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Donning the Habit: Examination of Catholic Sisterhood as a Discourse Community

Have you ever heard the words “vocation” or “discernment,” or wondered what your purpose is in this world? For many, these topics send them running in the opposite direction, not wanting to think about or plan for the future. For others, their calling is loud and clear. In the Catholic Church, there are three central and distinct vocations a person may be called to including single life, married life, and religious life. For women, religious life is a calling to sisterhood, which could be with one of hundreds of different religious orders throughout the world. One of these religious orders is the Congregation of Divine Providence (CDP), a well-established religious life community for Catholic women called to dedicate their lives to serving God. Women called to this community take vows of poverty, celibate chastity, and obedience, and they live their lives by these principles (Congregation). Their spiritual lives are governed by the idea of Providence Spirituality, which calls the women to let the virtues of poverty, simplicity, charity, and abandonment to Divine Providence guide them (Congregation).

There are currently three provinces of CDP, and the one in focus for this ethnography research will be the American Province based in Melbourne, Kentucky with 100 Sisters currently serving throughout the United States. Currently, from what I could find (or could not find) no research has been done on the Congregation of Divine Providence, and little to no studies have been conducted on Catholic religious orders for females in general. The research for this essay was conducted with the intention of gaining insights into CDP as a discourse community and

discovering how a woman becomes a Sister of Divine Providence. From in-person interviews and responses to an online survey emailed to all of the Sisters, I was able to establish with certainty that CDP is a discourse community and gain insight into the real struggles these women faced when they made the decision to join religious life including the costs of affiliation of joining, the literacies they had to acquire as part of the community, and finally the joy and fulfillment they found because of their decision.

For this research, a discourse community was defined by the criteria given by John Swales, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Michigan. In his article “The Concept of Discourse Community,” Swales provides “six defining characteristics that [are] necessary and sufficient for identifying a group of individuals as a discourse community” (220). The first of these characteristics is that the group must have “a broadly agreed upon set of common public goals” (Swales 220). CDP has a formal constitution, which articulates all details of the community including the exact goals and generalized methods of how those goals will be achieved. Further, every five years, chosen Sisters of the American Province come together and write a Chapter Call, which is a statement written to remind the Sisters of their call and help them to renew their focus and maintain direction in their ministries and spiritual lives. The 2014 Chapter Call is pictured in figure one of the appendix.

The second characteristic Swales provides is that “a discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members” (221). This is evident in CDP through face-to-face communication at Chapters with all the Sisters, community life, email, Facebook, a CDP website, prayer, and many other methods.

The third characteristic is that “a discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback” (Swales 221). The Sisters have daily morning

and evening prayer with the members of their communities in which they pray together and reflect on the day. This is a time to share about their lives and what is happening in each of their ministries for which they work. Further, Chapter meetings are biannual formal gatherings of all the Sisters of the American Province to come together to discuss and vote on business matters within the community. All of these interactions among members serve to share information and feedback.

The fourth criterion according to Swales is that “a discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims” (221). Some of the forms of intercommunication listed previously are of various genres and serve to further the aims of the community. The constitution, for example, is a genre that formally communicates the goals of the Congregation and the expectations of Sisters of the community that will help those goals be achieved. Another genre used for the furtherance of CDP’s goals is their online website (www.cdpkentucky.org). This site provides a wealth of knowledge about CDP, its ministries and goals and how to begin the journey of becoming a Sister of Divine Providence. The site is accessible to anyone via the internet, so it communicates all of this information to a large audience. Finally, the Bible is also a genre used by the Sisters to guide them on their missions.

The fifth requirement of a discourse community is that it “has acquired some specific lexis” (Swales 222). For CDP, this lexis is in the form of Catholic and religious terms that may be unfamiliar to people who are not Sisters, even if they are Catholic. From an interview with Sr. Leslie Keener, a few of the lexis terms I heard included “postulant,” “novitiate,” “Canon law,” and “exclaustration,” just to name a few. These terms and others were common

vocabulary for Sr. Leslie, but as an outsider, I had to ask her to pause and explain what these unfamiliar words meant.

Finally, the sixth requirement of a discourse community according to Swales is that the “community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discourse expertise” (222). Having “experienced” Sisters in the community is crucial to the existence of the community because of the journey each woman must take to become a Sister. The journey is an extensive period of prayer and discernment, which depends greatly upon Sisters of the community who act as mentors to aspirants and postulants (those women considering a call to religious life and CDP specifically). Because CDP satisfies each of these criterion put forth by Swales, it can be classified and examined as a discourse community.

