Spring 1999

Daughters of Charity: Catholic Women and Their Communities in Antebellum America

Linda Merritt McCubbins
Old Dominion University

DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY: CATHOLIC WOMEN AND THEIR COMMUNITIES IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

by

Linda Merritt McCubbins
B.A. December 1996, Old Dominion University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty
of Old Dominion University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

HUMANITIES

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
May 1999

Approved by:

Carolyn J. Lawes (Director)

Anita Claire Fellman (Member)

Jeffrey H. Richards (Member)

ABSTRACT

DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY: CATHOLIC WOMEN AND THEIR COMMUNITIES IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

Linda Merritt McCubbins
Old Dominion University, 1999
Director: Dr. Carolyn J. Lawes

This study calls into question common assumptions about the limited public role of Catholic women during the antebellum period of American history. To understand the roles Protestant women played during this era, it is important to understand Catholic women's roles. Through primary and secondary source documents, the similarities and differences relating to church structure and theology will be documented. The study will also examine reasons why Protestant women converted to Catholicism during a profoundly anti-Catholic era.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, women, both Catholic and Protestant, played an increasingly public role through organized benevolence and other activities. In a time when there was insufficient social welfare, the roles women played were important as poverty, sickness, and death began to reach crisis proportions. Women's benevolent and other activities were often organized through churches. This thesis suggests that Catholicism and Protestantism both supported and subverted traditional gender roles, and aided the emergence of a new feminine ideal. This ideal was an extension of the more activist components of the traditional female roles of mother and wife.

In memory of Catherine Maguire du Hadway

Annie Nelson Stanley Cox

Alma Stanley Merritt

and Loretta du Hadway McComb

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is my pleasure to thank those individuals who contributed so much, in so many ways, to the writing of this thesis. As my thesis director, Dr. Carolyn J. Lawes has made what could be seen as a cumbersome task, a pleasant and worthwhile task. Her constant insistence that I look past the surface to find the real meaning of each document has helped me to develop historiographic inquiry and technique. I thank her for sharing her knowledge with me both as my thesis director and as my undergraduate advisor. It has also been a great pleasure to work with Dr. Anita Claire Fellman, who recommended important secondary sources to help contextualize this thesis. She also provided valuable guidance on how to improve my analysis and presentation of evidence. I am extremely grateful for her willingness to continue on my thesis committee while on a one year sabbatical. I thank Dr. Jeffrey H. Richards for sharing his immense knowledge of American literature with me. He provided valuable guidance on how to interpret the literary works cited in this thesis.

While searching for primary source documents, I became acquainted with several people. Sharon Sumpter, archivist at the University of Notre Dame; Gerald Fogarty, S.J., a faculty member in the University of Virginia's Department of Religious Studies; and Sister Betty Ann McNeil, a fellow Norfolk Catholic High School alumna, who is now at St.

Joseph's Provincial House in Emmitsburg, MD, have all provided me with the information needed to find the primary sources used in this thesis.

Most importantly, I wish to thank my family. My parents, Loretta and Leonard Merritt, who have always encouraged me to pursue my goals-despite any obstacles that might be in the way. My husband, Ronald McCubbins, who always believes in me, even when I doubt myself. By assuming a considerable amount of household and childcare duties, he has made it possible for me to reach my goals. I also thank my husband and my son, Joseph Merritt McCubbins, for traveling to South Bend, Indiana with me this past summer. Joseph has been a wonderful research assistant and has also accompanied me to many archives in Virginia. Finally, my great-grandmothers and grandmothers, both Catholic and Protestant, who contributed so much to who I am, and ultimately to the writing of this thesis. It is to their memory that this thesis is dedicated.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	INTRODUCTION: MARKET CAPITALISM AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW FEMININE IDEAL	1
II.	WOMEN AND THE CLERGY.	28
III.	CATHOLIC WOMEN AND THEIR COMMUNITIES. . .	55
IV.	CONCLUSION	89
REFERENCES		93
VITA		97

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: MARKET CAPITALISM AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW FEMININE IDEAL

This thesis will call into question common assumptions about the limited public role of Catholic women during the antebellum period of American history.[1] Much has been written about how Protestant women, concerned with the social injustices that existed in their communities, established benevolent societies to help feed, clothe, and educate the poor. A study of the Archdiocese of Baltimore from 1795 to 1860 (a geographic area extending from Baltimore, Maryland to Norfolk, Virginia) provides an opportunity to analyze the activities of Catholic women. I

---

[1]In his analysis of female converts, Patrick Allitt maintains that "their gender made a crucial difference in the strongly patriarchal Catholic environment, whose traditions encouraged them to play the role of self-effacing wives and mothers." *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997),127. Hasia Diner argues that religious values, such as marriage and motherhood were more important to Irish Catholic immigrant women than the early feminist movement. *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 7. Barbara Welter states that the feminization of Protestantism led Catholic convert Orestes Brownson to the strongly patriarchal Catholic Church. "The Feminization of American Religion, 1800 - 1860," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, ed. Mary Hartman and Lois Banner (New York: Harper Collins, 1974), 137.

The format for this thesis follows current style requirements of Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations* 6th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

will argue that Catholic women had considerable opportunities for autonomy and influence in their individual and organized benevolence. Therefore, Catholicism offered women alternative options to marriage that allowed many to devote their lives to leadership in the provision of social services. Indeed, the opportunities to play roles in public life were among the lures of Catholicism to Protestant female converts in a profoundly anti-Catholic era.

I will argue in this thesis that despite the theology and the formal structure of the Catholic Church, many Catholic women played central roles within the church and in American society. While organized religion, both Protestant and Catholic, supported the ideal of traditional female roles, in practice it helped to subvert those gender roles. Documents from the period suggest that although the Catholic Church's hierarchy was strongly patriarchal, the Catholic clergy, like their Protestant counterparts, took direction from women on a number of issues, such as the establishment and administration of orphan asylums, schools and hospitals. Moreover, women often gained full autonomy to administer and establish many of these institutions. Wealthy Catholic and Protestant women often provided their communities with the finances needed to establish these institutions.

Scholars have traditionally asserted that the antebellum era was a transitional time for American women and have cited a sharp division between the domestic sphere of women and the public world of men. In her 1966 article,

"The Cult of True Womanhood," historian Barbara Welter defined the separate spheres ideology. Welter argued that the separation of men's and women's economic, social, and political roles became more defined as commercialism replaced agrarianism in the early nineteenth century. Men increasingly left farms and family businesses to obtain work in the public sector. Women, she argued, who had had heavy economic responsibilities on the farm, became increasingly confined to household chores and child care. Although linked to the private realm, organized benevolent work helped women obtain skills needed to expand to the public realm.[2]

As immigration, poverty, illness, and mortality rates strained limited social services, female benevolence became important to the well-being of American society. This study examines the work of elite Catholic women, who, like their Protestant counterparts, organized and administered activities to aid the poor, the sick, and the homeless. Documents reveal that although there were differences in theology and church structure, the experiences of elite Protestant and Catholic women were similar. The similarities suggest that the separate spheres ideology be reexamined.[3]

---

[2]Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966), 151-174.

[3]Suzanne Lebsock argues that although men dominated society, women changed their status by working together to create a distinctly female culture. *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984), xiv-xx; Mary P.

The similar experiences of Protestant and Catholic women suggest that the public roles they played did not contradict nineteenth century gender expectations. This thesis argues that instead of living in separate spheres, women and men performed different roles in the public realm. While men influenced the public sphere through commerce, women influenced the public realm through individual and group benevolence, which was often organized through religious institutions.

This study must be placed in historical context. Primary and secondary sources will be employed to gain an understanding of the economic and social conditions of the period. Studies of women and gender will help to inform the thesis on women's roles during the antebellum era. Although Protestant and Catholic women's experiences were similar during this period, there were some differences. To understand the Catholic experience, the thesis will rely on studies and primary source documents that disclose antebellum American attitudes toward Catholicism. Finally, Catholic theology and primary source documents will be employed to reveal the relationships among women, the clergy, and their communities.

This thesis argues that instead of restricting women's sphere of influence, the emergence of the market economy

---

Ryan suggests that women's social experiences were complex and cannot be explained by the "separate spheres ideology." *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825 - 1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 59-94.

provided new responsibilities for women. Documents from the period suggest that women played important public roles during the nineteenth century and that their communities relied on them to alleviate some of the societal ills created by the market economy. In *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York City, 1789-1860*, Christine Stansell states that the rise of commercialism created a great disparity between the rich and poor. Many antebellum families moved to the city in search of work because they could no longer rely on farming as a means of support. City life proved to be detrimental for many of these families. Cramped conditions made contagious diseases, such as tuberculosis, cholera, and yellow fever, more prevalent. Unhealthy work conditions led to injuries and death. Since a family's well being, depended on the father's wage-earning ability, the loss of a father's support usually meant a life of poverty for his survivors. As a result, numerous women and children lived in poverty.[4]

Stansell further states that the causes of female poverty were both economic and familial. Some women were born paupers, that is, they were the destitute daughters of indigent mothers driven from one village to another until, in the Revolution and its aftermath, they drifted into the comparatively secure harbor of the city. Some women came upon hard times with the declining fortunes of the men in

---

[4]Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York City, 1789-1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), xi-xiv.

their families. Stansell states that widowhood, abandonment, and a sudden loss of male support also led to poverty. For example, sailors' women suffered great hardship while their husbands and lovers were at sea. The exodus of men to the American Revolution, and later the War of 1812, precipitated a crisis of female poverty from which many of those who were subsequently widowed by the war or deserted by roving men, never recovered.[5]

In the absence of sufficient social welfare, many elite women provided clothing, housing, and food to the impoverished. Although the poor benefitted from these activities, elite women also profited.[6] Through their benevolent organizations, elite women earned recognition and influence in their communities. Through their organizations, women often obtained rights that they could not receive through state and national laws. For example, in *The Free Women of Petersburg,* Suzanne Lebsock maintains that the incorporation of an orphan asylum gave the women of Petersburg the power to make laws, elect officers, buy and sell property, and appear in court.[7]

Religious organizations also gave women rights that they did not have under state and national laws. Beginning in the seventeenth century, secular activities became increasingly more important to men, and women began to

---

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid., 64-67.

[7]Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg*, 194.

comprise the bulk of American churchgoers. Because of waning male support and the disestablishment of churches after the American Revolution, wealthy women tax payers became increasingly important to the financial well-being of churches. In many Protestant churches, women used their growing economic influence to establish universal adulthood suffrage for the election of ministers.[8]

Increasingly dependent on female support, more and more Protestant ministers catered to church women's needs. Ministers wrote sermons intended for women and became involved in women's charitable work. Ann Douglas argues in *The Feminization of American Culture* that charitable work was personally fulfilling for women and ministers, and allowed them to cross lines laid down by sexual stereotyping. Through reform work, women could become aggressive, even angry, in the name of various holy causes."[9] While ministers "could become gentle, even nurturing, for the sake of moral overseeing." Douglas maintains that ministers and women believed that their redemptive mission was to propagate the potentially matriarchal values of nurture, generosity, and acceptance.[10]

Organized religion thus provided many women with a

---

[8]Carolyn J. Lawes, "Trifling With Holy Time: Women and the Formation of the Calvinist Church of Worcester, Massachusetts, 1815-1820," *Religion and American Culture* 8 (Winter, 1998):119.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 10.

degree of power and a sense of identity. Although the church hierarchy, ministers, and theologians remained male, women played a prominent role in Protestant congregations and revivals. In the "Feminization of American Religion," Barbara Welter states that this is what writer Orestes Brownson meant when he "growled about" a feminine religion. When Brownson used the word "feminine" to describe Protestantism, he referred to the prominent role women played in the church and the ministers who catered to their needs. According to Welter, Brownson characterized the Protestant minister with "such scorn as a domesticated pet of spinsters and widows, fit only to balance teacups and mouth platitudes."[11] Welter asserts that the feminization of Protestantism led to Brownson's conversion to Catholicism. Brownson assumed that unlike its Protestant counterparts, the patriarchal structure of the Catholic church would discourage feminine influence. However, documents from the period reveal that Catholic women, like Protestant women, played central roles in church activities and exerted considerable influence over their priests.

