1985

The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Newport News, Virginia

Brenda Buddeke Fairbairn

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-7v0h-fe74

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THE SISTERS OF CHARITY OF NAZARETH IN NEWPORT NEWS, VIRGINIA

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Brenda Buddeke Fairbairn
1985
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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The writer wishes to express her appreciation to the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Newport News, Virginia, who permitted the use of the "Annals of St. Vincent's," the document that provided the basis for this study. The author is particularly indebted to Sister Martha Joseph Lenahan, S.C.N., who helped to clarify some "Annals" passages, supplied additional documents, and generously agreed to be interviewed about her long and fruitful life as a woman religious. Finally, the writer expresses her appreciation to Professors Robert Scholnick and Richard Sherman, for their careful reading and constructive criticism of the manuscript.
The purpose of this paper is to examine the historical experience of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Newport News, Virginia. An attempt was made to identify the goals of this religious community, to determine whether the group had achieved its goals, and to investigate some of the factors that encouraged or inhibited the sisters in their work.

The paper includes an historical overview of the sisters' Newport News mission, from 1903 until the present. The historical discussion emphasizes the period from 1920 until 1940. The major source for this analysis is the "Annals of St. Vincent's," an unpublished journal written by the sisters.

The paper also includes a discussion of the ways in which the role of the nun, and the popular stereotype of the nun in the 1920s and 1930s, affected what the sisters in Newport News were able to do. The portrayal of nuns in popular literature and film was used to show how nuns were viewed by outsiders. This view was compared and contrasted with the sisters' own apparent perception of their role as women religious. Two primary sources were particularly valuable in illustrating the S.C.N. self-concept: the "Annals" and personal interviews with a member of the S.C.N. order, who discussed her life as a nun in the 1920s and 1930s.

Based upon examination of the historical evidence, it was concluded that the sisters were successful in building both an educational institution and a working relationship with the Protestant majority. The period from 1920 to 1940 appears to have been critical in the development of the school and the establishment of the sisters' position in Newport News. Analysis of the way the sisters and the society perceived the nun's role suggested that one reason for the sisters' success was their ability to conform outwardly to public expectations of them while in fact using the stereotype to enable them to achieve both individual and group goals.

Brenda Buddeke Fairbairn

DEPARTMENT OF AMERICAN STUDIES

THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY IN VIRGINIA
THE SISTERS OF CHARITY OF NAZARETH IN NEWPORT NEWS, VIRGINIA

The Effects of Historical Trends and Role Perceptions on the Achievements of Women Religious in the 1920s and 1930s
Twentieth century American culture is a marvelous tapestry, in which countless different ethnic, racial and religious strands are interwoven to create an integrated whole. To analyze the culture in its entirety, with all its layers of meaning and each of its subcultural units, is an overwhelming task. It is often more enlightening to isolate a single motif in the tapestry, and to study it in detail. One such aspect of the American cultural tradition is the special contribution made by religious minorities, including the American Catholic community. Within the complex motif of American Catholicism, the story of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth is but a single thread. Yet focusing on this single, small group of women can enhance our appreciation and understanding of the intricately woven cultural fabric of which they are a part.

The experience of these sisters was not typical of the American Catholic community in the early twentieth century. It is this fact that makes their story so valuable. Most American Catholics of the period were immigrants, living in large urban centers in the North. Newport News was a small Southern city; its population was multi-ethnic, but predominantly American-born. Yet despite the uniqueness of the SCN experience in Newport News, it mirrors, in many respects, the development of the modern American Church. If studied chronologically, the SCN community's growth can be seen to have proceeded in stages, from the mission's establishment in 1903 until its transfer to lay
hands in 1966. Each stage lasted approximately ten years. Those that occurred in the 1920s and 1930s appear to have been pivotal; the nature of the educational institution and the relationship between the sisters and the "outside world" were solidified during those years. An historical examination of what these women said, did and thought reveals the extent to which they were able to achieve their goals. It also indicates the methods used by this minority group to deal with a majority culture that was not always supportive of its efforts.

Such an examination is possible largely because of the existence of "St. Vincent's Annals," an unpublished journal account that was begun with the Newport News mission's establishment. This document is a valuable historical source, providing insights and information not available elsewhere. It was an internal document, written by the sisters and intended primarily as a record for their Mother House, in Louisville, Kentucky. Because it was never intended to be seen by outsiders, it might be an especially frank account. Because it is a journal, written by one sister at a time, it provides a personal viewpoint and reflects an individual's interpretation. Yet it does not attempt to justify events, or to identify causal relationships. Instead, the "Annals" provides a rare, candid, eyewitness account of the way an institution and a community functioned.

There are, of course, some limitations to the use of such a source. Because it is an internal document, it often tells little about what was happening beyond the walls of the convent or school. Furthermore, since the journal was intended to be read by the religious superiors of the women who wrote it, it is possible that failures might be deliberately minimized, and that indications of disharmony within the community might
be suppressed. The custom of the community was for the journal to be maintained by one of the sisters, who was assigned this duty by her Superior within the local convent. Sometimes, the "Annals" was kept by the Superior herself. This task, like all others within the community, was delegated annually; yet, evidently, a single woman often retained the role for several years in succession. The anonymous nature of the journal seems to have encouraged its authors to suppress their personal concerns, and thus perhaps to express more accurately the group's consciousness.

The fact that the authors are anonymous presents special problems of interpretation. It is not impossible to identify the author of some specific passages; certainly, similarities of handwriting and expression link certain passages, even if the identify of the author cannot be ascertained. For example, the entries from 1926 - 1931 were clearly written by a single person, most probably Sister Mary Bathildes. It is difficult to tell how much of the distinctive tone and content of those passages reflect the personal sensibility of one woman, and how much they reveal changing perceptions and concerns of the community. Thus, the special value of the "Annals" lies in its revelation of both individual and group concerns; the special challenge of using such a source is to determine where the line between the two lies.

The "Annals" can be useful in interpreting at least two facets of the SCN experience. First, the journal can be used to study the history of St. Vincent's School, and of the women who built it. The "Annals" tells much about what the sisters were able to accomplish, and about the circumstances in which they operated. It is a record of the efforts and achievements of a group. Because the journal was also, to
a limited extent, the story of individuals, it also helps to reveal
the personal factors that might have contributed to the success of the
group. The "Annals" and related sources reveal much about the internal
group dynamics of the SCN community and about the self-concept of these
women. This source suggests that the sisters' perception of themselves
and of their role may have helped this minority religious community to
achieve both personal and institutional goals within a social, economic
and religious environment that was not always receptive to minority
contributions.
CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE NEWPORT NEWS MISSION 1903-85

On October 3, 1903, Sister Charlotte, Sister Lorinza, and Sister Agnes Sienna arrived at the Newport News train depot. The three members of the SCN community had been sent from Louisville, Kentucky; their mission was to establish a Catholic girls' school in Newport News. They were met at the station by Father Wilson, pastor of St. Vincent Catholic Church. He conducted them to the homes of two parish members, with whom they would be able to stay temporarily. During the next two days, the sisters moved into a temporary convent, contacted businessmen and local merchants, made a few minimal purchases of residential and educational supplies, and began to enroll students. On Oct. 5, 1903, St. Vincent's School for girls opened in a four-room, steam-heated building donated by a parish member. Sixty girls were enrolled.

At about the same time, one of the sisters began to make entries in a journal that would become the permanent record of their Newport News experiment. The first pages of "St. Vincent's Annals" describe the turbulent early days of the mission's establishment.


2 Letter from Sister Roseine, Feb. 9, 1908 (in possession of the author). It is not known to whom this letter was sent, but it was apparently written in response to a request to provide details about the early days of the mission.
In 1903, Newport News was very much an "infant city," as one of the sisters was later to write. Unlike her sister city, Hampton, Newport News had little corporate pre-civil War history. The urban location of St. Vincent's school was farmland only a generation before the sisters' arrival. The city of Newport News was formally chartered in 1896; it was an industrial city, which grew rapidly after the first railroad line, built in 1881, facilitated the operation of the port. Its largest industrial concern was the Newport News Shipyard and Dry-dock, completed in 1899. The relationship between the city and the "yard" was a close one; the sisters learned to live with the fact that the fate of their school often seemed linked to the prospects of the shipyard. When the shipyard was hit by "hard times" (as it was, for example, in 1921), the "Annals" noted that enrollment declined and fund raising efforts were frustrated. Overall, according to an author of the "Annals" in 1921, Newport News was a prosperous and growing community, "although at times the city runs down if the shipyard machinery runs down."

When the sisters arrived in 1903, the "shipyard machinery" was operating at peak capacity. The Spanish-American War and America's experiment with imperialism had stimulated interest in a strong national navy. Workers were beginning to be drawn to the peninsula as the

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3"Annals," 1903.


5"Annals," 1921.

port city became more prosperous. Although Newport News was too small and too far south to compete with Baltimore, the smaller city was beginning to take on some of the characteristics of the larger, ethnically mixed Northern port cities. In fact, one of the sisters who was a member of the early SCN community in Newport News claimed that it was the increase in the numbers of "foreigners" that necessitated the establishment of the school. In Newport News, as in Boston, New York and Baltimore, the Catholic Church hoped that Catholic schools would help to keep the "new immigrants" from Catholic countries from being tempted away from the true faith by the enticements of a secular, urban environment.

