Declining Institutional Sponsorship and Religious Orders: A Study of Reverse Impacts

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In recent decades, Catholic religious orders have largely withdrawn from an active presence in the day-to-day operations of their sponsored institutions. Recent mergers have similarly reduced their presence at administrative and board levels. While many studies have investigated the impact of this reduced presence on religious colleges, hospitals, and social agencies, few if any have studied the impact on the sponsoring orders themselves. The present paper uses a series of thirty extended, taped interviews to explore the implications of reduced or eliminated institutional presence on the internal functioning, group identity, and spirituality of two communities of Catholic sisters. Some tentative implications are suggested for further research in other denominations.

Of all the various religious denominations in the United States, the Roman Catholic Church has been the most likely to deliver education, social service, and health care through an extensive network of institutions (Starr 1982: 144; Oates 1995: 53). Traditionally, the majority of these have been staffed and administered by religious orders of women.1 To a large extent, the sisters' communities had been uniquely defined by their provision of these institutional services.

Today, however, most Catholic hospitals, schools, and social agencies have few or no sisters working in them, either in line or in administrative staff positions. In many cases, even the boards of directors for these institutions are pre-dominantly lay. The sisters have become, as one writer noted, "nearly invisible" in institutions where once they had been a dominant presence (Gottemoeller 1991: 564).

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1 According to Canon Law, these women are called "sisters," and their communities are called "congregations." The words "nuns" and "religious order" are officially reserved for cloistered, contemplative women living in monasteries. In practice, however, sister/nun and congregation/order are used interchangeably, and they will be so used in this paper.
To date, research has focused primarily on the impact of the sisters' withdrawal on the institutions they had once staffed. Few, if any studies have considered the effect of this separation on the sponsoring religious group. It is probable, however, that religious sponsors have been at least as profoundly changed by withdrawing from their sponsored institutions as the institutions themselves have been changed by their absence. If the orders no longer sponsor and operate service ministries, why should they exist at all? In what way is sponsoring, administering, or working in these institutions still considered an appropriate religious activity for their orders? What effects will withdrawing from the institutions have on the internal dynamics of the order — on the sources of its new members, the background of its leaders, the job security of its wage earners?

The identity of Catholic religious orders was once intimately connected to the provision of education, health care, and social services. As their schools, hospitals, and social service agencies grew, however, the role of the sisters changed from providing these services, to administering others who provided them, and finally to controlling, through their board presence, those who administered the provision of the services. Mere board membership, however, is often an insufficient vehicle for maintaining commitment to the institution among the order's rank and file. As a result, many members have lost interest in performing any kind of institutional ministry at all (e.g., Moylan 1993: 175; Ebaugh 1993: 101; Sanders 1988: 24). Instead, many sisters now enter or remain in their order because it fosters their own personal and spiritual development, rather than to participate in a common apostolate (Ebaugh 1993: 101). Numerous studies have found that the connection between the sisters' more personalized vocation and their ministerial service activities was diminished as a result (Nygren and Ukeritis 1993: 151; see also Ebaugh 1993: 87).

Not only may the identity and purpose of a religious order change as it loosens its ties to its former institutions, its internal functioning may change as well. Future leaders of the religious orders, coming from non-institutional backgrounds, may show different priorities in their decision making. Without the assurance of being rehired in their own institutions, sisters may be less willing to interrupt their professional careers in order to serve in the community's leadership. A community may lose access to some of its most capable potential leaders because they cannot interrupt their careers without losing them altogether.

METHODOLOGY

In 1995, I conducted six preliminary interviews with sisters from several different religious communities, all of whom were involved in the administration of their orders' colleges, hospitals, or social service agencies. Based on the issues raised in this initial research, I subsequently conducted, in the fall and winter of 1997, twenty-five additional interviews with present and former sister administrators in two other communities, neither of which had participated in the
preliminary study. These two communities were selected on the basis of the type of relationship which they had attempted to maintain with their sponsored institutions. In other ways, however, they were similar. Community A is a regional province within an international religious order, and has traditionally staffed and administered grade and high schools, hospitals, orphanages, settlement houses, and day care centers throughout the North Central and Southern United States. Formerly, the community also owned and operated a small college. This order has attempted to sustain a strong administrative presence in its institutions. Community B, also an autonomous province in an international order, once operated a similar range of social service, health care, and educational institutions. Recently, however, Community B has withdrawn from most of them. It still continues to maintain a presence on the boards of its college and its hospital system, both of which are run by lay administrators. Other works, such as residential centers for troubled youth, nursing homes, and high schools, have either been closed or transferred to other ownership and management.

