

New Catholic Religious Orders in the United States

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Sociologists and historians have long held that the periodic appearance of new sectarian groups within Protestantism regenerates flagging religious fervor and initiates creative religious responses to societal change.¹ But this pattern of sectarian development has been less applicable to the Catholic Church. Instead, the sectarian role in Catholicism appears to have been filled by the foundation of new religious orders, which provided an outlet for religious virtuosity, led new religious evangelization movements, and initiated creative adaptations to new societal circumstances.² Like the sects in Protestantism, religious orders have experienced recursive cycles of foundation, growth, stabilization and decline, responding to social, economic and political changes in the surrounding society.³

To what extent can this same pattern be observed in U. S. Catholicism today, and what characteristics do the new religious orders⁴ exhibit? Several directories of new religious orders and lay ecclesial movements have been compiled by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA).⁵ The most recent (2017) one counts 159 religious orders, charismatic covenant communities, and lay prayer associations founded within the past fifty years in the United States. At least 120 of these are, or aspire to be, canonically recognized as religious orders or societies in the Catholic Church. They vary widely: some accept both male and female members while others are single-sex; some contain families as well as vowed celibate members. Some are offshoots of older communities; some were established *de novo*. A few accept members from other Christian denominations. They also vary in the degree to which their members live a communal life, and in the spiritual tradition (e.g. Franciscan, Benedictine) they follow, if any.

It must be said, however, that the initial period of any newly-established religious order is precarious. A large percentage – as many as two-thirds by some estimates – disband after only a few years. Of the religious orders listed in the second (2006) edition of the CARA directory, 41 had either ceased to exist entirely, or had dwindled to only one or two members by 2017. Of the still-existing communities with membership figures for both 2006 and 2017, 33 had decreased in membership, 8 had remained the same size, and 43 had grown at least somewhat larger. But only five of the religious orders extant in 2006 have more than 60 members today, and only four of these have achieved membership growth of more than 100% since 2006.

Characteristics of the Rapidly-Growing Religious Orders

The 2017 CARA directory listed some salient characteristics of those new orders which had increased their membership by at least 50% between 2006 and 2017. The rapidly-growing orders were significantly more likely to wear a religious habit, to require communal living of all their members, to engage in evangelization practices, to work with young people, and to profess fidelity to the Pope and his teachings. Among their spiritual foci or prayer practices, they were more likely to emphasize Eucharistic Adoration, prayer for priests, charismatic prayer styles, and popular devotions such as praying the rosary.

It may be noted that the largest and most rapidly-growing of the new religious orders strongly resemble the lifestyle of the orders that existed prior to 1965 and the end of the Second Vatican Council. In contrast to the earlier founding periods, most of the orders which have attempted to develop more creative adaptations to new societal circumstances have not grown much, if at all. The Catholic Church has not yet found a new articulation of religious virtuosity which is sufficiently appealing to counteract the increasing loss of its members in North America and Western Europe.

A Sampler of New Catholic Religious Orders

Below are brief descriptions of the four largest Catholic religious orders which have been newly founded in the United States, and which have at least doubled their membership since 2006. All also have at least 20 new members in training.⁶ After these descriptions, there will be a summary of the similarities and differences between the groups and what they may mean.

The Franciscan Friars of the Renewal:

Founded 1987. Males only. 105 full members, 23 in Formation. 91% growth since 2006.

The Franciscan Friars of the Renewal are an offshoot of an established order, the Capuchin Franciscan Friars, whose perceived secularization they had objected to. As one of the founding members put it, “We were concerned about the effects of secularism on religious life and a lack of clear and explicit fidelity to the Church. Our desire was to stay in the Capuchin community, but to be a renewal community. We wanted to bring back adoration and traditional devotions and practices, such as wearing the habit.”⁷

In 1987, therefore, 8 friars, under the leadership of Fathers Benedict Groeschel and Andrew Apostoli, left the Capuchins to form a new order with the support of Cardinal John O’Connor of New York, who gave them a little-used parish church, rectory, and convent in the South Bronx. From this beginning, their community has spread to fourteen locations in the United States and four foreign countries. While most of the Friars are Americans, some are Irish and some are French. The superior general resides in the United States. In 2016, the group was given official Papal recognition as a religious institute of pontifical right.

The friars wear a gray Franciscan habit and sandals. They do not shave. They live communally in some 14 friaries: eight in the United States (largely in New York and New

Jersey), three in the United Kingdom, two in Central America, and one in Ireland. Their prayer consists of daily Mass, an hour of Eucharistic Adoration, and another hour of morning meditation, plus communal recitation of the Divine Office and the rosary. The physical aspects of the friaries are kept deliberately simple, with no air conditioning, carpeting, or paneling.