The relationship between the immigrant, blue-collar workers and the school is reflected in the location of St. Vincent's. The original building was located on 34th Street; although it was expanded and altered several times, the school and the convent occupied the same site for the next three-quarters of a century. During those years, the 34th Street location provided easy access to commercial as well as residential communities. It was quite close to the shipyard itself; in fact, one of the more comical entries in the "Annals" describes the reaction of the shipyard workers to their first glimpse of women religious in habits. The first four sisters, according to this account,

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7 Jester, p. 131-132.
8 Letter from Sister Rosine, Feb. 9, 1908 (in possession of author).
joined in the "stream of workers" to walk to St. Vincent's parish church:

Each morning we walked five squares to church keeping pace with the disorderly procession of "blacks" and "whites" by the thousands on their way to the shipyard ... All during the march, the men were wondering where the queer black-robed creatures came from and inquiring in which one of the many departments of the drydock they worked. Many stopped to look under their bonnets, one going so far as to ask if the president of the yard is dead.10

These were but the first of many personal contacts between the religious community and the city's non-Catholic majority. Such contact was necessary and desirable, of course. Initially, the sisters had to rely on the good will of local merchants to provide them with what they needed to set up a home and a school. Later, local businessmen would be contacted for more direct aid in the form of financial contributions. During these first weeks in 1903 the sisters established the basis for a working relationship with the commercial community of Newport News. It was a commercial environment that was still developing; in fact, the "Annals" author noted that the sisters were disappointed to find so few large stores. Many things that might have been purchased inexpensively in a larger city were not available.11 But the SCN community grew with the commercial/industrial district near which it was located. The school and the sisters benefitted from the charity of local businessmen in the early years.12 The 34th Street location

10"Annals," 1903.
12References to the charity extended by local businesses in particularly trying circumstances appear in the "Annals" entries for 1912, 1918, and 1929-30.
was close not only to the shipyard and the retail shopping district, but also to the seat of local government, the oldest Catholic and Protestant churches, middle income residential neighborhoods, and even the infamous, crime-ridden "hell's half acre."\textsuperscript{13} The school and the sisters occupied a place in the busiest and most prosperous part of the "infant city." In many ways, this location was fortuitous; it was at least partially dictated by the proximity of the Catholic church and the availability of property. Although the advantages of an inner-city location would not be permanent, they were appreciable in 1903.

The SCN community was perhaps fortunate, then, to enter Newport News at a time when its secular, economic environment was characterized by rapid development and change. The same might be said of the religious environment of the city at the turn of the century. Again, the newness of the city meant that it was less strictly bound by the traditions that characterized some other cities in the South. In Newport News in 1903, there was no single dominant church or denomination. In fact, the history of organized churches in Newport News was characterized by cooperation and accommodation. Until the 1880s, there were neither churches nor formal Christian congregations. Residents of Warwick County worshipped in country churches, or in those located in neighboring Hampton. In 1881, with the beginning of large scale railroad construction, there was a rapid increase in population. Among the many attempts made to accommodate the new residents was the decision to provide a place of worship, at least "for the white laborers."\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13}Jester, p. 114-117.

\textsuperscript{14}Eunice Leland, Historian of Trinity United Methodist Church, private interview held in March, 1984.
The Old Dominion Land Company (which supervised the laying out of the town) obtained a building which was designated the Union Chapel. It was used for worship by the small Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist and Catholic congregations. In the years from 1881 to 1902, these congregations gradually separated themselves from one another; as each one grew in numbers, its members built their own house of worship. By 1903, when the sisters arrived, the downtown area contained separate Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist and Catholic churches. The Catholic church, St. Vincent's, was the most modest of these structures in 1903. Its congregation was small, and without great financial assets. The Newport News Catholic community perhaps benefitted from the common history it shared with the larger, more affluent Protestant congregations. More importantly, the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in Newport News was born long after the period of intense nativist pressure against Catholics. Thus, that relationship did not retain the scars of the events of the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s, which left a legacy of hostility between Catholics and non-Catholics in older cities. Thus, the "infant" state of the city allowed a minority religious group to make a place for itself, and to grow with the religious and secular community in which it was located.

The years from 1903 - 1918 saw the establishment of the SCN school and convent in Newport News. In part, their settlement was eased by the special social, economic and religious factors that characterized Newport News. But the "Annals" indicates that the achievements of this period were due, in large measure, to the persistence.

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and dedication of the sisters themselves. These accomplishments were real ones. The original school was opened, as the "Annals" indicates, "under real missionary circumstances." The school building contained only four classrooms. The original 60 students were distributed among these rooms, with only three teachers to serve the entire group. Equipment was minimal, and even books were scarce. No suitable (i.e., approved Catholic) texts were available, so "public school texts" were used. The sisters' first, primitive convent was described in the following humble terms:

In front of the house was a road mud-knee-deep in the rear a mud pond enclosed by a green-mold fence partly standing and partly reclining. . . Within the imposing mansion was a coal stove as large as an Irishman's clay pipe. . . Sister Rosine who had just arrived now believed she was at last on a foreign mission.

The hardships of the first winter were particularly severe. Because of the lack of sufficient heat from the small stove in the convent, Sister Charlotte contracted rheumatism during that winter. She became the first of many to depart after having made her contribution to the mission's success.

During and after that first winter of 1903-4, steady progress was made. The tangible accomplishments of the period from 1903-1918 were impressive. Enrollment steadily increased from the original 60 to a

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16 "Annals," 1903.
17 "Annals," 1903.
peak of 200 in 1919. The school building was expanded, and a permanent convent building was constructed. Membership in voluntary religious and social organizations, like the sodality (C.S.M.C.), had also grown among the school's students. The authors of the "Annals" conscientiously and proudly noted successful efforts to raise money.

The parish community had also increased in size, and a new parish church had been built. The original frame building that had served as a Catholic house of worship was replaced by an impressive neoclassical structure. Thus, the Catholic congregation had come to take its place with the three Protestant downtown congregations. The school had become an important part of the parish's life, and was operating smoothly as an alternative educational institution in the city.

The intangible accomplishments of the period are more difficult to ascertain, yet may have been of greater significance than the improvements in physical facilities, fund-raising, and enrollment. During this period, the sisters built not only the school but their own convent community. With the construction of the permanent convent, their preoccupation with physical hardships was lessened; the authors of the "Annals" paid less attention to such details. As less energy was expended on personal and institutional survival, more was devoted to the development of relationships within the convent, and between

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the convent and the outside world.

As the enrollment and financial stability of the school increased, efforts were made to expand what was done in the classroom. It became possible to add some of the "extras" that would provide more than minimal education. Religious training, of course, was an important part of the curriculum from the outset. One of the sisters noted in a letter that they found the children, particularly those of immigrant parents, to be almost completely ignorant of Catholic doctrine. The efforts to provide such religious training was the main element that distinguished St. Vincent's from the public schools in Newport News. Interestingly, however, when the "Annals" deals with curricular or classroom work, the area most often described is not religion but music. The Music Department was one of the first to be established, and the school was marked by the periodic expansion of the music program. Since enrollment in the music classes was voluntary, the size of these classes seems to have been regarded by the sisters as an indication of their success in promoting not only a school but an idea about how young women should be educated. The inculcation of this educational philosophy was perhaps the most important accomplishment of the 1903-1918 period. The focus on religion, music, and religious and social groups reflects not only conventional American notions about the proper role of young women, but also the sisters' idea of the school as an integral part of the entire life of the child, the

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23 Letter from Sister Rosine, Feb. 9, 1908 (in possession of author).

24 "Annals" entries for 1926 and 1928 contain typical references to the growing Music Department and to the success of music programs.
family and the parish.

The period of the SCN community's establishment in Newport News might be said to have come to an end with the years of World War I. This termination date is not arbitrary, since important changes took place both in the school and in the larger Catholic community during these years. In terms of its financial independence and prosperity, the school's growth reached its first peak in 1918-1919. The final years of World War I were boom years for the shipyard and for Newport News. The school benefited from the economic prosperity produced by the shipyard's wartime contracts, and by the influx of military personnel to the Newport News port of embarkation. The "Annals" entries for 1917-1918 are unusual in that they do not reflect the intensely internal focus of the earlier years. Entries for the war years refer again and again to the changes brought about by the war. There is no effort to disguise the fact that the sisters took an active interest in the comings and goings of the troops, and that they enjoyed the social stimulation provided by the influx of "outsiders." The World War, as it is described by the author of the "Annals," was a grand, patriotic adventure, and one in which the sisters were eager to participate.

In some respects, the Catholic community experienced a similar reaction on a national level. Catholics, as a group, were at first divided in their attitude toward the war. Yet by 1917, Catholics were

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25 Jester, p. 136-140.
participating actively in all facets of the war effort. The League of National Unity, an "organization dedicated to stirring up peoples of all creeds, classes and occupations to prosecute the war to the finish," was chaired by Baltimore's Cardinal Gibbons. The Church's episcopal leadership argued that Catholics could eliminate the last vestiges of nativist suspicion by enlisting in and supporting the war effort. Because World War I promised at the outset to be a "just war, it seemed the perfect opportunity to prove to the public that Catholicism and Americanism were not contradictory impulses. In a small way, the sisters in Newport News did their part to support the war effort. They made efforts to welcome Catholic servicemen who passed through Newport News, most notably the "boys from Boston," who were among the first to arrive and the last to leave. "Annals" entries for 1917-18 contain several anecdotes that illuminate the relationship between these soldiers and the sisters. The incidents described are both touching and comical. In some ways, they seem to reflect the natural sympathy that can develop between "outsiders"; yet they also seem to indicate the sisters' pride in their own contribution to the larger national struggle. These passages emphasized the energy and activity of a society at war. No deaths were mentioned (except those that occurred during the 1918 influenza epidemic); hardships received scant attention. The period of 1917-1919 saw the culmination of fifteen years of progress toward economic stability and

27 Hennessey, p. 223-226.
28 Ibid., p. 225.
social respectability for the sisters and their school. The tone of these passages is one of undisguised optimism about what the future might bring.

That optimism, central to the American experience during the war years, was to be short-lived. The "Annals" accounts of 1920-21 show an abrupt change in both circumstances and sentiment. They indicate the passage of the SCN community in Newport News into a second phase of its history: from "establishment" to "consolidation." A brief review of trends within the national Catholic community indicates that the 1920s were years of retrenchment and consolidation. This decade was a pivotal one for the American Catholic community. It was during these years that the Church faced the greatest popular hostility it had experienced since the 1830s and 1840s. The impulse toward nativism seemed to grow with the isolationist ideology that drew its strength from the general post-war disillusionment. American minority groups were no longer welcomed as participants in the common national struggle of war. The 1920s began with the "noble experiment" of Prohibition, a reform that drew some of its impetus from ethnic bigotry. Although temperance was a popular notion among many Catholic liberals, legal Prohibition was not. In 1917, Cardinal Gibbons had spoken for his church's majority when he stated that he "would regard the passage of a federal prohibition law as a national catastrophe, little short of a crime against the spiritual and physical well-being of the American people."30 After Prohibition became the law of the land, the Church found itself supporting an unpopular, perhaps even un-American

30Hennesey, p. 231.
position. In the years that followed, the Church was to face many such confrontations between minority and majority morality.