Brownson was one of an estimated 700,000 Americans who converted to Catholicism between 1813 and 1893.[12] It is difficult to understand why Protestants converted to

---

[11]Welter, "The Feminization of American Religion, 137-139.

[12]Jenny Franchot, *Roads To Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xx.

Catholicism during a time when there was significant anti-Catholic sentiment present in American society. At the beginning of the Republic, the nation's leaders believed that "the only proper American was independent of all patronage--economically and intellectually."[13] During the early Republic, "Catholics found no relief from charges that they were expected to surrender mind and conscience to the will of priest and prelate."[14] These charges stemmed from the structure of the Catholic Church's hierarchy, which was governed by a pope, who according to Church doctrine, had the authority to speak and act in God's name.[15] The pope extended his jurisdiction to cardinals, bishops, and parish priests, who had authority over their parishes and dioceses. Nativists feared that the Church's authority would undermine Catholics' loyalty to their country.

Although nineteenth-century Nativists viewed the Catholic Church's hierarchy as a threat to the survival of the new nation, documents from the period suggest that the authority of the Catholic hierarchy was not as strong in America as it was in Europe. Indeed, the Catholic Church

---

[13]Dale T. Knobel, *America for the Americans: The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishing, 1996), 30.

[14]Ibid., 31.

[15]The analysis of Catholic theology is taken from the documents of Vatican I, which met in 1869, and set forth the principles that were not revised until Vatican II (1962-1965). Although it was not official doctrine until 1869, Catholics believed in the infallibility of the Pope during the first part of the nineteenth century.

had quickly adapted to Protestant America. Like Protestants, Catholic lay people ran their parishes and usually hired and fired their pastors.[16] While Catholic women may not have played as large of a role in church governance as their Protestant counterparts, documents from the period suggest that they participated in some aspects of church governance. As pew holders, for example, several women of St. Patrick's Parish in Norfolk, Virginia had voting rights.[17] In fact, a petition from December 1816 asking the Archbishop of Baltimore to remove Norfolk's pastor includes the names of several women.[18] Three Petersburg women were also central figures in the community that built the city's Catholic church. Margaret Kenny, Catherine Bissett, and Ann Moran served, with men, on the church's building-fund committee.[19]

Like their Protestant counterparts, Catholic women also found opportunities to perform charitable activities. Because of the large size of Catholic parishes, priests relied on lay assistance in their ministry to parishioners. Documents examined for this thesis illustrate that there

---

[16]Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church* (New York: Random House, 1997), viii.

[17]List of Pew Holders, St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 1 October 1809, Diocese of Richmond Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

[18]Roman Catholic Congregation of Norfolk, Virginia to Leonard Neale, December 1816, Diocese of Richmond Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

[19]Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg*, 179.

were a limited number of priests to minister to their needs. "A Summary of Catholicity in the United States" reveals that in 1857 there were only seventy five priests to minister to one-hundred and thirty thousand Catholics in Maryland, and only ten priests to minister to nine-thousand Catholics in Virginia.[20] Moreover, the Catholic virtue of charity was compatible with the nineteenth century woman's desire to improve American society.

In her discussion of nineteenth-century evangelical reform, Christine Stansell states that "divine grace had a social as well as spiritual purpose."[21] Calvinists believed that God saved whom He chose, but evangelicals began to give more credit to human agency. God would help those who helped themselves. Stansell maintains that by 1829, evangelicals had taken their faith in human agency one step further: "If people could help to save themselves, then they could also expedite salvation for others."[22] Inspired by this new view of salvation, evangelical women and men went into the city to minister to the poor. The expanded interpretation of salvation was also similar to the Catholic virtue of charity, which is the "love of men for the sake of God. This love compels one to set aside his own selfish desires in order to do that which is desired by God and

---

[20]*The Catholic Mirror* III (January 3, 1857): 1.

[21]Stansell, *City of Women*, 64.

[22]Ibid.

others."[23] To obtain salvation, it is each Catholic's responsibility to work for the good of society.

American Catholic women found numerous opportunities to exercise the virtue of charity when millions of German and Irish Catholic immigrants landed in the United States between 1830 and 1860. The majority of these immigrants were unskilled laborers from Ireland, and most ended up as day laborers and domestic servants. Many of the jobs that were open to Irish Catholic men were dangerous or unhealthy Moreover, many Irish immigrants fell prey to contagious disease due to poor and unsanitary living conditions, and as a result, many Irish Catholic families lost male support.

Irish Catholic immigrants became one of the groups the Nativists blamed for America's increasing poverty crisis as they burdened the newly created poorhouses, prisons, and juvenile halls that nineteenth century America used as caretakers for dependents.[24]

Despite anti-Catholic sentiment, Irish Catholics continued to immigrate to the United States in increasing numbers. The burden they put on American society and their seemingly "un-American" views exacerbated anti-Catholic sentiment. Reaction to the "large waves" of Irish immigrants during the 1840s ranged from curiosity to a xenophobia that

---

[23]Peter Cardinal Gasparri, *Catholic Faith Based on the Catholic Catechism,* ed., Felix M. Kirsch and Sister M. Brendan, IHM, vol.3 (New York: P.J. Kenedy and Sons, 1938), 296.

[24]Stansell, *City of Women,* 44.

expressed itself in street riots; in church, convent, and bible burnings; and anti-Catholic political parties dedicated to the "counter subversion" of Rome.[25] In 1852, a secret organization opposed to Catholics and foreign immigrants, the Grand Council of the United States of North America, was formed. Known as the "Know-Nothing Party" because its members refused to admit they knew anything about the organization, it tried to pass laws to prohibit Catholics from holding public office and certain jobs.

Although many native-born Americans were hostile toward Irish Catholics, Irish women survived by performing tasks, such as domestic work, that native-born Protestant women and other immigrants would not perform.[26] While anti-Catholicism made it more difficult for Irish Catholics than other working-class women to provide for themselves and their families, antebellum American life was grim for most women who did not have male support. Documents from the period reveal that elite Catholic women employed Irish Catholic immigrants and working-class Protestant women. Documents further reveal that like the Nativists, Catholics were concerned about America's increasing problem of poverty. To help alleviate the growing crisis, Catholic women and priests worked together to minister to the poor and less

---

[25]Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, xx.

[26]Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 7; Thomas Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 140.

fortunate. In many cases, like their Protestant counterparts, women directed priests in ministries to the less fortunate. Religious and other unmarried women also played an active role in the establishment of orphanages, schools, and hospitals. Widowed and abandoned women found shelter from poverty in the convent, and some of them gained considerable authority as mother superiors or officers of religious orders.

Along with helping Catholics, these institutions often aided Protestants. Some Protestant women, who received aid from the Catholic Church, converted to Catholicism. Since most American Catholics were from the lower classes, many elite Protestant women found more opportunity to perform charitable work in Catholic parishes than in Protestant congregations. Some of these women also found support for their literary endeavors in the Catholic Church.

Catholic bishops and priests often helped women publish their short stories and poems in Catholic periodicals. Publication in Catholic periodicals often laid the groundwork for a lucrative writing career. During the antebellum era, women wrote and published in increasing and considerable numbers because a literary career could be pursued at home. Furthermore, a writing career was much more accessible to women than were professional careers related to industry, law, medicine or higher education, which required either substantial capital or formal

accreditation.[27] Writing also enabled women to influence society because novelists could reach the masses with their ideas.[28] In *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome,* Patrick Allitt asserts that convert writers sought to persuade other Protestants, Jews, atheists, and agnostics to follow their example and convert to Catholicism." As a result, converts usually wrote with this audience in mind.[29]

Allitt maintains that most of the female Catholic writers who broke into print during the mid-nineteenth century were converts. However, he also asserts that nearly all of the writers who converted to Catholicism had conflicting feelings about their roles as Catholic women. While most became Catholic out of a religious conviction, they found themselves part of a community that shared a range of ideas and beliefs that were at odds with their own. According to Allitt, a convert woman's decision not to marry "demonstrated that realities did not conform neatly to the Catholic ideal of submissive wife and mother."[30] Allitt states that in "almost every case they became writers instead of marrying or after their marriages ended in their

---

[27]Barbara H. Solomon, ed. *Rediscoveries: American Short Stories by Women, 1832-1916.*(New Jersey: Penguin Books, 1994), 17-18.

[28]Mary Kelley, "The Making of the Learned Woman in Antebellum America,"*Journal of American History* 83 (September 1996), 401-412.

[29]Allitt, *Catholic Converts*, ix.

[30]Ibid., 128.

husbands' deaths," and maintains that the decision not to marry stemmed from the women's relationships with the clergy.[31]

Allitt maintains that the relationships between convert women writers and priests were consistent with the "separate spheres" ideology of nineteenth century America. Instead of seeking the advice of their husbands, before making important decisions, Catholic women writers sought the advice of their priests.[32] Documents examined for this thesis reveal that women writers often corresponded with priests. More importantly, the clergy encouraged women in their literary endeavors. I suggest that this encouragement stemmed from the clergy's belief that the women's literary endeavors would influence American society. In essence, it was the clergy's hope that these women would alter anti-Catholic sentiment and bring more converts into the Church. Documents further reveal that many women had sufficient income from their writing to become self-supporting and did not have to marry. Thus, the decision not to marry was likely based in part, on a woman's financial well-being, and not necessarily on religious ideology.

However, the importance of marriage and motherhood was not just a Catholic concept. While the Catholic Church considered marriage and motherhood as religious vocations important to the general well-being of society, Protestant

---

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid.

Americans increasingly viewed motherhood as essential to the survival of the new nation.[33] In her study of American and British literature between 1780 and 1835, Ruth Bloch finds a profound change in attitudes relating to the roles of mothers. A large number of literary works began to appear that stressed the unique value of the maternal role to American society. Bloch argues that the psychology of the Enlightenment, among other developments, influenced Calvinist doctrine. Personal interaction between mother and child was important to a child's well-being. Enlightenment thought implied that children's minds were blank tablets and encouraged mothers to establish a gentle but firm moral discipline as early as possible.[34]

Changing attitudes toward child development sparked educational opportunities for women. Although colonial women seldom received a formal education, by the antebellum era many of the nation's leaders believed that a virtuous citizenry was paramount to the success of the new nation and promoted female education so that mothers could raise "good republican sons."[35] Changing attitudes toward child development opened additional opportunities for women.

---

[34]Ruth Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815," *Feminist Studies* 4 (June 1978): 108-109.

[35]Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 228; and Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 243.

Women, both Protestant and Catholic, wrote books and short stories to instruct children on morality and their mothers on child rearing. While many Protestant women wrote articles in magazines published by evangelical maternal organizations, articles by Catholic women appeared in Catholic periodicals; both reached many sectors of society.[36] Thus, Protestant and Catholic women gained considerable influence as they fostered their views of Christian motherhood throughout the country.

The emphasis on their roles as mothers also expanded women's opportunities outside the home. Considered naturally suited to caring for children, many Protestant women became Sunday school teachers and administrators. As such, they fostered Protestant values into American society. Like male administrators of Sunday school unions, women printed and sold books, collected statistics from schools up and down the East Coast, and raised annual budgets ranging from $300 to $1,800.[37]

Like their Protestant counterparts, Catholic lay and religious women taught and served as administrators of schools. Catholic women also sought to impart values into society; however, rather than Protestant values, they taught

---

[36]Richard A. Meckel, "Educating a Ministry of Mothers: Evangelical Maternal Associations, 1815-1860," *Journal of the Early Republic* 2 (Winter 1982): 420.

