and good evening everyone. I'm honored to be part of a panel of sisters such as this. I look forward to our interaction as a panel and to our interaction with the audience.

When Jim called me to invite me to be part of the panel, I told him that I graduated from elementary school in 1971 and high school in 1975 and college in 1979 and that I had watched the evolution and the reform of religious life take place right before my eyes.

He said, "That's a good thing."

I said, “Well, you want me to be an *N* of 1?”

He said, “Yes, speak from your experience.”

I mentioned this to a former student of mine who is a Franciscan friar who’s in his late twenties, and he said, “We need that history, the history of the 1970s.”

I said to him, “But I don’t think of it as history. It’s inside of me and I live out of it every day and it formed me.”

He said, “No, no, believe me, it’s history.” [Laughter]

So my twenty-nine-year-old former student made me think. It was a marvelous exercise in reflecting upon that phenomenal period in time, to be a junior high student and watch the sisters change before our very eyes.

Of course, in Massachusetts at that time I can remember an Irish-Catholic boy sitting next to me in the seventh grade one September, at the beginning of school, saying to me, “Mary, doesn’t it seem that every year the sisters take more and more of their clothes off?” [Laughter] He said it with great respect. He was just incredulous that every year we did see this movement.

But, even then, I think something deep inside of me felt there was more going on than just the change in this external habit. As the years unfolded, I could see exactly that there was more going on.

It really wasn’t until I entered, in 1981, into the Sisters of Notre Dame and I was plunged into the study of the social teachings of the Church that I really found two sentences that explained what I had seen transpire over the last fifteen years.

The first sentence comes from *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World from Vatican II, the opening line: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” — join with me; I think you know this one — “of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”

The second sentence comes from *Justice in the World*, the 1971 document of the Synod of Bishops, which said: “Action on behalf of justice is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.” So it’s in you and it’s in me.

When I read those sentences, I said, “Aha! That explains it, that explains them, that explains my teachers, that explains the women who really formed me.”

As I reflect on those moments when they put flesh on those powerful sentences and on all the documents of Vatican II and on the renewal chapter documents of their own congregations, I think that the description of tonight is true, that sisters shaped the Church.

But I think there’s another piece to it, and that is the Church shaped the sisters. As Sister Doris said, sisters in front of me, in front of my eyes, put flesh on these powerful and prophetic words.

So how did they do it in the eyes and the imagination of a seventh grader, then as a high school student, and then as a college student?

I saw them cross all kinds of lines — ethnic lines, going all around the parishes of the city; racial lines, becoming involved in all kinds of civil rights initiatives; ideological lines, engaged with the antiwar movement and so many of the social movements of the late-1960s and early-1970s; but also social class lines, where they could work with well-to-do people on a fundraiser and then be in a homeless shelter or a soup kitchen in the evening. And they did it with such aplomb.

They were intriguing to me because then they started to cross linguistic lines. Several of my teachers went to Puerto Rico in the summer to learn Spanish so they could minister to Hispanics in our diocese in Massachusetts.

But, more than doing all this, they also brought us with them. They opened our parochial world so that we could realize there was the cosmopolitan world, there was a big world. So often they took us to places that we had only read about.

And then, when we couldn't go, when they started to travel internationally, they would come home and weave those stories for us in the classroom. So they would return from refugee camps, or from the Amazon rain forest, or from a desert in Sudan, and our world got bigger and bigger and bigger. They were crossing boundaries and borders that most people I knew only read about or thought about.

But most folks were called to single life or married life, and they were very happy in those lives. But I could see in the sisters that something had to explain this ability to go so broad and so deep at the same time.

And then, over time, as I got a little bit older, I realized that that passion for mission, that passion for the poor, that passion for the Church, that passion for the world, really came from the freedoms and the constraints of their vows. Their vows, which people would only talk about as an answer on a quiz show at night — poverty, chastity, obedience — those started to intrigue me too, in the sense that I was starting to learn more about society and more about social science, and I could see that those vows were counter to the culture, that they were countercultural to issues related to power, to money, and to abuses of sexuality.

So in this unfolding of religious life they were really not just doing all the time and working all the time in a really fascinating weaving of new and old ministries, but they were also living in such a way that, by their very being, by their very essence, they were pointing to a different way that all of us could live, a way that would take more seriously the call of Jesus Christ and the imagination of God for a new kind of human community based more on liberation than oppression.

As the years went by, I was happy to at times become involved in some of their new ministries. What fascinated me about my own order, and about other sisters whom I got to know, was some of their key administrators could pull out an envelope, and on the back of the envelope sketch an idea for a new institution, and a year later it would be built. So I marveled at their ability not just to talk about things or write about things, but actually to build things.

In sociology, a major point of analysis for us is institutions, large and small. Institutions are hard to begin and hard to nurture, hard to continue. And they did it, again in my experience, with such aplomb.

I was fascinated, especially as we went into the 1970s, to see the new kinds of ministries that unfolded, the new kinds of institutions that were built, and then the new kinds of

relationships between and among those institutions and with old institutions, and the transformations of old institutions in response to new needs, especially great human need.

Where does that leave us? All these years later, when we look at the data and move from an *N* of 1 to looking at the sisters in religious life today in the United States, we know that there are 1,200 women in formation, preparing for final vows to become sisters in a variety of religious congregations. I'm a believer that, just like we say when a baby is born that's evidence that God wants the world to continue, when we've got 1,200 women in formation in religious institutes in the United States, that's evidence that God wants religious congregations of women to continue in this country, in my estimation.

When I think of what faces them, I think that there is a solid foundation underneath them and all kinds of challenges before them. But I think that God will work in them, just as he has worked in previous generations of sisters, to help bring about a new kind of kingdom. Thank you.

CHRISTINE HINZE: Our next speaker is Sister Maria Cimperman. She is a religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Maria taught for eight years at the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio and was an Associate Professor of Moral Theology and Social Ethics, teaching at the intersection of social ethics, moral theology, and spirituality.

Her first book, *When God's People Have HIV-AIDS: An Approach to Ethics*, received a Catholic Press Association Award.

Currently she teaches at Catholic Theological Union and she is finishing a book with Orbis on *Social Analysis for the 21st Century: Faith and Action Toward a Socially Conscious Spirituality*.