It was in the 1920s, for example, that the first legislation was passed to attempt to bring about ethnic homogeneity through immigration restrictions. The debates over the Immigration Act of 1924 were explicitly racist; the quotas established by that bill imposed the most severe restrictions on immigration from Southern and Eastern European countries, many of which were predominantly Catholic. National, state and local legislatures moved at the same time to restrict Catholic autonomy in education; the Society of Sisters in Oregon found itself in a Supreme Court battle to protect their right to operate a school like St. Vincent's. The Ku Klux Klan, one of the most visible nativist pressure groups, experienced a sudden surge in membership and in political power. According to John Higham, the Klan had many enemies, chief among which was the Catholic Church. The Klan's terror tactics, most commonly associated with racist extremism, were turned against Catholics and Catholic institutions in both the South and the North. Anti-Catholic propaganda was distributed in cities and rural areas alike. This was particularly true during the 1928 presidential campaign, when nativist forces joined to oppose the candidacy of Al Smith. Perhaps religion was less influential than other political and personal factors in determining the outcome of that election, but the quantity and content of printed material devoted to the subject stands as proof that at the time both Catholics and non-Catholics perceived

the Smith candidacy as a religious confrontation.

The American Catholic Church's response to the popular hostility it faced in the 1920s included efforts in two directions. In each case, the decision made by the national leadership, and the responses of Catholics across the nation, were mirrored in the actions and attitudes of the sisters in Newport News. The first and most important reaction of the national Church was to consolidate its institutional structure. In some cases, new organizations and agencies were added, to meet the needs of the Catholic immigrants who now faced special pressures. In other cases, the Church moved to solidify its hold on its people by incorporating all Catholics into an extensive network of educational, welfare and social organizations. The cornerstone of this system was the Catholic school system, which experienced dramatic growth in the 1920s. During these years, the number of Catholic schools, of pupils in these schools, and of staff members serving the schools, increased steadily. Furthermore, the Catholic school system diversified to include new areas. It expanded to include the Catholic college system. Efforts were made to make the Catholic schools competitive with the public schools in terms of their curriculum and instructional staff. At the same time, the Catholic schools were linked with other Catholic social and self-help organizations. Every effort was made to tie the child and his parents to the larger Catholic community, and to preserve a Catholic consciousness in the family. A host of welfare institutions (hospitals, orphanages, nursing homes) and voluntary social organizations (the National Council of Catholic Women, the International Federation of Catholic Alumni, the Knights of Columbus) were established to integrate the efforts of the entire
Catholic community. All were placed under the leadership of the
National Catholic Welfare Council, the first national organizing body
for the American Catholic Church. 32

Even as the Church's leadership moved aggressively to reinforce
its institutional base and to establish a sense of Catholic solidarity,
efforts were made in a second direction. The experience of World War I
had encouraged some Catholics to believe they would soon be accepted
within the majority culture. Such people advocated policies that con-
sciously minimized the differences between Catholics and Protestants,
and sought solidarity across denominational lines. Leading Catholic
spokesmen like John A. Ryan of the Social Action Department of the
N.C.W.C. and George N. Shuster, editor of Commonweal, published numer-
ous articles designed to dispel persistent nativist myths about Church
doctrine and practice. 33 A group known as the Catholic Truth Guild ex-
perimented with the unconventional tactic of street preaching to en-
lighten the public about the faith. 34 During the 1928 campaign, some
Catholics openly opposed Smith, reasoning that the Catholic minority
could best protect its own position by avoiding controversy and main-
taining a low profile. Articles in Catholic periodicals consistently

32 Hennesey, p. 234-253

33 John A. Ryan, "Do Prohibition Laws Bind in Conscience?" Catholic
World, May, 1925, p. 145-7; George N. Shuster, "The Catholic Conspiracy
Myth," Outlook, Nov. 7, 1928, p. 1102-1105; George N. Shuster, "The

34 David Goldstein, "Religious Campaigning in American Streets,"

35 Pierre Crabit, "Is It Time for a Catholic President?" Outlook,
argued that there need be no conflict between American citizenship and Catholic practice. In fact, supporters of the Catholic school system pointed out that parochial schools actually provided an important service to the society, in that they worked to assimilate the most ethnically diverse elements. In an address to the national meeting of the National Education Association, Reverend Hickey, Boston's Diocesan Supervisor of Schools, stressed the close parallels between public and parochial curricular content. His statements, and those of others, indicated a willingness to sacrifice some of the uniqueness of Catholic culture in order to make it an acceptable part of the larger American culture.

The tone and content of the "Annals" changed during the 1920s, but not as dramatically as one might expect in light of the events that brought Catholics into conflict with their fellow citizens throughout the nation. The first indications of the new post-war climate appeared in the entries of 1920-21. In those years, repeated reference was made to the "hard times" the city was suffering. Because it was so dependent on military spending, the shipyard suffered almost immediately from postwar federal cutbacks. The school's enrollment fell, and attempts to raise money were also frustrated. Yet neither seems to

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38 "Annals", 1921.
have greatly disturbed the sisters, who evidently attributed the setback to a temporary economic slump. In speaking of the disappointing results of the annual bazaar, the "Annals" author remarked, "The children were not discouraged, since they knew it would be impossible to reach the amounts realized in former years."\textsuperscript{39} No explicit references were made to national or local expressions of anti-Catholic sentiment. There are several possible explanations for this apparent omission. First, it is certainly true that most of the sisters were uninformed about national political affairs. Although eligible to vote, most did not; their access to information about the outside world was strictly limited by convent rule.\textsuperscript{40} Therefore, it is not surprising that there was no mention of the Smith candidacy at all. Second, it is possible that the authors' perception of the function of the "Annals" caused them to consciously omit some kinds of information. For example, if the "Annals" was seen as a record of the inevitable progress made by the faithful, then temporary obstacles may have been considered to be of little importance. Pride or confusion might have made it difficult to acknowledge the deterioration of the hard-won relationship with Protestant society. Perhaps the sisters in Newport News saw little evidence of the anti-Catholic feeling that seems to have been expressed so visibly and violently elsewhere. After all, Newport News did not have a heritage of religious friction. Its population, although multi-ethnic, did not contain the large, competitive ethnic blocks found in some Northern cities. Finally, the small size or distinctive style

\textsuperscript{39} "Annals," 1921.

\textsuperscript{40} Sister Martha Joseph Lenahan, private interview held in Newport News, Va., May 21, 1984.
of the SCN community might have helped to limit trouble. The sign-
nificance of this element of style is discussed in the final chapter
of this paper.

Although the "Annals" does not reveal the level of nativist pres-
sure experienced, this document does describe the same patterns of
response found elsewhere among Catholics. On a national level, the
Catholic school system was being deliberately expanded and bolstered.
The "Annals" entries of the 1920s tell the story of the determined
efforts to do the same for St. Vincent's School. The sisters worked
hard during this period to consolidate the gains made before the war.
The tone of the "Annals" became increasingly businesslike. Enrollment
figures are mentioned more frequently. Amounts realized from fund
raising events were conscientiously, and proudly noted. Several en-
tries indicate that the school had begun to compete aggressively with
the public school system. By the 1920s, non-Catholic students were
attending St. Vincent's. Efforts were made to expand the offerings
of the school. Again, particular attention was given to the Music
Department; new musical instruments were purchased, and a school or-
chestra was organized. The academic demands made on students were
increased when a twelfth year was added to the high school.

One of the most interesting entries of the period was written in
September of 1923. The author complained that enrollment (although
not stated exactly) was "rather discouraging." She seems to have had

little doubt about the reason for some students' decision to switch to the public school:

Since our children could leave our seventh grade and enter public high school, it was decided, rather than have them go to public school, to permit them to enter our high school from the seventh grade. Under this condition nearly all the seventh grade girls returned.44

Evidently, the public schools had "lured" students from St. Vincent's with the promise of a shortened school career. The sisters, with little debate, chose to play the same game, and were thus able to "win back" most of the "lost" students. The author of the "Annals" expressed no concern about the need to maintain substantive differences between the two school systems. It seems to have been a purely pragmatic decision. Perhaps, like so many people in the 1920s, the sisters were simply applying the "cult of business" to a religious endeavor.45

In addition to illustrating the emphasis on institutional reinforcement, the "Annals" also indicates the extent to which schools and religious communities were incorporated into a national network of Catholic self-help organizations. Previously referred to as a "mission" or an "outpost," the school in the 1920s became closely tied to the activities of Catholic social organizations like the Knights of Columbus. Most importantly, the school's Alumnae Association chose to affiliate itself with the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae. In fact, the decision to do so necessitated the addition of the twelfth year.46


46"Annals", 1923.
Throughout the decade, the "Annals" entries reflected active interest and participation in the activities of such national organizations.

Yet even as the sisters worked to stabilize the financial basis of the school, and to make it a viable business operation, they sought to maintain close relations with the competition. Like Reverend Hickey, they evidently believed that Catholic schools had a special responsibility to promote Americanism in values and behavior. Particular emphasis was given to patriotic events and holidays.\(^{47}\) The school's student body included many children of immigrants. In 1921, the author remarked that there was a surprisingly large number of "foreigners" enrolled in that year.\(^{48}\) A letter written by one of the early sisters confirms this impression. In 1920, one third of the students had fathers who were born abroad.\(^{49}\) Yet there is no mention of any effort to preserve the ethnic culture of these children. Instead, it seems, the emphasis was on making them good American citizens.

In other respects as well, the curriculum itself certainly was not radical. The emphasis on music, and on religion, seems to indicate that the sisters subscribed to thoroughly conventional beliefs about the kind of education that was appropriate for young women. Vocational training, an important part of the neighboring boys' school, received little attention from the sisters. When the difficult decision was made

\(^{47}\) Representative references include the entry for 1927, which records the school's celebration of the birthday "of the illustrious Robert E. Lee," and that for 1920, which describes the sisters' pride in a student's achievement in a national patriotic essay contest.

\(^{48}\) "Annals", 1920.

\(^{49}\) Strong, p. 7.
(in 1929) to admit male students, the author of the "Annals" frankly admits the sisters' reluctance to "experiment" or innovate. This fundamental conservatism, and the energy devoted to maintaining community relations, suggest that the sisters saw themselves and their school as forming a small, but contributing, part of the larger American educational system.