[37] Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of An American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 119-120.

Catholic values. Since the Catholic Church contributed to the financial well-being of the parish schools, Catholic women were not as involved in fundraising as their Protestant counterparts. However, Catholic women did have a degree of autonomy in the administration of their schools. Although in theory the bishop or parish priest oversaw the administration of the schools, documents reveal that the priests' workload kept them from intervening in the day-to-day operation of the schools.

The experiences of Catholic and Protestant women therefore suggest that the conditions of the early nineteenth century opened new responsibilities for women in the public sector. Some historians argue that women limited their roles in the public sector by emphasizing their traditional roles.[38] This thesis argues that the nineteenth century brought new opportunities for women. As men became increasingly interested in secular activities, women gained influence in their churches. Catholic and Protestant churches provided a springboard for various benevolent and volunteer activities. While Protestantism and Catholicism embraced women's traditional roles, they helped to construct

---

[38]Anne M. Boylan argues that by emphasizing feminine virtue, evangelical women not only enlarged women's sphere, they entrenched and perpetuated the whole notion of separate gender spheres. *Sunday School,* 126; Nancy F. Cott argues that by the end of the nineteenth century, the focus on women's moral capacities in the public as well as the private sphere kept women out of public life, higher education, and professional careers. *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 115-143.

a new feminine ideal that was not a total departure from the traditional role, but an extension of the more activist components of the traditional ideal.

A study of the Archdiocese of Baltimore supports this thesis. Along with illustrating the economic and social conditions that existed during the early nineteenth century, the archdiocese represents the broad range of attitudes native-born Americans held toward Catholics. While anti-Catholicism existed in Virginia from the time of its founding, it did not find a foothold in Maryland until the 1850s. Lord Baltimore, the Roman Catholic founder of Maryland, intended the colony to be a haven for people of all faiths, especially Catholics. However, the development of Maryland, especially Baltimore, is full of contradictions. Half northern and half southern, the city embraced commerce, industry, and slavery; Germans, Irish, and Know-Nothings; Protestants and Roman Catholics.[39]

Although the colony was originally established for their benefit, by the 1790s, Catholics constituted less than six percent of the population. However, Baltimore became the seat of the most powerful Catholic archdiocese in the United States when, in 1785, Bishop John Carroll, whose family was a member of Baltimore's landed gentry, became the leader of the American Catholic Church. The Archdiocese of Baltimore was erected on November 6, 1789 by Pope Pius VI to

---

[39]Gary L. Browne, *Baltimore and the Nation, 1789-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), xi.

govern all of the Catholic churches in America.[40]

From 1750 to 1790, Baltimore grew from a village of twenty-five houses and two hundred people to the fourth-largest town in America. The people who immigrated to Baltimore were mainly of British descent and were Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Baptist, or Methodist. The population also grew in the early 1800s as people migrated from other parts of the East Coast in search of employment. Social services could not keep pace with Baltimore's growth, and churches and other benevolent organizations were the main source of support for the indigent population.[41] Many Catholic women and priests also came to the aid of Maryland's indigent population. Elizabeth Seton, a Catholic convert, founded the Confraternity of Charity, the United States' first female religious order in 1809, which provided shelter to widows and other women who did not have male support. Seton also established the country's first parochial school and female orphan asylum. Documents from the period reveal that Archbishop Carroll and his successors, Ambrose Marechal and Francis Kenrick, along with some of Baltimore's wealthy Catholic women, came to the aid of the city's sick, homeless, and impoverished citizens.

Anti-Catholicism did not appear in Maryland until the 1850s, in part because many of its Catholics were members of

---

[40]James H. Bailey, *A History of the Diocese of Richmond: The Formative Years* (Richmond: Chancery Office, Diocese of Richmond, 1956), 21.

[41]Browne, *Baltimore and the Nation,* 3-13.

the landed gentry. As part of the state's elite, these Catholics did not threaten the status quo. Anti-Catholicism emerged as 65,500 immigrants entered the state during the 1820s and 1830s, most of whom were German and Irish Catholics. Along with irregular employment, long working hours, and a declining shipbuilding industry, native Baltimorean laborers competed with the German and Irish immigrants who agreed to work for lower wages. When economic depression set in during the 1850s, many native-born Americans grew resentful of the immigrants and joined the Know-Nothing Party.[42]

Nativism was also intensified by the strained resources of the various immigrant aid societies and public health facilities, who appealed to the public at large for financial help. Like other cities throughout the country, Baltimore was hit with severe epidemics, including yellow fever during the 1820s, cholera in the 1830s and 1840s, and smallpox in 1845 and 1846, when death rates ran from seventy-eight to seventy-nine per 100,000 people. Still, Maryland's Nativist movement was never as strong as it was in neighboring Virginia.[43]

Anti-Catholicism began in Virginia during the seventeenth century--before the colony was settled. When the London Company departed for Virginia in 1606, James I issued a charter that expressly decreed the establishment of

---

[42]Ibid., 233-236.

[43]Ibid., 200

the Anglican faith: "That the true word, and service of God and Christian faith be preached, planted and used . . . According to the doctrine, rights and religion now professed and established within our realm of England."[44] A second charter issued on May 23, 1609 states: "We should be loath that any person should be permitted to pass, that we suspected to affect the superstitions of the Church of Rome; we do hereby declare that it is our will and pleasure that none be permitted to pass in any voyage . . . but such as first shall have taken the oath of supremacy."[45] Although he was a friend of the king, even Lord Baltimore was expelled from the colony when he refused to take the "oath of supremacy."[46]

Catholics were also forbidden to hold political office in the Virginia colony; in 1699 they were deprived of the right to vote; and in 1705, an act declared them incompetent to act as witnesses in a court of law. In some regards, Catholic men were placed as low on the Virginia legal and social hierarchy as African Americans, for while a slave could not serve as a witness against a white person, a Catholic could not testify against a white or a black

---

[44]William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of all the Laws in Virginia, 1619-1792* vol. 1 (New York: R.W. and G. Bristow, 1901), 289-269.

[45]Thomas P Phelan, *Catholics in Colonial Days* (New York: P.J. Kennedy and Sons, 1935), 153.

[46]Peter Guilday, *The Catholic Church in Virginia, 1815-1822*,(New York: The United States Historical Society, 1924), xxvi.

person. Finally, at the outbreak of the French and Indian War, Catholics were forbidden to bear arms. Despite these restrictions, there were some Catholic families in Virginia during the colonial period, mainly Irish immigrants who lived in the Roanoke valley region. Jesuits from Maryland came to Virginia to minister to them.[47]

The laws restricting Catholics were repealed in 1785 by Section III of Thomas Jefferson's "Act for Establishing Religious Freedom."[48] However, of the 35,000 Catholics in the United States in 1790, no more than two hundred lived in the Old Dominion.[49] Roman Catholic churches in Virginia were administered by the Archdiocese of Baltimore until 1820 when Catholics in Norfolk petitioned for a bishop and Pope Pius VII established the Diocese of Virginia. The Pope chose Patrick Kelly as its first bishop and Norfolk, the city with the largest number of Roman Catholics, as the See. However, financial difficulties and a schism between French and Irish Catholics convinced Kelly that the establishment of the See had been premature. Kelly petitioned the Pope for relief and in 1822 was transferred to a See in Ireland.[50]

After Kelly's departure, the See of Virginia reverted to the Archdiocese of Baltimore and remained under its jurisdiction until 1840, when the Archbishop decided to

---

[47]Ibid.

[48]Bailey, *A History of the Diocese of Richmond,* 21.

[49]Guilday, *The Catholic Church in Virginia,* xxvi.

[50]Ibid., xxiv.

revive the Diocese of Virginia. Richmond became the seat of the new diocese, which included, with the exception of Alexandria, the entire Commonwealth which at the time also included West Virginia. By 1860, Catholic churches existed in Norfolk, Portsmouth, Petersburg, Lynchburg, Martinsburg and Wheeling, with two churches established in Richmond.[51]

Ironically, the Catholic Church obtained an institutional foothold in Virginia in the midst of anti-Catholic sentiment and "Know-Nothing" politics. The white population of Virginia increased by 3,529 between 1830 and 1840 and by 11,569 between 1840 and 1850.[52] Since much of the increase was due to immigration, the Know-Nothing Party became a strong political force in Virginia during the 1850s. Know-Nothing appeal was strongest in Norfolk, where many Irish had found employment in the shipbuilding industry, and the city was governed by a Know-Nothing mayor from 1853-1855. There was also a close gubernatorial race in 1855 when the Know-Nothing candidate, Thomas S. Flournoy, was only narrowly defeated by the Democratic candidate, Henry A. Wise, by 10,180 votes from a total of 156,668 cast.[53]

Know-Nothings blamed the Irish Catholics for the rise of poverty and disease in the city during the early 1800s.

---

[51]Bailey, *A History of the Diocese of Richmond,* 118.

[52]*Documents, containing statistics of Virginia, ordered to be printed by the State convention sitting in the City of Richmond, 1850-1851* (Richmond: W. Culley, 1851).

[53]Bailey, *A History of the Diocese of Richmond,* 118.

To counter Know-Nothing sentiment, Catholics founded orphan asylums in Norfolk and Richmond, and between 1833 and 1848, three schools were established, including two female academies, by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent DePaul. Also, through the efforts of the Sisters of Charity and Ann Herron, a wealthy lay woman, St. Vincent's Hospital was established in Norfolk in 1856.[54]

By the 1830s, the Catholic population in Virginia began to grow, reaching 9,000 by 1857 and 12,000 by 1861.[55] While the increase can be attributed in large part to immigration, conversion also played a role. Among Virginia's most prominent Catholic converts were Letitia Preston Floyd, wife of governor John Floyd, who served from 1830 to 1834, one of the Floyds' sons, and all three of their daughters.[56]

The following chapters will examine the conditions of the archdiocese more closely. To determine the reasons Protestant women converted to Catholicism, the following two chapters will analyze the lives of several Catholic women, both converts and those born into the faith. Chapter Two discusses antebellum women's experience with Catholicism. It explores relationships between women and the clergy, and

---

[54]Ibid.

[55]Joseph Magri, *The Catholic Church in the City and Diocese of Richmond, Virginia* (Richmond: Whittet and Shepperson Printing, 1906), 88; and "Summary of Catholicity in the United States," *The Catholic Mirror* III (January 3, 1857):1.

[56]James H. Bailey, *History of St. Peter's Church, Richmond, Virginia* (Richmond: Lewis Printing Company, 1959), 11.

suggests that a priest's institutional authority was often mediated by close relationships with his parishioners. The chapter also examines the life of Elizabeth Seton, and thus finds that the Catholic church opened up additional opportunities for women to perform social services, while the high mortality rates of the nineteenth century attracted some women to Catholic concepts of salvation.

Chapter Three examines the role of the Sisters of Charity in the establishment of schools, orphanages and a hospital in Virginia. The chapter argues that, like many of their Protestant counterparts, these women found, in organized religion, a means to increase their autonomy. It also analyzes the contributions to the city of Norfolk by Ann Herron, a lay woman, and examines the lives of converts Emily Virginia Mason, Eliza Allen Starr, and Anna Dorsey. This chapter concludes that because marriage was not economically expeditious for many wealthy women, Catholicism provided them with an acceptable alternative.