Maria also brings her theological and lived experience background to one of her great passions, that of engaging in the area of contemporary religious life.

In addition to teaching courses and writing on contemporary religious life, she presents nationally and internationally on this subject. Speaking at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, National Religious Vocation Conference, and the Religious Formation Conference, among others, she presents and engages local and international congregations, formation programs, and leadership groups.

Maria also served for nine years as a national core team member of Giving Voice, a gathering of women religious under the age of fifty across congregations in the U.S. and internationally. This is a particular lens she brings to religious life today.

MARIA CIMPERMAN: I want to begin by saying it's such a gift to be with you tonight, to share and to have conversation about a way of life not only dear to me, but also important to the Church and to the world.

I'd like to use my time in three different ways: The first is to just offer a bit of personal context; the second is to look at the contributions of women religious in the areas of theology and spirituality; the third is to point out, perhaps, or suggest, some future significant challenges and invitations that we have in this field.

Context: I am in my forties and I was born as Vatican II ended, so I am a grateful beneficiary of all the initiatives of Vatican II. I didn't see limits for women growing up. I

didn't see limits in religious life. I saw women in classrooms, in soup kitchens, working in law, medicine, and public policy. I saw everything was possible.

Interestingly, too, from high school on, I was raised in inclusive language. I saw so much possibility.

A significant catalyst for my own vocation grounded in God was in 1980. I was a high school student in Cleveland, Ohio, at an Ursuline high school. That was when the news came forth of the death of four North American church women who were martyred in El Salvador on December 2nd.

I was in that high school that Dorothy Kazel had taught at, and people knew her. From stories about her, it was her death, but actually even more her life, that made a profound impact on my life. She still serves as an image of religious life for me, engaged in the world, in the joys, in the sorrows, in love, and offering all that she could. She loved not counting the cost and stayed among the people as long as it could be of help to them. She did not seek to die; she chose to love. In doing so, she also suffered the same fate as thousands of *campesinos* in El Salvador. That was a key impact for me on what it means to be a woman religious.

In my own formation I was blessed with many inter-congregational experiences. That's where some of the generation starts shifting. It wasn't "these sisters" and "those sisters," but we came together. That was a way of both learning from one another and appreciating one another's charisms and our own calls. So it was very much a gift of my time.

Where theology came through, I just remember that one of the gifts I received in the 1990s, when I made my final profession, was a copy of Beth Johnson's *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*.

Sisters work in theology and spirituality. First, some background.

Sister Doris gave a helpful piece on the Sisters Formation Conference. But I would like to talk about the fact that we can even talk about sisters' work in theology and spirituality is because women religious made such study possible when it did not exist.

In a biography of Sister Madeleva Wolff, a Holy Cross sister who is the president of St. Mary's College in South Bend, Indiana, Gail Porter Mandell writes that: "In the early 1940s women, including religious women, as well as laymen, were barred from the graduate study of theology by all Catholic universities in the United States, in spite of a shortage of teachers."

So in 1942 the NCEA, National Catholic Education Association, identified the shortage as one of the biggest problems facing Catholic education and appointed Sister Madeleva to figure out some possible solutions.

Every graduate school she approached refused to consider setting up a program for sisters and lay people. No alternative seemed to remain. This is where religious women tend to come in. All options are gone, and yet they have hope and see beyond. It's about hope, and I'll speak to the virtue of hope.

But at the next meeting of the NCEA, Madeleva amazed herself by announcing to the group, "I do not know how we will do it, but this summer we will offer at St. Mary's a six-week graduate program in theology." [Laughter]

And so it happened. The Sacred School of Theology was organized and started running. Eighteen sisters registered the first summer. By the time the school closed almost twenty-five years later, St. Mary's had granted seventy-six doctoral and thirty-five masters degrees in theology to sisters as well as laymen and laywomen. Only after major universities in Europe and America began admitting laypeople did the school phase out its program.

Interestingly, one of the significant theological societies in the U.S., the Catholic Theological Society of America, lists as one of its first members Elizabeth Farience [phonetic], who graduated in 1958, a laywoman, and she graduated from St. Mary's.

It was because of a program like this and farsighted women religious in congregational leadership that people started getting this kind of education.

One of those people was Margaret Brennan IHM. She earned her doctorate and then became a novice directress in 1962. If you think about it, at that time the novitiates were huge. So imagine someone with a doctorate in theology forming the sisters, and all the way through Vatican II. Then, in 1966 she was elected General Superior of her community and a theologian continued.

She talks about this in her memoir and talks about this as yet another watershed moment. I'm going to quote her here: "In the late 1960s, as I began to attend many meetings of bishops and to interact with clerical persons in the Church, I had become more and more aware of the theologic dependence of women religious on the views and expertise of clerics. In discussions on renewal, the Vatican documents, or life of the Church in general, we sisters were always reminded of our need to defer to male theologians and male teachers for the final word.

"Sometime in 1968 I had a conversation with Father Pierre Pare, a priest chaplain at the University of Louvain. I was remarking about our difficulties in conversations with Vatican officials in Rome. Each time we brought forward our opinions and convictions about renewal, which had come from our lived experience, we were told that we did not have the expertise to make these judgments and should leave them with the theologians — all male, of course — who were empowered to do the interpreting."

"Well," answered Father Pare, "why don't you educate your own theologians?"

On returning home, the idea stayed with her. From that moment, she brought to her council the suggestion that: What would it look like if for every hundred sisters one sister was a theologian? So they invited ten of their sisters to do graduate studies, doctoral work in theology, and they chose all different areas of theology and then scripture. And the impact continued. They have served in the U.S., in Canada, South Africa, and Rome. What it also offered was an opportunity to create their own theological updating programs for their sisters and for the laity in the summers and at other times. This was also impacting other religious congregations, who saw "Here's what you can do."

There is no way to really name the contributions of women religious who are theologians. But I will say two small pieces.

One is there are a number of unsung heroines who spent more of their time in the classrooms and in the colleges that the sisters started, doing education, who were not as well published as others. But these are the women who educated your religious education directors, your teachers, your pastoral ministers, and, even more, part of the educated laity we now have among us.

