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### A change in habit: Benedictine sisters, Vatican II and the pursuit of a meaningful renewal

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A CHANGE IN HABIT:  
BENEDICTINE SISTERS, VATICAN II AND  
THE PURSUIT OF A MEANINGFUL RENEWAL

A thesis submitted to  
The Regis College Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors

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May 2012

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"The women who lived through these tumultuous years of searching and change need to have their historic efforts chronicled and kept alive as inspiration for the next generations".

– *With Hearts Expanded*

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## **I. Introduction: A Contemporary Context**

I am fascinated by the lives of nuns. Having grown up in Minneapolis, Minnesota, my home is just a short hour and a half drive northwest on the interstate to Saint Benedict's monastery in the small town of St. Joseph, Minnesota. Connected to the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University that my parents attended, I have had a peripheral relationship to these sisters my whole life. It is not only their love for and pursuit of God that draws me, but the matter-of-fact way in which they approach their work. These women are smart and hard working, engaging and spirited people who have chosen to live their lives within the confines of monastic vows and the patriarchal structure of the Church. Why? This question has led me to explore the many complex and enriching dynamics that compose the lives of Sisters.

In December of 2011 and January of 2012, I had the opportunity to interview several older Sisters from Saint Benedict's Monastery. I deepened my understanding of the Benedictine way of life as I listened to these dynamic, engaging and thoughtful women. The purpose of these interviews was four-fold. The first was to get a sense of why they chose to join the monastery during the 1940's and 50's; secondly to get a clearer picture of what life was like prior to the Second Vatican Council<sup>1</sup>; thirdly to understand how these women experienced the changes brought about through their renewal process, and fourthly to find out why they choose to stay in the Catholic Church.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Second Vatican Council" will be used interchangeably with the phrase "Vatican II." This was a gathering of Catholic Bishops from 1962-1965 (Sullivan 9).



My first interview was with a group of five sisters at the Benedictine retirement center of Saint Scholastica<sup>2</sup>. Tucked away in the woods of central Minnesota, the building and grounds are extensive and quiet. The retirement home is about a fifteen-minute drive from the monastery where many of these sisters spent the better part of their lives.

I was greeted at the door by 84-year-old Sister Linda Kulzer. She took her final vows with the Sisters of Saint Benedict in 1948 at the age of 21. Short of stature and with a helmet of curly gray hair she welcomed me with a hug. Sister Linda led me through the open greeting area to a meeting room at the back of their dining hall. Gathered around a table sat four other Sisters: Sister Marilyn Kulzer, 83, the blood sister of Sister Linda who, following in her sister's footsteps, entered the community in 1949; Sister Dale Wollum, 89, who entered the community in 1945 at the age of 23; Sister Merle Nolde, who entered in 1954 at the age of 31, and Sister Maranatha Renner, 87, who entered in 1953 at the age of 24 (Kulzer).

The second interview I conducted was with Sister Katherine Kraft, a woman who took her final vows with the community in 1959 at the age of 21. Sister Katherine had been a student at the College of St. Benedict which the Sisters founded in 1857 (Berg 3), and, inspired by the lives and work of her nun professors, decided to pursue a religious life for God.

There are three-standout points about these sisters. First, their experiences are unique in that they all entered the community before Vatican II and all, except for Sister

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<sup>2</sup> Saint Scholastica was the sister of Saint Benedict. Both contributed to the founding of the Benedictine Order (Benedict 10).

Katherine, lived over a decade with the pre-Vatican II traditions of prayer, black habit and veil and unchallenged hierarchical power. The roots of these traditions stretch back to the writing of *The Rule of Saint Benedict* in the fifth century AD (Benedict 9) and the founding of the monastic way of life. This ancient text gives relevant instruction regarding how to seek God in the modern world. What was counter-cultural about *The Rule* fifteen hundred years ago is counter-cultural today. In order to comprehend the contemporary context in which the sisters lived, it is important to understand the ancient beginnings of their community. The history of monasticism offers insight into the relevance of Benedictinism today. Everything from where the Sisters live and work to the vows they take, threads can be found leading back to the early years of the Church. Just as Saint Benedict wrote *The Rule* to be counter cultural, so to monastic communities today seek to continue to live out this spirit.

The second unique aspect of these Sisters is that they lived through the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council. In the wake following the publication of Vatican II documents in 1965, a renewal of religious life began. This renewal process challenged the Sisters to reflect on the practices and traditions of the Benedictine lifestyle. These Sisters all choose to undertake the renewal with open minds and open hearts, learning again how to be a Benedictine Sister within a changing institution. It was often a difficult yet life giving process of self-discovery and finding their agency.

The third, and perhaps the most personal point these Sisters impressed upon me is the fact that they were able to undergo this renewal process within the patriarchal Church and *remain a part of it*. The Second Vatican Council, the catalyst for the renewal

process, was a gathering of male Church leaders to direct the future of the Church. In the documents published by the Council, not only was there a call to renewal within religious communities, but a summons for all Catholics to be creators of the future. When this call was answered by the Sisters of Saint Benedict and other women's religious orders, tensions arose between a Church that calls all members to be full contributors in the future while simultaneously excluding women from the decision making process. The Catholic leadership called on women's religious communities to be full participants in the Church and in the world, but refused them a voice within the hierarchy.

The implementation of the renewal mandates was an awakening for the Sisters of Saint Benedict. In creating a meaningful renewal as they imagined it, the Sisters found a way to live with the tension the Church hierarchy placed them in. Furthermore, when the Sisters began to implement the renewal mandates, they were able to bridge the divide between committing themselves to a Church that does not see them as equals in terms of power and authority, while cultivating their own sense of identity and spirituality.

This paper explores the experiences of the Sisters of Saint Benedict of St. Joseph Minnesota, and their unique process of renewal. I begin with Benedictine spirituality and the connections between the ancient and the modern. Then, moving into the history, participants and documents of Vatican II, Chapter III sets the stage for women's relationship with the Catholic hierarchy and the women's renewal to come. Chapter IV explores the ways in which sisters created a new way of living out their Benedictine vows that was meaningful and completely their own. In the exploration of their traditions, the

sisters of Saint Benedict were able to create a new way of living out their vows and commitment to God.

## II. Benedictine Spirituality

At the core of Benedictine spirituality is the pursuit of God. To aid them in this search the Sisters use Scripture, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, liturgical tradition and their experience of community as guides.

The history of the Benedictine Order stretches back over fifteen hundred years (Benedict 9). Founded on principles that challenged social norms of the time, this monastic way of life at its core is about seeking God. At first glance, the pursuit of God undertaken through following traditions, observance of vows, and fulfilling daily tasks does not challenge or disturb established power structures. However, from the writing of *The Rule of Saint Benedict* to the historic attraction that religious life held for women, monastic life has offered the world a different template of power relationships, both interpersonally and on a structural level.

Throughout this chapter, the traditions and practices that have shaped the lives of Benedictines over the centuries will be contrasted with the present day Benedictine women's community in St. Joseph, Minnesota. At Saint Benedict's, as with all Benedictine communities, there was an intentional structuring to the monastic way of life, and that structure was what helped create the current Benedictine community that remains there today.

### A. *The Rule of Saint Benedict* and Early Monastic Communities

In many ways, the Benedictine way of life has been counter-cultural from the beginning. From the composition of the earliest communities to the geographic limitations followers chose to place on themselves, monasticism clearly sought spiritual grounding. Beginning in ancient times, these traditions and teaching inform the lives of Sisters today.

*The Rule of Saint Benedict*, the document at the heart of Benedictine spirituality and the enduring guideline for their monastic life, was written in about 500 AD during the fall of the Roman Empire (Benedict 9). At a time when the world's leading political and economic authority was crumbling, *The Rule of Saint Benedict* addressed these changing power dynamics as evidenced in its approach to religious life. Benedictine Sister and author Joan Chittister addresses this in her work, writing: "In the face of Roman patriarchy, Benedictinism flourished because it offered a new model of human community made up of slave and free, rich and poor, lay and clerical, all of whom were equal, had voice, served one another, sought spiritual depth rather than secular power" (Chittister 8). This way of life was counter-cultural. While the Roman Empire sought to expand its worldly power, nuns and monks who followed *The Rule* looked only to deepen their understanding of God. It is especially important in terms of the Benedictine movement's counter-cultural character that these early communities included members from all walks of life: poor, rich, slave, free. The laity and members of the clergy were equalized in their mutual search for God.

The inclusive nature of *The Rule* offered everyone guiding instructions to live lives for God. As Benedict writes: “Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way; the love of Christ must come before all else” (Benedict 27). Stepping outside the ‘world’s way’, Saint Benedict wished to create a new community of people.

Just as the early monastic communities included people from all walks of life, these new communities of people included input and creative effort from both men and women. Bishop Palladius wrote one of the earliest accounts of the people involved in creating the monastic life in 420 AD. According to the work of historian Patricia Ranft: “Of the 177 individuals Palladius mentions, thirty-five percent of them are women... Women were clearly quite essential to the movement” (Ranft 2). While one must remember that throughout history men in the Church have limited women within the Benedictine movement, it is critical to acknowledge that these women contributed a great deal to the creation of the tradition, nonetheless. If a male Bishop operating within the structure that chose to exclude women from positions of power also chose to include a large number of them in his historical account of monastic life, then we can conclude here that women undoubtedly played prominent roles in that community. This inclusive distribution of creative effort is an important factor when considering women’s decisions to join religious communities.

Indeed, women had many reasons for wanting to join a monastic community in those early centuries. Along with the fact that women played a central role in the formation of these communities, monastic life presented women with a different life than that offered them in the Roman world. Ranft continues: “A community and structure

offered women protection, security, freedom, and status in a world where these were often lacking” (Ranft 2). While the structure of religious life came with traditions and was part of a larger governing body, it also opened new doors for women of the time. In many ways religious life offered women a choice in what they would do with their lives

Another way in which Benedictines communities stood outside of the secular influence of the world was through spatial limitations. As the early followers separated themselves from the political turmoil of the Roman Empire by creating a different social dynamic, they also found solitude and contemplation possible within a limited physical area. The commitment to stability was foundational to their way of life. Understood in light of this reality, the way of monastic life is about limiting oneself geographically in order to open oneself spiritually to community, service and God:

The man or woman who voluntarily limits himself or herself to one building and a few acres of ground for the rest of life is saying that contentment and fulfillment do not consist in constant change, that true happiness cannot necessarily be found anywhere other than in this place and this time (McGinnis 180).

There is always work to be done. It is about finding fulfillment in all times and places; a commitment at all times, regardless of where one is. The Benedictines limit themselves geographically in order to open themselves spiritually. Their search for a full life is found within their own world; happiness is found not over the next hill, not tomorrow, but here and now.

The monastery, in this sense, becomes a spiritual anchor for the monastic. This commitment to a single setting offers Sisters the opportunity to better undertake the task



of seeking out the spiritual depth *The Rule* calls them to. With the acceptance of monastic life, these women opened themselves to God and to the happiness that the commitment to stability offers. It is in returning again and again to daily tasks that God is found.

For the Sisters in St Joseph Minnesota, the geographic location placed them on the prairie amid small, family-owned farms. In the heart of the small town of St. Joseph, the monastery and the College of Saint Benedict sit in a landscape of lightly rolling hills and grasses. For the monastics who live here, God is to be found among a predominantly German population, cold winters and college students. Their purpose is to ‘serve one another’ and ‘seek spiritual depth’. The Benedictine way of life, in many ways, has always been about service to God and one another, not the quest for power. Prayer and work are fulfilled in a generally unchanging setting, offering freedom to seek depth among community members and in daily tasks.