CHAPTER II

WOMEN AND THE CLERGY

The strict patriarchal hierarchy of the Catholic Church suggests that antebellum Catholic women did not have the same measure of authority as their Protestant counterparts to organize and administer benevolent activities. At least in principle, the all-male hierarchy of the Catholic Church had greater authority over church-related benevolence than its Protestant counterparts. However, closer examination reveals that a priest's authority was often mediated by his relationships with individual parishioners. Through these relationships, priests found that they shared a common interest with many of their female parishioners--to alleviate the poverty, sickness, and death that plagued antebellum America. Moreover, ministering to the needs of a large parish was often burdensome. To alleviate the burden, women assumed some of the priests' duties. Consequently, many Catholic women found, under the auspices of the Catholic Church, a measure of autonomy to organize and to administer various benevolent activities.

To understand the relationships between women and the clergy, it is important to examine the roles priests played in their communities. The sacrament of Holy Orders gave bishops and priests the responsibility to continue the work of the Apostles. As the Apostles' successors, priests

shepherded the Church, led it in worship and service, and taught the way of salvation. To better imitate Jesus, priests took the vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience. The vow of celibacy was not only taken for a spiritual purpose, but also had a "functional" purpose. By freeing the priest from the demands of family life, it made him available for greater service to the community. A priest's role in his community is summed up in the following poem:

> To live in the midst of the world
> Without wishing for its pleasures
> To be a member of each family
> Yet belonging to none
> To share all sufferings
> To penetrate all secrets,
> To heal all wounds . . .
> To have a heart of fire for charity,
> To teach, and to pardon, console,
> And bless always . . .[57]

Church documents reveal that many families living in the Archdiocese of Baltimore during the early nineteenth century developed close relationships with their priests. Many in the community considered the parish priest a part of their own families. Although the clergy held positions of authority in their parishes and dioceses, this authority was mediated by the close relationships they shared with their parishioners.

Ties among women and priests were especially strong, sometimes resembling a father and daughter or a brother and sister relationship. While I do not suggest that priests

---

[57]Lacordaire, "Thou Art a Priest Forever," in *Path Through Catholicism,* ed. Mark Link (Allen, Texas: Tabor Publishing, 1991), 163.

broke their vows of celibacy, the tone of some letters reveal a high level of affection. In some cases, the secrecy of the confessional seems to have added to a woman's trust in her priest.

An 1855 murder case reveals the strength of a priest's vow of secrecy. In October 1855, Father John Teeling of Richmond was called as a defense witness in a murder trial of a man charged with killing his wife in a jealous rage. The defense attorney wanted the priest to disclose whether or not the wife had confessed to an adulterous affair. The priest refused and the court decided in his favor, stating: "Any infringement upon the tenets of any religious denomination is a violation of the fundamental law, which guarantees perfect freedom to all classes in the exercise of religious duties."[58] In essence, the court held that according to the Bill of Rights, a priest did not have to disclose the confessions of his parishioners. Although the life of this woman came to an untimely end, her story indicates that a woman could trust a priest to take her deepest and darkest secrets to the grave with him.

Many women developed much trust and affection for their priests during childhood. An example is the relationship between Mary E. Allen, a child of six or seven years, and Bishop Francis Kenrick. Mary developed strong feelings for Kenrick during his tenure as Bishop of Philadelphia. A letter from Allen to Kenrick, written after he left

---

[58]*Catholic Mirror* VI (November 10, 1855): 1.

Philadelphia to become the Archbishop of Baltimore, illustrates her affection for him. Allen wrote that although she liked her new priest very much, she hoped Kenrick would visit soon and that Kenrick would not think her "too large" to kiss him: "Ma told me (only for fun) to stoop down when I come to see you for fear that if I am too large you will not want to kiss me."[59]

Mary's concern about becoming "too large" to kiss Kenrick suggests that she may have developed an infatuation for him. If a priest were indeed considered to be part of the family, possibly a favorite uncle, why was Mary concerned that she was becoming too old to kiss Kenrick?

Affectionate relationships such as Allen's for her priest, might continue into adulthood. Virginia Lynch wrote to Bishop John McGill, after he left Louisiana to become the Bishop of Richmond, that "I barely have the courage to tell you how deeply I mourn your loss." She continued to say that "Not a day passes without taking me in thought to you. I never forget you in my prayers. I have only been to the Bishop's once since you left--that was one Sunday to Mass--I have no desire to go there now, everything seems changed."[60] Lynch's letter, like Allen's, suggests that personal affection, along with religious conviction, bound

---

[59]Mary E. Allen to Archbishop Kenrick, 17 June 1851, Baltimore Cathedral Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

[60]Virginia Lynch to John McGill, 24 January 1851, Diocese of Richmond Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

parishioners to their priests.

The relationships these women had with the men in their families may have contributed to the emotional content of their letters to priests. Documents examined for this thesis reveal that business pursuits often took men away from their families for extended periods. Perhaps the priests provided girls and women, such as Allen and Lynch, with the attention and understanding that they did not receive from the men within their families.

Mrs. James Barry was married to a Washington, D.C. merchant whose occupation took him away from home for extended periods. A letter from Archbishop John Carroll to Barry on December 12, 1802, illustrates some of the problems women encountered. Carroll wrote that "I can hardly express the pleasure I felt in seeing Mr. Barry so much improved in health and spirits since I left the city, not only on his own account, but for the great comfort which that circumstance must afford you."[61] Carroll was also going to visit a Mrs. Caton at her farm because, "I dare say, that she stands in need of the company of friends." He also told Barry to inform her maid, Sally Campbell, that "I have not yet had any information concerning her sister; but she must not be discouraged." Carroll ended his letter by assuring Barry that "Anne and Mary [Barry's daughters] will always, I hope, be persuaded, that, next to their dear parents, no one

---

[61]John Carroll to Mrs. James Barry, 12 December 1802, Archdiocese of Baltimore Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

can be more interested for their happiness than I am."[62]

Archbishop Carroll was thus like a brother to Barry, a friend to Mrs. Caton, a minister to Barry's maid, Sally Campbell, and a father to Barry's daughters, Anne and Mary. In each of his roles, whether friend, brother, or father, the priest provided the women in his parish spiritual guidance and emotional support.

But Barry's letter also illustrates some of the concerns of nineteenth-century women and the toll that the emerging market could take upon men's physical and mental health. Barry was evidently concerned about the health of her husband and Carroll tried to convince her that her husband's physical and mental condition seemed to be improved. The reference to Mrs. Caton illustrates the geographic distance that existed between family and friends. Carroll served as a link between friends and families when he visited Catholics in the archdiocese. The fact that Carroll helped Barry's maid, Sally Campbell, search for her missing sister indicates the misfortune that could befall impoverished women. Perhaps, like other poor women, Campbell had gone to the city in search of work. Many of these women became victims of crime as they resorted to prostitution or life on the street.

In *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers,* Amy Gilman Srebnick argues that the working-class woman's identity was defined by her sexuality rather than by the dress and

---

[62]Ibid.

manners that fixed middle-class social position.[63] Christine Stansell similarly finds that male license for sexual aggressiveness increased in the two decades after the Revolution. Stansell states that "men could with some justification make women, especially laboring women, their sexual prey, since a foul nature exempted the latter from the customary protection of virtuous womanhood."[64] Some men believed that if a woman exchanged sex for food, shelter and other commodities she gave up rights to her own person. As a result, some male lovers refused to disclose information on their mistress's whereabouts. Other women became victims of brutal crimes, such as murder and rape. By citing the allegedly immoral nature of the victim, men from all classes successfully defended their crimes.[65] Perhaps Sally Campbell's sister was among these unfortunate women.

Carroll may have been more successful than the average citizen in uncovering the fate of Campbell's sister. As archbishop of a diocese that covered a large geographic area, Carroll traveled extensively. During his travels, he came into contact with people from many walks of life. Many of these people were in search of work, shelter, and various other needs. Perhaps, Carroll provided work or shelter in exchange for information about Campbell's sister and the

---

[63]Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 48.

[64]Stansell, *City of Women*, 27-29.

[65]Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers*, 1.

lost relatives of other parishioners. There was also the possibility that Campbell's sister might come to Carroll in search of employment.

Much of the correspondence between women and priests concerns finding employment for needy women. Letters and other documents from the era point to an informal network whereby Catholic women, along with their clergy, helped other, less fortunate women. In 1795 Archbishop Carroll recommended Mary McLaughlin to the Barrys as a potential domestic worker: "Sally Brothers tells me that the young woman knows plain sewing and all kind of house work, and that she is willing to go to the city, and undertake any work except cooking."[66] On January 10, 1804 Carroll wrote about another woman who was looking for domestic employment. He told the woman that Barry would pay her four dollars a month, and promised that after Barry had time to review the quality of her work she would add one more dollar to the woman's monthly salary. Carroll told Barry that the woman "has not long resided in Baltimore, nor served much, but as a wet nurse whilst her child lived (being reduced to it by her husband's misconduct)." Although the woman's references were not "full as might be wished," Carroll assured Barry of the woman's good character. Her papers "vouched for her discretions, which implies sobriety and honesty, and for her

---

[66]John Carroll to Mrs. James Barry, n.d. Archdiocese of Baltimore Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

obliging manners, which implies a good temper."[67] Carroll had to convince Barry that along with being a good worker, the woman had a moral character.

The relationship between Barry and Carroll is similar to the relationships between Protestant women and ministers described by Ann Douglas. Yet, while Barry and Carroll worked together to provide employment to needy women, the tone of the letter suggests that they exchanged gender roles.[68] Carroll's pleading tone reveals that Barry was in control of the situation. For example, Barry was under no obligation to hire except on her own terms and conditions. Moreover, she apparently did not want to pay the woman more than four dollars a month. To convince Barry to hire her, Carroll brokered an agreement with the woman to accept four dollars a month salary. Carroll also had to persuade Barry that the woman was trustworthy. The reference to the woman's character illustrates the distrust that the upper class had toward their working-class counterparts. By referring to the misconduct of the woman's husband, the letter also reveals the predicament that women could find themselves in if they lost male support. Carroll's letter suggests that after being abandoned by her husband, the woman went to Baltimore, with no work experience, to seek employment.

---

[67]John Carroll to Mrs. James Barry, 10 January 1804, Archdiocese of Baltimore Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

[68]Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 10.

A letter from Father Michael Egan to Carroll on March 10, 1804, also reveals the consequences for women who lost male support: "a woman genteelly dressed and accompanied by these children called on me one morning and told me that her daughters were desirous on becoming Catholics and that she had no objection." Egan told Carroll that he gave the young women the necessary instruction, at the end of which, the two were baptized and confirmed. Egan said that after the administration of the sacraments he "discovered them to be the children of a Mrs. Smith who separated from her husband and keeps a house of ill fame in this city. This discovery really shocked me as I was greatly interested in the children's welfare." The children were put under the charge of a Mrs. Capron and sent to school in Wilmington. However, Mrs. Capron feared that because of their mother's profession, the school's reputation would be injured if she retained the two much longer. The women were advised to go to Baltimore to finish their education under the assumed name of Nelson. When they completed their education, the young women planned to relocate with their mother and open a school for their mutual support.[69] By changing the women's last name, Father Egan protected both the school and the women from harm. Relocation to another city and completion of their education would allow the women to provide a respectable life for themselves and their mother.

