

Habits of Change: An Oral History of American Nuns

Carole Garibaldi Rogers

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“Nuns defy stereotypes,” says Carole Garibaldi Rogers, whose compelling collection of interviews with ninety-six women religious highlights the dramatic changes that they have had to confront during the past fifty years. *Habits of Change: An Oral History of American Nuns* was first published in hardcover as *Poverty, Chastity, and Change: Lives of Contemporary American Nuns*; the updated volume gives an intimate glimpse into the nuns’ lives and their service on the front lines of social and religious change, including the women’s and peace movements, the struggle for racial equality, and work on behalf of the most vulnerable members of society.

Garibaldi asked women from over forty religious communities, most of whom had entered the convent before Vatican II, why they had opted for religious life, what changes they had experienced over time, and why, when so many options are open to women today, they had chosen to remain. The responses revealed a wide range of reasons for choosing religious life, including the early loss of a mother, admiration for a particular nun, the desire for a specific work or service, or having felt called by God. Surprisingly, not all the nuns claimed to have a deep and devout prayer life, and, especially during the years before the Second Vatican Council, many of them had struggled with rules and regulations that appeared to them to be arbitrary and excessively restrictive. Some told of having been forbidden to attend a mother’s funeral, of not being allowed to drive, of being removed from fulfilling work and re-assigned, and of personal conflicts with superiors, priests, and other nuns. Especially challenging was the 2009 announcement by the Vatican that their lives and doctrinal beliefs were to be investigated. “Women religious have often been in trouble with the Church,” said writer, teacher, international speaker, and interviewee Sister Joan Chittister, “they know that they are in a long line of troublemakers.”

With the aging of current Sisters and the number of new vocations declining drastically, Roman Catholic nuns in the United States are now facing the possibility that monastic religious life, as they have known it, may no longer be viable; while some see the end of their way of life as inevitable, others are hopefully leaping into the twenty-first century and standing in the gaps created by injustice and faltering social services.

Garibaldi’s richly detailed oral history will be welcomed by all who seek a deeper understanding of women’s religious communities; those who are exploring such a life for themselves will find the answers they seek in these frank, honest, and moving stories.

Carole Garibaldi Rogers has been an oral historian with a focus on women and religion for more than twenty years.

KRISTINE MORRIS (September / October 2011)

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