At the end of the 1920s, the American Catholic Church, and the rest of the nation, entered a new and particularly challenging era. Church historian Winthrop Hudson has analyzed the dramatic effects of the Great Depression on America's churches. In many ways, Hudson argues, the Protestant churches had become complacent in the prosperous '20s; thus, they were unprepared to deal with the stresses imposed by economic crisis. Most Protestant churches lost members during the 1930s; even when membership appeared to remain stable, church attendance declined. Yet Hudson agrees with Catholic historian James Hennessey that the Catholic Church did not suffer such a decline; membership and attendance remained stable during the 1930s. In fact, there was a "Catholic Renaissance" in theology and social action. This may have been due to the fact that the Catholic immigrant urban poor had not experienced the extremes of "Coolidge prosperity," and therefore were less committed to the illusion of American cultural supremacy that fed on that prosperity. For them, the Depression was an economic, but not a personal moral crisis. Furthermore, the Depression

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51 Hudson, p. 378-381.
52 Hennessey, p. 254-279.
may have brought Catholics into the larger society in a new way. The economic catastrophe prepared Americans to accept the New Deal, a program of economic and social reform that contained many elements of the ill-fated Bishop's Program for Social Reform. That program, proposed by the liberal episcopal leadership in 1919, was never formally enacted; but it had the support of Ryan and the liberal Catholic wing throughout the 1920s. In fact, George Q. Flynn, in his book American Catholics and the Roosevelt Presidency 1932-1936, argues that Catholic social programs and Catholic leadership were effectively incorporated into the New Deal during its first four years. Thus, the 1930s was, for the Catholic church, a period of steady growth after the "retrenchment" of the 1920s.

The SCN "Annals" suggests that the experience of the Newport News community closely paralleled this national model. One of the most striking things about the entries that appeared in the 1930s is the absence of explicit reference to the Depression. This is particularly surprising, since the far milder 1920-21 recession received repeated mention. The information included about the sisters' concerns in the 1930s suggests not only that the school and parish were suffering little, but that they were in fact prospering. Thus, the "Annals" seems to support the contention of Hudson, Hennesey and Flynn that the 1930s was not perceived as a period of isolation and deprivation for

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many American Catholics.

Financially, the school became substantially more secure in the 1930s. This can be inferred from a number of entries, although neither total income nor individual tuition figures was given. In the 1930s, the number and frequency of references to fund-raising activities and contributions increased. Such activities, usually sponsored by a parish or school social organization, were carefully described; the exact amount collected was meticulously recorded. These descriptions contain no suggestion that parishioners had to endure hardships or make sacrifices in order to support the school. These passages are strikingly different from those that appeared during the 1920-21 recession. In the earlier accounts, the sisters admitted that "the annual fund-raising bazaar was almost a failure" due to "the severity of the times." They express pride that they were able to collect anything at all. The record of the 1930s implies another sort of pride. The parish and school community, it would appear, were not only able but eager to contribute to the sisters in their endeavors. Enrollment figures offer further proof that the school had community support and a measure of financial security. The sisters seem to have taken particular pride in the increased enrollment. Total enrollment in 1928 had fallen to 70. Ten years later it had more than tripled, remaining at 250 until the early 1940s. First Communion and C.S.M.C. membership figures were also noted frequently. These latter numbers have special

55"Annals", 1921.

56Strong, p. 8-10.
significance, since they include children who did not attend the school. The increasing size of these groups reflects both the healthy growth of the parish community and the involvement of the sisters in the lives of Catholic families in Newport News. The particularly religious terminology used in such entries seems to indicate that the sisters still perceived their primary role as one of religious education.

Beyond the gradual changes in student body and class size, the school was dramatically transformed during the 1930s as a result of two important decisions. Both were forced upon the sisters by circumstances, yet each was fortuitous in the long run. The first of these was the decision to change St. Vincent's from a girls' academy to a coeducational elementary and high school. It appears from the "Annals" that this decision was not made voluntarily by the sisters. In 1902, the year before the arrival of the original three sisters, the Xaviaran Brothers had established a boys' school in the same 34th Street neighborhood in which St. Vincent's was eventually located. The Xaviarans were instrumental in helping the sisters to establish their mission, and perhaps helped to pave the way for parish support of a girls' school. The two schools were nominally separate, but by the 1920s they were holding graduation and other ceremonies together. In 1929, the Xaviarans announced that they would not return the following fall to operate the boys' school. The reasons for their decision were not


58 "Annals entries for 1921 and 1927 contain descriptions of the joint graduation ceremonies held by the schools.

stated, although a later entry hinted that many of the boys in the parish were attending public school anyway. The "Annals" author implies that the sisters were not consulted by the Brothers. The entry for Feb. 2, 1929 stated:

The rumor that the Xaviran Brothers would not return in September was at last given out officially. We shall have to take the boys but where shall we put them is the question. 60

Evidently, there was little discussion about whether the sisters should open their school to the boys. They did so, despite the fact that the existing school building was tremendously overcrowded. Additional sisters were requested from the SCN Mother House, but only one was available. Temporary measures were taken to deal with the staff shortage. Non-Catholic students were, for the first time, refused admission. Classes were combined and the high school students were moved to a nearby Knights of Columbus building. 61

The "Annals" account of the school's opening in the fall of 1930 is reminiscent of the entries from the first difficult winter of 1903-4. Emphasis was placed on the "emergency" measures taken, and on the determined efforts of students and teachers to make the best of a difficult situation. Yet, within a short time, the long-term benefits of the change became apparent. Later that year, the author of the "Annals" was able to state proudly that:

No one. . . could. . . say that the experiment of combining both the boys and the girls in the classes had not worked harmoniously even though it was only an experiment. 62

60 "Annals," 1929.
When the boys took a leading role in one of the school's fund raising projects, the results seemed both to please and to surprise the sisters. More importantly, the presence of the boys encouraged the sisters to expand and update the curriculum in subsequent years. A new gym was built. In 1938, Physics was added to the curriculum, after the nuns realized that several of the older boys had switched to the public school to study that subject, which was required for admission to the shipyard's Apprentice School. The decision to admit boys thus caused the sisters to alter their conception of the school. It was, by the late 1930s, no longer a girls' academy, with emphasis on religion and music. It had become an academic alternative to the public system. From that point on, the sisters consistently offered a curriculum comparable to that of the public system, although classes in religion were retained. As a "secular" education became increasingly valuable in the American job market, this decision perhaps helped to insure the survival of St. Vincent's into the 1970s and 1980s.

The second critical choice made in the 1930s followed directly from the first. In the Spring of 1930 the decision was made to erect a new school building. The overcrowding caused by the admission of the boys led the sisters to request a new school from the Bishop. The way in which the final decision was made is again interesting. The sisters themselves, although directly concerned, seem to have been periph-

63 "Annals," 1930.
eral to the decision-making process. The Bishop, the pastor, and the "prominent men of the parish" consulted about the need for additional space; an announcement was then made that a new structure would be built.\textsuperscript{65} Once that commitment was made, progress was rapid. Evidently there was little trouble financing the construction, although for a few years references were made to the "heavy debt" of the school. The sisters seem to have been primarily concerned with the disruption of the move, and with the need to maintain normal school operation while construction and relocation took place. This time, the advantages of the move were immediately apparent. The new building offered more space, as well as many of the special facilities available in public schools: a science room, a new gym, and an expanded music department. The gym, the sisters felt, was particularly important to the boys, many of whom looked forward to the building of the new school primarily for this reason.\textsuperscript{66} With more space, enrollment was able to grow once again. Non-Catholic students were again admitted, and the staff size was increased to ten.

The change in the nature and function of the school was reflected in a subtle alteration in the tone of the "Annals" entries. From a literary point of view, these passages (particularly those in the early 1930s) are the most beautiful in the entire journal. Many appear to have been written by a single person. The language used in this section is far more descriptive and expansive than that found elsewhere. The range of subjects described was broader also. In the

\textsuperscript{65}"Annals," 1930.
\textsuperscript{66}"Annals," 1930.
1920s, almost all references dealt directly or indirectly with the school. Yet in the 1930s, the reader learns more about the sisters' lives outside the classroom. Lengthy anecdotal accounts of daily events were included: a shopping trip, a snowball fight, a card party, an auto accident. The tragic death of Sister Loretta Cecilia was described in affectionate detail.\(^\text{67}\) Even the "outside world" is conveyed more fully. For the first time, details of the weather, city scenes, and parish celebrations were regularly included. In comparison with these lengthy and elaborate passages, those of the 1920s seem businesslike; the accounts of seem abrupt. No doubt, the personal sensibility of the author is largely responsible for this change in tone. Yet the new spirit may reflect something about the community as well. The sisters of the 1930s were not facing the day-to-day struggle to survive that occupied their counterparts in 1903. By the 1930s, they had achieved a measure of success. The school was growing; the life of the parish was healthy and the religious community seemed to have found its niche in Newport News. The tone and content of the "Annals" expressed the sisters' satisfaction with the present and optimism about the future.

It was an optimism that seems to have been well-founded. For the next two decades, the school prospered while the convent community continued to find acceptance within the city. If Flynn is correct in his assertion that it was in the 1930s that Catholics were "incoro-

\(^\text{67}\) Some representative anecdotes describe a shopping trip (1929), a snowball fight among the nuns (1930), a card party with some visiting sisters (1930), an auto accident in which two of the sisters were involved (1929) and the death of Sister Loretta Cecilia (1929)
rated" into the American system, then the sisters' experience during the war years seems to provide proof that Catholics continued to operate in the American mainstream. As in World War I, Americans in 1941 were caught up in the patriotic excitement of a "just war." Once again, ethnic and racial minorities volunteered to prove their Americanism by joining in the war effort, at home and abroad. The Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies included among its leaders both John Ryan and Archbishop Lucey. Roosevelt's foreign policy was actively supported by Bishops O'Hara, Hurley and Ryan, by Archbishop Schrembs, Cardinal Mundelein and Cardinal Spellman. The military chaplaincy program enacted during the war brought Catholic clergy and laity into intimate contact with members of other Christian denominations. Once again, the reality of total war obscured differences between individual races, religions, and ethnic groups.