The primary ministries of the friars is evangelization. They provide missionary centers for the poor, parish missions, young adult retreats, college missions, days of recollection, Right-to-Life events, pilgrimages, and Youth 2000 retreats. They also live in poor neighborhoods and engage in “street evangelization.” According to their website, “One of our apostolic missions is to serve the materially poor, most especially the destitute and homeless. By living in poor neighborhoods, running homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and youth programs, friars strive to fulfill the command of the gospel and our Holy Father St. Francis to live among the poor, providing for their physical and spiritual needs.”⁸ They also have an active media presence; one of the founding group, Fr. Benedict Groeschel, presented a weekly catechetical program for 25 years on the conservative Catholic television station, Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), founded by Mother Angelica. They have also produced several recordings of traditional and modern religious music and various podcasts.

There have been few controversies involving the group. Neighbors to the Albuquerque friary protested the soup kitchen the friars, saying that the 250 homeless who came left too much trash and that some even camped in the area overnight.⁹ The friars met with them to address these problems. Father Groeschel received some negative press in 2002 due to his accusation that the mainstream media had been biased in its reporting of clergy sexual abuse cases and, later, a 2012 interview in which he seemed to blame minor children for “seducing” priests. He later apologized.¹⁰ According to an official report of the National Board for Safeguarding

Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland there have been no allegations of child abuse among the friars there; in the United States one friar admitted to abusing minors and was arrested in 2008. The community expressed its “outrage” at the friar’s crime.¹¹

The friars have 23 men in formation. In 2017, six were ordained as priests, while another four became deacons.

The Sisters of Life

Founded 1991. Women only. 91 full members, 49 in formation. 355% growth since 2006.

The Sisters of Life were founded by Cardinal John O’Connor of New York in 1991. According to the order’s official history, the Cardinal had written in his weekly newspaper column an article entitled, “Help Wanted: Sisters of Life.” Receiving “hundreds” of responses, he began the work of founding the community, and eight women entered it on June 1, 1991. The Cardinal then recruited sisters from established religious orders to train the women. By 1999, the community had 40 sisters in formation, but no full members as yet. In the 2006 edition of the CARA directory, the order had 20 full members and 33 sisters in formation. In 2004, the Sisters of Life were given official Papal recognition as a religious institute of diocesan right. In contrast to the Friars of the Renewal, “diocesan right” means that the local bishop, not the Vatican, is responsible for supervising the community.

The sisters’ habit consists of a full-length white dress with a navy blue scapular and cape over it. They wear a long white veil. They live communally in four convents in the New York area and two in Toronto, Ontario, as well as individual convents in Connecticut, Philadelphia, Colorado, Maryland, and Washington DC. They do not watch television. According to their website, they “are often spotted *en masse* on the walking and bike paths near [their] convents or

engaged in other types of exercise.” Their prayers are also in common: daily Mass and a communal “holy hour” of Eucharistic Adoration that also includes recitation of the Rosary, 45 minutes of meditation and Vespers. Since they were officially established as a “contemplative-active” community, four hours a day are spent in common prayer.

As their name implies, the Sisters of Life primarily minister in various pro-Life and anti-abortion activities: among these are Holy Respite, which provides a place for pregnant women to live with the sisters, and Villa Maria Guadalupe, which offers retreats, educational opportunities, seminars and weekend programs, as well as special healing retreats for those who have had abortions. The sisters also operate the Family Life Office of the Archdiocese of New York, give presentations on pro-Life issues around the country, and accompany pregnant women who are in difficulty and need assistance. Since they take a special fourth vow to “protect and enhance the sacredness of human life,” they also work to protect the vulnerable from euthanasia.

The Sisters of Life have less media presence than the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, although they have made at least one record of religious music and several of their members have been interviewed on EWTN. There are many articles in local newspapers, however, which mention their participation in various pro-Life rallies and conferences. These articles are uniformly positive.

The 2017 CARA directory states that the Sisters of Life have 49 women in their formation program. In 2017, eight postulants entered the order, twelve novices received the religious habit, and ten made their first religious vows.