While change, in one sense, may refer to a change in location or physical movement, change can also be in reference to policy, tradition and routine. If ‘true happiness’ is found within a limited spatial area, then it may also be found within limited traditional practices. Knowing what you can and cannot do, when you need or do not need to do it, what to wear and with whom you will live, while confining in some senses, may open other spiritual options that are very attractive. Energies that may have been spent in negotiating change are instead spent on prayer, work and community life. For Benedictines, it is not about gaining more, whether it is land, or wealth, or secular power. It is about the quest for God and a simple life lived in one simple area, with one simple

plan for life. It is not about finding happiness, finding God, in the accumulation of new things and experiences, but about finding God here, now.

### B. Benedictine Vows

As the founder of one of Christianity's oldest religious orders, Saint Benedict set the stage for a lifestyle structured by the taking of vows, which would become central to all that followed. For women living within this tradition, vows were and continue to be a defining part of their lives. The process of becoming a Benedictine Sister, which happens over several years, concludes with the profession of three vows: those of chastity, poverty and obedience (Neal 6). Just as the geographic limitations opened monastics to a deeper richness while simultaneously limiting them in other respects, the profession of these vows has the same dualistic quality. While confining and defining in some respects, the vows offer structure for a meaningful connection with God and with the community. These vows guide and inform the lives of the women and their communities. Chastity expresses a commitment to a community and to the monastery that becomes your family. It is a dedication to a life of sisterhood and to a broader meaning of the word "family" than the nuclear definition allows for. In this way, support and love can be focused on the community as a whole, rather than on a single or a few individuals. Poverty expresses a rejection of material pursuits in the world and an acknowledgement that spiritual currency is more important than financial currency. With money comes secular power and as *The Rule* of Saint Benedict makes clear, the pursuit of religious life requires

a refocusing of life goals away from worldly power. Obedience, the last vow, is perhaps the most difficult to define. At the time of the writing of *The Rule*, committing oneself to *The Rule* of the Order of Saint Benedict and to the Abbot meant, by extension, obedience to God (RB-5). In many ways, both historically and currently, it signifies obedience to the hierarchical Roman Catholic Church. It can also mean obedience to the Gospels, *The Rule*, or to a personal calling from God. This vow can lead to conflict, when obedience to one appears to contradict obedience to another.

Even with the limitations these vows placed on women in the Church, great numbers of women have chosen to take them throughout history. During the first half of the last century, the number of women entering religious life in the United States was enormous. “At their peak in 1965, Roman Catholic religious communities in this country included 181,421 women and 38,478 men” (Wittberg 2). Whatever restrictions monastic life offered, it was very attractive for many women and men. The incredible difference between the number of women and men religious can partially be explained by the different gender roles of the time. Culturally, men simply had more options in life. For women, entering a religious order in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a chance to choose a life path that did not include motherhood. As Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine from Erie, Pennsylvania, writes: “Here women found the opportunity to give themselves to the questions of life and human development far beyond the scope that would be afforded them within the confines of marriage as it was then defined” (Chittister 6). Before the women’s rights movement of the 1960’s and 70’s in the United States, the life choices for young women were extremely limited: marriage and family, single life, or religious life.

For a woman who wanted to work professionally, even if those choices were confined to teaching or nursing, the Church offered an outlet and a career if she chose to become a Sister. This choice gave the women of that generation, as it had done for previous generations of women, the agency to choose a path for themselves in life. While family was one option, the Church offered education, community and opportunities for service to the world.

The expanded roles the Church offered women were an important factor during the 1940's and 50's for the Sisters I interviewed, beyond what society traditionally offered. However, the decision to take vows was larger than simply wanting more career options in life. In their own words, the Sisters of Saint Benedict have differing, yet meaningful reasons for joining the monastery. During my interview with Sister Katherine Kraft, I asked what had drawn her to the monastic life. She replied:

The brightness, the happiness, the ability, the service. Mostly, the Sisters had to be in love with God, and I figured at an earlier age that the most important question is the God question. Either God is or isn't, and if God is, then God has to be love and concern for others and compassion. So I figured I had to give it a try (Kraft).

For Sister Katherine, service and the opportunity to work were two of the factors calling her to religious life, but not the only ones. Here, more broadly, she echoes the sentiment of the religious women in the United States in the 1950's. It was the Sisters who were pondering the big, theological questions. For a woman of the time who wished to pursue these questions, the Church offered a life in which she could do so. For Sister Katherine

and for many others, God was the most important question in life, and the Church offered a place to pursue that question.

Sister Katherine makes it quite clear that love for God was central to her decision in becoming a nun. While this love for God, and the prayer time to pursue it was vital to the monastic way of life, there were other important activities going on. Sister Katherine alludes to these qualities by speaking of ‘the abilities and the service’ of the Sisters, and goes on to explain:

I think what impressed me was meeting the Sisters. Almost all my college faculty were Sisters, and I recognized that they were smart, they were very human, they were funny, but what struck me was that they were so capable and so human and so non-stereotypically “nunny”. Each of them seemed to be their own person... I thought “Why would they do this when they are so talented and so capable?” I think what struck me was they were obviously in love with God. And I saw that here a lot because as a monastic community I knew that they prayed like four or five times a day. And I thought “This life makes absolutely no sense unless God is real to them; they can find God here.” And I have to say, I really thought “These people are in love with God! Plus, they’re living a life where they are serving other people, and they’re not getting *paid*. I mean there is no monetary reward. And they’re not making headlines. It’s all being done rather quietly” (Kraft).

Here Sister Katherine shares a deeper, broader understanding of the attraction to monastic life. Traditions and vows aside, the Sisters themselves were inspirational. Their love and

search for God was central to their lives, but that is only one aspect. As college professors, these women were some of the best-educated women of the time. They were complex people, leading meaningful lives. As Sister Katherine explained: ‘Each of them seemed to be their own person...’ It is clear that for her, taking vows did not detract from the women’s individualism, nor from the spark that made them ‘human,’ ‘funny’ and ‘capable.’

The motivation for becoming a Sister seems based in a love for God and in the pursuit of that love. The vows Benedictines take offer a structure and lifestyle within which that love for God can be realized. While the vows taken by the Sisters may have been confining in some respects, they offered a very different sort of confinement than did marriage. Along with the vows came freedoms not afforded to most women before the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They offered women who cared about theological questions a chance to live, work and pray together. The monastic life opened doors to work and careers outside the home, opportunities to travel and a chance to continue one’s education.

### C. Monastic Life In the 1950’s

In the years before Vatican II, the lives of Sisters looked much as they had for the previous several centuries. The two basic tenants of Benedictine spirituality, prayer and work, were accommodated by strict daily schedules. While founded in tradition, there were many customs of this period that the Sisters found difficult. From the power

dynamics between the Prioress (the head of the monastery) and the Sisters to praying in Latin and distance from one's family, these Sisters both thrived and struggled within a confining way of life.

### 1. A Day in the Life of a Benedictine Nun

Guided by *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, life for Benedictine Sisters during the decades prior to Vatican II was one of large community and strict rules. The foundation of Benedictine spirituality and the guiding principles that direct their life were prayer and work. "The Benedictine conviction is that work and prayer go hand in hand – that work supports the life of prayer, and indeed, that one's work can and ought to function as a kind of prayer. The goal for the Benedictine is to be attentive and responsive to God at all times, in all tasks" (McGinnis 182). This practice is at the core of the Benedictine spirituality. The line between prayer and work grows to become blurred, until in many ways, work grows to be prayer. As a result, the Benedictine pursuit of God is guided equally through prayer and work. Communion with God is found not just in the chapel, but in the classroom and hospital, as well. Service to God is performed not only kneeling in a pew, but also in taking care of the sick and educating children. This prayerful, service-focused life has been practiced since the writing of *The Rule*, and for the past century and a half, Benedictine Sisters in St Joseph, Minnesota have explored this life.

Prior to Vatican II a Sister's day was very structured, beginning early and ending with an enforced curfew. While prayer and work may have gone hand in hand, a

Benedictine day always began in the chapel. Morning prayers began after the bell rang at 5:15 am, and lasted for several hours (Kulzer). After breakfast, as Sister Dale recalls:

Then we'd have a few hours for work and then we'd come back together at the noon hour and pray and then a few more hours of work and then we'd come back for vespers. And then the supper hour, and then come back and pray compline—no compline was before we ate. Then we ate, and then we had Mass. Then we went to bed. Everyone went to bed and the lights were out by nine (Kulzer).

As Sister Dale illustrates, a Sister's daily schedule truly was centered around prayer and work. The day was divided into intentional units of time, allowing for the pursuit of God in different aspects throughout their day. By maintaining such a schedule, the Sisters lived out the value that prayer and work are what grounded them and defined their lives.

Prayer prior to Vatican II was both demanding in terms of the time commitment and in the difficult style. All official, community prayer was done in Latin. Sister Katherine, while thinking about prayer before the renewal movement, reflects: "I found the praying in Latin extremely difficult. We prayed in Latin and often it would be an hour and a half or an hour and forty-five minutes and I have to say that was really hard on me" (Kraft). The Sisters not only prayed several times a day, but for long periods of time. For Sister Katherine, the God question was the most important question, and Benedictine's undertook their quest for a deeper understanding seriously. It is also important to note that very few of the Sisters spoke Latin and praying in a language they did not understand was difficult (Kulzer). Sister Linda, remembering prayers in Latin, joked: "We'd say, 'We hope God understands'" (Kulzer).



When the Sisters were not in the chapel or at prayers, they were working. The Sisters worked primarily in the fields of education and nursing (Kulzer). Prior Vatican II, Sisters had very little say in the work that they would be doing, both in regards to what field they would go into and where they would be employed from year to year. Upon entering the community, Sister Linda was told by the Prioress she would be a teacher. She recalls visiting the office of the Prioress to get work assignments:

We got on our knees and she [the Prioress] would say, 'This year I would like you to teach fourth grade.' And sometimes she'd say, 'I'd like you to do it at Meyer Grove,' and we'd say, 'Mother I don't know where Meyer Grove is.' And she'd say, 'Oh, well I'm sure someone will tell you' (Kulzer).

There was no discussion about what a Sister would do - she would obey the Prioress. This is a prime example of the power structures that existed before the renewal process began. The monastery, founded on ideals of obedience to the Abbot and to Christ, had become hierarchical, with those on the lower rungs responding without question to those above. The Church had positions to fill and the Sisters were there to fill them.

*The Rule of Saint Benedict* may have been written to remove its followers from the pursuit of secular power, but the system that developed over the centuries created power dynamics within monastic communities. There was no dialogue between the junior Sisters and their superior. When it came time to get a job assignment, Sisters got on their knees to receive their orders, which they then fulfilled.

While the method of placement might have been uncompromising, it was not without reason. As Sister Katherine will tell you: "...if you talk with the older Sisters,

because there was such a need because of the immigrants to educate, Sisters were sent out to teach without adequate education or preparation” (Kraft). At that time there was a large immigrant population in Minnesota and the Catholic schools needed teachers. The bishop would tell the Prioress ‘We need this many teachers’, and she would send out the Sisters to fill the positions (Kulzer). The assignments were not given as an exercise of power, the type of power *The Rule* warns against and tries to avoid, but to meet the needs of the community. Even so, this was not a time of dialogue and communication within the monastery. Sister were not asked their opinion, regardless of the larger community’s need, but simply followed the orders of their superiors.

As demanding and strict as the daily schedule of prayer and work were, these were not the only regulated aspect of the Sisters lives. To fully understand the lives of Sisters prior to the changes brought by Vatican II, several other aspects of life have to be considered. Everything from living arrangements, time for socializing amongst the community, and opportunities to visit one’s family were directed by the rules and traditions of the monastery.

