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FOR CONGREGATIONS OF
Women Religious

Nuns vs. Sisters:

Frequently Asked Questions About Women Religious

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INTRODUCTION

Women religious congregations have a language and structures that can be difficult for those outside of the congregation to understand. Each congregation is unique in its history, government structures, culture, ministries, and language. Also, because nuns and sisters have historically lived in community with each other and have been separate from the general population, there are many misunderstandings and misconceptions about religious life.

Below are some frequently asked questions about women religious in the Roman Catholic tradition.

What is a "Woman Religious"?

Women religious, also known as nuns or sisters, are women who are called by God to enter religious life. In response to this call, they dedicate themselves to God and the service of the church by taking vows. Ordinarily, women religious take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, although there can be other vows, e.g. stability, depending on the religious congregation. Women religious belong to a religious institute with a specific charism (spirit or mission), foundation and history, and usually live together in community.

Nun vs Sister: Is there a Difference?

Yes! Although both nuns and sisters are addressed as "Sister," the Catholic Church makes a distinction between the two. Nuns take solemn vows and are cloistered, meaning they reside, pray and work within the confines of a monastery. Sisters take simple vows and live an apostolic life, meaning they work with the public in fields, such as education, health care and social services.

Today, in the United States, the terms are often used interchangeably, even by women religious. For example, the Sisters of Charity of Montreal are commonly known as the "Grey Nuns" even though they are an apostolic congregation of sisters. A Catholic sister also founded the "Nuns on the Bus," a travelling Catholic advocacy group.

Is it a Religious Order or a Religious Congregation?

Today, religious Orders and religious institutes—also known as congregations—are largely the same in practice, though Canon Law distinguishes them in certain ways. Their primary difference lies in their historical development.

While informal rules emerged in early Christianity, the most famous and long-standing are The Rule of Basil (written c. 356 CE) in the East and the Rule of Benedict (written c. 529 CE) in the West. These Rules provided a blueprint for communal life centered on prayer and work as foundational in one's search for God. Soon women's communities adapted these rules for their own common life.

Some of the best-known religious orders in the West include the Benedictines; the Order of St. Francis (Franciscans), founded by St. Francis of Assisi in 1209; the Order of Preachers (Dominicans), founded by St. Dominic in 1216; and the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola in 1540. While nuns within these Orders mostly carried out any ministry within the confines of the monastic enclosure, the Franciscan and Dominican men, and Jesuits carried out ministries away from any provincial house or headquarters.

After the 16th century, congregations expanded ways of living consecrated life. Newer congregations, such as the Sisters of St Joseph and the Grey Sisters, also focused on active ministries—such as education, healthcare, and

social service—often carried out beyond cloistered monasteries. These congregations were formed independently of existing orders.

For general understanding today, the term religious order refers to a distinct way of living religious life defined by a founder or foundress, including its members, governance, mission, and charism (for example, Benedictines or Dominicans).

Some congregations are neither founded by nor affiliated with an order. Others, however, are connected to a religious order. Congregations that are part of an order are typically founded by a member of that order at a specific time and place to meet a particular need and to extend the order's charism and spirituality. Such congregations function as independent entities while also maintaining membership within the larger order.

For example, the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa were founded in 1847 in southwest Wisconsin by Father Samuel Mazzuchelli, OP. He invited women to join the mission of the Order of Preachers through teaching. The Sinsinawa Dominicans are both an autonomous congregation and members of the Dominican Order.

Why Do/Did Women Religious Change Their Names?

The practice of women religious receiving a new name started as early as the sixth century. The purpose of a religious name is to signify the adoption of a new life; the replacement of the family identity with the religious one. This custom can be traced to the Bible when a person, who is chosen by God for a special mission, takes a new name. For example, Simon became Peter; Abram became Abraham, etc.

Naming customs varied among religious congregations. Some congregations allowed a woman to choose her name, while in other cases someone in authority, e.g. the prioress, major superior, or provincial leader, etc., chose the name. In general, a woman received her religious name when she entered the novitiate. It was also common practice for sisters' religious names to begin with "Mary," (sometimes abbreviated to M.) in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God.

There are various sources for names, including:

- **Saints**: Catherine, Anthony, Francis, Hormisdas, Mustiola, Eubula, Magdalene, etc..
- **Titles of Mary**: Madonna, Immaculata or Concepta (Immaculate Conception)
- **Bible**: Martha, Salome, Susanna, Gamaliel, David, Daniel, etc.
- **Latin words**: often words that describe positive attributes for women religious, such as Humilitas (humility), Vota (vows), Pieta (piety), and Illuminata (enlightened).
- **Family members**: women might choose to honor a family member by using their name as their religious name.

In some congregations, a "mystery" is added to a religious name. It is a name or phrase that speaks to a woman's personal spirituality. Examples include: Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary; Jesus the Good Shepherd; or Immaculate Conception.