The Religious Sisters of Mercy of Alma, Michigan

Founded 1973. Women only. 83 full members, 30 in formation. 93% growth since 2006

The Religious Sisters of Mercy are an offshoot of the Sisters of Mercy, begun by ten sisters who separated from their original order in 1973 under the influence of a Jesuit priest, the Rev. Francis J. Prokes. In the years following the Second Vatican Council, Father Prokes persuaded sisters from several established religious orders of women to begin new, reformed communities under his spiritual direction. Complaints soon surfaced about the “cult-like” influence Fr. Prokes exerted over the women in these communities: coercive manipulation and control of the members, improper attempts to extort money from lay persons, turning people against their families if they opposed the sisters' requests, and a mystical emphasis on female sexuality. Since the order had already received Papal recognition as a religious institute of pontifical right, the local bishops did not always have the authority to investigate these claims. As a result, Vatican's Ambassador to the United States commissioned the Bishop of Saginaw in 1987 to investigate the accuracy of the allegations, after which Fr. Prokes was removed from having any contact with the sisters.¹² Currently, the Religious Sisters of Mercy are a recognized religious order of Pontifical Right, and are active in the leadership of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR), the more conservative of the two officially recognized umbrella organizations of American sisters.

The sisters wear a blue, floor-length habit with a short veil. They live communally in several convents located in nine U.S. dioceses, as well as in Germany, Scotland, Australia, and Rome. Their prayer is also in common, and consists of daily Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, a morning period of meditation and an evening Holy Hour which includes Evening Prayer and the recitation of the Rosary.

Unlike either the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal or the Sisters of Life, the Religious Sisters of Mercy primarily serve in corporate apostolates, operating Mercy Health Care Clinics in Alma, Michigan; Jackson, Minnesota; and Breuberg, Germany. The community strongly emphasizes the educational credentials of its members, and many have professional degrees. Some of the Sisters teach in seminaries as professors or work in hospitals as nurses and physicians. Several have published scholarly books, usually on theology, psychology, and philosophy. They also have several members who are lawyers, and have been active in filing *amicus curiae* briefs in court cases involving the right of religious-sponsored institutions not to offer contraceptive coverage in their health care insurance plans. Their sisters who serve at the Pontifical North American College in Rome, however, do not do so in a professional capacity – they staff the visitors’ center there.

In addition to their controversial beginning, there have been other controversies around the Religious Sisters of Mercy. They received a certain amount of bad publicity when they offered a place of refuge to Cardinal Law of Boston after his resignation as archbishop in 2003 amid criticism for his failure to remove abusive priests from ministry.¹³ They also aroused a certain amount of ire among other religious communities of sisters in the United States by supporting the Vatican in its recent investigation of American nuns.¹⁴

Unlike the other orders profiled here, the Religious Sisters of Mercy are not involved in media attempts at evangelization such as podcasts or recordings of sacred music. Their official website is relatively bland, when compared to the others’ sites, and they also have had less presence on EWTN. Their listing in the CARA directory states that they have 83 full members and 30 postulants, novices, and temporarily professed members.

Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist

Founded 1997. Women only. 66 Full members, 66 in formation. 633% growth since 2006¹⁵

The Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist are an offshoot of an established order, the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia of Nashville, TN. A former head of the Nashville community, Mother Assumpta Long, had been one of the sisters whom Cardinal O'Connor had invited in 1991 to mentor the newly-founded Sisters of Life. Possibly inspired by the experience of being involved with the foundation of a new religious order, Mother Assumpta and three other sisters from the Nashville community, with the support of Cardinal O'Connor, began the initial stage of a new religious order¹⁶ in February 1997. Three months later, they were invited by the bishop of Lansing, Michigan, to teach in his diocese, and began to staff Spiritus Sanctus Academy, a private Catholic K-8 academy sponsored by the Mater Christi Foundation. Today, the sisters teach in numerous parish grade schools and private high schools in Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, Missouri, Texas, Arizona, and California as well as at Ave Maria University in Florida. They are also active in pro-Life Marches and in the Catholic Home Schooling Movement. They have convents for their sisters who are studying for academic degrees, both in Rome and close to Catholic University in Washington, DC.¹⁷

Since their founding, the sisters have had strong connections with various conservative groups and individuals within Catholicism, who have supported them in various ways. Tom Monaghan, the billionaire founder of Domino's Pizza, has contributed to the construction of their Motherhouse and several of their convents. He also sponsored and funded Spiritus Academy and Ave Maria University, where the sisters have taught. Others of the sisters teach at the special seminary of the Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter, the diocesan equivalent established by the Vatican for Anglican priests who want to become Catholic.¹⁸ Many of the

parish schools which the sisters staff are also connected with the Ordinariate, and one of the community's sisters is manager of development and support services for the Ordinariate's Chancery.¹⁹