Appendix A lists the professional background, administrative experience, and current occupation of the twenty-five interviewees: fourteen from Community A and eleven from Community B. The pool was evenly divided between retired and active sisters, and included a significant percentage of the present and former governing councils of both orders. The professional backgrounds of the sisters were also evenly spread between health care, education, and social work. All but two had had at least some administrative experience.

Since both of the communities had originally been so heavily involved in institutionalized ministries, reducing their presence there might affect these orders in profound ways. The distinctiveness of the sisters' particular lifestyle and, ultimately, their corporate identity and raison d'etre may be altered or diminished. In addition, their leaders' lessened institutional experience may impact their other decisions. Community A, which is attempting to maintain a presence in its institutions, may be affected by these changes differently than Community B, which has not.

**FINDINGS**

Institutional *Desacralization*

A generation ago, the institutions in which the interviewees served had few lay staff members — and no lay administrators. The orders' schools and orphanages were staffed almost entirely by sisters, while each of their hospitals had, at a minimum, forty or fifty sisters spread throughout administration and floor positions. Today, however, the proportions are reversed. Both Community A, which has attempted to maintain an active presence in its institutions, and Community B, which has not, have experienced a similar reduction in the number of their
sisters who are working in, and administering, their hospitals, schools, and social service institutions.

The sisters' presence on their institutions' boards has also declined. One interviewee in the preliminary study estimated the percentage of sisters on her order's hospital boards to be 30 percent. A member of Community B noted that, in her community, "on most of the hospital boards, we are trying to keep at least one sister among the twelve or fifteen board members."

Some interviewees believed that the sisters' reduced board presence did not affect the religious focus of their institutions. Other interviewees worried, however, that the few remaining sisters in these institutions would become ghettoized in "mission effectiveness" positions, and that their opinions on other issues would be ignored.

The assumption is that the only people with sufficient expertise to be on hospital boards are wealthy men.... We put lots of businessmen with financial expertise on boards. They leave the 'mission' to the sisters and make all the real decisions. Sisters have tremendous expertise in public policy or ethics or communications, but it's ignored and not used. When an issue arises, the guys solve it by themselves, using their perspectives only. (Preliminary interview, college professor and hospital board member)

This decreasing sense of controlled some to question the wisdom of the order's continuing its sponsorship at all.

Now this would be my problem if I were in administration [of the religious order] these days: how much do you turn over to other people and how much do you know what's going on? ... My last evaluation for the administrator of the hospital whose board I was on at the time- he was a great man, his evaluations were great, but he was so involved with everything outside the hospital, like, oh, commissions, merging for this, clinics for that, and taking on another hospital here. And that's what your top administrators have to do these days. But I said about this particular one, he like all of them was building a real empire for himself. And I said, 'You don't want a person like that unless they are good. And they're going to go out and do all these things. But at the same time, when he gets a better job offer, he could leave tomorrow and leave every responsibility off to the sisters.' And I just think that it's an awful lot of responsibility to take on, when you're not sure you know what's going on in it. (Retired social services administrator and former council member, Community A)

Even among those sisters who believed that institutional sponsorship was still a valid component of their order's mission, a certain detachment had taken place. Few of the non-retired interviewees expressed an intention to work in such institutions again.

[Interviewer: What are your plans for after you leave office?] Well, one has always been to go down to Mexico and work in one of our missions. Another would really just be to get involved in some direct project with the poor.