But, of course, there are also women religious theologians who have, through publications and teaching, helped to move us more deeply into theology and our tradition. It's a litany, simply, and I will offer simply some names. But I do want to say — and you know this — this has not been without cost, as you listen to the names mentioned: Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ; Mary Hilbert, OP; Margaret Geiter [phonetic]; Margaret Farley, RNS; Ann Patrick, Holy Name Sister; Barbara Reed; Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ; Sandra Schneiders, IHN; Kathleen Hughes; Mary Boyce [phonetic] — and the list goes on.

So they are many, and they continue, and it's another generation that's emerging.

One of the people, though — and this has been fascinating — is Sister Agnes Cunningham. This is how some of the movements in theology have occurred. She received her master's in 1962 from Marquette. Her religious order superior asked her to go to Europe and get a doctorate in theology. Sister Agnes demurred, on the grounds that she was already teaching at Mundelein College in Chicago and that the Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary had no institutions of higher learning. "But," she recalls, "that wise woman superior said, 'This isn't about us. This is about the Church. The Church is going to need women well formed in theology. I would like you to be our contribution.'"

She would become the first woman to apply to and be accepted at the Facultes Catholiques in Lyon, France, where she received a licentiate in moral theology and a doctorate in patristic theology; she was the first woman president of the CTSA in 1977; and received the John Courtney Murray Award in 2001.

And that's simply the theology. The spirituality areas, that maybe for our discussion are really interesting, are where the women religious really moved areas of spirituality, retreats, and spiritual direction. I think there's a lot to be said there.

Four phrases about our invitations for the future:

- One area is peace-building, both in the world and in the Church. That includes dialogue, collaboration.
- The second one is internationality.
- The third one is deepening community in prayer.
- The fourth one is about having ever more deeply a contemplative lens as we future.

We offer this, but we have to find ways to live this better, or we will simply rush from one crisis to another or recede into workaholicism.

Ultimately, ours is a God-seeking life, it's all of ours, and this is essential, as there is both institutional crumbling and a future emerging, all of which the God we seek and ever more deeply long for invites us to. This will allow us to use our religious imagination and offer real hope.

So I end with a quote from Vatican II which speaks to our call as women religious and to our call as humans. It's from *Gaudium et Spes*: "The future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping." May we live this. Amen.

CHRISTINE HINZE: Next we welcome Sister Maria Theotokos Adams. She is a member of the Servants of the Lord and the Virgin of Matará, a congregation founded in Argentina in 1988.

After graduating from Columbia University, Sister Adams [sic] became one of the early pioneers of American postulants in her congregation. She is currently a graduate student

in late antique and early Medieval Church history at the Catholic University of America, as well as the Director of Studies for the American province of her congregation, overseeing the education and formation of sisters as they move toward profession and final vows.

MARIA THEOTOKOS: Thank you so much. It's a great honor to be here with all of you, and especially with this distinguished panel.

As I said to them before beginning, we are just at the beginning. So our story is a story of beginnings.

In particular, I wanted to share with you, having been invited to speak — as an order founded after the Council, I wanted to give you a brief sketch of our post-conciliar council; then the chronology of our foundation; and finally, some of the particular ways of our ministry here in the United States.

My religious community, the Servants of the Lord and the Virgin of Matará, is the female branch of a religious family, the Religious Family of the Incarnate Word. So their priests founded the sisters and then Third Order laymen and women.

Currently, we have over a thousand sisters in thirty-five countries. We are engaged in both *misión agentes* in parts of Asia and Africa, as well as the call of the new evangelization throughout Europe and the Americas.

Our missions in the Middle East, which include Aleppo, Gaza, Baghdad, among others, are comprised of both foreign missionary sisters and local Arab locations. They commit themselves to the enduring witness of the forgiveness and peace of Christ's love in these places.

The province here in the United States includes fifteen houses, mostly apostolic convents, as well as a monastery of our cloistered sisters, and then the houses of formation. Our founder, Father Carlos Miguel Buena, is still living, and it is his story that frames our birth in the Church during the post-conciliar period.

Ordained in 1971 in Argentina, Father Buena served for over ten years as a diocesan priest in a parish setting, while also accompanying a chaplain in a high school and giving retreats for laity. When in 1978 the election of the young Karol Wojtyła to the See of Peter came and captured the world's attention, father Buena also began to follow very closely his writings and activities from his parish in Buenos Aires, the great travels of John Paul II. The foundational grace, the inspiration to found a new order in the Church, came in 1981. The male branch, the Institute of the Incarnate Word, began in San Rafael in 1984, on March 25th. Four years later, in 1988, Father Buena founded the sisters based on twin constitutions with the male branch, reflecting the same charism, to prolong the incarnation through the specific aim of evangelization of culture.

The influence of the Second Vatican Council in shaping our charism is evident from the more than sixty citations of eleven of the sixteen Council documents found just in our constitutions and the companion text, Director Spirituality.

In fact, *Lumen Gentium* is the most frequently cited document, appearing twenty-three times, including our opening statement of intent. Number one of our constitutions includes the phrasing that we want to give "testimony that the world cannot be transformed and offered to God without the spirit of the Beatitudes," from *Lumen Gentium* 31.

In fact, the expression “evangelization of culture” directly in number five of our constitution speaks of the entire chapter of *Gaudium et Spes* number fifty-three to sixty-two, dedicated to culture and what that evangelization means.

John Paul II is the other most influential post-conciliar source in our charism. Cited well over seventy times, he often spoke about evangelization of culture, including in 1979, addressing the Pontifical Biblical Commission, he said, “The term ‘acculturation’ or ‘inculturation’ may well be a neologism, but it expresses very well one of the elements of the great mystery of the incarnation.” That is at the heart of our spirituality and charism. We consider him as the spiritual father of our religious family, since we recognize our enduring bond to his legacy both as the monumental pope under whose pontificate we were born in the Church, but also as the outstanding spiritual leader and friend of young people who inspired so many of us to answer our vocations to consecrated life.

Turning to our ministry here in the United States, it was in 1994 that a small group of Argentinean sisters came here to Brooklyn to join the priests of the IVE in East New York, a part of Brooklyn, last on the Number 3 train, out near JFK, an inner-city evangelization. Over the past eighteen years since then, our sisters have responded to the request of various bishops to serve especially in the Hispanic ministry, youth ministry, young adult formation, adult catechist formation, pro-life work, university campus ministry, catechesis and sacramental preparation for all ages.