Living arrangements within the convent was one aspect of monastic life that was both assigned and accepted by Sisters. “Traditionally, the Sisters at the Motherhouse and large local missions lived in close quarters, often sleeping in dormitory arrangements, six to ten in a room, or, if they were lucky, with two or three in a room” (Berg 29). This practice finds its roots in *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, which calls for “groups of ten to twenty under the watchful care of seniors” (RB 22). And with so many Sisters in the mid-twentieth century, individual rooms were not a luxury afforded them. This also

accentuates the communal aspects of monastic life. Just as prayer and work are shared, living quarters are as well.

Although Sisters lived, prayed and work together in close quarters, friendship was not strongly encouraged among them. Much of the day, outside of prayer and work, was spent in silence. They were taught their focus should be on God and the work of the Church (Berg 30). This is how the pursuit of God was defined for the Sisters: prayer and work and service to God. This was achieved not through friendships and relationships, but through a strict obedience to *The Rule* and to the traditions of the Church. During the brief time the Sisters did have for recreation, conversation began and ended with the bells. Sister Maranatha recalls: “I remember 7 o’clock every night we were having recreation from 7-7:30pm and you had to sit in your place and darn our socks or mend our coif. And then the bell rang and we retired.” And Sister Linda adds, “Almost like the sentence was interrupted” (Kulzer). Even the short free time the Sisters had to enjoy and converse with each other was strictly regulated. The image Sister Linda’s words inspire is one of Sisters who, while conversing, get interrupted and simply stop talking for the night. These were not women who were encouraged to fully engage in directing the lifestyle they had chosen, but rather to follow the rules. Relationships with one another were second to obedience.

Just as relationships within the community were not encouraged, maintaining contact and connection with one’s family was also made difficult. Prior to Vatican II, women in the community had extremely limited contact with their families. Sister Dale remembers: “We could only go home every five years. What was difficult was if you had

a parent that was very sick. You had to choose whether you'd go home to see them while they were alive or wait and go home for the funeral" (Kulzer). When a woman decided to enter into religious life, she was not only sacrificing a future husband and children, she was in most ways giving up the family she was born into. This practice seems to reinforce the idea of celibacy and focus on the community rather than one's family of origin. At the time, the search for God was more narrowly defined and did not include or allow room for outside relationships.

For some Sisters this seemed to be enough. Sister Dale reflects: "It was just a very structured kind of life and we just thought that was the way it was supposed to be" (Kulzer). Entering as young women and having grown up within the Church tradition, Sisters experienced their lives as normal for what they had chosen. These women entered into the community prior to the upheaval that the Second Vatican Council would bring, and many accepted the life they had chosen at face value.

While these traditions and structures were acknowledged and accepted upon taking final vows, Sisters at Saint Benedict's Monastery still found ways to express their individuality. Even within the rigid parameters that the monastic life offered women in the 1940's and 50's, Sisters found ways to thrive. As Sister Katherine remembers: "Well, you know, what do you do when you're confined? You try and figure out ways to survive... One night, when the full moon was out, we were sleeping in dormitories and I put a chair outside on the balcony and I crawled out there to enjoy the moon. You know, you find ways to survive" (Kraft). Perhaps this is what she meant when she said she was attracted to monastic life because the Sisters were their own persons. Even within the

confines of the vows and traditions, *The Rule* and the rules, Sisters found ways to seek time alone and to explore the world their own way.

## 2. Changes on the Horizon

As important as understanding the traditions and daily structure of the Sister's lives prior to Vatican II is, the relationship between the hierarchical Church and these women is equally significant. The 1950's were both a time of strict adherence to tradition and subtle, yet meaningful, exploration of new actions. Sisters nationwide began asserting their voices and organizing themselves, the hierarchy began addressing religious women in a new way, and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Saint Benedict's Monastery brought reflection and change to the lives of the Benedictine Sisters there.

### a. Sister Formation Conference

While Vatican II is certainly the most pronounced catalyst for change in Catholic Church tradition in the last century, the upheaval it caused was not without groundwork. The 1950's, a period of seeming tranquility, was in fact a time of reorganization and reordering of power structures within women's religious communities. In 1952, the first Sister Formation Conference was held (Berg 10). This was the first gathering of women religious leaders from different religious orders across the United States. It marked the first time women gathered to discuss their situation within the Church and within the context of the world. It was the first time women made decisions concerning their own Orders on a national, inter-Order scale. This was huge.

One result of the Sister Formation Conference was that the Sisters began clarifying and articulating their needs. A clear example of this happened in regard to the teaching positions Sisters were expected to fill. As Sister Katherine recalls:

And so they started in the US, the Sisters Formation Conference. And even I, as a very young Sister before taking my final profession, remember reading their publications. They were standing up and saying to the bishops, “We cannot do this to the Sisters. It’s not fair to them and it’s not fair to the children that they’re educating, or the adults they’re educating.” ...I think then we started taking a stand saying we’re not going to send Sisters out who aren’t prepared (Kraft).

Many Sisters took the initiative of the Sister Formation Conference as inspiration for finding their own voice.

Other, smaller scale changes were also taking place. For the Benedictines, organization in the 1950’s led prioresses from different monasteries to begin planning communal retreats, workshops and an Institute of Theology (Berg 10). This led to greater communication and collaboration between Sisters nationwide. It was a time for Sisters to find their own voice - first with each other, and later, within the greater Church community.

#### b. Centennial

Then, in 1957, the Sisters of Saint Benedict celebrated their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in St. Joseph, Minnesota. During the Centennial Mass, Abbot Baldwin Dworschak gave the homily during which: "he urged more attention to the future than to the past, successful

as it was, and to a rededication to the sacred purpose for which the community had been founded" (Berg 5). This refocus echoes the voice of Pope Pius the XII in two important ways. First, it is a call to all women religious; they have an important role to play in the world and their attention should be on the future. And second, at this most important Mass, dedicated to women who have given their lives to God and to service, a man is the one acknowledging this milestone.

Abbot Dworschak's homily rang true of the Sisters in another sense. The past, for Benedictines and for US nuns in general, had been very successful as illustrated by their overwhelming numbers. It makes sense, then, to imagine wanting a return to former times of high vocations and active communities when charting a course for the future. Women religious outnumbered men four to one. For Abbot Dworschak to say that Catholic women are a powerful force in the United States or the world was an understatement. What these women lacked in institutional power, they made up for in sheer numbers.

This homily also foreshadows the future, not only for this particular Benedictine community, but also for the Church as a whole. The Abbot urges the women to return to their founding document, not simply to focus on the past, but to bring that past into the present and future in a meaningful way.

The Benedictine community in St. Joseph in the 1950's included well over 800 members at the monastery alone. Several hundred more served in small groups surrounding the monastery (Kulzer). With these numbers, opinions and reflections varied greatly. While some saw the Centennial as a confirmation of a successful past, others

believed it foreshadowed changes towards a brighter future. In a book written in 2000 by four Sisters of Saint Benedict from the monastery in Minnesota, one reflects that: "Prior to and immediately after the centennial, monastic life at Saint Benedict's Monastery seemed to go on as usual. There was little indication of pending change in the community's traditional religious life. If anything, old customs were strongly reaffirmed" (Berg 7). Perhaps like a frog in slowly heating water, some of the Sisters could not detect a change. Never mind the Sister Formation Conference earlier in that decade or the growing collaboration between monasteries; the Sisters felt the affirmation of their community was simply a continuance of the past. Without outward signs of change, some Sisters seemed to continue life as usual.

In contrast, many other Sisters began to see and welcome changes in their lifestyle. The call by Pope Pius XII was taken to heart within the Minnesota Benedictine community, and the Sisters were exposed to more educational materials in the hopes that they might better prepare them for service to the world. One significant change was the call to better educate and prepare those Sisters who would be going out into the community as professionals, at that time, almost exclusively as teachers or nurses (Kraft). The focus was on becoming more educated to better serve the community. The Sisters and Prioress in the Benedictine community began to understand that the more prepared the Sister were, the more able they would be to assist those whom they served. This allowed Sisters to take a more active role in their preparation. It was an opportunity to explore one's interests more deeply and decide what would be the best fit.



Along with furthering their academic education in order to serve more fully in their work, new recreational readings were suggested. In the process of becoming more educated, both theologically and about world issues, the Sisters began expanding what they read. This development of readings further demonstrates the Sisters growing sense of agency. As they began seeking out and undertaking additional professional training, their understanding of their role in the world, and the force they contributed grew. Encouraged by their Prioress Mother Henrita Osendorf, the community circulated a copy of *The Nun in the World*, written by Cardinal Leon-Joseph Suenens of Belgium (Berg 12). In it, he "...urged that religious be faithful to their constitutions and collaborate with lay people in their apostolic work by opening the doors and windows of the convents, not to let the world in but to let their spirit out" (Berg 12). This take on religious life is very reflective of the pre-Vatican II time. The goal was to influence the world with the great spirituality of the Sisters, while they were to remain essentially the same. It is the job of the Church and those who have taken vows to be a light, a guiding post for the world. At this time, religious life was seen by many as a more holy vocation (as opposed to the vocation of marriage and parenthood). Women religious were seen as a beacon to society to exemplify a dedication to God.

While the lens used in this call to action reflects a more traditional time, it is also forward thinking in a few respects. The wording is progressive in that it asks Sisters to work with the laity, to 'collaborate,' to be partners. It takes a popular educational approach in that it sees both women religious and those who haven't taken vows as being able to work together and as having something to offer while 'collaborating.' The spirit

of the Sisters may still be seen as a holy force in the world. This approach required interaction between those living in monasteries and those living in the secular world.

Cardinal Suenens was also asking the Sisters to take a more active role in the world. They are no longer simply in their convents to pray, but to actively influence the world with their understanding of the spirit of God. The pursuit of God has been broadened to include not just Sisters but the laity as well. It is not only Sisters who undertake this spiritual quest and can be guides, but all Catholics are on this journey, and they can undertake it together.

Hand in hand with this more cooperative approach was the idea that the convents will let their spirit out into the world. For the Benedictine Sisters in Minnesota, their monastery ran hand-in-hand with a college. By the very nature of this institution, they were letting the world in with each new freshman class. Indeed, Sisters even lived in the dorms with students, acting as mentors as well as chaperones. As Sister Linda puts it: “We lived right in the dorm with them, with the women. And you know we would never have thought of that as being worldly. We were just trying to understand them, so that we got to be really able to see what life was like for them” (Kulzer). Sisters and students were living side by side. To contend that one group should influence the other without learning anything themselves would be short-sighted and naive. As Sister Linda puts it, they were just trying to understand the young women. While Cardinal Suenens warned against letting the world in, the Sisters already saw their relationships as mutually beneficial and educational. While the students got to see and experience the lives and

spirits of the Sisters, the Sisters were able to learn from their relationships with the students.

### 3. Conclusion

Benedictine spirituality, as founded in *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, has far reaching implications for those who choose to follow it. From the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience to geographic limitations, *The Rule* gives very specific outlines for one spiritual journey to God. Sisters who chose this path lived very structured lives centered in prayer and work. The dynamics of the monastery reflected those of the Catholic Church of the time, hierarchical and authoritative. With few other models, most Sisters accepted this patriarchal structure as normal and simply the unquestioned way of religious life.

However, even within this ancient organizational system, there were seeds of change. Women religious all across the United States began to organize in the 1950's and find a voice for themselves and their communities. For the Benedictine Sisters in St. Joseph, Minnesota, celebrating their centennial marked not just an acknowledgement of their past success, but a call to fully engage the future. These seemingly small changes laid the groundwork for a more critical and intentional approach to religious life that would come to define Catholic communities in the second half of the twentieth century.