---

[69]Michael Egan to John Carroll, 10 March 1804, Archdiocese of Baltimore Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

Father Egan gave the Nelson sisters more support than they received at Mrs. Capron's school. Like the Nelsons, the support other women received from the Church may have played a role in their decisions to convert. Archbishop Carroll and Mrs. Barry also helped to place needy women in jobs, gave them travel money, and arranged religious instruction for possible converts. Sally Campbell, Barry's maid, converted to Catholicism, and Grace Drew, another woman Carroll recommended to Barry for employment, also contemplated conversion.[70]

Correspondence between Mother Rose White and Archbishop Ambrose Marechal suggests similar concerns to those expressed by Barry and Carroll. In a letter dated May 11, 1826, Marechal addressed White's concern over the well-being of two unnamed women and whether or not they had converted to Catholicism. Marechal told White that he had had the pleasure of receiving two "young ladies." "Whether they were among the number of persons confirmed or not, this I truly cannot tell. Such was the multitude of those to whom I administered the Sacrament that they might have been among them."[71] A March 18, 1848 article in the *U.S. Catholic Magazine* states that after the establishment of St. Mary's Orphan Asylum and Female Academy in Norfolk, Virginia, the

---

[70]John Carroll to Mrs. James Barry, 12 December 1802, Archdiocese of Baltimore Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

[71]Ambrose Marechal to Rose White, 11 May 1826, Archdiocese of Baltimore Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

bishop administered the sacrament of confirmation to forty-three converts.[72]

While the Catholic Church's concern for the welfare of the indigent may have been a factor in some women's decision to convert, it also helped many women to expand their skills and activities in public. Education offered the Nelson sisters, daughters of a prostitute, the opportunity to support themselves respectfully as well as to learn business skills through the administration of their school. Rose White, a widow, found refuge from poverty as a member of the Sisters of Charity. While White helped to uplift the condition of other indigent women, she found authority and prestige as mother superior of the Sisters of Charity.

The religious order of the Sisters of Charity was founded by a widowed convert, Elizabeth Seton. Seton's reasons for converting were two-fold: she was interested in obtaining spiritual and material well-being for herself, her children and others, and she was interested in offering shelter, food, medicine, and education to the impoverished. When Seton founded the Sisters of Charity, her primary concern was the spiritual and educational development of her children. Because of the anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States, she planned to join a religious community in Canada where she could devote time to her spiritual needs as well as oversee her children's education and spiritual

---

[72] *U.S. Catholic Magazine* VIII (March 1848): 7.

development.[73] Although nuns from France, Ireland, Belgium and other European countries established convents in the United States, the American Catholic Church had not established its own female religious order. Attitudes toward Catholicism were more favorable in Canada, especially in Quebec, where female religious orders had been established in the early seventeenth century.[74]

However, Seton was introduced to Archbishop Carroll by an Italian family during a stay in Italy. Carroll persuaded Seton to bring her children to Baltimore where she subsequently founded the first Catholic female religious order in the United States, the Confraternity of Charity. With Carroll's help, Seton's sons were placed at St. Mary's College, and she established a school for girls next to the chapel of St. Mary's Seminary. Seton also organized a convent adjacent to the seminary where she, her daughters, her sisters-in-law, and other single and widowed women lived.[75]

The Sisters of Charity began as the Confraternity of Charity and was established to "assist both corporally and spiritually, the poor," and "those afflicted with illness." The sisters assisted the poor corporally by "furnishing them the necessity of life and the proper medicines during their

---

[73]Biographical information about Seton is from Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville eds., *Elizabeth Seton, Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), ix-xxv.

[74]Ibid.

[75]Ibid.

sickness." They assisted the poor spiritually by procuring them the "means of receiving the Sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Extreme Unction. . . ."[76]

The confraternity was composed of "a certain number of ladies who are married without the support of their husbands, and the sick who do not have the aid of parents or other superiors." Three officers--a director, or treasurer, and a superintendent of the wardrobe were elected from within the members of the confraternity. The director saw that the regulations of the confraternity were observed, and that the members attended to their duties. The director also admitted the poor and the sick of the congregation to the convent's infirmary and dismissed them, when sufficiently recovered, with the advice of the two assistants.[77]

The treasurer served as a "counsellor" to the director, and she kept the money of the Confraternity "in a coffer with two different locks." The treasurer held the key of one of the coffers, and the director the key of the other. However, the treasurer was allowed to keep a small sum for unforeseen expenses. At the expiration of her two years in office, the treasurer gave an account of her management to the newly elected officers and to the other members of the confraternity, in the presence of the pastor and the

---

[76]Rules of the Confraternity of Charity, Baltimore Cathedral Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

[77]Ibid.

congregation.[78]

The superintendent of the wardrobe also served as counsellor to the director. She mended and took care of the linen and other clothes of the confraternity. Like the treasurer, at the end of her two-year term, the superintendent of the wardrobe gave an account of her inventory to the other members, the pastor, and the congregation.[79]

The Confraternity's rules and regulations also called for a mother superior to oversee. Elections for the Mother, and for the other officers were strictly regulated. Officers could not serve more than three years, except where one, "through infirmity or otherwise had been for a whole year prevented from filling her office, and at the time of the next election is found capable of doing so." If elections of the Mother and all three officers took place during the same year, then "the last deposed Mother, or some of the late officers with the advice of the Superior, may be admitted into the council, in order to supply, by the knowledge they have acquired during their exercise to the inexperience of the new promoted members."[80]

The Confraternity thus ran somewhat like a corporation. Studies of Protestant women suggest that there were close resemblances between female organizations and nineteenth-

---

[78]Ibid.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Ibid.

century corporations. According to Suzanne Lebsock, by deciding membership and electing officers, female benevolent organizations gave women the rights that were denied to them by state and national laws.[81] These organizations heightened women's sense of their own significance. Like Protestant organizations, the Confraternity also offered women considerable autonomy. The rules and regulations did state that the women must seek the advice of the priest.[82] However, letters between Seton and Carroll reveal that Carroll's workload kept him from intervening in the daily operation of the organization. Not only did the women govern themselves, but they organized and administered schools, orphan asylums and various other benevolent institutions. Moreover, the Confraternity of Charity offered a respectable alternative to marriage.

Along with autonomy, the Confraternity offered women shelter from poverty. Although most of the women in the Confraternity of Charity were originally from the upper classes, they were all single women, and as Christine Stansell states "widowhood was virtually synonymous with impoverishment."[83] Of the forty-three women in the first group of Sisters of Charity, seven were converts, six were widows and one was an orphan who entered the order after

---

[81]Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg*, 205.

[82]Rules and Regulations of the Confraternity of Charity.

[83]Stansell, *City of Women*, 12.

completing her education at St. Joseph's Female Academy.[84] Without the convent, the only options available to Seton and other widowed and single women were marriage or a life of poverty. The confraternity also allowed women to raise and educate their children under the best possible conditions without remarrying. At the same time, these women contributed to society by educating poor children and taking care of the sick. Some of these women obtained positions of influence and prestige. Four of the original members, including Seton, were elected mother superior.

While Seton was concerned with alleviating the effects of poverty, she was also interested in the spiritual well-being of herself, her children, and others. Sickness and death were part of everyday life in antebellum America, and therefore, the lives of family members and neighbors were claimed, without warning, by cholera, tuberculosis, yellow fever, and other diseases.[85] A sermon by James Van Horseigh, a Richmond priest, given at the funeral of eighteen year old Emily Carroll Brent, reveals antebellum attitudes toward death:

> Death walks through the world without any order. He delights to surprise and to give a shock to mankind. He leaves the wretched to prolong the time of their sorrow, and cuts off the unfortunate in the midst of their career. He suffers the aged

---

[84]Kelly and Melville eds., *Elizabeth Seton, Selected Writings*, xxi-xxv.

[85]See Nancy Schrom Dye and Daniel Blake Smith, "Mother Love and Infant Death 1750-1920," *Journal of American History* 73 (September 1986): 329-353;Douglas, *Feminization of American Culture*, 200-226.

> to survive and aims his arrow at the heart of the young who puts the evil day far way. He delights to see the feeble carrying the vigorous to the grave and the father building the tomb of his children. Often his approaches are least expected, he bursts at once on the world, like an earthquake in the dead of night, or like thunder in the serenest skies. All ages and conditions, he sweeps away without distinction, the young man just entering into life high in hope, elated with joy and promising to himself a length of happy years, the father of a family from the embraces of his wife and children . . .[86]

As Van Horseigh's sermon indicates, death could strike at any age. Parents had reason to worry about the physical and spiritual well-being of their children because the infant mortality rate rose during the early nineteenth century. In "Mother Love and Infant Death, 1750-1920," Nancy Schrom Dye and Daniel Blake Smith argue that although the child mortality rate was high during the colonial period, mothers became more concerned about the health of their children during the antebellum era. Reactions to infant death gradually changed as individual mothers slowly replaced God as the most important guarantors of their children's welfare--a role that created great anxiety for many nineteenth-century women.[87]

Many doctors, ministers, and mothers of the time suggested that there was a correlation between close mother-child relationships and child survival rates. However, few

---

[86]Sermon at the Funeral of Emily Carroll Brent, September 1851, Diocese of Richmond Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

[87]Dye and Smith, "Mother Love and Infant Death," 338.

advances were made in medical science during the antebellum era. Like their colonial counterparts, antebellum doctors still did not know the cause of most diseases. Thus, the new responsibility mothers felt for their children's physical well-being was a source of great anxiety.[88]

Apprehension about the new role they played in their children's well-being may have attracted some women to Catholicism. According to Church doctrine, God was still the major guarantor of an individual's well-being. Documents from the period suggest that for many, it was more consoling to put faith in Divine Providence. Moreover, salvation was important in this time of uncertainty. To obtain everlasting life, Catholic children were taught to devote themselves to God through prayer and sacrament. Father Van Horseigh assured Emily Brent's family and friends that her religious training and devotion would give her a place in God's kingdom by stating that Emily's "spirit has fled to the God who gave it though her earthly house of this tabernacle be dissolved. . . Such we may trust is the happy state of our much lamented Emily, whose remains we are about to consign to the tomb. Trained up to virtue from her very infancy . . ."[89]

Although the Second Great Awakening of Protestantism increasingly rejected predestination and emphasized

---

[88]Ibid.

[89]Sermon at the Funeral of Emily Carroll Brent, Diocese of Richmond Archives.

salvation, the more liberal Catholic view of redemption may have attracted converts. While Protestants sought the Spirit of God through prayer and meditation, Catholics received the "real presence" of Christ through the sacrament of the Eucharist. The doctrine of transubstantiation holds that the bread and wine of the Eucharist are transformed into the true presence of Christ. Moreover, the contrite would be absolved from their sins by the priest. A priest's power to forgive sins gave Catholics a better perception of where they stood with God than their Protestant counterparts enjoyed.

Documents suggest that along with interest in their material well-being, Elizabeth Seton converted to Catholicism out of concern for her family's spiritual well-being. Seton became influenced by Catholic doctrine during a visit to Italy, and was especially enthralled by the doctrine of transubstantiation. On February 24, 1804, Seton wrote in her journal: "How happy we would be, if we believed what these dear souls believe, that they possess God in Sacrament and that he remains in their churches and is carried to them when they are sick." She described the consoling effect of the sacrament and stated that "when they carry the Blessed Sacrament under my window, while I face the full loneliness and sadness of my case, I cannot stop the tears. At the thought my God, how happy would I be even so far away from all so dear, if I could find you in the

church as they do."[90] On March 14, 1804 after her return to the United States, Seton converted to Catholicism.

Seton was no stranger to sickness and death. When she and her family first arrived in Italy, they were quarantined for several weeks with many people who were dying from tuberculosis, yellow fever and other diseases.[91] Faced with the fragility of her own mortality, the Doctrine of Transubstantiation comforted her. Receiving the "real presence" during the Sacrament of the Eucharist would not only help her spiritual well-being, it would also help her physical well-being. Moreover, in the sacrament of Extreme Unction, the priest brought the Eucharist and absolved the sins of the sick at their bedsides. Those who died after receiving Extreme Unction were promised a place in God's heavenly kingdom.