Our fifteen houses in the U.S. are found in seven dioceses and archdioceses, mostly along the East Coast.

Like older orders who came from Belgium, France, Italy, and Germany to serve the young Church in the United States, our sisters minister especially among immigrant and minority communities. The mixture of American-born, English-speaking vocations with Hispanic missionary sisters allows us to experience in our fraternal life in common the rich diversity of the American church today.

The tough urban settings of North Philadelphia, Bridgeport, Connecticut, and Spanish Harlem are for us the urgent modern mission fields of the Church in America.

Beyond the cities of the Northeast, we also accompany families of rural migrant workers in the underground mushroom farms of Avondale outside of Philadelphia and in the orange groves of central Florida.

As more families settle into the local communities, the needs for women and children alike increase in both the spiritual and material needs and all kinds of programs of language, education — everything that includes.

One of the things we see so often, and it’s a particular moment in which the sisters interact, is the confrontation of culture and authority between bilingual, technology-savvy teenagers and their immigrant parents. So, working with youth groups and confirmation classes as bilingual sisters, we have a unique opportunity, not afforded by public schools, to answer questions about the faith and culture of their families, as well as assisting each young person to discover Christ on his or her own terms.

And, like every Catholic immigrant group which has forged a new place in the Church in America, Hispanic families benefit from the attention of parishes to celebrate feast days, family traditions, and liturgies in our language. We aspire to join the long line of women religious in America who have done just this for past immigrant families in need.

In the method of our ministry we have focused on parish life and the catechesis as a

principal way to support families and nurture the faith.

In the summertime we do door-to-door evangelization with lay volunteers and seminarians and sisters in formation to whole neighborhoods, whether they are within or without of the parish for now. These are public and active outreach events that draw on both traditional methods of evangelization as well as the spirit of the new evangelization. Another way that we participate in the new evangelization in our ministries in the United States is through the work in media. We collaborate with the priests of our religious family in a bilingual publishing company, IV Press, to make contemporary books of moral theology, family issues, and spirituality more available to all readers, in English and in Spanish, through hard copies as well as Kindle editions and e-book technologies.

I serve as the editor for our Web site, which is run out of the province. It maintains a weekly blog post, offers extensive links to other Catholic sites, and posts formation articles on social doctrine and on spirituality. The Web site is also the principal connection for lay missionaries, young people who serve in our missions abroad, a very good experience.

Most recently, we were able to upgrade our Web site to being mobile device compatible, which is a very important apostolic project, since 30 percent of all Web viewing is done on mobile devices, and that percentage increases among young people.

The technology industry, as a final note of our ministry, is also central to the work we do in Silicon Valley. Our sisters teach catechism, support the liturgy and sacristy of the Shrine of Our Lady of Peace, lead youth groups and a company of nearly twenty families in a home-school cooperative.

Many parishioners work in this extremely demanding field of technology, and it can create a disproportionate emphasis on the material world and its criteria. Our sisters ministering there encourage the faithful to develop deep lives of prayer, to make frequent recourse to the sacraments, since, indeed, it is only Christ who can ground the men and women of our times in their true dignity, elevate their daily work, and strengthen their hope for eternal life. By supporting their spiritual needs and helping them to regain balance and perspective, our sisters hope to foster healthy families and strong Catholics who will continue to contribute to the important field of innovative technology.

Finally, for us, as modern missionary sisters, the dynamism which the Second Vatican Council sought to revive in the Church is found in the secret of the joy of the cross and the inexhaustible confidence bestowed on us in the sacramental life. The spirit of the Second Vatican Council continues to inspire and to shape our religious life and our ministries. Thank you.

CHRISTINE HINZE: Last, but certainly not least, we welcome Sister Miriam Ukeritis, a Sister of Saint Joseph of Carondelet, who is a psychologist and CEO of the Southdown Institute in Toronto, dedicated to serving the mental health needs of religious and clergy. She previously served as Director of Research at Southdown, as well as Director of the Institute for Leadership of Religious Organizations and Acting Director of DePaul University's Center of Applied Social Research.

Along with Father David Nygren, she was co-researcher for the Religious Life Futures Project and co-author of a major study published in 1992, known as the FORUS Report, the *Report on the Future of Religious Orders in the United States*, about which you will hear more momentarily.

MIRIAM UKERITIS: Thank you. Thank you all for the invitation, for your presence.

Part of me says I don't know what else to say. The four women before me have said it. They have talked about every facet of the study that David and I worked on. It's an incredible witness of the last, really, fifty years of service and ministry to the church that we all love. It's an incredible story tonight. So I stand here saying, "Okay, well let's just talk."

In the invitation I was asked to talk a little bit about the FORUS Study, looking back twenty years. It doesn't seem like twenty years. My hunch is some of you may have been involved in it, answering the survey or in some way.

Can I ask, did anybody here do the survey?
[Show of hands]

Oh my gosh! Okay. Thank you very much for responding. We had a response rate of well over 77 percent, which was really good for social science research at that point in history. I'm just going to tell one tiny little story. One person who was doing the survey, we got it back incomplete with a note from his superior saying, "Father died while doing this," but he wanted to assure us that it didn't kill him. [Laughter]

The last question asked was essentially: If I had to do it all over again, would I choose religious life? His response was "very strongly agree." They used that as part of his funeral liturgy.

It's kind of those stories that make the numbers come alive.

If I were to give the summary, what I want to do is just talk a little bit about the bottom line of the work that we did, look at some of the dimensions as they're alive today, and then where are we. Everybody does three points, so I figured I should come up with them.

We said the bottom line was for religious communities to continue to live vibrantly, that the two things — the formula, if you will, or the equation — was fidelity to founding purpose and responsiveness to absolute human need. Those were two dynamics that we've seen over and over.

However, what we thought they were when we first heard that or thought of it and what we think of them today, if you were to talk about what it is to be faithful to your founding purpose and how do you respond to absolute human need, I believe our thinking has evolved.

As I heard Doris talk about change, I was thinking of how part of that evolution — at Southdown we really work a lot on change, and it's an exciting and graced ministry. Remember the vitality curve? The talk was if you were going to have it — when things started to decline, the first thing you would do was change the externals, rearrange the room or something like that; and then, the next thing to keep the decline from totally slipping down was you would change the documents, the written statements; then finally, after collapse, you really worked on the interchange.