### **III. Vatican II and Emerging Tension**

The strict and confining traditions of the Benedictine Order were reevaluated as a result of the Second Vatican Council, held from 1962-1965, in Rome. This was a gathering of Catholic Church leaders, all men, who issued documents pertaining to all aspects of Catholic life. Two of these documents, *Gaudium et spes* and *Perfectae caritatis*, had a direct impact on religious life. The first asked communities to consider their relationship with the modern world. The second invited them to examine their traditions and return to the founding mission of their order.

In the United States, this examination process for religious orders occurred simultaneously with the secular women's rights movement. As the modern world began to name and criticize women's place of subordination in their access to education, job training and placement, within the family system and social norm, religious women began to examine their own relationship to men in the Church. This was an awakening of all western women to the power dynamics that had shaped and informed their lives. Religious and laywomen alike began redefining for themselves what worked and what needed to be changed.

### A. Ecclesiastical Context and the Documents of Vatican II

The term ‘Vatican II’ is “shorthand for the Second Vatican Ecumenical<sup>3</sup> Council, held in Rome in four sessions from October 1962 until December 1965” (Sullivan 9). In the Catholic Church, an Ecumenical Council, which gathers bishops from all over the world, is the highest authoritative body. This was a gathering of the leaders of the Catholic Church from all over the world. In the entire history of the Catholic Church, twenty centuries, this was only the twenty-second such gathering of bishops in an Ecumenical Council (Sullivan 9). Over the course of these three years and four sessions, the Council produced documents pertaining to all aspects of the Catholic Church’s tradition, practice, and its relationship with the world.

The documents of the Second Vatican Council address two main areas of teaching concerning the Church: its history and tradition, and how the Church will bring that tradition into the modern world in a meaningful way. This two-fold process of examining traditions and bringing them to new meaning in the contemporary context was directed specifically towards religious communities in two critical documents, *Gaudium et spes* and *Perfocate caritatis*. This first dealt with the Catholic Church in relation to the modern world: how the institution as a whole and, by extension, individual religious orders would relate in a meaningful way with modern society. The second, focusing specifically on religious communities, asked members of religious orders to critically

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<sup>3</sup> “Ecumenical comes from the Greek word meaning *worldwide*” (Sullivan 9).

examine their traditions and founding documents, as the Church was doing on a larger scale.

1. *Gaudium et spes*: “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”

One of the main missions of the Council was to bring the Catholic Church fully into the modern world. The document directly concerning this topic was *Gaudium et spes*: The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, approved during the fourth and final session (Sullivan 67). In this document the Council fathers asked the Church to examine what role it had historically played in the world, and what role it wanted to play in the future. Its focus was on integrating the religious way of life of the Church in a meaningful way with the modern world (O’Connell 81). Those who drafted this document believed that as the secular world continues to transform itself, the Church and its traditions must find their place in this new order of things. This process of engaging with the modern world was known as ‘aggiornamento’, Italian for ‘updating’ (Sullivan 13).

Transformation, however, happens more easily in some aspects of society than in others. The practices of the Catholic Church, founded on the Gospels and tradition, were centuries old. *Gaudium et spes* allowed for conversations to begin in addressing what a transformation of the Church might look like. This was an opportunity for the Catholic hierarchy to proactively engage the modern world. “It was a church in the direction of progress and serious renewal, a church no longer fearful of dialogue” (Sullivan 116). By undertaking this renewal process, the Church was opening the doors of history and

tradition to be analyzed and reevaluated in light of current realities. Rather than standing tradition in opposition to the modern world, the Church looked to engage and to have dialogue with both other religions and secular society. The modern, secular world was no longer perceived as simply in conflict with the Church. The purpose *Gaudium et spes* was to acknowledge that the two are complementary and that both undertake the same problems and challenges.

Part of the Church's task in finding a place in the modern world is to acknowledge the struggles that exist and pronounce solidarity with those who suffer. *Gaudium et spes* plants itself centrally in the struggles of the modern world: "Hence, giving witness and voice to the faith of the whole people of God gathered together by Christ, this council can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with, as well as its respect and love for the entire human family with which it is bound up, than by engaging with it in conversation about these various problems" (GS-3). In this statement the Council begins by acknowledging to all who are united in Christ: the Church is bound to your struggle! The writers go on to expand this circle to include 'the entire human family.' The Church is recognizing that to be an active member in the modern world, collaboration with those of different faiths and beliefs is required. Everyone is 'bound up' meaning our problems, our goals and the realization of these goals will be connected. Also highlighted is the respect with which the Church wishes to approach this engagement with the world. The Council seeks 'solidarity' through 'respect and love'. This tactic allows the Church to be collaborators in, rather than directors of, the changes that would be made.

*Gaudium et spes* goes on to say that the mission of the Church is to engage with the people of the world in order to solve these problems in a collaborative manner: “The Council wishes to speak to all men [*sic*] in order to shed light on the mystery of man [*sic*] and to cooperate in finding the solution to the outstanding problems of our time” (GS-10). In this, all human kind is called to respond to the needs of the modern world. It is not about the Catholic Church deciding what is to be done, but about dialogue and cooperation. This approach transforms the top down power structure that has often characterized the Church because it assumes that the Church does not have all the answers. While the hierarchical structure still exists, the Council contextualizes that structure with a vision that sees all persons included in the creation of a better future.

When this dialogue and cooperative vision of the Church and the modern world was applied to monastic life, the Church began moving past the idea that those living in monasteries must be divorced from contemporary life. While initially established to remove followers from the power race in life, the idea of a monastic life has transformed in the decades since Vatican II with the transformation of the modern world. As Reverend Timothy Fry, translator of *The Rule*, reflects: “...Benedict’s Rule offered definitive direction and established an ordered way of life that gave security and stability” (Benedict 11). While this may have been the founding intent of *The Rule*, as time passed, some of the mandates became less applicable. Fry continues: “...some customs are outmoded today, and monks have accordingly modified some of these [rules]” (Benedict 11). As the modern world has changed, the relationship between the ancient mission and the reality for monastics has also transformed. By engaging with the



text of the *Gaudium et spes*, monastic leaders began to reevaluate the role their communities would play in modern, secular society.

In light of these changes in teaching, the Benedictine nuns in St. Joseph, Minnesota, especially those who taught at the college, began to reexamine their calling. As professors, the Sisters engaged with young women and men in an academic setting daily. It makes sense that if these Sisters wanted to have a meaningful impact on the lives of their students, they would develop the capacity to critically and articulately define what it means to be a Benedictine nun in the Catholic Church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Gaudium et spes* gave Sisters the go-ahead to examine their lifestyle in relation to the modern world.

The inclusive nature of *Gaudium et spes* extended to women in limited ways. Yet in many respects, it was also a great defender of women's rights. "Where they have not yet won it, women claim for themselves an equity with men before the law and in fact" (GS-9). Here, the hierarchy is acknowledging that women are claiming these rights for themselves, asserting their own agency and finding their voice. But, as we will find, this championing of women only extended so far. It is clear that in the secular world, 'in law and fact,' the Church adamantly calls for greater equality between the sexes. However, no mention is made to include them as equal participants within the Church hierarchy.

## 2. *Perfectae Caritatis*: "The Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life"

Hand in glove with the renewal of the Catholic Church's role in the modern world was the renewal of religious communities. The second, and most important, document

directly concerning women religious was *Perfectae caritatis*. This document of Vatican II dealt with the renewal of religious life among religious orders, asking Orders to go back to their original, founding documents in order to bring them into the modern world in a meaningful way (Sullivan 62). This challenge to return to the original documents invited the orders to ask-- Why were we founded? The communities used their founding documents to determine which traditions and practices that had developed in the intervening centuries were true to their mission and the mission of their founder, and which had become excessive and served to distract from their original vocation. What would help them going forward and what, over the years, was superfluous addition?

The members of the Council did not welcome the renewal advocated for in the *Perfectae caritatis* in a homogenous way. There were two opposing views on how to consider this topic. According to theologian Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ: "Some felt that the document did not adequately reinforce traditional viewpoints and that the Council was thus in danger of undermining the essentials of religious life; others felt that it did not address the real problems of adaptation to the modern world" (O'Connell 80). On one side, some felt that to draw attention to religious orders and to ask them to reevaluate their mission would be to fundamentally change religious life. Change can be perceived as a threat when it challenges people to define their motivations for their actions. It can be a chance for clarification, but can also undermine practices that have been maintained for generations. The Benedictine order was over 1,500 years old. To be asked to defend traditions that had been practiced for centuries was, in some cases, interpreted as an attack on those customs.

On the other side of the debate, some felt that to discuss a renewal without truly looking at religious life with regards to the modern world would be missing an opportunity. What is the purpose of renewal if not to better understand the roles that the Church and religious orders play in the world? To address the question of religious life in relation to the modern world would give religious orders a context for approaching the future. Adaptation to the modern world, as outlined in *Gaudium et spes*, meant it was critical to engage meaningfully with the modern world. Many authors of *Perfectae Caritatis* wanted to ensure that the document challenged religious communities to undertake this assignment with open minds and a view towards the future.

In its own words, *Perfectae caritatis* extols the multitude of variety and great work of religious communities.

So it is that in accordance with the Divine Plan a wonderful variety of religious communities has grown up which has made it easier for the Church not only to be equipped for every good work (cf. 2 Tim 3:17) and ready for the work of the ministry-the building up of the Body of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:12)-but also to appear adorned with the various gifts of her children like a spouse adorned for her husband (cf. Apoc. 21:2) and for the manifold Wisdom of God to be revealed through her (cf. Eph. 3:10) (*Perfectae caritatis*, 1).

This text both acknowledges the past history of diverse ways to dedicate one's life to God, in the 'wonderful variety of religious communities', and implies that these diverse ways should continue into the future. The 'Wisdom of God' has been revealed through these diverse communities and each holds their unique understanding of service to God in

the world. As the Council asked communities to consider how their service to the world and ‘building of Christ’s Body’ would continue in the future, religious orders undertook this task individually. It is no wonder religious communities took this call from the Church for renewal and interpreted it as a license to be creative in their way of life.

Praise for the diversity of the Church’s religious communities was the first pronouncement of the renewal document. The second was a mandate to fulfill two things: 1) return to the sources of the religious order, both in Scripture and in the writings of the founders, and 2) figure out how to relate to the modern world. "The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time" (*Perfectae caritatis*, 2). This two-fold process grounded the renewal in the tradition of the Church and religious communities, while keeping the focus on the future and the relevance of those communities to the modern world. In asking communities to examine their founding documents, the Council gave permission for this renewal process to be directed by communities themselves. Each religious community has its own individual understanding of their calling from God, and each community was asked to examine and redefine what this calling was.

The first objective for this renewal process - returning to the Scriptures and then to the founding documents of individual orders, was clearly outlined. The second part of this renewal mandate – to adapt to the ‘conditions of our time’ – required more creative interpretation. Because, as *Perfectae caritatis* proclaimed that each religious community was unique, each one was going to have a different view on how they would bring their

mission to the modern world. Specifically, "All institutes should share in the life of the Church, adapting as their own and implementing in accordance with their own characteristics the Church's undertakings and aims in matters biblical, liturgical, dogmatic, pastoral, ecumenical, missionary and social" (*Perfectae caritatis*, 2c). All those called to religious life within the Church are called equally to share in the responsibility of renewal: "All institutes should share in the life of the Church..." all, not just some, and not just men's religious orders. This simple sentence opens the door for women's participation in all aspects of Church life, as it currently exists. The renewal of the Church and its adaptation to the new world called for in *Gaudium et spes* was a process that all within the faith must undertake. It was a process that would be 'shared' not just within individual communities, but among members of the wider Church as well.