The war brought about a dramatic change in the focus of the "Annals". The war effort dominated the journal entries during the early 1940s, although school and community events were still recorded. Once again, the sisters' location in Newport News undoubtedly affected their perspective. Newport News and the peninsula had always been influenced by the military, because of the shipyard and the nearby military bases. During the war years, the city experienced a massive influx of military personnel, who were waiting to be shipped to the European theater. Civilian institutions throughout the city were transformed; St. Vincent's was but one such institution. The parish's Knights of Columbus building was commandeered to serve as the Officers'
Headquarters for the 85th Division. The names of many of these men were included in the "Annals" anecdotes. They remain the only names of people outside the parish or religious community. Included in the pages of the "Annals" are the letters of some of these men, who left but remained in touch with the sisters. The sisters and the soldiers seem to have mutually adopted one another. The soldiers performed odd jobs for the sisters, while the nuns provided them with some of the comforts of home. The children in the school were also included in this familial relationship. In Christmas of 1943, according to the "Annals," the children took special pride in preparing a Christmas party for "the boys."^70

The circumstances of the sisters in the 1940s were externally similar to those of 1917-19, when World War I brought soldiers and military organizations to Newport News. Yet there was a critical difference. In World War I, the "Annals" certainly reflected the sisters' special interest in the soldiers, particularly the Catholic men who worshipped with the parish in St. Vincent's Church. Yet the relationship was nevertheless a distant one, and it existed between persons rather than between groups. For example, one of the most poignant episodes is the 1918 entry that involves a young Catholic soldier, far from home, who sought the friendship of the nuns. Hesitant to approach them directly, he lingered outside the convent wall for several days. Eventually, he asked if they would like him to mow the grass in the

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convent garden. The sisters agreed, offering to pay him with a meal. His visits soon became regular, always beginning with an offer to do some household chore and ending with the meal.71 The sisters' sympathy for the lonely, unnamed "soldier boy" was obvious; but their involvement with him was purely personal. They remained, in World War I, aloof from the army itself, and from the larger war effort. In another entry, there is a humorous description of a group of sisters who wandered down to the port to look at the warships. Curious about what they saw, one "bright sister" began interrogating the soldier on duty. The sentry stubbornly refused to give her any information about the ships or the men aboard them.72 The sisters remained interested but uninvolved bystanders.

The situation was quite different during the Second World War. In that case, the sisters' involvement was communal and wholehearted. A bond was established between the sisters and the men, between the convent and the military unit. The "Annals" includes not only the letters of individual soldiers, but also a letter from Col. William Maris, Commanding Officer of the 85th Antiaircraft Group. That letter extends the thanks of the unit to the sisters for their moral support and friendly hospitality to the soldiers.73 The fact that this humorous, informal letter was included in the "Annals" is but a single indication of the pride the sisters felt in their contribution to the war effort.

71Ibid., 1917-18.
72Ibid.
A feeling of solidarity bound the sisters more closely to the world outside the convent. The deaths of their own family members in combat were mentioned as communal losses. During this period, "Annals" entries expressed a new acceptance by and of the outside world; a new pride was taken in American citizenship.

Our school continues to do its bit. . . Valentine's Day we supplied cigarettes to our boys of the 85th and gave a cake, which was drawn by Private Johnson. Our children are knitting afghans and making bed shoes for the soldiers. Of course we are buying War Bonds and Stamps.

The sisters of the 1940s seem strikingly different from the sisters of 1903, who saw themselves as "strange creatures," the subject of curious scrutiny by the city's residents.

With the end of World War II, the tone of the "Annals" changed again. The comfortable prosperity of the post-war period resulted in "good times" for the school. By 1946, the school's debt had been retired, and the tuition requirement was eliminated. During the 1950s, the school's enrollment increased steadily, to reach a total of 649 by the end of the decade. The staff grew correspondingly. By 1955, the instructional staff was composed of 18 people, 5 of whom were lay people. The "Annals" no longer looks like the diary of a family of women engaged in an experiment, but instead resembles the log of a business operation. New emphasis was placed on quantifiable elements: enrollment, test scores, schedules, awards made, scholarships won.

74 "Annals", Oct. 3 and 4, 1943.  
There are few references to individuals by name, either students or teachers. As the school became larger, and the demands on it more complex, its staff adopted a more academic, secular focus. The school seems to have become less involved in the family and parish lives of the students. Parish events are mentioned infrequently. In part, this is a reflection of the decline in the size of the parish that occurred as people moved out of the inner city to the suburbs. The students who attended the school no longer lived in the 34th Street neighborhood, which had become almost exclusively industrial and commercial.

The school's expansion and incorporation into the community during the 1950s and 1960s led to two final decisions about its future. In 1966, the high school was transferred from the control of the SCN community, and St. Vincent's parish, to that of the diocese, which assumed financial and instructional responsibility for it. The school was renamed Peninsula Catholic High School, to reflect its designation as a central Catholic high school. Three years later, it had become clear that the existing building was no longer adequate; overcrowding made it difficult for the high school to function as a central institution for the peninsula. Therefore, in 1969, an "emergency meeting" of the faculty and parents resulted in the decision to close the elementary school and operate only the high school in the existing building. Again, these changes redefined the nature of the school and altered the relationship between the sisters and the school. Some of the sisters

remained on the staff, but their numbers and authority declined. By 1974, there were six sisters on the staff, which numbered 21 in all. At the time of this writing (1984), a single nun planned to return for the 1984-85 school year. The school is no longer identified primarily with the women from Kentucky; in this sense, those women succeeded in establishing an educational institution and turning it over to the community of lay people it was designed to serve.

In fact, the sixty-year history of the SCN mission in Newport News is the story of success on many levels. In pragmatic terms, this group of religious women were able to build a school that survived for three quarters of a century. Their efforts, particularly during the critical 1920-1940 period, shaped the character of that school, and enabled it to make an educational contribution to both Catholic and non-Catholic families in Newport News. On a broader level, these women managed to find a place in the majority society for themselves as a religious community. The community's survival during the stressful 1920-1940 period is significant. Their community grew not only in its size but also in its respectability during those years. By the 1940s and 1950s, it was accepted as part of the establishment. The experience of the sisters in Newport News mirrors many of the trends that characterized the larger American Catholic community. It is a minority group's "success story," a case in which a religious minority group was tolerated by the majority and was even able to satisfy its own personal and communal needs. The SCN community functioned simultaneously in the Catholic and non-Catholic environments, and achieved success in each.
CHAPTER II

THE NUN'S ROLE: STEREOTYPE AND SELF-CONCEPT

The success of the SCN community can be attributed to many forces, both inside and outside the convent's walls. Some of these have been discussed previously. The small population of Newport News in 1903, and its lack of a long historical tradition may have made it easier for newcomers to settle there. The Catholic minority there was quite small when compared with those of Northern cities of the period. According to the "Annals," in 1895 there were only three Catholic families in the city.\(^80\) This group might have been too small to attract nativist attention or hostility. It certainly does not seem that Catholics were perceived as having displaced Protestant workers, or as being potential competitors for political power. The relative newness of the Protestant congregations, and this history of recent interchurch cooperation, may also have helped to minimize the differences between Catholic and Protestant traditions.

Apart from these broad social conditions, there may have been unique elements within the SCN community that enabled these sisters to interact well with both Protestants and Catholics. First of all, it is important to recognize that Catholic women religious of the 1920s and 1930s, although often perceived as a homogenous group, belonged to

\(^{80}\) "Annals," 1925.
communities with a wide range of philosophies and behavioral characteristics. Among such groups, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth might be placed among the more liberal religious orders. Even in the 1920s, their dress was unlike that of most nuns; they did not wear a black veil, but a white headpiece modelled on the Kentucky sunbonnet. Their rules, and the nature of their missions, allowed them to mingle more freely with the society outside the convent than members of cloistered orders. Thus, perhaps they were more able to adapt their behavior and goals to the demands of a pluralistic society. One of the most interesting illustrations of this adaptation is found by examining the sisters' own self perception. Their writings, words, and actions, particularly in the period from 1920-40, indicate that they had developed a self-concept that both coincided with and contradicted the popular perception of the nun. This self-concept was an important element contributing to their success as a group, and as individual women. It enabled them to function within the majority society while remaining ultimately aloof from it.

The popular perception of the nun, at least during the period from 1920-40, was the product of a number of different stereotypes. In attempting to analyze such a perception, one must begin by noting that nuns, as women, were subject to the same role restrictions that faced all women in this period. Despite the attention given by the popular press to the phenomena of the "flapper," most women in the 1920s and 1930s did not work outside the home unless the family's financial circumstances required them to do so. When they did choose to do so,

81 Lenahan, interview.
their career choices were restricted. Members of the "women's professions" - teaching and nursing in particular - were subject to strict behavioral regulations. Women were severely underrepresented in leadership positions of all kinds. The American economic, social and religious environment was essentially a patriarchal one, which recognized the contributions of women as acceptable only when they were confined to specific spheres. Nuns, like other women, worked within a limited role, assigned and defined by social convention.

However, the character of the nun has held a special significance in the American popular mind. One way to determine the nature of the public's image of the nun is to examine the way in which that image was expressed in literature. In an article entitled "Nuns in Novels," Walter Gavigan wrote of the unrealistic portrayal of the nun in American literature. The view of the nun, he argued, was characteristically distorted in one of two ways. The first of these resulted in the stereotype of the mad or corrupt nun; such characters were commonly found in the nativist literature of the nineteenth century. Probably the most extreme, and certainly the best known, example of such a portrayal is that found in the notorious book entitled *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal*. This book, published in 1836, has been called by Ray A. Billington, "the most influential single work of American nativist propaganda in the period preceding the Civil War." The book was alleged to be the account of Maria Monk, a young


woman who entered the Hotel Dieu convent, only to learn the horrible truth about the mysterious doings within its walls. The authorship of this account was questioned almost immediately; subsequent investigation discredited the purported author. Yet the book remained popular, perhaps because it articulated fears and fantasies about life in a convent. These same nativist sentiments, it should be remembered, led to the vicious burning of an Ursuline convent outside Boston in 1834. At a time when the Irish famine was driving hundreds of thousands of Catholic immigrants into the United States, the image of the nun came to trigger nativist anxieties. Dressed in funereal black, and shut off from public view in a convent, she came to represent all that was foreign, mysterious, and alien about the Catholic faith.