I think that's a lot of what we've done. We started by changing externals and then we rewrote our documents. But we're coming, I believe, to really understand what they mean, and not just in our head but in our heart and in our gut. That's where I believe much of the pain is, and also much of the excitement and challenge and life, and I dare say new life — it's in that experience.

Another way of thinking about change is when you get to doing that inner work. A man

by the name of Carlo DiClemente, who works a fair amount in addictions and stages of change, once talked about various stages, and he talked about them as pre-contemplation — nothing to do with contemplation as we think about it — but it's the pre-contemplation, contemplation, planning, implementation, and maintenance.

- Pre-contemplation: "I'm not even aware that I have to change. People might be talking about it out there, but it's not inside of me."
- Contemplation: "I'll think about it. Yeah, maybe I've got to lose about fifty pounds. I'll think about it. I'll be thinking about it."
- The next is the planning: "I'm going to do it, I'm going to plan to do it."
- Then, after that, comes implementation — I start to watch my diet, or whatever, and I tell people so they can help me watch, they can watch me.
- Then the maintenance, and of course checking on the maintenance, making sure, readdressing.

We've thought for a long time — and I think it's true for us in religious life — that change was "we've got to change and we'll do it tomorrow"; "we've got to change" and we implement immediately. Oftentimes — and I think it's some of what our struggle is today — the changes that we've thought about, the changes that we know we have to make, we kind of struggle in some ways with the commitment — commitment and contemplation, thinking about it, planning, and then moving forward.

That's just a little bit about how, when I look back on what we talked about in terms of faithfulness to founding purpose, responsive to absolute need, we're beginning to go much deeper as individuals, but also as groups, as congregations, to move on that.

The dimensions that we talked about in terms of the future of religious life — we had a handy-dandy little arrows chart. Some of you may remember it. There were eight dimensions talked about as kind of antithetical.

- One would bring us in a direction that we would like to go. The other kind was inhibiting or restraining. They were around individualism and a true sense of vocation.
- Average leadership or excellent leadership that would need to move us into the future.
- Issues around authority, corporate identity, or simply work absorption. Role clarity, or just the loss of what affiliation meant for us.
- Issues around multiculturalism and racism.
- The materialism and the Gospel.
- Recognizing and living charism, or being what we called parochial assimilation, kind of letting go and giving into the demands of a, perhaps, diocesan structure and losing touch with the needs and demands of our religious community.

All of those are elements that we heard talked about tonight.

I think the biggest place that we have done work and need to face is in the area of role clarity. I think that's where we are. I think that's where apostolic religious women are struggling — not struggling to understand what it is, not struggling to figure out what it means to be a sister, but saying, "What is our role in the world and Church today?"

I think it was David Fleming who talked about the role of religious as addressing the gap between the Gospel and the culture, be it the culture in society or the culture in the Church. I think we have heard tonight many ways — from new religious communities, to the theological studies, to how sisters were in the schools — that we have seen how religious women have done that.

As we are appropriating that more deeply, I think it's leading to a tad of tension. [Laughter] But I think we're really moving in a wonderful understanding of what our role is as religious in the Church at this point in the 21st century.

Last night, as I was packing and cleaning up, I came across a wonderful little card. It's from Joan Chittister more than ten years ago. She wrote: "Religious life lives on the edge of society in order to critique it, lives at the bottom of society in order to comfort it, and lives at the epicenter of society in order to challenge it."

May we be faithful to that and to the Church we love. Thank you.

CHRISTINE HINZE: What a rich repast.

I sense a contemplative mood in the room. People are taking their own notes. But we want to hear your questions. Now is the time, if you haven't already, to jot something on a card and wave it. We'll pick them up. Thank you.

We want to start our conversation portion of the program by, on my part, both thanking you all and also asking if — maybe I'll make a couple of little comments, but then mostly be asking if any one of you was struck by something one of the others had said that you want to build on.

A couple of things really struck me: the consistent reference to change and the many facets of change that have been discussed by various speakers; the consistent reference to fidelity, to founding purpose, as Sister Miriam was just telling us; and the response to absolute human needs, and then figuring out what that means as far as evangelizing culture or getting within the culture and the myriad ways that that happens for sisters. And then — and this is something that is very intriguing to me — Sister Mary Johnson mentioned the freedom and the constraints of the vows as creating a particular way that's different than someone like myself, that inserts religious women into the world and into a life of religious community. I personally would love to hear more about how all that strikes you, how the vows are — and I think, Mary, you mentioned around money, around sexuality, and around power — how do those vows free and constrain religious sisters today and how are they a resource for us?

Does anyone want to make an initial comment on any of those topics? Or perhaps you have something on your mind that you'd really like to say in response to — Go ahead, Sister Doris.

DORIS GOTTEMOELLER: Well, I'll jump in and respond to Christine's last point: how are the vows lived differently today than they were fifty years ago, and what does it mean to live a celibate life when you're working in a workplace with as many men as there are women?

Years ago, when I was teaching in a Catholic high school, there might have been one or two men on the faculty, and we maybe saw a Father or two at an evening event, but we actually did not encounter persons of the opposite gender. But now that's our ordinary work venue.

Or what's it like to live poverty when you have to travel extensively, even internationally, when you have a car to your use, a computer to your use, and so on?

What's it like to be obedient when you are a director of a large organization with dozens of people accountable to you?

There wasn't anything in that Catechism of the Vows that I read fifty years ago that even intimidated any of this. So I would say that that has been part of the journey. We've had our ups and downs.

To me, most of our congregations have a commitment to living in community. It has always been my feeling that that's where it all comes together, because it's in that communal setting where we are persons who are in many ministries, where we challenge one another, where we support one another, where we pray together, where we bring the needs of the ministry together through our prayer, where we go out refreshed to the ministry.

It's deciding together how much is enough, what does it mean to live simply, where we share all things in common. To me that's a powerful integrating force, or integrating dimension of our life, that hasn't really had occasion to be mentioned yet this evening.