As *Perfectae caritatis* opened the door for religious women's full participation in deciding their communities' missions in the world, it subtly but significantly adjusted the power dynamics between religious communities and the hierarchy. The wording of the document is extremely important in that it calls 'all institutes' to 'adapt as their own' the changes they see fit. Everything from liturgical practices to missionary work within an order was to be reevaluated and this allowed for a certain degree of autonomy.

On a more intimate level, *Perfectae caritatis* asked communities to reflect on their way of living. "According to the same criteria let the manner of governing the institutes also be examined. Therefore let constitutions, directories, custom books, books of prayers and ceremonies and such like be suitably re-edited and, obsolete laws being suppressed, be adapted to the decrees of this sacred synod" (*Perfectae caritatis*, 3). Rules

such as dress, living arrangements, prayer schedules and the novice experience were to be examined and those that were ‘obsolete’ would be discontinued and new things introduced. This instruction extended the independence of communities and gave them the opportunity to recreate their religious experience in a way that was both true to the Scriptures and their founding documents, but just as importantly, to create a religious life that was meaningful to those living it today.

### 3. Women and the Council

The documents of the Second Vatican Council were written to include and engage all members of the Catholic Community, women and men, lay and religious. However, this seemingly inclusive nature of the Council stands in contradiction with the fact that women were excluded from the Council itself. It is important to note that, while meant to be universal, the documents rarely address Catholic women specifically. According to theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether: “Women are seldom discussed in the documents as a social group with particular problems and concerns” (Hastings 260). While it is true that women’s perspectives were almost completely ignored by the Council, the impact that Vatican II documents produced for women’s religious communities was profound. For the Sisters of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota, these changes affected everything from what they wore, how they interact with one another and new and renewed vocations. It is clear that much greater attention has been paid by women religious to the documents than the documents paid to women religious.

A clearer understanding of the Council's failure to address Catholic women directly comes from an analysis of the Council members who were included. The Council consisted of the Church leaders of the time. "The Second Vatican Council opened its first session on October 12, 1962, with a group of over 2,400 cardinals, bishops, abbots, theologians – all men! It would not be until the second session that some women would receive invitations to be auditors for the remaining Council sessions" (Sullivan 120). All of the official participants of the Council, from the Pope to lay theologians, called *periti*<sup>4</sup>, and non-Catholic observers, were men. Of these participants, it was only the ordained Bishops who were given a vote (Sullivan 34). Women were not included in any of these categories. Women's official, and limited, inclusion in the proceedings did not take place until well after the Council had begun.

Tracking their inclusion in Vatican II, it is important to note that women attempted to participate in the Second Vatican Council before the actual council took place. The first official call for women's inclusion came in 1961 from the St Joan's Alliance, a group dedicated to finding compatibility between women's political and social rights and Catholicism. This request was deliberately ignored (Hastings 260). This appeal took place during the planning period before the members of the Council gathered. The exclusion of women could not be put down to time limitations or logistics; it was an informed, thought-out resolution to bar women from one of the largest gatherings in Church history, in keeping with the historical, patriarchal attitude the hierarchy held toward women. The fact that it was a women's religious group – a

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<sup>4</sup> (Sullivan 21)

Catholic social rights group – that spoke out signifies that women in the Church at least were well aware of this exclusive policy. The mere fact that women had to request to be included reflects the unequal power scales. Their petition came from a place of subordination.

This exclusion of women from the proceedings of Vatican II continued through the first two sessions. While the Church did eventually lift some of the restrictions which excluded women from the Council, although women were still only offered a limited role. “No member of a women’s order or congregation was permitted to participate in, or even attend, the first two sessions, although a limited number of Sisters were admitted as auditors in 1964 and 1965” (Wittberg 213). Not only were women barred from participating as full members of the Church, as the *Gaudium et spes* acknowledges they are, they were not even allowed to observe the first sessions. As shown in Chapter One, the number of women religious in the United States far and away outnumbered the men. On the global scale, there were over twice as many nuns as there were priests (Sullivan 62). The decisions made by the Council, especially those concerning religious life, affected almost four times more women than men in the United States, and twice as many women as men worldwide. However, when it came to important decisions being made in terms of the direction of the Church, where energies will be spent, men got to make the decisions.

The question may be asked: What changed between the start of the Council, in 1962, and 1964 when women were finally allowed access to the events, albeit in a very limited role? What changed was that it was no longer only women who were calling for



their inclusion, but men as well. It was Cardinal Suenens of Belgium<sup>5</sup> “...who asked at the end of the second session of the Council why they were discussing the church when half the people of God were not represented there with a voice, the Council made history when it then appointed twenty-three women as auditors at the Council and as participants in the theological commissions” (Madges 79). Although women had made the same point two years previously, it was not until a high-ranking man pointed out the discrepancy that changes began to unfold. This was a history making moment for the Church – letting twenty-three women observe as over 2,400 men made decisions.

Of the women who were eventually allowed to audit the sessions, twelve were laywomen and ten were women religious. These women were given a voice, but not a vote, in the proceedings (Hastings 261). The Church demonstrated the miraculous ability to save face while doing and changing almost nothing. Men were still in control.

While the Church may not have wanted to admit women’s growing leadership role within the Church, the hierarchy was certainly willing to acknowledge women’s changing position within the secular world. In a document released in 1963 by Pope John XXIII, he acknowledges the awakening of women regarding their place human rights and dignity. ““Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person in both domestic and public life (Hastings 261).””<sup>6</sup> Women were quite clearly becoming more conscious of their innate human dignity that had been so often

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<sup>5</sup> Cardinal Suenens is the same Cardinal who wrote the book *Nuns in the World* that the Sisters of Saint Benedict read during the 1950’s, mentioned in Chapter Two.

<sup>6</sup> This foreshadows the women’s rights movement of the 1960’s and 70’s, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

denied them. They had asked to be participants in Vatican II, a clear declaration that they believed themselves to be equal participants of the Council. However, just two years before this pronouncement by Pope John XXIII this request had been denied. It seems quite obvious therefore that: “This [Pope John XXIII’s] endorsement of liberal, democratic principles, however, did not extend to the life of the Church” (Hastings 262). While Pope John XXIII very clearly articulated that women are coming into their own, realizing their potential and demanding opportunities to achieve it, those opportunities would not be afforded to them within the Church. He acknowledges women are demanding their human rights, both in the domestic setting and the public sphere, but is not ready to admit that these human rights should extend to the Church. He is saying, yes, we fully support women fulfilling their full potential in life as human beings, but just not when it applies to life within the Catholic Church.

### B. The Beginnings of the Renewal Process

While the first step of the renewal process, a return to Scripture, was universal for all religious orders, the second was unique for each community. It was a return to the founding documents of individual Orders and an opportunity for rediscovery. According to Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ:

This principle allowed and encouraged the elimination of much ‘excess baggage’ that had accumulated in many congregations over the centuries and stimulated research into the historical roots, original documents, and unpublished writings of

founders and foundresses, which has enabled more direct contact with origins and first inspirations (O'Connell 81).

This interpretation of *Perfectae caritatis* falls in line with the steps taken by Pope Pius XII in the 1950's. It is a call for women religious to take the initiative in their lives. The Council's decree not only 'allowed' this reexamination of the founding documents but also 'encouraged' it. In this sense, communities understood the Church leaders as quite clearly asking women to take a more participatory role in their own lives within the Church. These women began their renewal with this assumed full endorsement in mind. It was only after the renewal was underway in many communities that Church leaders began to question the self-direction of women's religious orders independent of Church authorities<sup>7</sup>.

As communities commenced their renewal, the changes that they made were not random and were not without foundation. For Benedictines, the renewal process was intentional, rooted in the 'origins and first inspirations' of the early monastics. It asked the religious orders to reflect: What are we doing? Why are we doing it? How do these practices deepen our spirituality or help us better serve the world? The answers to these questions helped guide the renewal process.

This renewal process takes the dynamic approach of going forward by looking back. While the focus is on how the Church and members of the Church will engage with the world in the future, the means of doing so are through a study of the founding

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<sup>7</sup> This tension between women's religious orders and the Church hierarchy is explored more fully in chapter IV.

documents. It is the writings of those who came before that will inspire those in the future.

The two-fold process of reexamination offered women religious a chance to reflect on their place within the Church and the world, and the opportunity to intentionally deepen their spirituality. The focus was on both the ‘temporal and theological,’ both the worldly and the spiritual. It was a process of clarification. What was essential to their way of life and what had become ‘excess baggage’? One challenge was determining what exactly constitutes ‘excess baggage.’ What was central to one person may have been superfluous to another. Communities had to learn to communicate.

For the Benedictine community in St. Joseph Minnesota, the community was divided between those who embraced the opportunity to examine their roots and those who felt threatened by this idea. In the book *With Hearts Expanded*, Sisters reflect: “Some felt discomfort in the questioning of long-held customs and the crumbling of Church and convent mores, which to them seemed essential for the continued existence of the Church and religious life” (Berg 18). Most of these Sisters, after all, had taken vows pre-Vatican II. They had committed themselves to a life with certain rules and traditions. It seems reasonable, then, that change was so difficult for some. The goal of renewal is to update and reform in order to increase faithfulness to what is essential to the Church and its life. For many women, it seemed the very essence of the Church, the core to which they had pledged their life was changing. They perceived these customs to be

‘essential’ to not only the Church itself, but also to their own religious life. This renewal process challenged these practices.

### C. Cultural Context: Rising Questions of Gender Equality

#### 1. Defining women in terms of their sex status

One important dynamic within Church politics, both pre and post Vatican II, is the way in which the Catholic hierarchy talks about women. The Church issued several documents and letters over the decades, both preceding and after the Council, that described and defined the role women play in the world. These definitions changed and evolved in the language they employed to describe who women are, but they all have one thing in common: women were identified according to their sex status.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church acknowledged two main categories for women: those who had taken vows and were celibate and those who were married (Hastings 263). This categorization of women is problematic in more than one respect. First, it is inaccurate. There exist women who have neither taken vows, nor are married. Second, this limited categorization places women into very confined boxes of identity. They can be either/or, but are not acknowledged as anything else pertaining to their religious or human identity. The male leaders of the Church, in labeling and categorizing women in their own terms, did not give women the right to define themselves. Men in the Church, as the official leaders, had the power to classify women according to their own standards.

The male leaders of the Second Vatican Council continued this tradition of defining women in terms of their sex status. As theologian Harriet Luckman writes: “The intention of the Council fathers was doubtless to acknowledge publicly the contributions of women in all states and ages of life. They identified women as girls, wives, mothers, consecrated virgins and single women living alone. They officially exhorted these women to share responsibility for humanity’s future” (Madges 85). It seems the Church had sorted women onto a neat timeline: In the beginning of life there are girls. These young ones grow up to be single women living alone. They become wives, and this inevitably leads to motherhood. The only ‘other’ category allowed is that of the consecrated virgins. This expanded grouping of women, while acknowledging more roles than simply that of religious or married life, will still never encompass the full range of experiences of women. The simple fact is that the Church felt it necessary to categorize women in the first place, something it doesn’t do to men in the same way. This is revealing and troubling. Assuming the Council wished to address all women, they fail to acknowledge that women live in countless situations and define themselves in countless ways. They still confine and classify women by their marital status and/or whether or not they are virgins. If the goal of the Council was to recognize women from all walks of life, categorizing them into small, labeled groups was not the best way to approach this task.

Indeed, during the third session, French theologian Yves Congar gave a long speech on the virtues of women (Hastings 261). This was a session in which women were present, and Rosemary Goldie had her own ideas of this speech. “She replied he

could dispense with the flowery rhetoric; what concerned women was that they be treated as the fully human persons that they are” (Hastings 261). In this, Goldie is voicing the simple yet profound notion that women, like men, are fully human. To categorize and narrowly define women, even positively, is an injustice. And while the Council’s announcement to ‘acknowledge publicly the contributions of women’ attempts to name women as equal creators in the world, it is severely mitigated by the exclusion of women’s full participation in the Council itself. The call is to be a part of creating ‘humanity’s future’ while not even being allowed to share equally in the Church’s deliberations in the creating the world today.

