A Widening Horizon Catholic Sisterhoods On The Northern Plains, 1874-1910

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Catholic sisterhoods have been part of American life since the colonial period, first as operators of charitable institutions to aid the needy and then, in the nineteenth century, as teachers of both immigrant children in the East and Indian children at mission schools on reservations in the West. Conventional historical studies have either slighted or ignored their contributions to the settlement of the northern plains, and recent articles on Catholic missions in history journals do little better. In both secular and church histories, Catholic sisters are traditionally pictured as silent representatives of female purity or as extensions of the church hierarchy on the frontier. A more recent stereotype attributes radical feminist motives of separation from male society to female religious orders.1

The experience of the Catholic sisterhoods on the northern plains is far more diverse than the stereotypes would suggest. Among the more than fifteen groups who attempted to bring religion and education to reservation missions and farming communities in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, four religious orders stand out for their successful adaptation to the frontier environment: the Grey Nuns from Montreal in Canada, the Sisters of the Presentation from Ireland, the Benedictine Sisters from Switzerland, and the Sisters of St. Francis from Germany. Other sisterhoods were unable to found lasting institutions and retreated to the more populous regions from whence they came. By contrast, the four groups treated in this study succeeded where others failed. Through their resourcefulness and their flexibility in responding to unforeseen circumstances, they not only established and maintained schools but also started hospitals and brought much-needed health care to the people of the region.

The challenges facing these sisterhoods in the often hostile physical environment of the western frontier required traits and abilities that are often missing from stereotypes of religious orders of women. The image of the sister leading a cloistered, confined existence, cut off from the “evils” of the outside world, does not

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fit the women of the four orders who made the most lasting contributions to the social development of the northern plains. These sisterhoods all came from outside of the United States. None of them had any experience with the people or the environment of the plains. For three of the groups, English was a new language to be learned, in addition to the various dialects spoken by the Indian tribes. One group was accustomed to very cloistered living, and none had previous experience in nursing. U.S. government Indian policy during those years was inconsistent. Despite these obstacles, however, these four orders became well known for their schools and hospitals within the thirty-six-year period from 1874 to 1910.

Of recent foreign origin, the four sisterhoods comprised a part of the late-nineteenth-century influx of immigrants to the West. All four groups began their tenure in Dakota Territory as missionaries to the Indians; the Presentation Sisters and the Benedictine Sisters added non-Indian parish schools to their apostolate, while the Grey Nuns and the Sisters of St. Francis confined their activities to the Sioux of the Fort Totten, Standing Rock, Rosebud, and Pine Ridge reservations. These same two orders retained ties with their motherhouses—in Montreal for the Grey Nuns and in Buffalo, New York, for the Franciscans—while the Presentation Sisters established motherhouses in Fargo, North Dakota, and Aberdeen, South Dakota, and the Benedictines founded a motherhouse in Yankton, South Dakota. Three of the four groups—the Presentation Sisters, the Benedictines, and the Franciscans—arrived through the auspices of Martin Marty, OSB, the first bishop of Dakota Territory. The Grey Nuns started their school because the Devils Lake Reservation had been assigned to the Catholic church as part of President Grant's peace policy, and the Indian agent invited them because he was familiar with their order since his cousin was a member.  

The Grey Nuns were a Canadian order founded in Montreal in the 1730s to serve the poor, the ill, and the aged. They had a long record of service among the Indians of both the eastern and western provinces. Thus, when they received a request for aid in founding a school among the Devils Lake Sioux from Indian Agent William Forbes in 1874, their mother superior agreed to send four of her community's members on the long journey from Quebec to Dakota Territory. They envisioned no difficulty in a Canadian order working in the United States because the Grey Nuns were already working in missions in Ohio and Massachusetts that had been started several years earlier.  

The Sisters of the Presentation were an order founded in Ireland in 1776. Like the Grey Nuns, they were dedicated to helping the poor, and their activity in Ireland centered on educating children from the slums of Irish cities. When Bishop Marty visited a Presentation convent in Dublin on his way back to the United States from Rome in 1879, he told the sisters of his desperate need for teachers at mission schools he planned to found on reservations in Dakota Territory. His visit proved successful; three Presentation Sisters and two novices accepted the challenge and left the security of their Irish convents for the uncertainty of the Yankton Reservation in 1880. Some Irish Presentation Sisters were already working in the United States—in San Francisco and New York City—but nothing in the sisters' training or background prepared them for the hardship of the Dakota Territory environment or the rigors of educating the children of the Yankton Sioux.