MARY JOHNSON: And to follow Sister Doris's questions on how we as individuals live the vows, the next level of questioning would be: How do we as groups live the vows; how do we collectively talk about and reflect upon and live our vow of poverty in terms of where we live and what we own, how we share, how we do social analysis about the needs of the world; how do we live collectively our vow of celibate chastity; how do we care for and comfort and challenge ourselves as members of the group, but also the world community; and then, how do we corporately live a vow of obedience, which is at its essence a vow of deep listening to God, God's actions in the world?

Some have suggested that the social teachings are a new lens through which we could look at the vows and that what's needed today too, in addition to what Sister Miriam said, is a new fresh look at these freedoms and constraints individually and collectively.

CHRISTINE HINZE: Anyone else want to make a comment on that topic?

MIRIAM UKERITIS: Just quickly, as I read the papers and look at the various things that make the news headlines, be it in our civic society or our church society, they tend often to be either with money, sex, or power.

The vows give me and us, I think, a way of dealing with those very powerful human drives, needs, issues. They give us a way of addressing them, of being attentive to them, being aware of them, and communally saying "How do we deal with money, sex, power, in ways that are, indeed, life-giving not only to ourselves but to the world?"

MARIA CIMPERMAN: The piece that really struck me was, Sister Miriam, when you talked about it's a time of role clarity and what does that mean. I think the people who lived post-Vatican II listened to the signs of the times, you read them, and you read the Gospel in light of them, and you responded in light of the Gospel with your lives in it.

I think Vatican II-plus-50 is asking us: How do we do that today? Just as you were faithful to that, this time is also continuing to ask us that. So even the we-ness of the vows is an emerging question, not just "I, how am I living it?" but "how do we do that?" It's a different question in this country, as the individual has such prime of place.

There's goodness to that. But how do we also offer that wideness when the world is crying for community? So how do we, in light of the different ways the family called "the Church" discusses issues, live obediently in a positive way? How does that help us love more deeply? How does my way of embodying the Gospel and my charism help me live celibacy more deeply? And how do I love in light of the resources I have, my time being one, as well as other pieces of it? I think this time is asking different things.

I loved, Sister Theotokos, when you were talking about the social media. I think that is one of the signs of our times. So how is that inviting? I did my timing with my iPod. How do we use a lot of things, and what does that mean for religious life and in the wider witness?

MARIA THEOTOKOS: What you are describing there reminded me very much recently I — we email and have all kinds of modes of communication.

I had an email from one of our American sisters from Philadelphia who's a superior in The Hague in Holland, and she was just sharing a little bit casually about — she has been in Europe for many years now, but it's her first arrival in Holland. She said, "I don't really know where to begin. The situation, the cultural feel, and the Church here, it's very demanding, and the family situations, marriage situations, are very tense and very broken."

She said, "I think our apostolate will principally be the witness of our community life and fraternal charity." She said, "I think we can only begin this mission by really going back to the roots of our common life, the witness of mutual forgiveness, community, fidelity, prayer."

And she said, "I think our fraternal life in common is the beginning of this apostolate, and maybe the only dimension of the apostolate for quite a long time of our ministry, what will open up in our ministry in Holland in that particular convent."

So it's very tied in with the witness of fraternal life, the witness of the vows and of unity, as a legacy for sisters, really.

CHRISTINE HINZE: Sister Doris?

DORIS GOTTEMOELLER: One little postscript I'd like to add. None of us have mentioned, except in passing, the newer members coming to us. I'd like to hold up the challenge of the diversity of the newer members compared to the homogeneity fifty years ago — at least we thought we were homogeneous. As years have passed, we've found out differently.

We were all, for the most part, right out of high school, or not more than a few years later. But now they come in — I live in a house with three people in formation. One is twenty-two, one is thirty-five, and one is fifty. Their life stories are so different, their ethnic backgrounds are different. They're all beautiful mature women. But to try to incorporate that in a wholesome way is a real challenge.

MARY JOHNSON: And just to tag onto that, of the 1,200 women in the United States who are in formation, preparing to be sisters, 40 percent are women of color. So they reflect the millennial and the Generation X generations of our Church and their great ethnic and racial diversity.

CHRISTINE HINZE: As a theologian, I'll throw out another thought that occurred to me. There seems to be this profound dynamic in our Catholic faith between what some would call the prophetic, the proclamation dimension, where we go out into the world and preach the Gospel; and then, on the other hand, what some call the sacramental, where by our life, by our being, we reflect who God is and God's love to the world simply by being who we are. Sister Theotokos's comments made me think about this, that in some situations one is appropriate and in some other situations the other may be emphasized.

Do you all experience both of those as religious sisters, and is there a tension at times, and do you think maybe that the varying directions of communities in the present era may be partly reflective of senses by some communities of being pulled toward one more than another? I'm not sure if I'm being clear. You're nodding your heads, so that's good. The sacramental and the prophetic?

MIRIAM UKERITIS: I'll start. There are many paths to holiness. Ours is an incredibly rich and diverse church. So I think that both the sacramental and the other need to be modeled. We need that witness.

I think people are called to different styles as they are called. I think it's time for us to celebrate that diversity and not try to figure out which is best. So that's a start.

I think there's a lot that different traditions have in common. Just as we've gone beyond "Is she going to the Mercy's or to the Sisters of St. Joseph?" — you know, we have moved beyond that. We have moved to the point where we walk with young adults and try to help them discern what their call is. That's the grace.

It's the same thing. It's not one is better than the other. There are different times, as we've noticed, that one is more needed or one is, perhaps, more appropriate. But I'd say it's at this point we really need to embrace one another and not try to be divisive.

MARIA THEOTOKOS: We were discussing that before, that the Church is like a family in which you have many siblings, and every family knows within their family how very different brothers and sisters in the same family may well be. It's a beautiful reflection, as we were talking about before. That is partly what you're describing, to get to why there would be many charisms in the Church, why there are many congregations in the Church.

The very fact that the Holy Spirit brings forth many families within the Church, the different brothers and sisters — especially in consecrated life we can see it — is very beautiful, and it's a great gift that we were discussing before.

MIRIAM UKERITIS: I think the media has done us in in some ways, in that they perpetuate one style. We just need to keep questioning that and letting the truth be told. I was at a conference this summer and somebody said to me, "Oh, I'm not used to seeing a sister not in a habit." I said, "I haven't worn one for forty years." [Laughter]

It was a good opportunity for education, that that is true of some sisters because of their institute or because of their personal choice, but it's not necessarily something that marks what a religious woman is in today's world.