Women were defined by men and thus pushed to the margins of Church life. This confinement limited women’s ability to be assertive and fully explore their power as members of the Catholic community. Women could not be independent of their relationship with those that defined them. As the theologian Harriet Luckman writes:

When speaking about women and the church, official church documents maintain an understanding of women’s status, vocation, and mission in the church and society based primarily upon her relationship with men, and this relationship is determined by her ‘nature’ (Madges 86).

Defining women in narrow ways based on marital status also identified them by their relationship to men. As women occupied a lower rung on the hierarchical ladder than men did, it seems clear that the ‘nature’ of women as identified by the Church is an inferior one.

The response of many women, those in religious orders and laywomen alike, to this paternalistic labeling of their marital status was one of rejection. “One of the most important developments in the post-Vatican II period has been an increasing rejection by both nuns and lay women of this hierarchical division among women” (Hastings 263). While the Church itself has created and sustained a divisional, hierarchical structure with men at the top, many women are now rejecting this same attempt at classification insofar as it concerns them. This refusal to accept definitions placed upon them gave women the opportunity to assert their independence. Both laywomen and women religious became united in their efforts of empowerment and self-direction. It was in the women’s rights movement that women, both lay and professed alike, began redefining their relationships, both with men individually and with sexist power structures as a whole.

## 2. The Renewal Process and the Women’s Movement

In the second half of the twentieth century both the secular and religious worlds were awakening to a new era of social activism and political awareness. Just as the Second Vatican Council was ending in 1964, the second wave feminist movement in the United States was gaining speed (LaCugna 33). While the first focused on religious, Catholic communities, the latter was secular and wide spread. As Catholic writer and radical feminist Mary Daly described in her book *Beyond God the Father*, “Women of all ‘types,’ having made the psychic breakthrough to recognition of the basic sameness of our situation as women, have been initiated into the struggle for liberation of our sex from its ancient bondage” (Daly 1). Within religious communities, the women’s rights



movement and the renewal process become intertwined. Though independently developed, the organizers and participants began to find areas in common. This movement included ‘all types’ of women from all walks of life, both religious and secular. Just as women within the Church began recognizing their shared goals, so too were women in secular society.

For Catholic women especially, there was great hope that this new awakening of women’s rights might bring about substantial changes within the structure of the Church hierarchy. Luckman writes, “At the beginning of this so-called ‘Second Wave,’ many Catholics expected to see the church as a champion of women, primarily on account of the Council’s strong defense of human rights” (Madges 86). Women in the Church, both religious and lay alike, rightly saw the Council as a defender of human rights, and by extension, women’s rights. As mentioned, in *Perfectae caritatis*, the Church declares that women are demanding and should be given the rights that are due to them as humans; rights under the law that is. The extension of this was the belief that the Church would soon become a champion for women’s rights within the Church itself. After all, the Council had called for women’s full participation in creating the future. This led many to believe women would become full leaders in the Church. Tension developed between the hierarchy and Catholic women when it became clear that those in power were not going to restructure the patriarchal organization of the Church.

During the ‘Second Wave’ of feminism women began to make advances for more equality in the workforce, economic rights, the job sector and access to education. It made sense, then that women began to expect changes in the appointment of deacons, the

structure of the seminary and the requirements for the priesthood. Catholic women saw their role in the Church as another place for advancement to be made. Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether reflects: “The Second Vatican Council created an atmosphere where a discussion among Catholics of women’s rights in society and in the Church seemed possible” (Hastings 260). Vatican II looked at and discussed Church tradition in its entirety. With a reexamination of everything from what language the Mass was said in and which direction a priest faces, it seemed reasonable to assume that the ancient tradition of male hierarchical power would be addressed as well (Sullivan 33). If the Church wanted to bring itself fully into the modern world, as *Gaudium et spes* suggests, then it was going to have to address the role of women. After all, if women were able to study and work like men, as the secular women’s movement was declaring, than perhaps women could pray and lead like men as well.

The hierarchical Church did not think so. Even as the Church defended women’s rights in the secular sphere, it refused to accept women as equals within the patriarchal tradition of the Church. The Church attempted to appear as great defenders of women’s rights. Daly writes, “In 1972, Pope Paul VI assumed his place as champion of ‘true women’s liberation,’ asserting that this does not lie in ‘formalistic or materialistic equality with the other sex, but in the recognition of that specific thing in the feminine personality – the vocation of a woman to become a mother’” (Daly 3). It is clear that women’s pursuit of equal recognition by the hierarchy and accompanying access to power within the Church was not to be forthcoming in the years following Vatican II. In returning to themes developed before Vatican II, Pope Paul VI takes up the task of being

a man defining what it means to be a woman. It is extremely presumptuous that a man would attempt to define and limit what women's liberation might mean. It becomes insulting when that definition is reduced to one aspect of 'feminine personality'- motherhood. Leaving aside the experiences of childless laywomen or the many roles of women who are mothers, what does this narrow definition mean for the countless women from history who have dedicated their lives to God's service in the form of taking religious vows.

The call to renewal and the women's rights movement encouraged women religious to look beyond the confining limitations Church men had placed on them to explore new possibilities in their lives. Rather than allow themselves to be defined by men, religious women sought to define themselves.

During this same period, religious congregations of women were also moving to reclaim the charisms of their foundresses and stood firm in their self-determination in matters of corporate renewal. This often led to tensions between religious congregations of women and the Vatican officials who felt it their duty to regulate the rules and constitutions of women religious (Madges 87).

Tensions began developing when communities, fully planning on directing and managing their own renewal, were asked to conform and report to male Church authorities.

Struggling with the contradiction of the renewal mandates – to be both directors and creators of the future while still conforming to men's idea of what that should look like- women religious undertook the task set before them. As the pursuit for a meaningful

renewal began, women leaders looked to the example of their predecessors: strong, capable women who led their followers in building vibrant communities.

#### **IV. Vatican II and the Benedictines**

Just as Vatican II left nothing of Church tradition unexamined, their mandate for religious communities was equally demanding. For the Sisters of Saint Benedict, this meant critically looking at what they wore, the careers they pursued, how they prayed, and redefining what their vows meant in a contemporary context. Undertaken in a contemplative, intentional manner, the Sisters gained a voice during their renewal process.

##### A. The Broad View

###### 1. The Council's call on women to share in the responsibility for the future

For the Benedictine community in St Joseph Minnesota and women religious everywhere, the changes brought about by Vatican II marked the passing of an era. As with many changes within large groups, the decrees were accepted and interpreted in different ways by different people. Sister Joan Chittister, from a Benedictine Order in Erie, Pennsylvania, describes the situation for Benedictine women:

Criticism, conflict, and concern arose from every side. Vocations declined. It was an anxious time, a crucial time, and exciting time. Hope and fear walked hand in hand... Women who lived a thirteenth-century lifestyle with twentieth-century responsibilities were being asked to integrate the two without overlooking the responsibilities or altering the essentials of the life (Chittister 170).

The response most emphasized here is the concern that arose regarding the renewal process that would be undertaken. The renewal process meant change, and change is always destabilizing. Not only were the traditional ways of life changing and practices being modified or discontinued, but vocations were declining within the order (and across all orders). This produced the binary response of hope and fear: hope that the changes might bring deeper meaning and understanding to the lives of the Sisters, that they would come to know God more intimately and serve the world better; and fear of the unknown – what change would be forthcoming, and would essential things be lost.

Chittister's use of the phrase 'essentials of life' is an important one. Stripped down to what is at the core, essentials included everything from *The Rule*, vows and prayer to work and clothes. In the renewal process, the Sisters were asked to intentionally and meticulously examine their lives and decide what was 'essential,' what was at the core of being a Benedictine Sister, and what had, over the years, become excess and extraneous. What contributed to their pursuit of God and what was infringing upon that pursuit?

## 2. A call to examine original documents

As specified in *Perfectae caritatis*, religious orders were to examine their founding documents, consider their current practices, and bring the two into alignment (PC- 2). While the document gave an outline for many of these changes, it still was unclear what they meant in a practical sense for religious communities. Patricia Wittberg, a professor of sociology at Indiana University writes: "The differences between

Rome's and the communities' interpretations of what their renewal would entail emerged shortly after the end of the Council, when all religious communities were ordered to convene, within three years, a special legislative session (a 'general chapter') to implement the council's inadequately defined reforms" (Wittberg 215). These 'inadequately defined reforms' foreshadow future tensions between religious communities and the Vatican. Without a clear definition or direction in which to take the reforms set forth by the Council, congregations of women interpreted them on their own terms. Indeed, each religious order has its own mission, its own unique calling in the service of God. *Perfectae caritatis* acknowledges and praises this diversity within the Church (PC- 1). Because of their very nature and variety, orders interpreted the renewal decree differently and implemented different changes according to their own understanding. What the Roman hierarchy envisioned and what communities created varied greatly.

For the Benedictine community of Sisters in Saint Joseph Minnesota, the renewal process was a time of exploration and adaptation. They took the mandate to intentionally examine their lives and practices seriously, and once they got going, there was no stopping them. As Sister Linda remembers:

We got a call to become more adept to the times. They said: 'You have to try to do something about the odd clothes you wear.' Actually we were asked by the Church to make those changes. It was the kind of things we had to learn, but once we got into that we really got into that. We said 'We can do this, and this, and this' and the Church said, 'Whoa, whoa, time out!' (Kulzer).

Sister Linda's reflection indicates that the changes initiated by the Vatican's call for renewal were, in turn, interpreted and expanded upon by the community members themselves, only to be curtailed by Church leaders once the women took up the initiatives they began. Whatever caution later expressed by Church authorities, the Sisters undertook this learning process at the behest of the Council and made it their own through their passion. Sisters began to find their own voices and they became creative and assertive in what they could do. As their ideas expanded and grew and their examination took into consideration more aspects of their life, the Vatican realized there was no going back.

For Benedictine women in the United States, the call of the Council to enact the reforms was a very serious and laborious undertaking that examined everything. The enthusiasm described by Sister Linda grew to encompass all aspects of Benedictine life. As described by Sister Joan Chittister: "Nothing went unquestioned: the nature of obedience; the function of the vows; the composition of the community; the place of authority; the character of the ministry; the charism of Benedictinism; the definition of community life; the place of religious life in the Church and society" (Chittister 171). These were not simple modifications to an ancient monastic practice. These questions produced ideas for reform that touched every aspect of life. These questions not only challenged what it meant to be a member of a Benedictine community, but what it meant to be a member of the Roman Catholic Church and what it meant to be a member of the world.



These women experienced this process of questioning and seeking new meaning in life as being a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it was an opportunity to deepen their faith, to seek out new understandings of what it means to be a Catholic nun in the twentieth century. It was an opportunity to shed practices and traditions that had built up over the centuries but that were not intended by the founding documents. The Sisters dedicated their lives to pursuing a closer relationship with God and the renewal process gave them the occasion to decide what in their life helped them on this journey and what did not. On the other hand, these questions have the potential to shake the very foundation upon which faith rests. As Sister Joan explains, everything in the life of the Sisters was called into question from vows to dress to service in the world. This left the Sisters vulnerable to discovering that the old way of praying, living and working was not truly their path. That is to say, if the traditions the Sisters followed were not, in fact, true to the founder's intent, then does that make them wrong? Does this invalidate the countless years and lives dedicated to this old tradition? This is one of the questions the Benedictines grappled with throughout their renewal process.