In her correspondence with Carroll, Seton described how daily Mass helped her spiritual and physical well-being. On March 16, 1811, she described her high spirits and improved health during the Lenten Season. Seton told Carroll that her fevers were less frequent and "consequently pains abated, indeed sometimes for whole days together the quick and calm which prevails over my body and mind is so general that I can hardly be persuaded anything has taken place in my constitution." She also told Carroll that this was the

---

[90]Kelly and Melville, eds., *Elizabeth Seton, Selected Writings*, 133.

[91]Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 290.

first time in her life that she was not threatened by consumptive symptoms. She said that "Perhaps. . .our dear Lord's will be done forever."[92]

Although Seton was confident about her own spiritual health, she was not sure of that of her children. On March 16, 1811 Seton told Carroll that ". . . my children are so circumstanced that I could not die in Peace (you know dear sir, we must make every preparation) except I felt the full conviction I had done all in my power to shield them from it--in that case it would be easier to commit them to God. . . ." Seton also told Carroll that "I have yielded every point that was consistent with my peace for the hour of death--and for that hour my dear sir, I now beg you to consider while you direct me how to act for my dear little children, who in that hour, if they remain in their present situation, would be snatched from our dear Faith."[93]

Another letter, dated March 19, 1811, suggests that Seton became more confident about her children's spiritual well-being. She thanked Carroll for his guidance and stated that his "letter was most consoling and overflowed the poor mother's heart with thanksgiving to our Lord who has been

---

[92]Elizabeth Seton to John Carroll, 11 March 1811, Baltimore Cathedral Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

[93]Elizabeth Seton to John Carroll, 16 March 1811, Baltimore Cathedral Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

pleased to give my children your fatherly love."[94]

In addition to spiritual guidance, Seton and other convert women in the confraternity, including her two sisters-in-law, found consolation in the sacraments of Eucharist, Penance, and Extreme Unction.[95] The sacraments along with the spiritual guidance she received from Carroll helped to console Seton as she witnessed the deaths of many loved ones. Seton suffered the deaths of her most intimate friends, her sisters-in-law Cecilia and Harriet, and two of her daughters, Anna and Rebecca Seton.

Although she grieved over their deaths, Seton was consoled by Carroll's spiritual guidance, the sacraments, and her faith in the Catholic Church. She reciprocated Carroll's kindness by helping him in his ministry. The widespread prevalence of illness made it impossible for Carroll to reach everyone in the large archdiocese. Along with ministering to the sick, Carroll gave spiritual guidance to prepare families for the deaths of their loved ones as when he wrote to the Barrys to prepare them for the death of their daughter, Mary:

> It is natural and commendable and amiable to see such parents, as you, and my dear friend, Mr. Barry do everything in your power, and spare yourselves no trouble and fatigue to preserve your most dear and lovely daughter: but if you be destined to lose her, we

---

[94]Elizabeth Seton to John Carroll, 19 March 1811, Baltimore Cathedral Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

[95]Elizabeth Seton to John Carroll, 8 September 1804, Baltimore Cathedral Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

> shall be sorry to hear of her resigning her break amongst strangers to her merits, as well as to her person. In a word, if she is to be taken from her affectionate parents and sister, we wish that it happen near to your friends, who may aid and strengthen the consolation which religion will afford you--Pardon me, for dwelling so long on this affecting subject; but it seems to me, best for you, to view it in all its aspect now that your mind may be less astonished at any event hereafter.[96]

Since Carroll had strong ties with many of the families in the archdiocese, the death and misfortune that befell them took a toll on his emotions as well. In January 1810, Seton found herself in the role of consoler. She wrote to Carroll that an "opportunity offers itself and I cannot refuse myself the melancholy comfort of telling you how much I feel your affliction, it would be greatest of all consolations to me could I lessen it by relieving you of the many cases your heavy loss throws upon you, both in the domestic and every other way . . . ."[97]

On June 19, 1810, when the Barrys faced the loss of their other daughter, Seton wrote to Carroll that "Dear Ann I fear has already the most painful presentiment--your friendship and affection seems to be their [Barry's] only consolation."[98] Although it was the priest's role to teach

---

[96]John Carroll to Mrs. James Barry, 15 September 1805, Archdiocese of Baltimore Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

[97]Elizabeth Seton to John Carroll, January 1810, Baltimore Cathedral Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

[98]Elizabeth Seton to John Carroll, 19 June 1810, Baltimore Cathedral Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

the way of salvation, he could not reach everyone in the community. Priests and bishops relied on devout women to give spiritual guidance not only to their families, but to their communities. While Seton prayed with the Barrys to console them over the imminent death of their daughter, and ministered to the many women and children who found shelter in her convent, she also gave spiritual guidance to Archbishop Carroll. A letter from Seton on September 10, 1813 reveals Carroll's confidence in her spiritual abilities:

> You may be sure we receive your great-niece as we should any one belonging to you with a double attention and affection. . .Charlotte is now with her friends at liberty much more composed and disposed to listen to reason than when you last heard from her--she left us this morning with our amiable and good Sally Coals and assured me she would do her best to keep her mind in Peace and endeavor by the comparison she would be able to make in her absence from us to ascertain whether she could content herself to return and remain until almighty God would point out to her some other way of life. I enclose a little letter she wrote me some time ago which occasioned me many tears, and after reading it, I took her to the grave of my Anna on which she secretly promised me all the confidence and affection of a tender child to a Mother, and since that she has been quite cheerful and contented.[49]

The letter suggests that Carroll had trouble convincing Charlotte to pursue religious orders and asked Seton to intervene. By using her daughter's untimely death as an example, Seton convinced Charlotte that she must also work toward her own salvation. Carroll, a "shepherd of the

---

[49]Elizabeth Seton to John Carroll, 10 September 1813, Baltimore Cathedral Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

Church" thus relied on Seton to provide spiritual guidance to a member of his own family. Although the Catholic Church supported traditional gender roles, in practice, Seton and Carroll crossed gender conventions. On some occasions, Seton took over the roles of spiritual advisor and consoler.

In summary, documents from the period reveal that a priest's authority was often mediated by the close relationships with the families in his community. Women and priests had especially close ties. The priest's vow of secrecy allowed a woman to talk about her innermost secrets without judgment. He also gained a position of trust as the center of a communication network linking women, family, and friends. By aiding the limited number of priests in large Catholic parishes, Catholic women, like Protestant women, worked to ameliorate the condition of the poor and less fortunate.

Some women worked with the clergy to find employment, shelter and education for less fortunate women. Along with finding relief from poverty, single and widowed women found a new sense of identity in the convent. The confraternity also offered women an alternative to marriage. While the administrators of most Protestant organizations were married, the women of the Confraternity of Charity were single. Thus, not only did they supervise the activities of the students and orphans at the various academies and orphan asylums, but they also governed themselves. Although the guidelines for the Confraternity of Charity stated that the

women be advised by their priest, letters between Seton and Carroll make it clear that Carroll's workload kept him from intervening in the day-to-day operation of the organization.

While many women sought protection from poverty, they were also drawn to the Catholic perception of salvation. In an era of high mortality, Catholic sacraments offered consolation. Documents suggest that ministering to the needs of the many people in a parish was often burdensome, and to alleviate the burden, women assumed some of the clergy's spiritual duties. Although women held a much lower position than did the clergy, they shared many of the same responsibilities.

The relationships among Catholic women and priests were similar to Protestant women's relationships with ministers. Both allowed women and the clergy to occasionally cross gender lines. The activities of Catholic and Protestant women were also similar. The public roles these women played call into question the separate spheres ideology. Instead of confining women to the domestic sphere, the market economy opened new responsibilities for women in the public sphere. At a time when there was little social welfare, Catholic and Protestant women provided early nineteenth-century America with much needed benevolence.

CHAPTER III

CATHOLIC WOMEN AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

Although women's roles were considered secondary to those of men, under Catholic doctrine male and female virtues were complementary. Catholic women, like Protestant women, were entrusted with the spiritual and moral well-being of their families and communities. As a result, women played important roles in their church and community activities. Like many of their Protestant counterparts, some Catholic women found that these activities offered considerable autonomy. Financial self-interest further increased a woman's autonomy, and both literary and benevolent activities contributed to the women's sense of identity and influence beyond the domestic setting. Thus, Catholicism, like Protestantism, both supported traditional female roles even while allowing women to subvert gender conventions.

To understand how women achieved greater autonomy under the auspices of the Catholic Church, it is important to examine their traditional roles. Catholic women played roles in church services by performing ceremonial functions during the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. They also gave speeches and welcoming addresses at public church functions. One of the most important roles a woman played in her early life was in the annual "May Day" procession. Every May, schoolgirls participated in processions to honor

the Virgin Mary. The following describes a procession in Portsmouth, Virginia on May 4, 1856:

> The first of May will long be remembered with feelings of joy by Catholics here. In the evening we had a procession of the Sunday School girls, all dressed in the purest of white, headed by altar boys, bearing a handsome banner of the Blessed Virgin. They were also joined by the orphans of St. Mary's Asylum in Norfolk . . . . On leaving the church the happy children were conducted to a liberal set out of refreshments, which had been prepared through the liberality of our generous Pastor, after which all retired to their homes with joyous and delighted hearts.[100]

The phrase, "Sunday school girls, all dressed in the purest of white," illustrates the emphasis that the Catholic Church put on female religious orders. Before Vatican II, the vocation of religious orders was actually considered a slightly higher vocation than that of marriage.

Nuns, like priests, took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience to better emulate Jesus. Like Jesus, nuns sacrificed materiality, the joys of marriage, and personal will for the sake of God's kingdom. Although nuns were not rewarded for their sacrifices during their worldly lives, the following two poems reveal that religious women expected to ultimately reap greater rewards than their married counterparts. The following poems were written by Hermine of New Orleans, whose poems appeared from time to time in the *Catholic Mirror* "the official organ of the Archbishop of Baltimore and the Bishop of Richmond."[101] The first poem was

---

[100]*The Catholic Mirror* VII (May 4, 1856): 4.

[101]Nothing is known about the author except that she was from New Orleans and that several of her poems appeared in the *Catholic Mirror* during the 1850s.

written for "Sr. Helena's Golden Jubilee" in March, 1872 and describes the sacrifices and rewards of a religious life:

> Sister Helena! The long years have brought you
> The glorious chimes of your first bridal bells
> And again do you hear, with holiest rapture
> The mystical meaning their melody tells
>
> They speak of a day in the dim past enshrouded,
> Fifty long years have been numbered since then
> When you as a bride, from the homestead departed,
> Passing away from the notice of men . . .
>
> Fifty long summers! The roses have faded
> That bloomed on your cheeks that far bridal day,
> But the lilies of Love, in their brightness and beauty
> Still 'round your heart in purity stay
>
> Ever to see Him! Always to love Him!
> What were fifty long years to a rapture like this?
> Who would not share all the yearning and waiting,
> At last to be crowned with such measure of bliss?[102]

The second poem is entitled "The Aged Wife to Her Husband On Their Fifty-Fourth Wedding Anniversary" and describes the sacrifices and rewards of marriage:

> Darling husband, do you love me
> As on that sunny day in life,
> When at the altar, close beside thee,
> I became thy happy wife.
>
> Then roses bright were on my brow,
> And joy and youth in my eye--
> But, faded are those roses now,
> And joys of youth have all gone by . . .
>
> And has thy love increas'd in might,
> As children dear sprang round thy knee,
> And when their virtues blessed thy sight,
> Did'st you look with more of love on me?
>
> . . . Then need I ask thee cherish'd one
> A question answer of thy life
> For thy dear love, like God's bright sun,

---

[102]Hermine, "Poem for Sister Helena's Golden Jubilee," March 1872, Archdiocese of Baltimore Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

Has daily cheer'd thy grateful wife.[103]

Both poems use marriage as a metaphor. The nun is the "Bride of Christ" and serves God throughout her life as the wife serves her husband. Like the wife, whose religious vocation was to maintain family life, the nun was entrusted with the well-being of God's community. While both poems relate the sacrifices lay and religious women made in their vocations, religious women reaped greater rewards in the end. The wife's reward for fifty-four years of marriage and motherhood was her husband's unconditional love. Sister Helena, who sacrificed sensual pleasures during her earthly life, would, in the afterlife, experience a rapture unlike mortals.