The sisters have been very active in evangelization through various media. They were profiled twice on Oprah Winfrey's television program, and have hosted a catechetical series on EWTN. They have produced three albums of sacred and classical music, the third of which topped Billboard's classical chart in 2017.²⁰

In 2017, the sisters welcomed twelve postulants intending to enter the community.²¹ This was slightly fewer than the sixteen young women who had come the year before. Between 2007 and 2012, an average of twenty postulants entered each year. The 2017 CARA directory states that there are currently 66 postulants, novices, and temporarily professed, "junior" sisters in the community, a number equal to the number of finally-professed full members. Many of those entering come from the sisters' own schools, or from a few conservative Catholic colleges. Unlike most other orders, the order accepts women immediately after they graduate from high school at the age of 18 or 19, although many postulants have had at least a few years of college as well.

Conclusions

The orders profiled here, which are the most successful of the new religious orders, display several similarities:

- They are all modeled on the traditional format of Catholic religious orders, with communal lifestyles, a common religious habit, and traditional prayer forms.
- All four are in some way active in the Right-to-Life Movement.

- Three of the four actively engage in evangelization ministries, both in person through youth rallies, retreats, etc. and also through the media.
- Three of the four are offshoots of longstanding religious orders, the result of a small group of members wanting to live a more “authentic” religious life in contrast to their original order’s perceived laxity.
- Three of the four were supported from the start by one or more bishops.

The Religious Sisters of Mercy are in many ways outliers: they are less involved in evangelization, not originally supported by any bishop, and have less of a media presence. They are also more involved in running institutional ministries than the other three.

In contrast to these relatively successful, albeit traditional, religious orders, the new foundations that do not follow the traditional model have been less successful. Of all the groups listed in the 2017 CARA Directory which increased more than 50% in membership since 2006, four are the orders already profiled. Another twelve are traditional-model orders which had fewer members and somewhat less rapid growth; another two are charismatic prayer groups. Only two communities are in any way innovative in their lifestyle or membership characteristics:

- The Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus: Founded 2002. Women only. 51 full members, 4 in Formation, 292% growth since 2006. The Missionaries have both vowed, celibate members who live in community and “promised” members who do not. They especially invite older and widowed women to membership. They do not wear a religious habit. They practice a contemplative spirituality in the Byzantine tradition, and minister to widows and orphans, not only in the U.S. but also in Haiti and several African countries.

- The Institute of St. Joseph. Founded 1987. Men and women. 44 full members, 0 in formation, 83% growth since 2006. Promotes the universal call to holiness in all states of life. Members include priests, monastic men and women, single, and married laypeople.

It is instructive to compare the communities profiled here with the previous foundation period of religious orders in the United States. First of all, the growth rates of the groups in the 2017 CARA directory are far less than the growth rates that occurred in the previous founding period. The table below gives the growth rates, where they can be determined, of some of the religious institutes of women founded in the nineteenth century United States. None of the current new religious orders in the CARA directory come close to matching the rates of growth routinely experienced by the religious institutes that were emerging in the United States in the nineteenth century. And there are far fewer new and rapidly-growing communities now than existed then.

A second difference is that most of the new groups are replicating previous models of Roman Catholic religious life. As has been pointed out,²² the most rapidly-growing new orders in previous periods changed religious models in some way to adapt to a changed society. The comparative failure of today's new communities to do so means that they will appeal to only a narrow slice of this country's Catholic population today. Instead, a large percentage of Americans who were raised Catholic leave the Church as adults, either to join another denomination or to become religious "nones." This is a far greater number than those who join the new orders or lay ecclesial movements developing in the United States today.²³ Throughout its history, new foundations of religious orders performed a valuable service for Catholicism. Their value is perhaps underappreciated today, to the detriment of the Church's ability to attract new members, or even to retain the ones it has.

Nineteenth-Century U.S. Religious Congregations of Women:

Percentage Growth within Ten Years of Founding*

Religious Initials and Location of Founding Community	Founded	Size of Community		Growth in 10 Years
		Initial	After 10 Years	% Change
SC, Emmitsburg, MD	1809	8	94	+1,075
SL, Kentucky	1812	5	84	+1,580
SCN, Nazareth, KY	1822	24	74	+208
OLM, Charleston, SC	1830	3	14	+366
OSP, Baltimore, MD	1830	5	17	+240
BVM, Iowa	1833	5	19	+280
CSJ, Carondelet, MO	1836	4	25	+525
SP, Terre Haute, IN	1840	6	88	+1,366
SC, New York	1850	72	202	+180
CSC, Notre Dame, IN	1850	34	120	+252
CSA, Cleveland, OH	1851	4	22	+450
RSM, Hartford, CT	1851	4	10	+200
SC, Cincinnati, OH	1852	8	75	+838
OP, Racine, WI	1862	3	17	+467
SSJ, Watertown, NY	1880	4	8	+100

* Several communities (e.g., the Visitation sisters, the Carmelites, the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the Ursulines) are not included here because they routinely split into autonomous houses or monasteries when they passed a certain size. Male communities are also not included, as they were usually branches or provinces of European orders.