The renewal process changed not only the Sister's relationship with the members of the Church hierarchy but with members of their own communities as well. They began to acknowledge the insights of their members as valuable contributions to monastic, Benedictine life. Marie Auguta Neal, SND, a professor of sociology writes: "The focus has moved from the sometimes unquestioning obedience to another person – who alone cannot have sufficient expertise to make decisions for the group – to obedience to a Gospel mandate that affect their lives and their accountability for the

chosen outcomes” (Neal 37). In other words, it is about “claiming agency” – acknowledging that Sisters are intelligent, insightful people with different abilities who are called by God with different abilities in different ways. It’s a call to be able to express God’s will as they hear it. This discovery became a huge challenge to the authority in the lives of the Sisters, both with respect to the Church’s hierarchy and within the system of the monastery itself.

This challenge led to the reexamination of the nature of obedience and to the reassessment of the vow of obedience. Obedience was no longer seen as a blind following of an authority figure, as *The Rule* suggests (RB-5) but a process by which consideration is given to what the Gospel calls each Sister to do. As the Benedictine Sisters began the renewal process it became clear that they would interpret each of their vows, to which Benedictines dedicate their life, in a new light. Sister Neal continues: “This called for a vowed poverty not rooted in the mere security of dependence, but rather opted for responsible stewardship, a sharing with those in need. It demanded a celibate life for mission and a more responsible obedience to the mission of the church as expressed in the gospels” (Neal 30). Neal’s new interpretations of their ancient vows allowed for a broader understanding of what the role of a Benedictine Sister is in the twenty-first century. This was an undertaking of clarification. The expanded definition of the vows gave new life to a very old practice. The vow of poverty is not for the sake of being poor, but of taking only what one needs so as to let others have what they need. It is not about being poor and dependent on the Church, but about a focusing on ‘responsible stewardship’ and being conscious of resource use. An examination of the

vow of celibacy reaffirms the mission of the Church, not on an individual family. It also allows the Sisters to put their energy towards new missions they choose to explore, as engagement with the modern world might lead them to.

The process of examination confirmed that the vows the Sisters take are still central and vitally important to their lives. Vatican II may have refocused these vows, but it did not remove them, or diminish their centrality. Vows are one of the aspects of religious life that defines each community, and the way in which the Benedictines live out their vows makes their lifestyle unique. These vows facilitate the pursuit of God in giving an outline and structure to daily practices. In very intentionally reworking their vows, the Benedictine Sisters acknowledged that their vows were at the heart of their search for God and must remain in the foreground of their lives.

## B. Saint Benedict's Monastery, Saint Joseph, MN

### 1. Articulating the Changes and Finding a Voice

The mandates initiated by Vatican II came to the Benedictine community of St. Joseph just as it did to all religious communities around the world. The call to renewal was taken seriously and approached with great intention. The size of St. Benedict's, however, was very large, and every person within the community approached it with a different view, adding great complexity to the process. Sister Katherine remembers:

That was a watershed, or I would say *major* change, and it was very difficult, because communities are not monolithic in what they think. There was a lot of

struggle, and you can't just go by age. Some of the older Sisters were as ready and welcome of change as some of the middle age or younger, and some of the younger Sisters might have been less open to change. So you couldn't just go according to category (Kraft).

The renewal opened the door for inspection and reflection on all of the community's traditions. There were as many opinions about the renewal as there were Sisters at the monastery. Just as there were differences of opinion in the writing of *Perfectae caritatis* and what the call for renewal might look like, there was division among community members of what it might look like for their community as Benedictines.

Division or no, consensus or no, the renewal was undertaken by the Sisters. As outlined in *Perfectae caritatis*, the community began with a return to the founding documents. Sister Linda remembers: "When we were in renewal we went to the sources. We asked: 'Why was the Benedictine life established? What is it all about?' And so returning to our roots, which I think Vatican II did in a lot of ways, gave us a sense again that we weren't going just willy-nilly" (Kulzer). Just as the Sisters took their vows seriously upon profession, they undertook the renewal of their life with deliberate care.

As the document *Perfectae caritatis* specified, the Sisters returned to the source of their community and history- *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. What they discovered and rediscovered was why Benedict wrote *The Rule* and what his intentions were in creating monastic communities. They used these insights to inform their choices and decisions about how to move into the future. The Sisters pursued the renewal process with open minds, asking questions and seeking answers- not arbitrarily, but from their roots.

One of the hurdles they faced in taking on the renewal was the ability to communicate. Prior to Vatican II, the vow of obedience and following the directive of the Prioress did not necessitate articulating an opinion. Sisters had few opportunities to find a voice for themselves. The renewal changed that. Sister Linda recalls: “It was wonderful. We had workshops about assertiveness training and making up our own minds and being able to express ourselves, and taking responsibility” (Kulzer). The renewal offered these women the opportunity to learn to be assertive. This process was two fold, first in being able to consider options and make decision for oneself, and second to be able to explain and articulate those decisions to the group. This aspect of the renewal was about taking control in the direction life would lead. If the renewal process was really going to be a group effort, everyone needed to contribute, and for that to happen, everyone needed to know how to communicate.

This move towards self-assertion was embraced and thought of as ‘wonderful’ in many respects. However, it did not come without effort. The structure of monastic life prior to the renewal did not offer space for dialogue. As Sister Katherine remembers, there were growing pains involved:

But we didn’t have the kind of skills that you need to be able to stand up and talk and be sure the minority view is heard. How do you listen to different points of view? How do you resolve differences of opinion or conflict? We worked hard on that. We had umpteen programs, interactions, and classes about building community. I can’t even name them all. It took us time (Kraft).

For the Sisters, finding their voices also meant asking important questions. Who was included in discussions and was everyone's voice being heard? This reflection offers insight into the importance of dialogue. Being able to communicate one's opinion is only half the equation; listening is the other half. While many of the Sisters embraced this move towards a more open exchange of ideas, it was also something they worked on. A clear example of the community's serious undertaking of renewal is in the amount of time and effort they put in to each aspect. Learning to communicate did not happen overnight. There were many, many workshops and classes.

Practicing good communication does not automatically translate into making it routine. For the Sisters, these skills were put into practice on both the interpersonal and community level. With such a large community and so many opinions to be voiced, the Sisters had to actively work against individuals getting lost in the crowd. Sister Merle recalls:

And we've always been such a large community that when it came to community and what we call our major meetings- there'd be, you know, a couple hundred people involved. This hardly made a great demand for you to get up and speak. We counted on our council leaders, which we did elect; we counted on them to tell us which way to vote. So the renewal process for us offered us ways to find a voice (Kulzer).

St. Benedict's, both before and during the renewal, was so large that it was easy to get lost in the crowd. They became proactive in finding ways to make sure everyone got to express herself. To counter balance the overwhelming number of voices, the community

subdivided the Sisters into groups. Each group elected a leader who had a voice to speak within the larger gatherings.

Over and over, Sisters reiterate the importance of finding their voice and communicating within the community. Communication is the keystone that allowed these women to create the renewal they wanted to see. It was in finding their voice, becoming their own authority in their lives, which led to the broader changes within their tradition.

## 2. Putting the Changes into Effect

### a. The Habit

One of the most prominent visual changes in the life of American Sisters after Vatican II was the change in clothing. As directed by Rome, communities were mandated to reconsider their clothing choices and adapt to modern times. “The Roman directives, promulgated by the Vatican Congregation for Religious, mandated the modernization of religious garb and customs that had come to give a too other-worldly character to Sisters working in ‘the world’” (Neal 30). Practically speaking, this meant dramatically changing what they wore to match more closely what lay people with whom they worked and served were wearing. It is important to keep in mind that although it was the Vatican that first proposed the change in habit and the eventual discarding of this traditional garb, it was the Sisters who took this charge and made it their own.

Changing from the tradition of wearing centuries-old garb to modern dress was a difficult process for many. Each Sister had a different relationship with the habit, which

in turn influenced her willingness and her approach to change. In the book *With Hearts Expanded*, written by Sisters from the St. Benedict's Monastery, one Sister reflects:

“Surprisingly, that change came more slowly and with more pain and labor than did most other changes. This difficulty is understandable when one realizes how the wearing of the religious habit was intimately inter-twined with witnessing to the role of religious in the vision of the Church and the world” (Berg 37-38). The habit was a matter of identity and being a part of something larger than oneself. To don one meant that a Sister had become a part of a tradition that came before her and would live after her. To change that would be a big deal. It was both a public identifier of Sisters and an equalizer among those who all wore the same thing. Those black and white clothes were something to hide behind, but also something that distinguished the Sisters. It is a paradox: the habit that identified and distinguished the Sisters as belonging to a respected subgroup within the Church simultaneously wiped clear all immediate appearances of a unique person. They simply became ‘a nun.’

At St. Benedict's, the modification and eventual discarding of the traditional habit became a symbol of individuality and independent thought within the community. This change was undertaken very methodically, and showed the Sisters growing sense of intentionality. Sister Katherine remembers: “I'd say the habit was difficult but we didn't do it that fast. We did it gradually. We had a committee on dress; we had people modeling possible changes. We moved gradually from the traditional habit into lay clothing” (Kraft). The Benedictine Sisters went about changing their clothing in a thoughtful, deliberate manner. Understanding that this was a major change in their lives



and would be difficult for some, the Sisters assumed the transformation slowly. They had an inclusive mentality, creating a committee to decide and try out the new clothing. This is one example of putting their newly acquired communication skills into practice.

And while the change in clothing was tough in regards to identity and changing a centuries old tradition, it was also difficult in a practical sense. Sister Maranatha recalls: “I think there were five of us that decided that after Christmas we’d change. One of the hardest things was shopping. How do you shop for clothes? You don’t. And what do you do with your hair? We hadn’t done it in years and years and years” (Kulzer). Many of these women had lived for decades wearing the habit. We see that while the renewal may have had a primarily theological focus, other unexpected considerations had applied relevance as well.

#### b. The Novitiate

Monastic life begins in what is commonly called “the novitiate”. The novitiate is a trial period that allows women to experience the Benedictine life before committing to it (Kulzer). Along with almost all other aspects of their life, the Benedictine novitiate period underwent examination and transformation during the renewal process. In a reflection in *With Hearts Expanded*:

The directors noted four major trends developing in initial formation among sisters nationwide: having formation teams rather than single directors for each stage, putting greater emphasis on the person, stressing community service to the Church and the world, and increasing opportunities for dialogue... It may not

have produced the fruit of increased vocations that the sisters had anticipated, but it helped the sisters make the work of renewal a transformative experience rather than a mere rejection of oppressive structures and traditions (Berg 15).

This was a progressive approach, breaking down the hierarchical tendencies of Church politics. Teams, instead of a single decision maker, allowed for input to be given from multiple sources and decisions to be made in a more democratic fashion. Teamwork also fostered a sense of community, the type of community the novices would one day join and become active members of. In emphasizing this move from one lone director to a more collective approach, the Benedictines acknowledged that a sustainable community is one where more voices are heard.

Whereas prior to Vatican II many Sisters spent their formative years in relative seclusion in an effort to conform their lives to God and the community (Kraft), the new process stressed the gifts of each person. Where previously the Sisters were expected to dress, pray and work in more or less identical ways, the focus on the individual encouraged individuality- a new concept. This move echoes the change in habit. A new emphasis on Sisters as individuals who bring their own unique gifts to the community had begun. Where the Sisters had once lost their identity (wearing identical clothes, changing their names upon their final vows) every woman was now seen as having a distinct perspective, each with her own gifts and insights to bring to the world.

The final major change to the novitiate, that of dialogue, breaks the tradition of hierarchical power even further. In dialogue, different perspectives are brought to light and acknowledged as having validity in their own right. Disagreements can be discussed,

new ideas considered, and those who once may not have spoken up are now being actively asked to share and are listened to. The days of meekly taking orders without discussion were over. Sisters who had once knelt before the prioress to receive work assignments now had a voice (Kulzer). Women who came to the community now participated more fully in designing their novitiate experience.