The Benedictine Sisters took a somewhat different route to the Standing Rock Reservation. This group had left Switzerland for the United States in 1874 because of difficulties with government authorities over their teaching activities, and they settled in Missouri near a Benedictine monastery, where they met Abbot Martin Marty. In 1881, after he had been named bishop of Dakota Territory, he asked the sisters to staff a school at Standing Rock, one of only two reservations in Dakota Territory assigned to the Catholic church under Grant's peace policy. As the years passed and more Benedictine Sisters from the Missouri motherhouse came to work at Standing Rock, the mother
superior and her council decided to move their headquarters to Yankton, Dakota's territorial capitol, in order to be closer to both the reservation and the bishop, whose residence was in the same city. 5

When Grant's peace policy came to an end in the early 1880s, other reservations in Dakota were opened to Catholic missionaries. In 1886 Bishop Marty and the Jesuits on Rosebud Reservation invited the Sisters of St. Francis to staff the school they were building at St. Francis Mission. This group of nuns was part of a congregation of sisters who had come to the United States from Germany in the 1870s as a result of pressure from the government of Otto von Bismarck. They had founded a motherhouse in Buffalo, New York, and operated schools in such far-flung areas as California and Nebraska. Like the Presentation and Benedictine sisters, the Franciscans had no previous experience in teaching Indian children, but they were successful enough at Rosebud to help found Holy Rosary Mission on Pine Ridge Reservation three years later. 6

All four sisterhoods experienced the harsh climate and difficult frontier conditions endured by the various groups that settled on the northern plains in the late 1800s. The blizzard of 1880-81 and the ensuing flooding forced the Presentation Sisters to abandon their convent at Wheeler in southern Dakota in the summer of 1881. Another blizzard, in 1888, took the life of Sister Wilhelmina Kaufmann, a Benedictine nun who got lost in the snow and froze to death. More than a hundred Dakotans suffered a similar fate during that disaster. Fire was another danger that plagued frontier settlers. Two orders, the Grey Nuns and the Sisters of St. Francis, watched their schools burn to the ground—the Grey Nuns in 1883 and the Franciscans in 1910—but both rebuilt their destroyed schools. The Presentation Sisters left Wheeler and migrated west to the Black Hills in hopes of staffing a more secure school in Deadwood. The sisters also learned to take the rumblings of winter storms seriously. 7

Aside from the harsh climate, there were other dangers the women encountered because of the difficult frontier conditions. One of these was disease. Their school records all report illnesses such as measles, whooping cough, and scarlet fever among their students, and the sisters themselves were not immune to such ailments. The Sisters of St. Francis experienced a high rate of tuberculosis, with ten of their members at the missions in South Dakota dying of the disease between 1885 and 1910. The rigors of homesteading also brought about difficulties for two groups of sisters, the Grey Nuns and the Benedictines. In one instance, the Benedictine Sisters agreed to homestead a section of land close to their convent near Redfield, and the two members who were sent to the forsaken claim shanty had to endure scarcity of food as well as loneliness. As one sister commented on the privations, "One can imagine the insecurity and fear as they spent the long hours of the night in their primitive shanty." 8

All four sisterhoods came to Dakota Territory to serve as teachers; some taught at mission schools on reservations and others in parish schools in the growing number of farming communities in the eastern part of the territory. The Grey Nuns, the Benedictines, and the Franciscans experienced similar situations at mission schools on the Fort Totten, Standing Rock, Rosebud, Pine Ridge, and Crow Creek reservations. In addition to coping with the hostile physical environment, they dealt with the language barrier, with changes in federal Indian education policy, and with developments in curriculum at their respective mission schools.