In the early twentieth century, there was no work similar in impact to Awful Disclosures. In fact, Gavigan argues that by the 1920s the evil or mad nun character had, in effect, vanished from popular American literature. In the 1920s and 1930s, the single most important element contributing to a negative portrayal of the nun was the influence of Freudianism. Several popular works of the period interpreted the character and life style of the nun by applying popular notions about the teachings of Freud. Helene Mullin's Convent Girl and Fannie Hurst's Appassionata were two works which drew criticism for their mistaken use of Freudian principles in such a context. In the 1930s, E. Boyd Barrett's "The Sociology of Nunneries," although

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84 Ibid., p. 296.
85 Gavigan, p. 190.
86 Ibid.
allegedly a work of non-fiction, reflects a similar fascination with sexual repression, assumed to be a critical element of the nun's life.87

Despite these exceptions, Gavigan is probably correct in stating that the popular image of the nun in the early 1920s was based on a new stereotype, one which in some ways reversed the negative nativist picture of the nun. During this period, it became fashionably to sentimentalize convent life.88 Nuns were frequently portrayed as tragic heroines, driven to the convent by misfortune or heartbreak, who lived a life of lonely self sacrifice. Such a stereotype of the "good sister" is found in the characterization of the heroine of the most popular convent novel of the time, F. Marion Crawford's The White Sister. The White Sister, published in 1903, sold out several numbers in the first decade of the century. Later it was made into a movie, in which the romantic and dramatic potentials of the convent setting were sentimentally exploited. Critic Jean Holzhauer has noted that the heroine of The White Sister "does not differ essentially from heroines of popular secular literature of the period."89 At the very time that the sisters began their experiment in Newport News, the public's image of the nun was largely shaped by such unrealistic and dramatically distorted works.

Contemporary Catholic critics, including Gavigan and Holzhauer,

88Gavigan, p. 186.
pointed out that the literature of the 1920s and 1930s did include some efforts to portray the nun as more than just a stereotype. The works of Willa Cather, notably *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*, and Thornton Wilder's *Bridge of San Luis Rey* were hailed for their balanced and realistic rendering of the nun characters.  

However, as Holzhauer argued in "The Nun in Literature," the majority of the American public was not reading the works of Wilder or Cather. Rather, it was the "excruciating simplifications of works like *The White Sister* that formed the basis for the view of the nun held by the average American.  

Popular films and non-fiction also focused on the dramatic, mysterious side of convent life. In 1936, the first film of life inside a convent was the basis for a movie entitled "Cloistered." The film, which had a successful showing in New York City, dramatized the convent's "other-worldliness" by relying on what one viewer called "murky lighting."  

A New York critic, who claimed that the film would undoubtedly help non-Catholics to understand nuns better, nevertheless identified as the most "arresting scenes" those that placed nuns in incongruous situations: wielding pickaxes, using typewriters, operating a printing press. His review of the film implied that only these scenes challenged the popular perception of the pious nun kneeling in solitary prayer. Further, he noted that the film "presents no conflict,  

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90 Gavigan, p. 186-195.  
91 Holzhauer, p. 529.  
92 "Sisters Screened", *Time*, June 1, 1936, p. 27.
reaches no climax, and accepts without demure the phenomena of women
adopting a medieval mode of life."93 At almost the same time, Time
printed the first photographs taken in America of a ceremony in which
young women took their vows as nuns. These pictures, and the accom­
panying text, reinforced the view of the nun as a silent, prayerful
figure.94 The tone of this article was very like that of a passage in
the "Annals," which described a similar scene. Its author recorded
being deeply moved by "the fervor of the young innocent novices who
have given up all worldly pleasures to answer their Master's call."95
"Nun's Diary," published in Scribner's Magazine in 1931, was yet another
example of the kind of popular literature that shaped the public's
view of what nuns were and should be. That non-fiction account dif­
fered substantially from "Cloistered" in its use of humor, and in its
acknowledgment of the youthful zest for living that characterized
many young women who entered religious life. Yet it ended on a con­
tented note, emphasizing the sister's willingness to repress her in­
dividual concerns and in fact surrender herself to her calling.96 Ac­
cording to Holzhauer, the cumulative impact of these and similar works
was to create in the popular mind a picture of the nun as a "pious,

93Ibid.
friendly, occasionally comic and always unchallenging" figure. It was this image that was both adopted and modified by the sisters in Newport News to create their own self-concept.

In many ways, the sisters conformed to the dual stereotype of the "passive female" and the "noble sister." The restrictions on their lives went far beyond those imposed on the average woman; often, it seems, they were treated almost as children. The daily life of the SCN member left her with little autonomy. From the moment she awoke at 4:30 a.m., her day was divided into units with assigned activities. Members of the order were never permitted to leave the convent alone. They were not allowed to be outside the convent, for any reason, after 6 p.m. One incident described in the "Annals" may be used to illustrate the seriousness of such regulations. In 1929, the chaplain of Ft. Eustis requested that the nuns help to prepare some of the children to sing as a choir for the midnight Mass at the base chapel. The nuns willingly did so, and petitioned their Mother Superior for permission to go out in the evening, in a group, to attend the Mass with the children. After weeks of preparation, the choir was ready. However, the sisters were denied permission to attend with the children. As a result, the choir did not perform at all, since many parents were unwilling to allow their children to go without adult supervision. In this case, the children and the parishioners suffered, and the valuable

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97 Holzhauer, p. 29. Gavigan concurs with Holzhauer's contention, noting that "Protestant writers likewise... have shown a tendency to treat of convent life in terms of the ideal." (p. 180).

98 Lenahan, interview.
religious function of the event was forfeited. Yet, the author of the "Annals" indicated neither surprise nor resentment. The nun accepted a passive role when she took a vow of obedience to a religious superior.

That vow, and the internal leadership patterns of the order, dictated a life-long loss of personal autonomy. From the day on which she chose to enter the convent, the sister's life choices were limited. In fact, during the 1920s and 1930s, such a sister made no important life choices beyond that to enter the religious life. The leadership from the Mother House, and from "Mother" (General) was absolute. At times, the domination of the sisters' lives seems almost heartless. Sister Martha Joseph Lenahan, who entered the order in the 1920s, remembers her first assignment to a mission. She was eighteen years old, and was assigned to teach school in a distant community. She was also told that she must prepare to leave immediately, and that she must tell no one where she was going. She obeyed, yet never forgot the pain of leaving her family without being able to say goodbye or tell them her destination.

More commonly, sisters received annual assignments in the summer, in the form of "thin letters." The notices were so named because they consisted of a single sheet of paper, with the sister's name and new assignment. No explanation was ever given. These is mention in the "Annals" of the distress often caused by the arrival of


100 Lenahan, interview.
Yet all submitted, like obedient children, to the maternal decision.

Leadership patterns within the order were perhaps matriarchal. Yet as a group, the order conformed to another social convention by complying with the patriarchal traditions of the Catholic Church and of American society in general. The "Annals" contain ample evidence that the proper role of women, and of women religious, was considered to be subordinate to that of men. From the moment the three original sisters stepped from the train in 1903, they found themselves in the care of Father Wilson and the "good Xaviarans." Their status within the parish was always dictated by the pastor, who apparently supervised certain aspects of the school's operation. On ceremonial occasions, the pastor or his assistant acted as symbolic head of the school community. The sacramental practices of the Church further emphasized the gap between men and women, priests and nuns. This can be seen most clearly in the nuns' persistent efforts to have Mass said in their own chapel. To hear Mass in the convent chapel was considered a special favor, one which the sisters always sought. Yet it could only happen

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101 "Annals" entries for most years begin and end with references to changes in the group's membership. The entries for 1913, 1919, and 1927 include specific references to the impact of the "thin letters." The effect of the loss of a sister who had been a long-time member of the local community is expressed in the 1913 entry: "This year we gave up Sr. Francis, who saw ten years of zealous fruitful service among old and young."

102 Representative references to the pastor as symbolic head of the school are found in the "Annals" entries for 1929, which mentions the pastor's official request for additional sisters from the Mother House, and 1930, which depicts the pastor making both daily decisions (whether to close the school because of snow) and long-range commitments (regarding the construction of the new building) for the school.
with the kind cooperation of a priest. Masses were occasionally sched-
uled in the chapel, but usually this was done to suit the convenience of
of the priest; often the nuns were not even informed. The "Annals"
contains many accounts of the sisters' grateful excitement in such
cases, and of their hurried preparations for an unexpected visitation. 103

In other cases, it is clear that male figures - priests, chap-
lains, and the bishop - made more important decisions involving the
sisters without consulting them. In 1930, the chaplain of Fort Eustis
announced to the sisters that he thought they should abandon their Sun-
day school classes at the base. The author of the "Annals" noted that
"he did not give any reasons for the decision." 104 They complied with
his wishes, without comment. In the same year, the decision to build
a new school was made by the Bishop, after he met with the pastor and
the "prominent men of the parish." Although the Bishop later instruc-
ted the architect to permit the sisters to make changes in the new
building's plans, a "misunderstanding" resulted in the rejection of all
the suggestions made by the nuns. 105 In these and countless other in-
cidents, the "Annals" conveys the nuns' willing dependence on male
leadership. The decisions of the priests and the Bishop were never
questioned. Clearly, the sisters saw their own position as subordinate
to that of the males. In this respect, the sisters' own self-concept
seems to have coincided exactly with popular perceptions of the proper

103 "Annals," 1930.
role of nuns, and perhaps of women in general.

Another key element in the stereotype of the nun was the anonymity of such women. Holzhauer wrote that in the 1920s most people still regarded nuns from afar, as "a backdrop of identicals, subdued by habit and manner into the geometry of a formal garden." To the public eye, many superficial factors contributed to the vision of nuns as nameless, identical entities. Certainly, the religious habit imposed a uniform external appearance on all these women. This might have been particularly important in an age when American women were beginning to recognize the value of clothing in making a statement about personal identity. The habit was more than merely a similar style of dress; it was a costume that deliberately concealed individual differences of physique and grooming. Since nuns customarily changed their names after taking vows, they were thus deprived of another source of personal or ethnic identity. These factors, and their common life style (reinforced by the practice of always travelling in groups) naturally led the public to view them as lacking in individuality.

Again, the truth was very close to the stereotype. There was much about the convent life style that worked against any expression of individualism. The vows of poverty and obedience required the sister to deny herself both possessions and autonomy. A young postulant wrote in "The Diary of a Nun" of the difficulty she had in adopting the convent's verbal convention of calling everything "ours." "The only thing I am supposed to call mine is my sins," she wrote. Later, she wrote

106 Holzhauer, p. 527.
107 Sr. Mary Francis, p. 601.
of the personal pain she felt when, on the eve of her profession of vows, she was required to give up her single most prized possession: a watch given to her by her late mother. The system used by the SCN community, and other orders, to assign duties seems also to have been designed to compel the sisters to subordinate personal to communal good. Although the sisters today are urged to apply for positions, and to state preferences, neither was permitted in the 1920s and 1930s. Annual assignments, like daily chores, were decided without regard to personal preferences.