MARY JOHNSON: I know some sisters who have worked on the international level say that they feel that it's only in the United States where the habit is politicized, that there's a meaning put onto it. In other parts of the world it is, just as Sister Miriam said, an expression of difference, and, as Sister Theotokos said, an expression of particular charisms and responses to need.

I'm struck by the groups or the individuals who try to impute various meanings or to try to use divisive rhetoric to divide us, rather than to look at the array of the hundreds of charisms that are present in the United States and how I think we need every single one of them for the mission of the Church in this country.
[Applause]

MARIA CIMPERMAN: I think sometimes, too, it's good to ask these questions and

ponder them. But I think, even in light of the different things that are going on right now in Church and religious life, the question for me always is: Where's the lead of the befriending spirit — that's a Vatican II image — where is that inviting us?

That's where I want to spend my time, is what's inviting, what's calling, and to use the rich heritage we have, and to be in this now of 2012, and to say, "What is that inviting?" because if we're constantly just responding to critique or applause, we are not about the vision that we're called to.

I think we are at a particular time in religious life. It's not simply about age, but it's about energy, it's about the moment we're in, in all kinds of ways, that is really asking us to go deeply, to plumb our contemplative depths, and then to respond. That's where I want to give my life to, that's where I want to spend my life blood.

It's not to just let something that's untrue be said about us, or that's unjust, but it's to say, "Gosh, there's so much calling for it in the world and in the Church." I do sense that.

Just in being with the under-fifties, that's where the energy wants to go. So how do we attend to where we are but continue to do what the women and men before us did and respond? That's where I want to spend my life blood.

CHRISTINE HINZE: We now have some audience questions. Some of them are definitely tracking topics that have already been brought up.

Before I read the first one, reflecting the questions of Sister Miriam, you said that the media does us in by perpetuating one image of religious life. Some of the comments are reflecting the fact that the media also does us in by perpetuating conflict and perpetuating the sources of tension more so than the great sources of unity and so forth in what's going on in religious life today.

Just to begin with one, this is for everything: "Obviously, there are real tensions within the Church today. How do these tensions impact your ministry and your community? Is there any way beyond these tensions?"

Let me link that to a couple similar questions: "Is it more difficult, or is there a huge change to thoughtful conversation coexisting with institutional tensions, and sometimes it seems tensions with the hierarchy?" And there's a number of questions along those lines. [Laughter] Just the kind of group we've got here tonight.

DORIS GOTTEMOELLER: Well, I can give a good example of tensions, because I work in institutional healthcare at the system level. The implementation of healthcare reform and, very particularly right now, the mandate to provide what we're calling the HHS mandate to provide free contraception to all employees, is something that's right in front of us right now and that we're talking about a lot.

For a health system, we're between a rock and a hard place. We're between the bishops' direction and the U.S. government as a provider of — we have 35,000 employees and we are directed to, beginning in 2014, make contraception a part of the benefit package. Now, I point out it doesn't require anybody to use it — that's still an individual conscience choice — but it has to be included in the benefit package.

There are lawsuits put forward by some dioceses and religious groups. So I'd say we're managing the tension. We're not defying anybody. We understand that we have dual obligations. We understand that we are a Catholic ministry and we have a position in the Catholic Church.

We don't have the answer to that yet. But as it is now, unless those lawsuit are settled, as we are thinking right now, we will provide the benefit under protest until the lawsuits can work their way through the courts. Just one example.

CHRISTINE HINZE: Other comments on that question of tensions, how those are dealt with? Again, you have made comments that addressed that to some extent already. Anyone else?

MARY JOHNSON: I was inspired by the way that leaders of the religious institutes responded to the apostolic invitation. They handled the enormity of that work with such dignity.

It's interesting — God does write straight with crooked lines — for some congregations, it was a time of deep contemplative reflection. Certainly we were forced to do it. But once we undertook it, there are new learnings and new kinds of analysis. I think we aren't able yet to measure all of the pieces that will flow from that.

That's particular to the visitation. Others might want to speak about other things going on recently.

MIRIAM UKERITIS: I think, in the same vein, responding to those tensions, or dealing with them, or even looking at them, through the frame of who we are as religious women, out of that contemplative stance, to be faithful to who we are as women of the Gospel, as those who seek the truth, who strive to bring about and make real the reign of God, the mission of Jesus — if we can remain grounded in that and then respond out of that stance, faithful to who we are, speaking the truth that we know, and being open to hearing the truth of all, of moving into dialogue.

One of the things that we have done since I entered in 1964 was talk about collaboration and dialogue. It has become a byword. We learn that skill as religious women, and it may be a gift that we can bring to the Church. I know all have to be willing to participate in that. But I think if we can continue to be here and to keep coming to the table with the integrity that we know is ours — I don't know what other options we have.

CHRISTINE HINZE: Thank you.

Here's a couple questions that are related on a different topic.

This one is for Sister Mary Johnson and Sister Theotokos: "Can you say a little bit more about who the 1,200 young women who are in training for the religious life today in the U.S. are? As far as you know, do they represent a cross-section of the U.S. Catholic community?"

And then a linked question: "As the number of women in various orders is declining in the U.S., what is being done to increase the number of vocations to the religious life?"

MARY JOHNSON: I might have statistics to start us off that I can share. What we know about the 1,200 is that, as I said, 40 percent are women of color. They are across a large expanse of age.

This is where I hesitate, because we haven't developed language yet to describe our distinctiveness. So we depend on words that are used in the political sphere — like "conservative," "liberal" — and they do not capture the complexity of religious reality.

So if we were to look at the 1,200, we'd say that half are in orders represented by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, half are represented by the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious.

If we step back a little bit more, LCWR has four times the number of congregations that CMSWR has, but when we look across all the categories, about one-third of the CMSWR orders and about one-third of the LCWR orders have no one in formation. And then, the rest of the orders have about one or two people, and then a handful of orders have a larger number.

So Sister Patricia Wittberg and I wrote a piece in *America* magazine in October and put these statistics out. We argued that this is an issue for the whole Church, that this is not just an issue for vocation teams of individual institutes, and that we have to talk about all of this.

I think tonight is a great example of a way we could talk about it. So I'm very grateful, and I think we all are, to Fordham University for hosting such an occasion for us to talk so honestly about what faces us.