(interviewer: You wouldn't go back to the hospitals?] No, I don't see that, unless it was some kind of program attached to it.... If I did any kind of direct health care, you know — I still
have my nursing license — it would be more like home health care. (Former emergency room supervisor and present council member, Community B)

I'd prefer a direct service job as opposed to administration. I think I've administered all my life and maybe it's time for somebody else to come in and do those kinds of jobs. (Former social services administrator and present council member, Community A)

Only one of the seven council members interviewed was willing to work in one of her community's institutions after her term of office was completed.

Many of the interviewees, both active and retired, expressed the opinion that their community should withdraw completely from involvement in its institutions, and concentrate instead on direct service ministries.

I'd like to see us get out of it. [Interviewer: for any reason?] I think it's such big business. We have maybe one sister, a board president only. Maybe two sisters in a hospital I don't see how we can say it's our hospital. (Retired social services administrator, Community A)

Other interviewees, however, were more reluctant to write off institutional sponsorship.

One of the things that would be lost [if the community gave up its institutions] would be the power institutions have. There's just something about an institution that can give a punch that maybe an individual cannot. Maybe it's the advocacy role of the institution; it's got the power to reach powerful people more so than an individual might have. (Former elementary school principal and present council member, Community B)

One sister thoughtfully noted that the basic problem was a lack of a theology of administrative service.

We have, and religious across the country have, created a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane in ministry. We have declared [some fields] profane and less acceptable. Suppose you had a stockbroker who wanted to enter our community - what would happen if we were really open to all areas of ministry? Subconsciously, we are setting ourselves up not to attract people from those professions. (Preliminary interview, former health care system CEO)

The first effect, therefore, of the orders' withdrawal from their institutions was a redefinition of the kind of activities that it is appropriate for sisters to be engaged in.

Community Identity

The sisters interviewed rarely cited their institutional ministries as the factor that distinguished their order from other religious communities. Some no longer saw any difference at all between one order and another. Those respondents who did see a difference tended to cite a noninstitutional basis for it: their community was friendlier or more down to earth than some other order they had once
considered entering. Such qualities, of course, are less specific to any given
religious order than operating a set of institutions had been.

If you try to get at our identity, I think most [of us] are very comfortable about being just kind
of common, ordinary, hardworking, faith-filled [people]. That's about it. Now does that make
a religious [sister]? It's not much different than any other person. But I guess my point is that,
when there's a group that kind of fits and melds together with that kind of identity, then
that's the core of who we are all about. And I can't name it in a word; I know we've tried to
come up with a little statement or whatever and we always find it very hard to do that.
(Provincial Superior, Community B)

Many sisters were also unable to articulate how being a sister-teacher or a sister-
nurse differed from being a laywoman in a similar occupation.

[Interviewer: How is being a sister-teacher different?] I don't think there is any difference
today. And the children, they don't seem to distinguish between the two. (Retired high
school principal, Community B)

Such identificational vagueness has ominous implications, because many of the
interviewees often mentioned that they themselves had decided to enter their
particular community precisely because they had identified the order with a
particular institutional work. Another large number had originally gotten to
know their community by attending its grade schools, high schools, or nursing
programs. Only three of the twenty-five sisters failed to cite one of these
institutionally-based contacts as the source for their own vocation.

The loss or attenuation of their institutional connection appears to have
reduced the number of young women entering both communities, neither of
which has more than a few young sisters in the initial stages of membership. It
also affects the reasons why women join, or stay, in the orders. Many new recruits
were in professionalized service ministries prior to becoming sisters, and they are
well aware that providing a ministerial service no longer distinguishes sisters
from the laity. To the extent that the new entrants are interested in service
works at all, they do not want to work in the order's institutions, much less
administer them.

Because of the big business aspect that's gotten into the hospitals in the last few years, the
younger sisters, at least in our community, who would be capable to go into those kinds of
roles, that does not turn them on. And so they are getting their Masters' or whatever — they
might get an MBA or they might get a Nurse Clinician's Masters' — but they want to go out
and go into the clinics, where they have more contact. (Former social services administrator,
present council member, Community A)

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2 These stages comprise five to seven years. Community A has two or three women in those stages—
one an older sister transferring in from another order—and Community B has one.
Withdrawing from their institutions, therefore, has begun to affect the orders’ very definition of their identity and purpose. It has become less evident—even to the sisters themselves—how one community differs from another, or how their service as sisters differs from that of a lay person. To the extent that the difference is mentioned at all, it is based on the harder-to-define spiritual and communitarian traits within the group. As new entrants are increasingly attracted by these latter distinctives, the perceived role of the community will further change to match the changed expectations of its members. Instead of providing an established institutional setting for ministry, the community's primary function may become facilitating the individual works of its members: offering spiritual and communal support against burnout, providing financial subsidies, or doing publicity work for them. The orders will, in essence, become different entities as a result.