Source: Data from statistics compiled by Sister Catherine Ann Curry, PBVM, for Stewart (1994).

Notes

¹ Ernest Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, volumes 1 and 2 (1911/1950, Macmillan), Richard H. Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, (1929, Holt), Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (1993, University of California Press), Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (2000, University of California Press).

² Roger Finke and Patricia Wittberg, "Organizational Revival from Within: Explaining Revivalism and Reform in the Roman Catholic Church." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol.39, no.2 (2000), pp. 154-170.

³ Raymond Hostie, *La Vie et Mort des Ordres Religieux* (1972, Paris: Desclee de Brouwer), Lawrence Cada, et al, *Shaping the Coming Age of Religious Life* (1979, Seabury Press).

⁴ There are several official term for these groups in Canon Law: orders, congregations, and societies of apostolic life. There are also hermits and consecrated virgins who are not necessarily members of any organized group. For the sake of simplicity, however, this paper will use the term "orders" to refer to all of them.

⁵ Patricia Wittberg and Mary Gautier, eds. *Emerging U.S. Communities of Consecrated Life since Vatican II* (2017, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University). See also Mary E. Bendyna, ed. *Emerging Communities of Consecrated Life in the United States* (2006, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University) and *Emerging Religious Communities in the United States* (1999, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University).

⁶ The official term for these postulants, novices, and temporarily vowed members is that they are "in formation."

⁷ <https://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=21813> Downloaded June 6, 2018.

⁸ <http://franciscanfriars.com/cfr-mission/work-with-the-poor/> Downloaded June 13, 2018.

⁹ http://www.krqe.com/news/albuquerque-neighborhood-calls-on-franciscan-friars-to-be-better-neighbors_20180104024556115/900198358, Downloaded June 6 2018.

¹⁰ http://www.krqe.com/news/albuquerque-neighborhood-calls-on-franciscan-friars-to-be-better-neighbors_20180104024556115/900198358 Downloaded June 6, 2018

¹¹ <http://westchester.news12.com/story/34911842/yonkers-franciscan-friar-admits-to-abusing-4-boys> Downloaded June 8, 2018

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/12/us/church-scrutinizes-3-groups-of-nuns.html>, Downloaded June 6 2018

¹³ http://archive.boston.com/globe/spotlight/abuse/stories4/020803_law.htm, http://www.bishop-accountability.org/news2003_01_06/2003_02_17_Halloran_EmbattledCardinal.htm, Downloaded June 6, 2018

¹⁴ http://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/faith-and-values/nuns-group-to-meet-in-st-louis-amid-criticism-from/article_bbbc7473-aa10-5ce7-8995-316c33bf6846.html, Downloaded June 6, 2018

<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/sisters-of-mercy-doctors-say-lcwr-defenders-use-political-approach-to-faith> Downloaded June 13, 2018.

¹⁵ There were only 9 full members (although there were 55 more in the Formation stages) in 2006 as compared to 66 in 2017.

¹⁶ The official name of this stage is "Public Association of Christ's Faithful."

¹⁷ <https://www.sistersofmary.org/apostolate/missions/> Downloaded June 13, 2018

¹⁸ Usually because the Anglican/Episcopalian Church has become too liberal liturgically and theologically, ordaining women, etc. See D. Paul Sullins, *Keeping the Vow: The Untold Story of Married Catholic Priests* (2016, Oxford University Press).

¹⁹ <https://ordinariate.net/staff> Downloaded June 13, 2018.

²⁰ <https://www.circa.com/story/2017/12/04/nation/the-dominican-sisters-of-mary-mother-of-the-eucharist-top-billboards-classical-music-chart> Downloaded June 13, 2018.

²¹ <https://www.sistersofmary.org/vocations/meet-the-sisters/meet-new-postulants/> Downloaded June 13, 2018

²² Roger Finke and Patricia Wittberg, "Organizational Revival from Within: Explaining Revivalism and Reform in the Roman Catholic Church." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol.39, no.2 (2000), pp. 154-170.

²³ One might, of course, make the same argument about Protestantism: that there are fewer sects developing today than arose (e.g.) in the Burned-Over District in the 19th century.