However, documents suggest that there were earthly reasons that women took the veil. For Catholics, unlike Protestants, religious vocation was an acceptable alternative to marriage. And marriage did not always benefit women in the antebellum period. As scholars in recent years have traced the history of marriage with an eye to the differing experiences of men and women, it has become clear that although many early nineteenth-century couples may have had affectionate and mutually respectful relationships, societal and legal expectations of marriage emphasized economic motives and masculine prerogatives. Suzanne Lebsock maintains that although companionate

---

[103]Hermine, "The Aged Wife to Her Husband on Their Fifty-Fourth Wedding Anniversary," *The Catholic Mirror* VI (September 5, 1822):1.

marriage, that is, marriage for love and not for financial wealth, emerged during the antebellum era, most marriages remained financially motivated. Consequently, given most women's disadvantaged position, men "retained the upper hand in almost every aspect of marriage."[104]

Christine Stansell similarly argues that "women needed men more than men needed women."[105] Women's economic dependency on men had some detrimental effects. Because some men questioned women's motives for marriage, they often mistrusted their wives, and this mistrust might turn into physical abuse.[106] In an era in which there were few ways for women to maintain an independent social or economic existence, joining a religious order gave Catholic women an alternative to the lottery provided by male-dominated marriage.

Along with male domination and abuse, marriage meant motherhood. Although infant mortality was high during the colonial period, urbanization caused it to increase in the early part of the nineteenth century. Moreover, instead of Divine Providence, Americans began to put the fate of their children into the hands of individual mothers. In lieu of medical advances, doctors cited close mother-child relationships as the key to good infant health. The constant threat of death caused maternal anxiety even with the increased emphasis on mothering as the guarantor of

---

[104]Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg*, 17-18.

[105]Stansell, *City of Women*, 76.

[106]Ibid., 77.

children's health suggests that some women may have doubted their ability to raise children.[107] Lack of medical knowledge also contributed to maternal death during childbirth and suggests another reason women may have searched for an alternative to marriage.

A religious vocation not only allowed Catholic women to avoid the potential heartache of marriage and motherhood, it enabled them to pursue professional careers. In her study of female religious orders in Quebec, *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood, and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920,* Marta Danylewicz maintains that in the early nineteenth century, religious vocation opened the door to non-traditional female occupations. While most religious women devoted their lives to social services, such as teaching and ministering to the poor, the scope of careers available increased and included administrators, nurses, and scholars (including the first female Ph.D. in Philosophy in North America), carpenters and engineers.[108] Danylewicz asserts that "under the aegis of a vocation, women could reject marriage, pursue lifelong careers, and be part of a community that enjoyed the ability to create its own sense of rank, status and division of labor."[109]

Nuns of different orders throughout the Archdiocese of

---

[107]Dye and Smith, "Mother Love and Infant Death," 329 - 353.

[108]Marta Danylewicz, *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), 107.

[109]Ibid., 106.

Baltimore and the United States gained great personal satisfaction and a measure of autonomy as they built and administered many benevolent institutions with minimal male supervision. At a time when there was considerable disparity between the rich and poor, and little social welfare, nuns established hospitals, orphanages, and schools.

Although Virginia established a public school system during the nineteenth century, the schools did not meet the needs of everyone. During the 1840s, public schools became a means to cultivate Protestant ideals throughout American society.[110] In most major cities Protestants supervised curricula, chose textbooks and ensured appropriate prominence for the King James Bible. The curricula and textbooks were often blatantly anti-Catholic and Nativist.[111] An 1854 editorial in the *Williamsburg Daily Times* stated:

> Our public schools offer an escape from the evils of ignorance. . . . A thing of vast moment--they overcome social differences which wealth and cultivation imposes upon the intercourse of men and gather each day intimate relations the children in every rank of our society, and of different national origins, and of various and conflicting creeds . . . regard our public schools as beyond all price and praise.[112]

Catholics, however, did not share much in the praise for the schools and began to establish parochial schools in major cities. Along with shielding children from the "evils" of

---

[110]Knobel, *America for the Americans*, 120.

[111]Morris, *American Catholic*, 73.

[112]Ibid.

nativism, parochial schools sought to instill Catholic values in American society. Like their Protestant counterparts, the parochial schools also sought to lessen the ideological and educational divisions between the rich and the poor by teaching the same lessons, values, and ideals to all--poor and rich.

The first parochial school was established in Emmitsburg, Maryland by a Catholic woman, Elizabeth Seton. The establishment of the school solved a personal dilemma for Seton, who was worried about the education of her own five children.[113] Soon afterward, three other women joined Seton, and the Sisters of Charity was established. The purpose of the school was to give religious instruction to Catholic children as well as customary female education, such as reading, writing, arithmetic and needlework. "The service of the poor of all descriptions and ages, the sick, invalids, foundlings, orphans and the insane," was the dominant purpose of the Sisters of Charity.[114]

The sisters based their mission on the Catholic virtue of charity, which was similar to the early nineteenth-century evangelical view of salvation. Evangelicals believed that people were not only responsible for their own salvation, they could expedite the salvation of others. Thus, many evangelical women left their middle and upper-

---

[113]Mary Agnes Yeakel, *The Nineteenth Century Educational Contributions of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent DePaul in Virginia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), 33.

[114]Ibid., 34.

class neighborhoods to minister and uplift the poor. The expanded interpretation of salvation also prompted female evangelical reform activities. The virtue of charity similarly encouraged Catholic women's reform activities, including the establishment of orphan asylums and female academies. Indeed, the Sisters of Charity's mission was analogous to that of the evangelical Protestant Sunday school movement: both were directed toward advancing the moral and educational capacities of the poor. While evangelicals hoped to foster Protestant ideals and values, the sisters sought to instill Catholic ideals and values. By nature, nurturing and virtuous, women, both Protestant and Catholic, could best instill these ideals and values in children.

Along with teaching values and ideals, the "Rules and Regulations of the Sisters of Charity" suggest that the sisters also sought to change the way Catholic and Protestants treated unruly youth. In her study of antebellum New York City, Christine Stansell finds that working-class families were "little hierarchies in which men dominated women, and parents commanded the labor and deference of their children."[115] Juvenile crime was thus related to family authority and family labor. Many times, children left home to live on the streets or try to make it on their own, because this type of life was more appealing than living with a father who whipped them or a mother who constantly scolded. Children living on the streets often

---

[115]Stansell, *City of Women*, 53.

ended up in correctional asylums. Although many children landed in these institutions because of crimes committed on the streets, most were committed to the asylums by their own families. According to Stansell, the movement against juvenile crime was a means of family as well as class control.[116]

Confinement in a correction asylum may have exacerbated rather than solved juvenile crime, and suggests that the firm but loving approach to discipline was the sisters' way of addressing juvenile crime. The sisters reproved unruly children firmly, yet mildly and to avoid humiliating children, the sisters did not discipline unruly students in front of the class. Instead, they took the children aside and explained the harmful consequences of their actions. This, they hoped, would discourage violence and other crimes.[117]

The Sisters of Charity's mission was introduced in Virginia through a number of parochial schools that were established in the state during the 1830s and 1840s. After the completion of St. Peter's Church in Richmond, Father Timothy O'Brien wanted to establish a school for young girls, regardless of social class. O'Brien wrote to Seton's successor, Mother Rose White, that "My next step is to have three Sisters of Charity. One, at least, should be an accomplished woman. There is a fine field for doing

---

[116]Ibid.

[117]Yeakel, *The Nineteenth Century Educational Contributions of the Sisters of Charity,* 95.

extensive and permanent good, but I will not conceal from you there will also be difficulties." When Sisters Margaret George, Mary Editha and Ann Catherine arrived in Richmond on November 22, 1834, O'Brien feared that some of the local citizens might not treat the nuns very well. However, most of the citizens were cordial and the governor lent one of his carriages to O'Brien so that he could drive the sisters from the steamboat to St. Peter's.[118]

Saint Joseph's Orphan Asylum was incorporated in 1848 and Academy grew rapidly. The institution was financed through donations, collections, and tuition. Elementary subjects offered at St. Joseph's, included religion, arithmetic, drawing, geography, grammar, history, spelling, writing and sewing, and were more diverse than those in the Academy Movement. These subjects included: algebra, arithmetic-mental and practical, composition, literature, globe problems, and natural philosophy. Church documents reveal that because the pastor was preoccupied with other concerns, the Sisters of Charity taught and administered St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum and Academy with minimal guidance.[119]

St. Mary's Orphan Asylum and Female Academy in Norfolk was exclusively administered by the Sisters of Charity. Ann Herron, a wealthy Norfolk woman, supported the institution in its entirety. In a letter dated February 8, 1848, Sister Mary Aloysia Lilly, one of three women appointed to open the

---

[118]Bailey, *History of Saint Peter's Church,* 15.

[119]Yeakel, *The Nineteenth Century Educational Contributions of the Sisters of Charity,* 45.

school, stated that "Miss Ann Herron has undertaken the good work; she furnishes and supports us entirely. If others wish to give donations, of course they can do so, but she is responsible for the support of the Asylum. There are no managers of any kind which is well for us. . . ." Herron intended the school "for the poorest of the poor."[120] When she learned that the families of many of the children could afford to pay tuition, Herron decided that they could remain, but that they must pay tuition. In November 1849, Herron agreed to donate $1,000 per year during her lifetime for the maintenance of St. Mary's, provided that the Sisters of Charity remained in charge. Although the asylum was incorporated in 1852 and technically came under the guidance of a board of trustees composed of male members of Norfolk's Catholic church, the Sisters of Charity continued to administer the institution. Herron made it clear that she would withdraw her support of the institution if the board interfered with the sisters' administration.[121]

Ann Plume Behan Herron was born in Wexford, Ireland in 1802. Her uncle, Walter Herron, was a wealthy Norfolk merchant and one of the first trustees of the city's Catholic Church. Following the death of his wife, Herron invited his niece to visit him. Since Herron and his wife were childless, he adopted Ann and changed her last name

---

[120]Ibid., 158.

[121]Ibid.

from Behan to Herron.[122] Upon his death, Ann inherited most of her adopted father's extensive estate. The Virginia Census of 1850 lists Herron as a head of household owning $32,400 in real property.[123] Herron never married and contributed much to her community. On March 18, 1848, just after the establishment of St. Mary's Orphan Asylum and Female Academy, the following appeared in the *U.S. Catholic Magazine*: "This institution, the want of which has long been felt, owes its origin and support to an estimable lady, Miss H. who devotes much of her wealth in charities for the relief of the poor, and in benefactions for the honor of religion."[124]

Herron and other Catholics contributed to the community during the 1850s even as Know-Nothing politics and anti-Catholic sentiment grew in Norfolk and throughout the rest of the state. During the 1855 gubernatorial campaign, many anti-Catholic editorials and speeches appeared in Virginia papers and some Know-Nothings proposed that Catholics be proscribed from holding public office. Senator R.M.T. Hunter expressed his sentiments in September 1855 during the height of the yellow fever epidemic. Hunter said that there were some offices which the "sons and daughters of that church are still considered competent to discharge." The offices he spoke of were "Christian charity" and the

---

[122]Herron Family Papers, The Historical Society of Virginia, Richmond.

[123]*Virginia Census, 1850*, Kirn Memorial Library, Norfolk.

[124]*U.S. Catholic Magazine* VIII (March 1848): 7.