Sometimes, the decision made caused particular suffering. As a young novice, Sister Martha Joseph recalls, she was assigned to work in the kitchen of the Mother House in Kentucky. The extreme heat of the kitchen in the summer, combined with the heavy serge fabric of her habit, caused her sensitive skin to break out in a painful rash each day. Her Mistress of Novices was aware of her condition, and even helped to treat her; but there was no discussion of changing her duties.

Years later, as a young nun, she began to teach at a school only to be told abruptly that she must report immediately to another mission. "I thought it'd kill me," she says, describing her departure from the sisters and the schoolchildren to whom she had become attached. Later, she learned that the convent to which she had been transferred lacked both a cook and a teacher. She had been chosen not because she was particularly well qualified for either position, but because she was

108 Ibid., p. 604.
109 Lenahan, interview.
young enough to be expected to assume both jobs. After learning this, she had no objection to the change. In fact, it confirmed her belief that such decisions were always made with the community's best interests in mind. It was not appropriate, she believed, for a sister to seek a position where she might feel especially comfortable or capable.\textsuperscript{110}

The decision to transfer a sister involved more than just questions of preference or performance. Personal relationships were also affected. This was perhaps the most painful way in which the religious life style confronted the impulse toward individualism. Sisters were denied not only possessions and personal autonomy but also the consolation of personal friendships. All within the order were to be treated alike as sisters. No woman was to attach herself to a place, a position, or a friend. In Sister Martha Joseph's case, she learned the lesson early. On the day she entered the convent, she met a young girl who was also entering the order on that day. "We walked up the steps to the Mother House together," she remembers. Both were in their early teens (entering the 9th grade), and both were leaving their families for the first time. They were assigned to similar chores, took the same classes in high school, studied together, and became close friends. Before long, their friendship was brought to the attention of the Mother Superior. Both young girls were spoken to sternly about the dangers of what the order denounced as "particular friendships."\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{110}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{111}Ibid.
This lesson was reinforced throughout her religious career. Like the Newport News sisters, she had to abide by rules that severely limited social interaction. No talking was permitted at meals or during work, prayer or meditation. For a single hour each day, the sisters were allowed to converse, in a group. 112 As a novice, Sister Martha Joseph recalls, she was forbidden to associate with the "young sisters"; she complied without question, yet still does not understand the reason for the regulation. 113 While still in the novitiate, she became particularly attached to the Mistress of Novices. All the novices were fond of this Superior, she remembers, for "she was just like a mother to us." It would certainly not be surprising if these young girls - most under 18 - did begin to regard their Mistress of Novices as a substitute for the mothers they had only recently left. When the time came for the older woman to leave her charges, the parting was painful. "She didn't even tell us she was leaving," Sister Martha Joseph recalls. She walked down a path, as though she were going to a favorite meditation spot; there a car waited to take her to a new mission. The novices were told later of her departure. "I guess she couldn't tell us," Sister Martha Joseph concludes, suggesting that even a long life in the community did not accustom one to breaking ties easily. 114 In over 35 years in the order, Sister Martha Joseph witnessed many such scenes. The "Annals" also contains many references to the confusion and disruption caused by the unexpected arrival of "thin

112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
letters." It is not clear whether decisions were made and announced in this way in a deliberate effort to restrain individuals from forming attachments. It certainly seems that the acceptance of the religious rule implied adoption of a self-concept that required a sister to repress some of her individual instincts.

The nature of the "Annals" is further evidence of the acceptance of the ideal of religious anonymity. To maintain this journal was an important responsibility, and one that its authors took seriously. Yet none of them could take credit for her work. Inevitably, the journal must reflect personal interests. Yet it seems that a conscious effort was made to keep the individual out of the pages of the "Annals." Sisters were referred to in groups, and always by their formal (religious) names. No mention was made of individual friendships, or of the kind of personal antagonisms that might be expected to emerge in communal life. The pronoun "I" appeared only once, and appears to have been used inadvertently in that case. In most cases, the life described by the "Annals" was exactly that which the public might expect. The nuns were portrayed as uniformly cheerful, hard working, and selfless. Individual talents were only recognized insofar as they contributed to the common enterprise. Even the title of the journal minimized the personal role played by each woman. The journal's official title is "St. Vincent's Annals," not "Annals of the Sisters of St. Vincent's." Its title identifies it as the story of a mission,

115 The "Annals" entry for 1929, which described the death of Sister Loretta Cecilia, includes many details about the measures taken by Sr. Mary Bathildes, the local Superior, to get treatment for the sister. At one point, the author wrote, "I called the doctor." It would appear, therefore, that Sr. Mary Bathildes was the author, although she refers to herself in the third person in all but this single sentence.
rather than the account of the lives of the missionaries. Even the historical document left by the groups preserves the carefully nurtured illusion of the anonymity of the group's members.

Nuns were expected, then, to be passive and childlike, and to be lacking in or unwilling to express individualism. The self-concept of the sisters matched the public stereotype quite closely in these respects. The same was true of another fundamental element of the popular stereotype of the nun: the perceived relationship between the nun and the secular world. Both Catholics and non-Catholics regarded the nun's aloofness from the outside world as a critical part of her identity as a woman religious. As the title of the film "Cloistered" suggests, nuns were believed to be physically, intellectually, and emotionally isolated from the public and from worldly concerns. The physical separation of these women was symbolized by their distinctive costumes. Even the architecture of convents often contributed to this impression. In Willa Cather's Shadows on the Rock, the fortress-like facade and prominent location of the convent above the city give it an aura of mystery. To some, like the nativists of the Maria Monk tradition, the physical details of the convent suggested nothing so much as a prison. To the sentimental "women writers" criticized by Gavigan, the aura of mystery that surrounded the convent was a particularly appealing dramatic device, casting "a halo of romanticism about women who have chosen the cloister instead of the world." For a variety


117 Gavigan, p. 186.
of reasons, the nun's separation from the rest of the world became an especially significant aspect of her image in the public mind. These women were believed to be, and expected to be, shielded from reality to an extent never demanded of their male counterparts. The priest's primary function was to minister to the people; the nun's interaction with the public, in school or hospital, was a "necessary evil."

It would appear from the "Annals," and from the lives of the sisters in the 1920s and 1930s, that they shared this perception. Their rules reinforced the barrier between the sacred and the secular. Some orders, of course, practiced a more severe type of physical seclusion. Sister Martha Joseph remembers travelling with some sisters who were not even willing to enter a private home without permission. Yet even the SCN members, although compelled by their mission to interact with the people of Newport News, voluntarily limited that interaction. In their daily lives, they routinely remained within the school and convent. They never left the convent, to travel or even to attend a meeting, without at least one other sister. On Sunday, when they attended Mass with the members of the parish, they sat apart from the parishioners; they were forbidden to "mix with" the parishioners on the steps of the church after Mass. Visitors to the convent were scarce. The female relatives of the sisters occasionally came to visit, but men were not permitted to enter the convent. The exception to this last rule was the parish priest. News from the outside world was also restricted. Most of the

118 Lenahan, interview.

119 Ibid.
sisters were forbidden to read newspapers and magazines, or to listen to the radio. One member of each local community, usually the Superior, read the newspaper and informed the sisters of important events. Sister Martha Joseph notes that the sisters were generally unaware of the major political events of the 1920s and 1930s. They were allowed to vote, but few did so. Even personal news was difficult to acquire. Letters to and from family members were permitted, but relatives were often less than candid in what they wrote. Sister Martha Joseph recalls that she was shocked to learn, years later, that her own family had suffered a great deal during the Depression. They had never told her, for example, that her mother had been forced to take a job to support the family; they usually omitted details of sickness or trouble in the family. She also recalls one incident in which a fellow sister learned of the death of her own father. She was disturbed and angry, because she believed that her Superior had deliberately refused to tell her that her father was ill and calling for her. Sister Martha Joseph concedes that this sort of thing never happened to her, but she believes that it did happen to some of the sisters. In general, she does not express any resentment at such attempts to shelter the sisters. She, like the authors of the "Annals," accepted the fact that a nun is by her nature divorced from the outside world. Like the general public, the sisters acknowledged the need for physical, mental and spiritual isolation. A nun, in the 1920s and 1930s, could not both be a nun and be "in the world." The aura of mystery that clung to the

120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
image of the convent was evidently appealing both to those inside and outside its walls.

In several important ways, then, the sisters adopted a self-concept that coincided with the idealistic popular stereotype of the nun. They, like the public, believed that the nun's subordination of free will, her repression of individual instincts, and her rigid protection from the temptations of the outside world were entirely appropriate. By conforming to this stereotype, individual nuns perhaps achieved a sense of identity and security; but, more importantly, such conformity also served the needs of the groups. By refusing to contradict a popular perception of the nun's "natural" personality and function, the sisters allowed the public to view them in a way which was perhaps particularly appealing in the 1920s and 1930s.

Thus, it was the positive, even sentimental, aspects of the White Sister stereotype that clung to the image of the nun. In an era in which people were concerned with the potential breakdown of family relationships and gender roles, nuns operated well within the traditional "women's" sphere. They were associated with chastity and purity, and hence promised the survival of traditional values that seemed to be threatened in the "roaring twenties." Because their work was confined to the traditionally female professions of teaching and nursing, they represented no threat to the male economic establishment. Their commitment to a life of selflessness, obedience and poverty might symbolize moral stability to a generation condemned for its materialism, hedonism and sexual promiscuity. It was to the majority of Americans, the ones who hoped to retain traditional family values, that the figure of the nun might be a comforting symbol of moral continuity.
This idealistic stereotype of the nun was an expression of what the majority wanted and needed to see, in the same way that the equally unrealistic negative stereotype of the evil nun reflected the needs of nativists of the 1830s. Gavigan noted this, remarking that the stereotype of the nun drew its popularity from the fact that "there is something appealing in the ideal of chastity and renunciation, especially when it is objectified in a woman." The sisters of Newport News did little to challenge this view, and thus won for themselves a measure of trust and acceptance. The Protestant majority welcomed them and allowed them the freedom to operate within the circumscribed role defined by the stereotype.