But, as a newer member, I'd like Sister Theotokos to weigh in and tell us a little bit about what the attraction was and then how you really entered into your own particular congregation.

MARIA THEOTOKOS: I entered in 2001, right out of university. I had not ever thought about religious life in high school. I hadn't been confirmed or been in any catechism program. In my parish, in particular, there was kind of a blurry meltdown of sacramental preparation.

Eventually, between high school and college, I took a year off and I lived in monasteries, mostly in France, to not become an atheist in college. This is just my story, but I think it's common to a lot of our young women. We are daughters of our age, the same way that all of us here are children of our own generation.

The Church is like that. The Church moves through time and space and is always the same and always changing. For me that was the concern, that I just didn't want to be an atheist, because the ones I knew were very bitter people, and I just didn't want to be like that. That was about all.

So when I was nineteen I was confirmed. A little bit before that I made my first confession ever. I discovered Jesus was present in the blessed sacrament, surprised by that, pleasantly surprised. So there was a whole kind of flourishing of the theology, the richness of our Catholic faith, of the depths of the sacramental life, that was just totally unknown to me. It was captivating.

As we all know with religious vocation, it's God initiative, it's His plan, so He can use whatever He wants to make His plan known to us, and then wait for us in our freedom to respond.

After that — I didn't enter right away at nineteen — I came back to the United States and I went to college. I was here in New York for four years.

I met our sisters once here at the visit of the Relics of Saint Therese and Saint Patrick in the fall of 1999. Then I was in Holy Land, in Jerusalem, for the Jubilee Year, where I was studying abroad for a semester at Hebrew University.

Everywhere I was the sisters were there, and everywhere I was — I went to visit them in Bet Jella, outside of Bethlehem, and had to go through this bombed-out building. I thought, “Are you sure they live here?” The taxi man would say, “Blue sisters, they live here.”

I was going up the flights of stairs. Finally there started to be potted plants, and finally there started to be glass panes in the windows, and then there they were, at the top of the stairs, in this little apartment.

I was very fascinated to see their life and I was very struck by living in a culture — and perhaps this is the case for certain young Americans now in the United States, depending on where they are — a situation where being Catholic wasn’t taken for granted. We’re not a generation who is growing up in kind of the Catholic bubbles of Catholic high school, Catholic elementary school, and then the next thing is “are you going to be a sister?” We don’t know that anymore, many of us. Some do, some do, but some of us don’t.

So the radical call of Christ and the radical life is really striking. I mean you think, “I’m going to lay down my own life. Lord, do you know my plans? I’ve got a lot of plans, you know; I’m going to do this and do this and this, I’m going to have a family, I’m going to get married.”

So what it means for all of us at our moments of discernment to lay that down and to trust —I think for younger vocations and the sisters I work with it’s a radical business that’s not an option that your friends and other classmates have thought about sometimes. So there is a freshness and, at the same time, a solitary radical encounter.

I mentioned John Paul II because the World Youth Days, the way he spoke to young people, for many of us was an electrifying confirmation of something we didn’t know what it was called.

I’m older in my house. The younger sisters are coming to us out of high school, out of college, some from the professional field, from the Midwest. In this particular most recent novitiate group, there’s only one Hispanic sister. The rest are mostly Anglo-Americans from the Midwest in this particular batch.

But I have with me sisters visiting to share in the talk. One is from the Philippines, one from Pakistan, an American-born, and Argentinean.

For us, things that culturally America and the Church had to go through we take for granted very naturally. That’s a gift we’ve inherited, I think, from those difficult times. So being bicultural, bilingual, it’s normal for us.

But I know it was a long journey for us as an American culture and a long journey in the Church. So we inherited that from the work of you all, really.

MARY JOHNSON: Let me use you as a piece of data for one moment, because as I listened to you and your beautiful reflection on your own journey, we also concluded that *America* article by saying that for many young Catholic women in the United States today their ambivalence about vocation is rooted in their ambivalence toward the Church, and that we are confronting a reality now we’ve never confronted before in the history of U.S. Catholicism, and that is that more and more young Catholic women are not practicing their faith the way that we did just years earlier; they are very hurt and sometimes disdainful of issues in the Church or leadership in the Church. So there is a dynamic at work here that is affecting some women.

For the first time, we are seeing more engagement of young Catholic men in the life of the Church — that is, the engagement of men is greater than the engagement of women. Now, this has tremendous implications for the future of the Church, because other studies tell us that the day-to-day work of the Church, all of the tasks that make up parish life and diocesan life, most of that labor is done by which gender?

AUDIENCE: [Chorus of “female.”]

MARY JOHNSON: Female gender.

If these projections hold, then years from now we will see a very diminished female labor pool in every organization of the Church’s life. So it will be a very different Church in the United States.

For us to address the issue of vocations is also to address the larger issue of women. Your story is beautiful, and I wish there were other women who could hear it and who could embrace it. But they are in a different place, and we have to acknowledge that and we have to do something about it.

[Applause]

CHRISTINE HINZE: I’m aware of the time. I think what I would like to do is just read out some of the most frequent questions that have come out and, perhaps, for a few minutes afterwards our speakers can speak with some of you individually.

What strikes me so much in these questions is the desire to share the struggle and share the gifts across the boundaries of standard laity and women religious and religious life. Here are some of the questions that you are asking:

“How can those of us who are leading lives as laypeople integrate the liberative model of the constraints and freedoms of the vows in our daily lives, especially given the very different sexual lifestyles and sexual ethics that we encounter that have become accepted?”

“How can the lay community be helpful and supportive to religious women, and in what ways?”

“How do different styles of living in community and dress help or inhibit different kinds of ministries, and what can laypeople learn from that?”

“If you could give one piece of advice to all of women religious in the U.S., or beyond, what would that advice be?”

And the flip side: “What are the things that laypeople can learn from what you’re going through?”

So much richness of questions, so little time. But I think at this point it’s best for us to just praise God for this richness and also thank our beautiful panel so very much.

JAMES McCARTIN: I’m with Sister Miriam and can only say, “What can I add?” Let me just simply say this. Be on the lookout for communications from us about our spring events.

Thank you all for coming. Thanks especially to our magnificent panel tonight. Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, God bless you.