**Internal Functioning**

One might expect that the decisions made by the current governing councils of the two orders today will be similarly affected by the fact that the councilors are less likely to have come from top administrative positions in their former institutions. Only half of the present governing council of Community B has had such experience—and both of them in education rather than in health care. In contrast, the previous provincial superior of Community B had been a hospital administrator. While the members of the governing council of Community A have all had administrative experience in the community's institutions, an examination of their archival records revealed a gradual shift in the type of this experience: from the early 1960s until 1990, the provincial superior and at least 40 percent of her council had served in hospital administration. Since 1990, however, the provincial superiors have been former education or social service administrators. Only one member of the five-member council between 1990 and 1996 had had any experience in health care administration; since 1996, none have. While the present study has not investigated exactly what kinds of differences these changes in background have made, it is logical to assume that there has been some impact, both on the kinds of alternatives considered and on the conscious and unconscious priorities that underlie decision-making in these communities today.

A second impact of the sisters' declining institutional presence is in the types of jobs available to their members, who are increasingly dependent on the larger employment market. Several respondents in Community B mentioned difficulties in finding positions in which they could effectively minister; one recounted an instance of being unfairly fired. As the respondents age, employment may become increasingly difficult for the members of Community B to find. Community A did not yet appear to experience this problem, since its members continue to serve in its own institutions.
CONCLUSIONS

One could view the processes described above through several different theoretical lenses. The secularization perspective in the sociology of religion could cite the orders' return to a more spiritual focus as another example of society's confining its religious elements to a separate, privatized sphere. Neo-institutional theorists studying formal organizations might note the strength of isomorphic pressures to bureaucratize and professionalize the orders' institutions: despite Community A's deliberate attempts to maintain their institutional presence, there seems to be little difference between the two orders in the impacts which they are able to effect on their changing institutions. Whatever perspective is used, however, it is evident that, in their concentration on the implications of these changes for the institutions, neither the orders, nor the church hierarchy, nor the Catholic public, has realized their full implications for the orders themselves.

The findings reported here also raise larger questions, each of which could serve as a focus for future research. To what extent is the connection between isomorphism in a sponsored institution and identity loss in its sponsor similar for Catholic orders and Protestant sponsors? No studies, to date, have investigated this relationship. Another issue for further research might be whether detaching themselves from their corporate service functions has reduced the "social capital" of the orders — their ability to rally social resources and address community issues (Messer 1998: 11).

Issues of the changing definition of religious work could also be addressed. Do the rank and file of a denomination's or a religious order's members who do not work in its sponsored institutions — view continued connection with them as an essential component of the denomination's/order's mission? If they do not, how do they define that mission? Might this be an additional causal factor for the loss of denominational identity and the privatization of religious practice that has been noted by church scholars (Wuthnow 1988; Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks 1992)? Finally, how do the lay employees of a religious institution view its connection with the sponsoring denomination or religious order? Does such a connection have any meaning at all to them, or are its vaunted mission statements quietly resented and "decoupled" from the institution's daily functioning (Meyer and Rowan 1991)? Such questions are, of course, threatening, and thus have not often been raised in the literature studying the "secularization" of religious schools and hospitals, which rely more heavily on the opinions of administrators in evaluating whether an institution has retained its religious focus.

Bureaucratic isomorphism within a service institution that is affiliated with a religious group has implications for that institution's own employees and clients. In a very real sense, however, these changes profoundly affect the functioning
and self-definition of the sponsoring body as well. It is hoped that this paper will initiate further studies to clarify what these latter implications are.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

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* Indicates additional past or current administrative experience on the governing council of the religious order.