After Vatican II, some congregations chose to give sisters the option to retain their religious names or return to their baptismal names. Today, some religious congregations still use the tradition of religious names, while others allow sisters to choose if they want to use their baptismal name or religious name.

Aren't All Benedictines (or Dominicans or Franciscans, etc.) the Same?

No. Some religious congregations are a single organization, where all sisters in the congregation follow the same rule and are under one leadership. For example, all School Sisters of Notre Dame, regardless of where they live, are subject to the General Superior in Rome. These types of communities might be subdivided into provinces, regions, or vicariates but all remain part of the larger organization.

Other congregations are made up of independent communities. A motherhouse will send sisters to a new location to start a mission. If the new location becomes self-sustaining, it will break off from the original motherhouse and become an entirely new congregation. At that point, the sisters living in the new motherhouse no longer have any ties to their original congregation. For example, the first Benedictine sisters in the United States lived in St. Marys, Pennsylvania. The congregation at St. Marys established three "daughter houses" that became independent Benedictine congregations: Erie, Pennsylvania; Ridgely, Maryland; and St. Cloud, Minnesota. In turn, each of these communities made new foundations, which became autonomous congregations.

Other groups, like the Franciscans and Sisters of Charity, are founded and operated independently of each other. These groups might have a shared charism or foundational history with other congregations with the same or similar name, but are otherwise autonomous.

What Do Sisters Do With Their Days?

There are two types of religious congregations. Congregations that engage in ministries and services with the public are called apostolic congregations. These congregations work in fields such as education, health care, social work, or parish ministries. Contemplative congregations, also called cloistered or enclosed orders, are dedicated to prayer, silence, spiritual reflection, and communal life within the walls of a monastery or abbey.

Some congregations are both in that they have sisters dedicated to perpetual prayers (such as Perpetual Adoration), while others work in active ministries. Sisters in apostolic congregations can also live semi-cloistered, meaning that they are only allowed to leave the convent in certain circumstances. Sisters living in contemplative congregations do not leave the confines of the monastery, but still engage in work to support themselves. This can include, making bread for the Eucharist (host), sewing and handiwork, providing technical services, providing space for private or program retreats, or making food items for sale.

Although apostolic congregations spend much of their day occupied in ministry work, they still engage in spiritual practices, such as morning and evening prayers, daily Mass, spiritual readings and study, private reflection and prayer, or praying the rosary.

Why Did/Do Contemplative Communities use Grates?

Enclosure (also known as cloister) can have different meanings depending on the congregation, but essentially it is the physical and spiritual separation from the outside world within a convent or monastery. Contemplative communities, such as the Poor Clares, Carmelite Nuns and the Handmaids of the Precious Blood, adhere to the strictest form of enclosure, known as "Papal enclosure".

Papal enclosure is governed by the Holy See and requires total separation from the outside world to foster a life of prayer. Nuns living in contemplative communities do not leave enclosure, except in specific circumstances, such as to receive healthcare. In addition, the public is not allowed inside the enclosure, except in specific instances, such as a priest giving sacraments to a sick nun or someone coming in to do repairs.

Does that mean that contemplative nuns never get to see their friends and family? No! Contemplative communities use grates (also known as grilles) to interact with people outside the cloister. A grate is a physical barrier, typically made of iron or metal bars, located in parlors or the chapel, which allows nuns to communicate with visitors while remaining in the enclosure. For more information on the different types of enclosures, see: https://cloisteredlife.com/introduction

How Does a Woman become a Sister or Nun?

Every woman who enters religious life goes through a period of "formation." The main purpose of the formation process is to allow women to learn more about their own vocation (call to religious life) and to learn about the congregation's charism and way of life. The formation process involves multiple steps that vary depending upon the congregation. It is a time of mutual discernment for the individual and the congregation prior to taking the next, more formal step toward membership.

Please note, that this is a general overview and not exact to any one congregation. Each congregation formulated its own rules, timelines, and language around formation. It is also important to note that the formation process can change over the course of a congregation's history, especially in the post-Vatican II era.

Candidate/Postulant: The first stage of formation is usually the candidacy or postulancy. This is a period of discernment, where the candidate / postulant lives and prays with the congregation under the guidance of a directress. During this stage, she might take classes or work in the congregation's ministries, while learning more about the congregation and their way of life. Candidates / postulants can freely leave the congregation at any time during this period. They may also be asked to leave during this period.

In some congregations, the candidacy refers to the first period after a woman has formally entered the congregation. In others, the candidacy (or pre-postulancy) is an informal period where a young woman continues her normal life while she examines her vocation. Once she formally enters the congregation, she becomes a postulant.

Novice: After a woman has completed the candidacy / postulancy, she enters the stage of formation called the novitiate and becomes a more formal member of the congregation. She is now a novice. It is often in the novitiate that she receives her religious name, and possibly the habit or other distinctive clothing, and begins to be called "Sister".