The new emphasis on community involvement within the Church and the world also marked a shift in the novitiate experience. The message of *Gaudium et spes* and the Church's relationship to the modern world were brought into the formative experience of novices. Shedding the traditional and limited roles of Sisters as teachers or nurses, the Sisters now sought new ways to engage with the Church and the greater community around them.

While these new practices regarding novices did not, in fact, increase interest in monastic life, there were other benefits. The renewal process became 'a transformative experience' as opposed to 'mere rejection of oppressive structures and traditions.' What the Sisters of Saint Benedict did so well was to preserve and maintain their sense of identity while exploring their values. In creating a new formation process that more closely reflected their values, the Sisters were acknowledging their own connection with these women and the lives and community they were committing themselves to. By focusing on the transformative aspects of the renewal they were able to make this process meaningful in their lives and for the lives of the women who would join after them.

### c. Prayers

There were two very important things that changed in the prayer life of the Benedictines in the wake of Vatican II: the amount of time spent in prayer, and the language of prayers. Prayer had always been fundamental to the Benedictine way of life, and the Sisters were sure that this should remain the case. Sister Linda explains: “Praying together is still essential to us. Before we prayed together seven times a day, and after Vatican II we were able to change that. We still said, ‘We will have morning prayer, we will have noon prayer, we will have an evening prayer’ and then for some there would still be a compline” (Kulzer). And just as their days prior to the Second Vatican Council began in the chapel, this practice continued. The Sisters asserted for themselves and the entire community that prayer was a core component to their lives and that it would remain so.

While the prayer time itself may have been only slightly modified, the language of the prayers was completely redone. Whereas all group prayers had been in Latin, Vatican II brought the vernacular. As difficult as some of the changes were, changing prayer to English was not one of them. Sister Katherine recalls: “I think the thing we had the least difficulty with was changing to praying in English” (Kraft). This was something the majority of Sisters supported, and it enriched their lives. Sister Maranatha expands on this idea saying: “You wanted to pray in your own language, have the words come out that you *know*. To know what we were saying to God. That was the big thing. It was just marvelous” (Kulzer). This was an institutional, Church-wide change that enriched the lives of the Sisters greatly.

#### d. Work

Prior to the Second Vatican Council women who joined the monastery were assigned work by the Prioress based on the needs of the community. For the Benedictine Sisters this meant almost exclusively education or nursing. As the Sisters began the renewal process, their approach to work changed. While prior to the Council Sisters were simply assigned to a job, afterwards they were encouraged to decide what they wanted to do and where they thought their services and talents would be most helpful. As Sister Maranatha points out, “You probably noticed, at least the four of us, we started out as teachers and moved to chaplaincy, parish work and peace and justice [work], directed retreats and spiritual direction” (Kulzer). While each of the five Sisters interviewed began their religious lives as teachers, all moved on to do other work. This is a great example of the Sisters becoming more aware of and assertive about the directions their lives would take. They were able to explore where they felt they could contribute most to the greater community and give voice to that instead of simply being inserted into a position.

With the new input they were able to offer regarding to their work placement came new demands in terms of qualifications. While the 1950’s had begun a movement to further educate and prepare Sisters for their duties, they now had to apply for jobs rather than be inserted into them. Sister Merle reflects on being interviewed: “In doing something like that you had to learn who you really were. And you had to become confident that you were able to do the work that you had been doing right along”

(Kulzer). Preparing for an interview gave these women the opportunity to reflect on who they were, where their gifts and skills lay, and what work they'd like to be doing. As Sister Merle states, while they may have been doing a certain work for many years, the difference now being they had to prove to themselves and others they were qualified to do it. This was an opportunity for reflection and building confidence. They were no longer working simply because someone told them they must, but because they wanted to and knew they could.

### C. Taking the Long View

The changes brought to Benedictine life through the mandates of the Second Vatican Council were complex and all encompassing. These women reflected on every tradition and practice that defined what it meant to be a Sister, whether they embraced that practice, such as prayer, or discontinued it, such as the habit. This enabled the Sisters to undertake their pursuit of God free from outdated and unhelpful practices.

However, these changes did not come without a price. In addition to the challenges of negotiating new and transformed traditions, the membership within the community itself was changing. After Vatican II, many, many Sisters decided to leave the community leaving a hole within the fabric of the monastery. Sister Linda recalls:

Sisters left in flocks after Vatican II. So we thought, 'What made them leave?' And you know it was still hard. Each one had their own reasons. The most interesting thing I garnered from that is that each Sister would say because they

could not do the things they were asked to do. They did not fit into a classroom. Or they felt so overwhelmed by what they were asked to do that it just became overwhelming. It's interesting to me to think that when you are asked to do something you are not good at and cannot do well, you start to think, 'This isn't the life for me.' So that is one reason why Sisters left. But right after Vatican II *big* numbers of people left (Kulzer).

This was a difficult time. As much as the changes brought by Vatican II affected the community, they also affected individuals. The Benedictine's made changes for the future of their Order and Sisters made personal decisions about their own future. As many Sisters began exploring other professions outside teaching and nursing, many began to question their lives as nuns. Sister Linda points out that being overwhelmed with life, with the changes that were happening and the structures that were changing and the jobs one was asked to do. For some women, this meant leaving the Order.

As women left, the community began to decline in numbers. In reflecting on the huge number of Sisters during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Sister Linda said: "What they are saying now is that those large numbers are really a fluke; that they had not happened before and are not likely to happen again" (Kulzer). The once largest Monastery in the United States was shrinking. Sister Linda, being a part of this community at its peak, was not despairing in its decline. Indeed, she takes a very practical approach. The calling that drew her and hundreds of others to follow *The Rule of Saint Benedict* was meaningful but not likely to happen again. It was a 'fluke.' This allows for an appreciation for their experiences and honoring the unique moment in history when so

many women came together in a pursuit of God. This time is past, but that does not diminish it.

Sister Linda goes on to explain: “I’ll always remember I asked Sister Margaret Wormwood, what do you think about us getting a lot smaller? She said, ‘Well you know, what we mostly do is we get up and pray and eat and then we work a little and then we pray and eat and then we work a little more. And I can do that as well with thirty people as I can with three hundred’” (Kulzer). This response embodies the positive attitude of these women. They had joined the community to seek God, and they have created a structure that allows them to do so. The beauty of their lifestyle lies in its flexibility. While *The Rule* and vows may be strict, the ability to fulfill them can be done in a community large or small.

Indeed, for the women I interviewed, Vatican II and the subsequent renewal offered the chance for a second discernment. Sisters who stayed had to make a choice, and many found that life in the Benedictine Order was where they were called to be. Sister Katherine remembers a challenging time of reflection:

You know in a way it was a very good thing. I had to do, especially when I saw close friends leave, I had to ask myself, ‘Why are you staying here? What’s keeping you here?’ And I considered leaving, very, very seriously because the question would be, I mean, I was young too, 18, so when that happened I was in my thirties. Well when you’re in your thirties you think, ‘Well, if I’m ever going to marry and have an intimate relationship and have children, you decide now or



it's going to be too late.' I did go through all of that. And I think it made us stronger (Kraft).

This reflection adds another dimension to the complexity of the decision. There was discomfort in changing traditions and questions about an individual's interests and abilities, but socially there were uncertainties as well. Sister Katherine was young when she joined and so when the Second Vatican Council met and the years of renewal following its mandates she was still a young woman. Many women who did leave ended up having families (Nalevanko xii), and this was a consideration for those who stayed. But, as Sister Katherine points out, she and others who made this decision were stronger for it.

While the reasons Sisters stayed are as personal as the reasons why women left, God remains a central question. Sister Linda reflects: "I suppose for me always it was that I loved the people I was with. I just thought, 'Where would I ever find people that really want to seek God? And who could I talk to about seeking God? You know, who understood me'" (Kulzer). For Sister Linda it is about God and community. Her love for God brought her to religious life and it was the community of women who kept her there.

## **V. Conclusion: What I have learned from the Benedictines**

The pursuit of a meaningful renewal undertaken by the Benedictine community of Sister in St. Joseph, Minnesota is remarkable. These women opened themselves to the brave task of questioning everything they knew in the hope of finding a deeper, simplified meaning to life. Having no training in communication or critical thinking, the Sisters transitioned from meekly following orders to asserting their agency. Sister Maranatha illustrate this transition clearly: “I think many of us came to the community as quite young women and I think that our culture was that we were not doing much thinking for ourselves” (Kulzer). At the heart of my thesis I wanted to explore a community in which thinking for themselves was a goal achieved through hard work and tenacity. These women are incredible. They have lived through some of the biggest changes, both within the Catholic Church, and in the social movements of secular society in the last century. Before Vatican II they were not asked to think critically. But given half a chance and a small window for exploration there was no turning back. Sister Maranatha finishes her reflection on the difference between pre and post-Vatican II monastic life with: “We weren’t being stimulated; you weren’t asked to make decisions, you just followed the rules, in some ways like children until we went through this change of renewal and we learned to manage a budget” (Kulzer). The reflection encapsulates the essence of renewal. Before the Second Vatican Council Sisters existed on a very low rung in the hierarchy. They were not given a voice and did not question tradition. And then these women undertook the renewal mandate and created a community that reflected

their own values, insights and ideas. Sister Maranatha is so practical and perceptive in her reflection. The renewal happened and Sisters learned to manage a budget, an empowering and useful skill.

At the heart of their faith lies *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. This timeless book has inspired the lives of countless women and men over the last fifteen hundred years to explore their faith through simplicity and hospitality. It has been the center of a rich tradition of prayer and work, and has informed the mission of many within the Church. Sister Merle reflects: “At the heart of my life is the perception about Church and community and that I see us called to model what is at the heart of the Gospel: living together and praying for one another. I think that is what human beings are called to do, to have concern about the people of our world.” (Kulzer). The Sisters of Saint Benedict live intentional, communal lives. At its core, their monastic lifestyle seeks God through the Gospel. For these women this means prayer and work in tandem. In their renewal and the movement away from strict rules Sisters maintained and strengthened their connection with God. And for them, this is the purpose of their lives: to pursue and more fully understand God.

In choosing my thesis topic I wanted to answer the question: why stay in the hierarchical, patriarchal Catholic Church? As a young woman who has been raised Catholic, I feel equal parts in love with the theology and repelled by the sexist power structures. I was drawn to research, interview and reflect on the lives of women who have spent almost their entire lives dedicated to the pursuit of God within the Church, balancing their own identity with a structure that devalues their input. They taught me

that there is room within the Catholic faith for exploration, for self-assertion, for unending love of God and community. *The Rule of Saint Benedict* is a timeless guidebook for those who seek simplicity and spiritual depth. For Benedictines, it is not about the accumulation of wealth or power, but the search for God. And this is an important distinction that must be made. To advocate for independence of thought and a more communal power structure within the Monastery is not a challenge to Saint Benedict's call away from secular power. Indeed, confronting the hierarchical Church is one genuine and important way of living out *The Rule*. Saint Benedict warns against secular power and the Sisters from St. Joseph, Minnesota embody this struggle as they live within the tension of the patriarchal Church and their own agency.

These women taught me that even in the face of structural limits and conflict it is possible to create a meaningful life. From the pre-Vatican II years in which the love of God drew hundreds of women to monastic life to the great effort of renewal and finding their own voice, the Sisters opened themselves to the possibilities of a life lived in the pursuit of God. There is a struggle that defines the lives of women religious in the past half century. Their view is unique and a vital piece of Church history. These women have the incredible talent of living in paradox and yet they are able to live meaningful, rich lives.

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