Archivists
FOR CONGREGATIONS OF
Women Religious

How Do I Find a Sister?:

Tips for Researchers

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INTRODUCTION

Archives of women religious (sisters and nuns) are rich repositories. Whether you are looking for a sister who impacted your life, a relative who entered religious life, or stories of sisters in your locale, the archives of women religious congregations can help.

There have been hundreds of congregations of women religious in the United States, many with similar names. To find the woman or women you are looking for, you must find the right congregation. For example, you might need to identify one of dozens of independent Franciscan congregations. Or as a historian, you might need to identify which religious congregations operated in a specific area or within a certain profession.

Following are tips for finding sisters or congregations and the archives that can shed light on their lives. If you need more in-depth information for learning how to connect a woman to her religious identity and congregation, we suggest *Searching for Sisters: A Guide to Researching Catholic Nuns in the United States* by Sunny Jane Morton.

Step 1: Gather Information about Her

Write down any information you have about a sister, including clues connecting her to a specific location, occupation or facility. Then follow these tips for learning more about her.

1. Google her. Use these search terms (if you know them): her name, religious community (if known), location, facility or organization (like school or charity). If she may be deceased, add the word obituary. In search results, look for an obituary or another article about her life. Note any clues it gives, such as where she may be buried, postnominals (the letters after her name, which signify her congregation), the name of her residence, etc.

2. Obituaries. A sister may be mentioned in her relatives' obituaries with her religious name, and perhaps with a location and/or other clues that might help you identify her congregation (see example below).

3. Parish records. A sisters' home parish (the parish where she was baptized) may have recorded her religious name and which religious community she joined in published parish histories, usually listed under titles, such as "native sisters", "daughters of the parish", or "vocations from the parish." Parish histories can be found at parishes (if open), diocesan archives, the local library, or local historical society.

4. Census records. You may find her in census records under her baptismal name and/or name in religion. Religious names could be difficult for census takers, so do not get discouraged if you cannot find her immediately. If you do find her, note the name of the institution and location and any other clues. Sometimes the census taker would write things like "Carmelite convent" which can narrow the search significantly.

Step 2: Identify the Congregation

Once you can place her in a specific location at a specific time, you can then work to identify her congregation(s) from those clues.

1. Google Location / Facility. If you have connected her with a particular school, hospital, convent, motherhouse, etc. try Googling that facility to see if there is anything online that names the religious congregation who served there.

- If the facility is still open, check its website. Many institutions have a history section on their websites that name the congregation(s) that founded and/or served at the facility.
- Google the question, "What religious order ran [name of facility] in [place]?

2. Catholic Directories. Catholic directories provide detailed, year-by-year information about Catholic parishes, schools and other institutions, and congregations of women religious. If you know a sister was living in a city in a specific year, use a Catholic directory from that year to see what religious communities were serving in that city. Check both schools and listings for hospitals and other charitable institutions. (If you know the name or type of facility, even better.)
If a sister served in a small community, there might only have been one or two congregations living there. However, in large cities, there may have been dozens of congregations, but it can still be a helpful starting point.

3. Local History Sources. City directories, census listings, maps, social statistics, special census schedules, and other resources can identify the presence of women religious communities in a locale or area of interest.

Step 3: Contact the Congregation

Once you have identified the name of a sister's congregation, look for its archives, even if you believe the sister may still be alive. The archives can typically confirm a woman's membership and direct your inquiry. If you find the website for the congregation but not its archives, contact the congregation and ask for its archives. Many, though not all, congregational archives are listed in the ACWR directory.

If the congregation no longer exists, it is possible their archives was moved to another repository. Try Googling the name of the congregation with the word "archives." Possible repositories might include diocesan archives; local or state historical societies / archives; universities (especially those founded by the congregation); hospital system archives; etc.

Special Case: Identifying a Habit in a Photo

Several clues may help you. Habits were (and are) specific to a religious community, and possibly to a time period and phase of profession. If you know where a photo was taken, it is often possible to determine which communities had sisters missioned in that area and what they were doing. Compare the photo to images of sisters shown in *Guide to Catholic Sisterhoods*. If you are still struggling to identify the habit and community, contact ACWR.

Still Stumped? Keep Reading!

Learn more about how to find women religious in *Searching for Sisters: A Guide to Researching Catholic Nuns in the United States* by Sunny Jane Morton.

-Courtesy of Archivists for Congregations of Women Religious (archivistsacwr.org) and Sunny Jane Morton, author of Searching for Sisters: A Guide to Researching Catholic Nuns in the United States.