Since the mid-1800s, government officials had issued annual contracts to missionaries by which they would allocate rations and a financial stipend for every child enrolled in school in return for the academic and industrial training the missionaries were to provide. When the Grey Nuns began their school at St. Michael's Mission in 1874, their contract called for payment of $150 plus rations to each sister, but by 1886, when the Sisters of St. Francis began teaching at St. Francis Mission, they received $50 a year plus rations for every student. 9 By the late 1880s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs abandoned the contract system in favor of
government-operated boarding schools, and most mission schools were either closed or brought under federal control. By 1890 both the Grey Nuns at Fort Totten and the Benedictines at Standing Rock had become government employees. Offsetting fears that their schools would lose their religious atmosphere and autonomy was the fact that the nuns received relatively high salaries as members of the civil service. In both cases, a teacher received $600 per year, and a cook or a seamstress was paid $500 annually.\textsuperscript{10}

For the Sisters of St. Francis on the Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservations there was a different solution to the problem of dwindling government contracts. When federal support for the mission schools was withdrawn in the late 1890s, the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions attempted to continue funding the schools with private donations, but sources of funds were few. Thus the sisters found it necessary to economize even more than they usually did in the face of a financial crisis due to the loss of contract monies and less-than-adequate private funds. The problem was finally solved in the early 1900s when the government, with the consent of the Indian parents, began using tribal education funds to support mission schools.\textsuperscript{11}

Another problem the sisters faced on the reservations was the language barrier. These difficulties were especially complex because of the variety of languages spoken and the necessity of giving instruction in English. The Grey Nuns spoke French and some English, while the Benedictines spoke German and even less English than the Grey Nuns. The Sisters of St. Francis had the least difficulty with English because most of their members who served as teachers at the missions were Americans of European ancestry.\textsuperscript{12} At first the Grey Nuns solved their problems with the Sioux language by hiring a mixed-blood woman who served as an interpreter; they also began learning the Sioux dialect as well as increasing their knowledge of English. A good command of English was even more important after 1890, when they became government employees, because their school was evaluated by an official school inspector who did not look favorably on the use of either the French or Sioux language in the classroom.\textsuperscript{13} The Benedictines were also plagued with the necessity of learning English, and their mother superior in Yankton was concerned that more attention should be paid to study of the language. Because the University of South Dakota was close by, the sisters built a convent in Vermillion, where the university was located, in order to take advantage of educational resources there.\textsuperscript{14}

Despite language difficulties the sisters who worked with Indians participated in developing the curricula at their schools. The three groups followed similar educational plans. Students spent half a day in academic instruction and the other half in manual labor. The academic subjects taught in the Indian schools included English, mathematics, geography, and history; manual labor instruction consisted of needlework, sewing, cooking, and cleaning for the girls and stockraising and farming techniques for the boys. Students also performed useful duties around the school compound, such as mending clothing, carrying firewood, and shoveling snow in the winter.\textsuperscript{15} The mission schools were visited by government school inspectors who evaluated the sisters’ teaching methods and encouraged them to use less recitation and drill and more discussion in their classes. All three groups of sisters received high marks for their students’ skill in the craft work produced in the needlework and sewing classes. As the years passed, the Bureau of Indian Affairs provided textbooks and a course of study, and the sisters kept records of their students’ reactions to their textbooks. For example, one Franciscan sister wrote that a text called Maxwell’s Primary Lessons “proved very interesting to the younger students.” The sisters also attended teachers’ institutes; one in St. Paul and another in Sioux City, according to their superintendent, “had a salutary stimulating influence on our teachers during the entire school year. From the second one attended I hope still more beneficial results.”\textsuperscript{16}

Besides teaching on reservations, two of the
orders treated in this study were instrumental in bringing education to the Catholic parishes being founded in the growing number of farming communities in eastern Dakota Territory. The Presentation Sisters had come to the territory to teach on the Yankton Reservation. They founded a small school at Wheeler, ninety miles northwest of Yankton, but the building that served as both convent and school was destroyed by flooding after only a few months. Then followed a fruitless journey to Deadwood, where they had hoped to start a school for the children of miners. The nuns were horrified at the rowdiness of Deadwood’s townspeople, and they soon left to return to Wheeler. One sister wrote that “conditions were against community life—in fact life at all.” They even considered returning to Ireland because the bishop had no immediate suggestions as to where they could settle. For several months they boarded with a group of Mercy Sisters in Yankton until a priest at Fargo, in the northern portion of the territory, asked them to open an academy in his parish. These were the events that led to the Presentation Sisters’ decision to forsake reservation teaching for work among the growing number of Catholic non-Indian settlers.