The Church defines the novitiate as a period of intense formation with the sole purpose of preparing for vowed life. In practice, novices basically "learn" how to become a nun or sister of that congregation by studying the congregation's rules and constitutions, its history, and its vows. In some congregations, novices might spend time working in the ministry of the congregation.

Temporary Vows: Toward the end of the novitiate, a woman takes temporary or first vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. These vows, as the name implies, are good for a set number of years, during which the newly professed sisters live and work as members of the congregation. As a sister nears the expiration of her temporary vows, she decides to either take her perpetual vows or she can leave the congregation without a dispensation from the Holy See.

Perpetual Vows: Before the expiration of a sister's temporary vows, she enters a period of discernment where she decides if she wants to make her perpetual or final vows. She formally requests to make final vows. The congregation, under the authority of the Superior General will accept, or in rare cases, reject the

request. Perpetual vows are the final, life-long commitment to live the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. After perpetual vows, a sister can only be released from vows by a dispensation from the Holy See.

What is a "Right"?

Congregations of women religious are divided into two categories – "diocesan right" and "pontifical right." To understand the difference between the two rights, it is important to know the structure of the Catholic Church. The Pope (pontiff) is the head of the Holy See, which is the central government of the Roman Catholic Church. The church is divided into administrative units called "dioceses." Each diocese covers a specific geographical region and is overseen by a bishop.

Diocesan right congregations were established by a decree from a local diocesan bishop. These congregations tend to be smaller in size and the sisters usually live and serve in ministries within the boundaries of the diocese (although they can live and work in other areas). These congregations operate under the authority of the bishop, who often oversees their governance.

Pontifical right congregations were either established or approved by the Holy See with a formal decree called the *decretum laudis* [decree of approval]. These congregations are under direct authority of the Holy See. Diocesan right congregations can also receive approval from the Holy See and become a congregation of pontifical right.

Why Did/Do Women Religious Wear Habits?

A religious habit is a distinctive set of clothing worn by women religious. The term "habit" can refer to the entire ensemble (clothing and accessories) or the main dress itself. Although most people are familiar with the image of sisters wearing black and white habits, habits can come in a range of colors, including brown, gray, all white, blue and even pink!

Sisters and nuns wear habits for several reasons. First, habits are worn as a sign of a woman's commitment to God and thus, made women religious easily identifiable as consecrated women. Habits are also a symbol of a congregation's vow of poverty because they were simple and modest and made from functional, inexpensive materials. Also, sisters showed their detachment from material possessions by giving up their personal wardrobe in favor of habits. Each congregation had a distinctive habit, so a habit also identified the congregation to which a sister belonged.

Habits are also used to distinguish between members within a congregation. For example, sisters at different levels of formation usually wore different habits to make them easily identifiable as a novice or postulant. Habits could also be used to identify sisters in different roles. Some congregations had "lay" sisters, or sisters who did the cooking, cleaning, and laundry. In these congregations, the lay sisters might wear a different habit from the sisters engaged in ministries such as teaching or nursing. In cloistered congregations, externs, or nuns who were not cloistered and interacted with the public, might have a different habit from the cloistered nuns.

A congregation's habit could change over time. After Vatican II, many congregations decided to leave behind the habit in favor of secular clothing. These congregations might wear a symbol for their congregation, such as a pin, ring, or pendant with the congregation's crest, a crucifix, or a medal. Other congregations continue to wear either their traditional habits or a modified version that includes a simple dress and veil.

For more information, see: *The habit: a history of clothing Catholic nuns* by Elizabeth Kuhns.

The Changes of Vatican II

On October 11, 1962, Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council (also known as Vatican II), which was held over four sessions, closing in 1965. The purpose of Vatican II was the renewal of the Church and its adaptation to the times. The effects of Vatican II were far reaching and profoundly affected congregations of women religious. What follows is a short summary of these effects.

The Second Vatican Council called on women religious to return to the sources of all Christian life and the original spirit of their congregation and its founders/foundresses. Vatican II also emphasized the Church's commitment to the poor and encouraged solidarity with the marginalized.

Women religious had been working with the poor and marginalized for centuries. Prior to Vatican II, congregations often engaged in specific works, such as teaching, nursing, orphan care, care of the sick and elderly, etc. Vatican II encouraged women religious to reexamine their congregation's charism considering modern needs. As a result, many women religious expand their ministries into other fields, such as social work, chaplaincy (prison, hospital, etc.) and secular professions, such as law, politics, and medicine.

Vatican II's call for standing with the poor and marginalized also led some sisters to engage in social justice advocacy. Catholic nuns and sisters have been on the front lines of major social movements, such as civil rights, environmental justice and women's rights. In addition, sisters and nuns work with vulnerable populations, such as migrants, refugees and victims of human trafficking.

For more information, see: the following documents from the Second Vatican Council, specifically, *Vita Consecrata*; *Perfectae Caritatis*; *Vultum Dei Quaerere*; and *Cor Orans* (for contemplative life).