Although they appeared content to function within such limits, the "Annals" and other sources indicate that these women actually manipulated the stereotype. Consciously or unconsciously, they learned to work within that rigidly defined role to achieve both communal and personal goals. Sister Martha Joseph admits this, when she acknowledges that nuns benefitted from the special, deferential treatment they received from the public. "They put us on a pedestal," she says, "... I think it helps [nuns to achieve their goals]." From a communal point of view, the primary goal of the SCN community in Newport News was the establishment of an economically and educationally viable school. In order to achieve that goal, they outwardly preserved the popular image of the nun; but their behavior often directly contra-
dicted that ideal.

They were not, for example, mere passive "feminine" pawns in the system. When necessary, they behaved aggressively, as is indicated by the open competition for students in 1923. That kind of energetic competition for pupils continued. The "Annals" entry for September, 1945, indicated this:

...we have had a regular campaign to get Catholic students out of the public schools by visiting homes, etc. Each year we have been successful in getting about twenty four.

Although the journal entries often attributed fund raising to the school children and their organizations, certainly the nuns' guiding hand can be seen. In 1921, the "Annals" entry includes a lengthy description of the attempts of the children to raise money for the missions during Lent. When their plan to sell food at lunchtime yielded impressive results, (especially considering the "severity of the times"), "the children begged to be allowed to continue the sales... to obtain enough money for improvements so badly needed in the Sisters' Chapel." 125 Although the account allows the sisters no credit for this plan, it is difficult to believe that they were not instrumental in its conception and implementation. What is clear is that the author believed that the sisters should not appear to have asked for money directly. Yet the fact is that these women were operating a successful business, and were asking for, receiving and managing money at a time when few American women were permitted to do so.

125 "Annals," 1921.
The "Annals" suggest further that the notion of the "rank and file" sisters' submission to the leadership of their male (priestly) and female (religious) superiors may also be a myth. Despite the ceremonial role played by the pastor, the school was run by the women. They took primary responsibility for encouraging enrollment, designing curriculum, and maintaining community relations. This last was a particular concern, considering the financial need to maintain a stable enrollment. Sister Martha Joseph remembers a superior's concern over the assignment of Uncle Tom's Cabin to a group of students in an Arkansas school in the 1930s. Although the book was retained on the reading list, measures were taken to neutralize parental outcries. Such matters were handled locally, by the teacher and principal, both of whom were nuns. Each school or mission was essentially autonomous and financially self-supporting.\(^{126}\) Although there is no denying that the authority of the Mother House was supreme in the order, the national SCN community was organized democratically. The "Annals" contains conscientious records of the elections to the "General Chapter," a quasi-legislative group that advised on policy matters.\(^{127}\) The Mother General herself was also elected. Sister Martha Joseph admits that "politics" often influenced mission assignments. Although the sisters may have been relatively unconcerned with power and politics in the "real world," most participated actively in the order's internal political processes. They took the opportunities provided by the Mother

\(^{126}\) Lenahan, interview.

\(^{127}\) Ibid.
General's periodic "visitations" to make special requests for themselves or for their mission.\textsuperscript{128} Far from being subservient fatalists, these women exploited every opportunity, within the order and within the community at large, to advance their communal goals. The impressive and steady growth of the school indicates that they were successful in doing so.

On another level, the sisters were able to utilize the popular stereotype of the nun to permit personal fulfillment. The tone of the entries in the "Annals," and the emotional content of the recollections of Sister Martha Joseph, indicate that these women experienced a high degree of personal fulfillment. This was possible not despite the stereotype but because of it. The special place of nuns allowed them a freedom of action within their own restricted sphere. The sisters who taught, for example, had a degree of classroom autonomy not shared by their counterparts in the public system. According to Sister Martha Joseph, few restrictions were made on how she and others taught. She recalls being criticized in the 1930s for "innovating," and she remembers the discussion about using \textit{Uncle Tom's Cabin}. Yet in both cases, she was allowed to proceed as she wished.\textsuperscript{129} Nuns, unlike public school teachers, could not be threatened with revocation of a contract. Sister Martha Joseph notes that sisters were often transferred because of poor relations with the local community or local administrators;

\textsuperscript{128}SCN practice required a "visititation" by the Mother General to each mission at least once in each 6-year term. A typical description of such a visitation is the account of Mother Mary Catherine's visit ("Annals," 1929). Sr. Martha Joseph confirms that each sister customarily met with "Mother" at such times; during the interviews, personal and local concerns were discussed.

\textsuperscript{129}Lenahan, interview.
but the teaching career of such women continued elsewhere. Thus, nuns enjoyed a sense of long-term career accomplishment not available to most women. In contrast, as late as the 1930s, public school teachers were often required to resign if they chose to marry, or if they violated the community's social conventions. Even if their performance were acceptable, such women were still at the mercy of local school boards, and tied to the cycles of the local economy. This was not true of the sisters. The sisters in Newport News often had to teach under difficult circumstances, but the fact that their services as teachers were always required and always valued must have contributed to a sense of self worth.

Personal fulfillment of a different type was also possible within the religious life. Despite the prohibition of "particular friendships," women living together in a religious community formed deep and lasting friendships with one another. Even when close friends were separated by their mission assignments, they would often meet again; they could certainly always hope to do so. Within the community, recognition was given to special talents and contributions. The "Annals" entries often include references to a sister's special effort or ability. Life within the community was not always tranquil. Personal antagonisms, like personal attachments, did emerge. Nor were

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130 Ibid.

131 An example of such a reference is found in the "Annals" entry for 1930. That entry includes a description of a particular sister's embroidered scarves, which were sold to raise money for the school: "Sister received much praise for the exquisite workmanship of the gifts. All who saw them were greatly pleased."
the sisters expected to conform, within the community, to the ideal of imperturbability and cooperation. One Mother General used a particularly effective image to describe the relationships of sisters within a convent:

We are like stones in a jar. To a person looking at the jar, all the stones look alike. Yet every time the jar is lifted or turned, each of the stones rubs against the others.\textsuperscript{132}

It was the friction, caused by the contact between unlike individuals, that enlivened the community’s life. In speaking of the occasional "troublemaker" who might disrupt the peace of the community, the same Mother General used to say, "If your house doesn't have a crank, go out and buy one."\textsuperscript{133} Total repression of individualism, then was neither anticipated nor desired.

In her "parable of the stones," the Mother General likened the religious community to a family, in which the members constantly "rub up against one another." In a very real sense, the religious life style did provide the sisters with a sense of family. It is interesting that the authors of the "Annals" began to use the word "family" to refer to the group in the 1920s; before that, it was referred to as a "colony."\textsuperscript{134} In practical terms, the convent provided each sister with personal security and a permanent home. In circumstances of unusual mobility (1920s) and economic depression (1930s), many natural families were no longer able to do this for their members. Further-

\textsuperscript{132}Lenahan, interview.

\textsuperscript{133}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{134}"Annals", 1929.
more, the life cycle of a member of the order held her in an extended family. In the course of each school year, she had contact with the very young (interestingly, the youngest schoolchildren were always referred to as simply "the babies"), with adolescents, and with her own contemporaries. In the summer months, she returned to the Mother House, where most sisters worked to support and care for the elderly members of the order. The terms "mother", "sister", "father", "baby", and "child", all used frequently within the "Annals," were more than simply role labels. They expressed the familial nature of the relationships established in religious life. They also reflected the degree to which the sisters were able to work within the special restrictions of celibate community life to meet their own emotional needs.

Their ability to do so required them, consciously or unconsciously, to manipulate an image of the ideal nun. In part, they accepted the image of the nun which was popularly marketed and accepted. Personally and communally, they worked within that role to take advantage of the freedom it offered. Like members of other minority groups, these women had to deal with a majority population whose perception of them was essentially unrealistic and unrealizable. By choosing to conform outwardly, they retained the freedom to contradict the image in less visible ways. The critical factor seems to have been the element of choice. Each of these women was aware of her own choice to enter religious life. Some, like Sister Martha Joseph, believed that their choice was made early, and with absolute certainty. She remembers
deciding in the fourth grade that she would enter religious life. Others, like the young novice who wrote "Nun's Diary," were tormented by doubt, questioning their ability to uphold the ideal of religious life. Yet once the decision was made, the stereotype was no longer a restriction imposed upon the woman by society, but an identity assumed voluntarily by her.

The adjustment of such women to the role, and the satisfaction they derived from it, is nowhere more clearly visible than in the beautiful death sequences included in the "Annals." The most striking of these described the death of Sister Loretta Cecilia, in 1929, apparently of leukemia. Her rapid decline and passing were described by a fellow sister who was profoundly impressed by her courageous and peaceful death. Again and again, the reader's attention is focussed on Sister's self control and independence at the end. She hesitated, at first, to seek medical attention at all; but when it became clear that she was terminally ill, she asserted control over her own death process. She refused all "dope," because "she wanted to have her senses when she was dying." She acknowledged her own imminent death by calling for an "extraordinary confessor," and by arranging for a fellow sister to attend to some "little obligations." Her final act was to pronounce, faultlessly, the words of her original vows; within moments of doing so, "she had gone home." At her death, Sister

135 Lenahan, interview.
136 Sr. Mary Francis, p. 601-610.
Loretta Cecilia demonstrated both the pious resignation of the "good sister" and a proud sense of free will and independence. The account of her death remains in the "Annals" as a reminder that her sisters valued both contradictory impulses.

Sister Loretta Cecilia's case was an individual one; it is perhaps dangerous to generalize about the whole religious community on the basis of such a single, extraordinary account. Yet her behavior, and the way it was interpreted and recorded by her sister, does reflect something of the spirit of the community in which she lived. Sometimes, the study of a particular case does enlighten us about a general condition. The "Annals" tells the story of a tiny group of women who entered a small Southern city and managed to build a single institution there. Many factors interacted to allow that group to achieve significant success. One of these factors was the personal and communal choice to adopt a self-concept that met the needs of both themselves and of the larger society. Their outward conformity to public expectations allowed the majority to feel comfortable with the group's circumscribed function and limited objectives. Their internal adjustment to the role permitted the community's members to achieve a remarkable degree of emotional fulfillment and personal satisfaction.

Thus, the religious minority could achieve its seemingly contradictory goals. The sisters were able to become integrated into the society, and to make a contribution to the local educational system. At the same time, they retained an autonomy that was far greater than that granted to most American women and many minority groups. Most importantly, they maintained a sense of personal and group identity. That
special sense of self helped to enrich their own lives as well as those of the larger society with which they interacted. In this respect, the story told by "St. Vincent's Annals" is an example of the most fruitful kind of cultural interaction that can occur in a pluralistic society.
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