The Benedictines were increasing in number because of recent arrivals from Switzerland and new candidates from the United States. In 1883, when they received a request from the bishop that they send some sisters to open a school near Redfield in east-central Dakota Territory, they decided to undertake parish teaching in addition to their work at the Standing Rock mission.

From these beginnings in Fargo and Redfield, the two orders spread their influence throughout the eastern half of North and South Dakota by the end of the 1890s. The Presentation Sisters, who were asked to staff a school in Aberdeen, some one hundred miles south of Fargo, founded a second motherhouse there after statehood put the two cities in separate episcopal jurisdictions. By the turn of the century, the sisters from Aberdeen, an offshoot of the original Presentation group that settled in Fargo, were engaged in teaching at six parish schools in South Dakota, and the Benedictines could claim seven such schools.

The sisters teaching at parish schools did not have to deal with the Bureau of Indian Affairs or missionary priests, but nevertheless their activities were scrutinized by pastors and parishioners. They had the usual difficulties adjusting to the frontier communities as well as problems with finances and curricula as they struggled to offer education, along with religion, to their young Catholic students. The sisters offset the expense of running their schools by charging tuition, such as the $3.50 in weekly fees paid by students attending Presentation Academy in Aberdeen, but after expenses were met, the amount of money they took in allowed little for reimbursing the teaching nuns for their living expenses. The sums they earned were paltry indeed—less than $25 per month—and the sisters were forced to run parish fairs and bazaars as well as to venture out on “begging tours” in order to finance their schools. The Benedictines were fortunate because the salaries earned by the sisters at Standing Rock were high enough to subsidize their teachers at parish schools, but the Presentation Sisters had no such support to rely on. During hard times in South Dakota in the 1890s, several of the schools they staffed were threatened with closing, and the sisters were forced to beg for food to feed themselves. One sister in Aberdeen remembered that the convent residents raised a white flag in back of the building when the sisters were in need of food, in the hope that they would receive aid from neighbors.

Despite financial difficulties, the parish schools offered ambitious courses of study, often relying on the individual talents of the sisters to supplement the regular offerings of classes in reading, writing, and arithmetic. For example, the curriculum at Presentation Academy in Aberdeen included classes in music and art along with English, history, geography, and mathematics, and the Benedictines near Redfield offered courses in German in addition to those other subjects. They also taught religion, and like other recent immigrants, they did their
best to train their students to keep their faith and to fit into American society as well.23

Though the four sisterhoods in this study came to Dakota Territory to serve as teachers, first on the reservations and then in the farming community parishes, it was in the field of health care that three of them were able to reach a larger portion of the population and spread their influence to include non-Catholics as well as Catholics. The Grey Nuns, the Presentation Sisters, and the Benedictine Sisters made significant contributions in providing emergency health care services when no other groups were prepared to meet this need. From the time of their arrival at Fort Totten Reservation, the Grey Nuns had opened their doors to the sick and administered medicines and attended to the comfort of ailing Indians. This service was so important to the reservation that the government Indian agent also encouraged the sisters to visit Indian homes to care for the sick. One of the nuns, Sister Auxelie Lajemmerais, was designated the agency physician by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Although she served in this capacity for nine years, she received no financial remuneration for her work. In the late 1880s the Grey Nuns opened an infirmary near the mission in an attempt to meet more fully the health care needs of reservation dwellers.24

In Aberdeen the Presentation Sisters offered their convent to serve as an infirmary during a diphtheria epidemic that struck the city in the late 1890s. Because they met this emergency so admirably, and since Aberdeen was in desperate need of a hospital, city leaders met with the superior, Mother Joseph Butler, to persuade her to build such a facility. Mother Butler accepted the request, even though the project presented a number of problems regarding finances, training for nurses, and the Presentation Order’s rule for living. Because she knew that the order had insufficient funds for building a hospital and that no help was forthcoming from the diocese, Mother Butler obtained a loan from a local banker. Fortunately, a new member of the sisterhood had received nurse’s training before she became a nun, and she was willing to teach the skills she had learned to other Presentation Sisters. The Presentation Order’s constitution made no mention of health care as an apostolate, and the order had evolved solely as a teaching sisterhood, but Mother Butler persuaded the sisters to change their rule to include nursing by reminding them that their founder, Honoria Nagle, had not only operated schools in the slums of Cork, Ireland, but had ministered to the sick as well. Once this hurdle was cleared, Mother Butler supervised construction of a fifteen-bed facility to be known as St. Luke’s Hospital. From this beginning, the Presentation Sisters later added three more hospitals and schools of nursing as the order became a leader in health care delivery in South Dakota.25