Discourse communities are complex and evolving and each is unique to itself, especially in the ways of how a person becomes a member and begins to feel part of the community. As mentioned above, the process of becoming a Sister of Divine Providence is a long and complex journey that takes strong faith and commitment. Sr. Leslie Keener has been a formal member of CDP for eight years. She joined the community in 2008 at age 33 and now works as a campus minister for the University of Cincinnati Newman Club through St. Monica – St. George Parish in Clifton, Ohio. In an interview with Sr. Leslie, she explained to me her process of becoming a Sister. She said that when she first began discerning, she had conversations with a Sister at the parish she was attending and began to attend dinner with Sisters of different communities in the local areas. She was considered an aspirant and was simply trying to gauge whether or not CDP was her calling.

The first official step in her discernment process was then to become a postulant. During this time, it was her opportunity to ask any questions she had about becoming a Sister. In her

interview, Sr. Leslie mentioned, “I asked lots of questions. [The Sisters] remind me that I used to ask deeply personal questions sometimes that would like, I didn’t realize I was doing that, but like, ‘so what is it like to live celibacy? What’s hard?’ Like that’s not easy to answer if you don’t know somebody! ... I would just ask these at like breakfast or whatever.” This was the first official step in her discernment process and trying to determine if CDP was the community she would commit the rest of her life to. As a postulant, Leslie sold her apartment and many of her possessions and moved into a community of Sisters. She recalled being absolutely terrified. At that time, she still had her job and retained her paychecks for herself and took a year to pay off loans and continue to discern her calling. At the end of one year, Leslie became a novice. At this point, she left her job, lived on the budget set by the nuns of \$45 per month, and volunteered in the community. After exactly one year as a novice, Leslie took her first vows, which are real vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but they are time-sensitive in that they are easily dissolved if a woman chooses to leave the community before she takes her final vows. For Sr. Leslie and her personal discernment process, she made her final vows in 2008, five years after making her first vows. This general, overall process is the same for most women joining the community.

From Sr. Leslie’s story, it became clear that joining a religious life community involves a good deal of sacrifice. She was required to give up many freedoms that a single person enjoys such as a working, receiving a personal income, and living independently. Additionally, the vows and fundamental virtues of the Sisters of Divine Providence place even greater sacrifice upon these women. The Constitutions of the Congregation of Divine Providence lists:

Abandonment to Providence disposes us to live in this world like pilgrims having no fixed abode...Content with little, we strive to leave behind the goods of this

world...Simplicity requires that we be direct and true in our relations making no compromise for the sake of appearance or self interest...Moved by the compassion of Christ for the needy and the suffering, we enter into their joy, their misery...

Each of these four fundamental virtues – abandonment to Providence, poverty, simplicity, and apostolic charity – require much of the women who are called to live by them. Ann Johns, a professor in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric Studies at San Diego State University, would refer to these sacrifices as the “cost of affiliation” for joining the discourse community. In her article “Discourse Communities and Communities of Practice: Membership, Conflict, and Diversity,” Johns writes, “[Members] often must drop, or at least diminish in importance, their affiliations to their home cultures in order to take on the values, languages, and genres of their disciplinary culture” (511). This is evident for the Sisters of Divine Providence.

In a survey sent out to the Sisters, one question asked, “What do you feel you had to give up to become a Sister of Divine Providence?” (Ulm). Sr. Barbra Marie Rohe answered this question with, “Living independently and making choices on my own.” One can imagine this is a difficult lifestyle to adopt because most people are raised to be independent and long for the day they will be out from under their parents’ thumbs. For Sr. Barbara specifically, she joined the convent (took her first vows) at age 27. Shortly after she ever really had a chance to be on her own, she was in the convent living a structured life that may have sometimes felt rigid and oppressive. In community, Sr. Barbara gave up some portion of her freedom. She no longer chose with whom she lived or even how she spent her days. When asked to describe the emotions she felt during her earliest experiences as a postulant and living in community, part of Sr. Barbara’s answer was that she felt “frustration and annoyance living with others [she] didn’t understand.” Each Sister is placed in a community household with a number of other Sisters,

whom they may have never met before move-in day. I can imagine the difficulties that would be encountered when strangers of different backgrounds are thrown together and expected to live with and care for one another. Some kind of compromise will often accompany affiliation with any discourse community. Becoming a member of a larger community places demands on the individuals and often asks them to give up some portion of their independence or individuality.

Another cost of affiliation for joining CDP that 16 of the 25 Sisters surveyed said in their response was that they gave up the possibility of ever having a husband and children. Obviously taking a vow of celibacy eliminates this option, and as a regular practice, religious women do not adopt children except under special and usually rare conditions. For many women, the idea of never having the companionship of a husband or family is a difficult decision to make.

However, women who join the Congregation of Divine Providence gain a community of sisterhood. This is a community rooted in faith and upheld by love and a common goal. Another part of Sr. Barbara's response about the emotions she felt as a postulate was: "happiness knowing others cared about me and were interested in me." A religious life community is unlike any other; a unique bond is created among these faithful women. In addition to having each other, they have the Lord. As phrased by Sr. Paula Gohs in her survey response:

I gave up marriage and children with my vocation to be a woman religious. I discovered that instead of focusing primarily on family, I was available to [focus on] hundreds of people through my ministries, so I was never pining for what I gave up...My best friend and spouse is Jesus Christ through my vows and community. I am richly blessed!!!

The community created among the Sisters and each of their relationships with Christ help them to overcome the costs they must "pay" to become religious women. Support from fellow community members is crucial to the success and continuation of any discourse community.

Everyone will face difficulties when making sacrifices to join a new group, so support and guidance from other community members is essential to bringing in new people and maintain membership in the discourse community.

Besides just having to give up certain freedoms to become members of CDP, aspiring Sisters must also learn and adopt specific and unique literacies that allow them to formally become and also feel like they are truly members of this long-established discourse community. According to James Paul Gee, Professor of Reading at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, in his article “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction,” “A Discourse is a sort of “identity kit” which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (484). For many of the Sisters in CDP, one of the roles they had to fulfill was that of a teacher. Some had had a teaching education prior to entering the Congregation, but some, like Sr. Virginia Ann Wolfzorn, obtained their education after joining the community. Sr. Virginia wrote in her survey response: “I received my AB in education and took History and Latin classes since that is what I was going to teach in High School!” This literacy of teaching had to be learned in order for the women called to be teachers to fulfill their role within the community. The education served as part of the “instructions” that made them recognizable as religious educators.

Further, as religious Sisters, these women naturally become literate in the Bible, which is one of the main genres used for communication. In the community, the Sisters pray with and reflect on passages in the Bible. The life and teachings of Jesus Christ are the guidance for the way they live their lives. Additionally, these stories and teachings are used to minister to the needs of the poor and suffering and all the people that the Sisters of CDP interact with on a daily basis. Literacy in reading and understanding the books of the Bible allow Sisters to apply its

lessons to everyday life and share those lessons with one another and with the world. These kinds of traditional literacies form the basis for the discourse community and help facilitate meaningful and fluid communication from member to member and from members to the outside world.

Beyond these educational literacies, survey responses from 25 of the Sisters made it clear that each woman had her own, individual skills to hone as she assimilated into CDP. It was also evident from the responses that many of the literacies needed in order to be a fully functioning member of this community are learned and honed over a lifetime. An anonymous response to the survey inquiry to list some skills you had to develop to become a Sister of Divine Providence was a good summation of the answers given by many of the Sisters:

Develop skills of: being a good educator, being a good community member, being a good listener, being supportive of community members and each person I meet, deepening a relationship with the "Beloved" by personal & communal prayer, deepening the life of living the vows, seeing each person as a gift of God and treating [them] with dignity... of course, this is all a life long journey.

These skills add to the repertoire of each woman and help her to adopt the appearance and attitude of and become recognizable as a Sister of Divine Providence. Becoming literate in each of these skills, as well as others, helps each woman make the transition from a single woman to a woman married to Christ and truly feel like a member of both a household community and the larger community of Sisters. In most discourse communities, as new members adopt the language and literacies of the community, they begin to feel a true sense of belonging and eventually, new members become indistinguishable from experienced members.

Thus far, we have examined the challenges a woman bears when entering into a religious life community as well as the skills she must diligently learn and practice over a lifetime to truly become a Sister of Divine Providence. The question now becomes, why go through all this trouble? Are these women satisfied letting go of the lives they leave behind and joining CDP, and if they are, what brings them this satisfaction? Early on in my research process, the answers to these questions became clear. A personal and intimate relationship with Jesus Christ is what these women seek above all else and joining CDP helps deeply root and facilitate this relationship over a lifetime. In a personal interview with Sr. Florence (Flo) Anyabuonwu, the newest member of the community, I asked about the emotions she has faced becoming a member of this community. In her response, she expressed nothing but love for her community members whom she feels love her deeply, care about her personally, and support her always. Sr. Flo went on to say, “I feel very fulfilled. I love my life. So when somebody is feeling like that then you know you’re in the right place...I love my relationship with God. That is the biggest thing, my relationship with God... My needs are met. My life is good.” Her contentment in life stems wholly from her trust in the Lord and His Divine Providence.