The Benedictine Sisters entered the field of health care by a different route. In the late 1890s, they were told by Bishop Thomas O’Gorman to finance and staff a hospital in Yankton. Fearing his displeasure if they refused, their prioress, Mother Mathilda Cattani, accepted the charge in spite of the expense and the sisters’ inexperience. Like the Presentation Sisters, the Benedictines borrowed the funds they needed to convert their former motherhouse into a thirty-bed hospital. Mother Cattani faced the same kinds of barriers that Mother Butler encountered, but they were quickly overcome. Because the Benedictines had no local members with nursing experience, the prioress sent six sisters to receive instruction at Catholic hospitals in St. Paul, Milwaukee, and Omaha while the hospital was being prepared. There were few difficulties with adding health care to their constitution because, even though this particular group of Swiss Benedictines had worked only as teachers, the Rule of St. Benedict, which they followed, contained an entire chapter on care of the sick. The new facility, known as Sacred Heart Hospital, eventually grew to serve as a regional medical center, while the sisters operated three more local hospitals in South Dakota.26

The key to the initial success of these four sisterhoods in Dakota Territory lies in their adaptability and flexibility. Adjusting to an inhospitable climate and terrain, the three
groups who were able to continue as teachers on the reservations accepted the challenge of teaching the children of a race and culture different from their own. The sisters who taught in the parish schools met many problems of financial hardship and harsh frontier conditions in their drive to educate the children of parishioners.

The best examples of their flexibility may be seen in their modification of the practice of cloistered living and the acceptance of health care as an addition to the apostolate of the sisterhoods. Orders that traditionally followed rules of enclosure were strictly constrained, being prohibited from traveling and, in some cases, from leaving their convents at all, even for short periods of time. By contrast, only one of the four groups in this study practiced cloistered living; and that order, the Presentation Sisters, willingly abolished the custom when they saw that less restriction in travel would better enable them to serve the widely scattered communities of eastern South Dakota. The readiness of the Grey Nuns, the Presentation Sisters, and the Benedictines to provide aid to the sick and the subsequent opening of hospitals in Yankton and Aberdeen are a dramatic witness to their adaptability. These undertakings had the most lasting effect on the developing society of eastern South Dakota because the sisters ministered to the entire population through their hospitals, both of which gained recognition as regional medical centers.

The success of these Catholic sisterhoods in providing education and health care on the Dakota frontier depended upon their flexibility and willingness to adjust, and these traits were undoubtedly nurtured by the communal character of their lives. Nineteenth-century nuns never labored as solitary individuals; they traveled in groups and shared their lives with other sisters. Even though the orders were not cloistered, they nevertheless retained elements of enclosure that allowed them to live, work, and pray together. The spirit thus engendered enabled the sisters to help each other adjust to the new environment, endure the hardships of isolation, and persevere in the face of the harsh reality of life on the frontier. Even when circumstances forced the sisters to modify their rules for living, they persisted in structuring their lives around the welfare of the group. As Mary Ryan suggests in her book Womanhood in America from Colonial Times to the Present, women strove for contact with other women. Their frontier experience was of a more communal nature than was Turner's frontier of male rugged individualism. Because they were never isolated from other women, the sisters were able to help each other overcome the difficulties of their work in reservation or parish schools and hospitals. From the beginning, when the Grey Nuns staffed a reservation school at Fort Totten in 1874, these sisters gained support from each other's companionship and were thus able to succeed in their mission on the northern plains frontier.

NOTES


4. Susan Peterson, "The Presentation Sisters


12. “Sisters Serving at South Dakota Missions, 1886–1910,” Archives, Sisters of St. Francis, Stella Niagara, N.Y.


18. Ibid.