Survey responses offered sentiments similar to those of Sr. Flo. The last question of the survey asked, “What have you gained from becoming a Sister of Divine Providence?” and the 25 responses were filled with answers including a deeper relationship with God, a meaningful prayer life, and a wonderful community of like-minded and motivated women. Sr. M. Theresa Bowman’s response to the question was that she has gained

Everything! A deep understanding and love of [God’s] Providence; a deeper experience of community, unity, wonderful friends, openness to all people, including all those I have been in ministry with and children I taught as well as working among people of different cultures.

I have had many more opportunities as a CDP than I could have dreamed of or could have been possible apart from my CDP way of life... I am forever grateful.

As mentioned, many of the Sisters echoed these same responses. Clearly, the lifetime journey of joining and participating in a religious life community is one of long-lasting fulfillment and joy and is unlike any other path of life. Having a common, individual desire motivates and unites all the women of this community. This kind of a shared and central motivation is what will draw members of any discourse community together and will encourage them to keep striving toward the goals of the whole community.

Examination of the Congregation of Divine Providence as a discourse community led to realizations about the women of this Congregation that can be broadened to any discourse community. There will most likely be some kind of struggle or difficulty associated with joining. For CDP, women are called to give up the lives they lead and accept a new lifestyle with a new focus and specific goals. There is a seemingly high cost of affiliation for joining CDP and much that each woman leaves behind when she accepts her calling to religious life. Anytime someone joins a discourse community, the individual must give up part of his or her unique identity or culture and adopt that of the group. Further, to assimilate into the discourse community, there are certain literacies each individual will have to gain. Through all of these challenges to attaining membership though, there is one common thread. For CDP, that is the desire of each woman to seek a relationship with God, but for any discourse community having a shared goal and underlying motivation among all members of the group keeps the community alive. It motivates each individual to keep striving toward the common goal of the community because he or she knows that the goals align with his or her own personal hopes and desires. This commonality among members then helps each member to support one another. Each

person is facing similar difficulties striving to achieve his or her personal goals within the discourse community, so everyone does what he or she can to help one another through the tough times. This builds fellowship among the members of the discourse community and allows them to grow in trust and maybe even friendship. A shared, personal desire within a discourse community is what inspires the individuals to endeavor to achieve the goals of the community and always support one another along the journey.

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Appendix

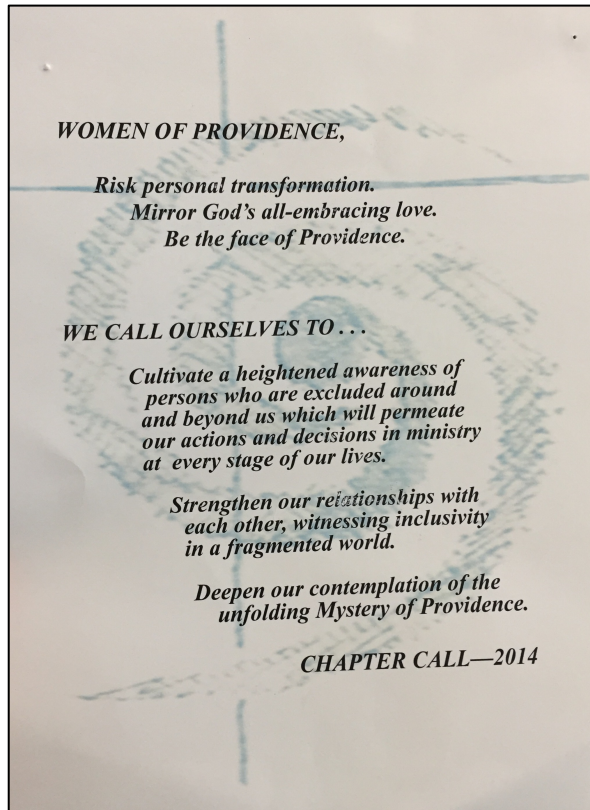


Figure 1: 2014 Chapter Call

Survey Questions:

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. How old were you when you took your first vows?
4. How old were you when you took your final vows?
5. What would you guess is the average age of Sisters in CDP?
6. In what city do you live?
7. How many other Sisters do you live with?
8. What are the ages of the Sisters you live in community with?

9. Please select your preferred methods of communication with Sisters in the American Province:

- a. Phone call
- b. Email
- c. Text
- d. Letter/Mail
- e. In person
- f. Facebook or other social media
- g. Other...

10. Please list some skills you had to develop to become a Sister of Divine Providence.

11. What do you feel you had to give up to become a Sister of Divine Providence?

12. Did you face any opposition to your choice to become a Sister of Divine Providence?

Please Explain.

13. Please describe your earliest experiences (as a postulant) with CDP and living in community. What emotions did you experience during that time?

14. What have you gained from becoming a Sister of Divine Providence?

15. Is it okay if I potentially use your name in my essay?

- a. Yes, you may use my real name
- b. No, please use a pseudonym