"ministration of the sick." He described how the Sisters of Charity entered "yonder pest-house, from quails and shrieks, she may breathe there the breath of the pestilence which walks abroad in that mansion of misery, in order to minister to disease where it is most helpless." Hunter then spoke of the dedication that Catholic women and men illustrated when they nursed the many victims of the epidemic.[125]

Many Know-Nothings blamed the epidemic on the Irish. The source of the epidemic, however, was the merchant ship *Ben Franklin*. The ship docked in Portsmouth in mid-June 1855, and despite rumors that passengers were infected with yellow fever, the ship was quarantined for only one day before moving to Gosport. Because the first cases of yellow fever developed in the Gosport area, especially around "Irish Row" on First Street, the Irish Catholic immigrant community was blamed for the epidemic.[126]

Catholics of Norfolk and Portsmouth came to the aid of their communities, both Protestant and Catholic. Sisters of Charity offered their services at the Portsmouth Naval Hospital.[127] Father Devlin, the pastor of St. Paul's Church in Portsmouth died while attending victims of the fever. In September, 1855 Ann Herron opened her house to the Sisters of Charity to nurse victims of the yellow fever epidemic. While attending the victims, Herron also contracted the

---

[125]*Daily Richmond Enquirer,* 13 September 1855.

[126]Bailey, *A History of the Diocese of Richmond,* 110.

[127]Mildred M. Holladay, "The History of Portsmouth," *Portsmouth Star,* January 19, 1936.

disease and before her death on September 27, 1855, bequeathed her house to the Sisters of Charity to establish a hospital. In December 1856, St. Vincent DePaul, the first Catholic hospital in Virginia, and the first hospital of any kind in Norfolk, was established.[128]

After Herron's death, a letter appeared in the October 13, 1855 edition of the *Catholic Mirror* describing her as a recluse. The letter was written on the occasion of Herron's death and the editor said: "The following touching letter, written by one who well knew the rare virtues of the lamented Miss Herron of Norfolk has been placed at our disposal by the one to whom it was addressed."[129] An excerpt from the letter reads:

> . . .It is not for her I mourn. But for the friendless, the poor, the fatherless, the timid, the pusillanimous whom she protected. . .Oh! her life of sacrifice, of self-denial, of thoughtful, practical piety, of consistent unwearied charity was so beautiful, that I would seek no other type of our religion, to symbolize its divinity, to demonstrate its truth, to win affection for its loveliness. . . .[130]

The words used to describe Herron characterize the ideal antebellum woman. As moral guardians of society, according to historian Barbara Welter, the nineteenth century woman was identified with all things beautiful and holy. Possessing piety, submissiveness, and purity, she was responsible for the spiritual well-being of her family and

---

[128]Bailey, *History of the Diocese of Richmond,* 128.

[129]"The Late Miss Herron," *Catholic Mirror* VI (October 31, 1855), 4.

[130]Ibid.

her community.[131]

The only virtues Herron did not possess were those of wife and mother. Although little evidence relating to Herron's life exists, a strong case can be made for why she never married or joined a religious community. Under Virginia law, as long as a woman remained unmarried, she was not subject to any special restrictions and could own and control property on the same terms as men.[132] Furthermore, if Herron joined a religious community, she would have had to take the vow of poverty. The best way to help others and to enhance her own status in the community was to stay single and secular. By not marrying, Herron was able to control the way her money and property was used. In return, she helped to empower the young women enrolled at St. Mary's, as well as the women who managed the school. Moreover, her support included the provision that the institution be managed exclusively by the Sisters of Charity after her death. In his last will and testament, Herron's heir, her brother John, bequeathed $3,000 per annum to St. Mary's with the stipulation that the institution continued to be managed by the Sisters of Charity.[133]

Herron's benevolence was not necessarily selfless. By antebellum standards, Herron was a wealthy woman and she

---

[131]Welter, *The Cult of True Womanhood,* 153.

[132]Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg*, 23.

[133]Last Will and Testament of James Herron Behan, 7 February 1866, Diocese of Richmond Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

gained recognition and influence in the community through her benevolence. Moreover, she did not use her influence and money to uplift the conditions of all of the poor in her community. Like many wealthy Virginians, Herron owned slaves. While she bequeathed a portion of her money to St. Mary's and the hospital, the rest went to her wealthy brother. James Behan dispensed a portion of the money to support St. Mary's, the hospital, and various other Catholic activities, but the remainder of his sister's money went to siblings in Ireland. Although a portion of the estate was allocated to charitable activities, the Herron family, who were members of Ireland's landed gentry, benefitted most. Thus like many elite women, Herron's generosity did not create hardship for her. On the contrary, she received rewards for her benevolence in the form of authority over the orphan asylum and female academy, and recognition for her acts in the Catholic magazines of the day. Instead of being confined to the domestic sphere, Herron, like many Protestant women of the era, played an important public role in her community.[134]

Other unmarried Catholic women also achieved substantial power through the Catholic Church. Anna Dorsey (1815-1890) was a Catholic convert who remained unmarried after her conversion.[135] Wealth, not religion, often

---

[134]Ibid.

[135]Little is known about Anna Dorsey. According to *The Living Female Writers of the South:* "Besides the 'living writers' noted in this volume there are a few not mentioned

determined whether or not a woman married. Suzanne Lebsock states that marriage in the upper classes mainly benefitted men, and sometimes it was in the best interest of a wealthy woman to remain single. By marrying, a wealthy man increased his wealth when he gained control of his wife's property. A wealthy woman, on the other hand, lost control of her property when she married.[136] Similarly, if a widow was left property by her deceased husband it was in her best interest not to remarry. A single woman had control over her property and money and did not have to worry about a husband making a poor investment or using her money for frivolous activities, such as gambling and drinking.[137] Instead, an unmarried woman could use her money in a number of causes that would bring her power and prestige in her community.

Patrick Allitt maintains that the reason Dorsey and other converts did not marry lies in their relationship with Catholic priests. Each sought the advice of the clergy before making important decisions. These relationships were consistent with the "separate spheres" ideology of nineteenth century America. Instead of seeking the advice

---

on account of the impossibility of obtaining data for a sketch, etc. . . Mrs. Anna H. Dorsey, is, I believe, a native of Baltimore. She has been writing for over twenty- years. She has written dramas, poems, novels, tales and essays, a great many stories for young people. . ." *The Living Female Writers of the South*, Manuscript Collection, The Historical Society of Virginia, Richmond.

[136]Lebsock, *Free Women of Petersburg*, 15-53.

[137]Ibid.

of husbands, Allitt concludes, Catholic female writers sought the advice of their priests before making important decisions.[138] Correspondence between Dorsey and priests suggest that they helped her publish short stories in Catholic periodicals. Instead of giving advice, the priests told Dorsey when they expected her stories would be published. Dorsey did not have to remarry because her short stories and novels brought her sufficient income.

Many of Dorsey's short stories appeared in the *Catholic Mirror*. Aided by Archbishop Francis Kenrick, Dorsey began her literary career by translating Latin prayers into English. On September 5, 1854, Kenrick wrote Dorsey: "Your translation of the *Pange Lingua* pleases me very much. I am delighted that you are determined to put the *Lauda Sion* into English. St. Thomas Aquinas would not, I am sure, choose any other interpretation of this sublime message."[139] On December 9, 1854, Dorsey's translation of the *Pange Lingua* was published in the *Catholic Mirror*. A little over a year after the translation of the *Pange Lingua* was published, Dorsey's first serial, "The Young Countess," written to instruct young Catholic girls on morality, appeared in the periodical.

Ann Douglas states that Protestant women and ministers wrote novels, short stories, memoirs, and magazine pieces to

---

[138]Allitt, *Catholic Converts*, 128.

[139]Francis Kenrick to Anna Dorsey, 5 September 1854, Archdiocese of Baltimore Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

influence the ever-increasing reading public.[140] The purpose of many of these works was to implant matriarchal values into society. Historian Mary Kelley maintains that ". . . . reading women made books a site for personal transformation."[141] She quotes historian Stephen Goldblatt, ". . .[reading] was self-fashioning: the achievement of a personality, a particular address to the world, a way of acting and a way of thinking." In essence, Goldblatt states that books were catalysts in the fashioning of alternative selves.[142] Moreover, many novels written by women in the nineteenth century suggest alternatives to the status quo. Both the households in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are women-centered. Writers such as Lydia Maria Child, Harriett Beecher Stowe, Fanny Fern and Louisa May Alcott also sought to instruct children on morality and used their literary works to expose social injustice.[143]

Several anti-Catholic novels such as Rebecca Reed's *Six Months in a Convent* (1835) and Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* (1836)

---

[140]Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 8.

[141]Kelley, "The Making of the Learned Woman in Antebellum America," 401-404.

[142]Ibid.

[143]Anne Scott MacLeod, *American Childhood: Essays on Children's Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 148-49.

also began to appear during the early nineteenth century.[144] While such novels drew on a long European tradition of anti-convent literature and pornography, the hostility toward authority and concern for personal autonomy they expressed spoke powerfully to American preoccupations. For instance, Monk depicted Catholic life as tyrannical and anti-democratic. Reflecting Protestant beliefs that lifelong chastity and rejection of marriage were unnatural, leading only to depravity, Monk also described the sexual debauchery that supposedly took place in a convent to which innocent girls were dragged forcibly.[145] A Norfolk woman, Josephine Bunkley described similar circumstances in *The Testimony of an Escaped Novice* (1855). In deciding to write the book, she did not "act on her own judgment only, but availed herself of the advice of judicious friends, who believed it was a sacred duty to the American community and the best interest of society to do so."[146]

Bunkley described the alleged relationships of the priests and nuns at St. Joseph's in Emmitsburg, Maryland. She recounted an occasion when she went to the pastor to receive his blessing. Instead of feeling his hand against her forehead, Bunkley felt the impression of a kiss. Startled and confused, Bunkley said that she "staggered" to

---

[144]Allitt, *Catholic Converts,* 132.

[145]Ibid., 24.

[146]Josephine M. Bunkley, *The Testimony of An Escaped Novice* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1855), 1.

her feet, but before she could regain her composure "seizing my wrist with his left hand, and encircling my waist with his right arm, he drew me toward him, and imprinted several kisses on my face before I was able to break from his revolting embrace." Bunkley also described how, when in the company of priests, the sisters were to conduct themselves. A sister should not see a priest alone in a parlor, or visit him alone. However, she could remain at the confessional for any length of time with her confessor. According to Bunkley, "when the Father Superior enters the room of the Lady Superior, should a sister be present, it is her duty to withdraw at once; nor is any one allowed to enter while he remains."[147]

Bunkley also asserted that priests spent the night at the convent, and that she could hear them walking the halls at night. One day, when she was working in the infirmary, she heard a priest's voice in an apartment belonging to one of the sisters. She said that she could not distinguish the conversation, but "the groans increased until they became shrieks, at intervals of about ten minutes, and then more frequent, until continuous, when they ceased altogether." Bunkley added, ". . . the task I have conscientiously undertaken compels me to withhold nothing that shall acquaint my countrymen with the reality of those dangers to which their daughters may be exposed within these guarded

---

[147]Ibid., 146.

precincts."[148]

Bunkley also described how the sisters worshiped statues of the Virgin Mary and other saints, and that the "idolatrous worship of the Virgin Mary was carried to such a pitch as could fail to shock a mind that retained any vestige of scriptural belief and conviction." She added that "connected to this blasphemous homage is an endeavor to represent the Virgin Mary as, in a peculiar sense, the Deity of women, and of course, especially nuns." She described how the nuns paid homage to St. Vincent, and stated that "no one passed it without a lowly obeisance, and some addressed it as a living person." Disturbed by her experiences, Bunkley fled the convent.[149]

Bunkley likely sensationalized the story so it would sell, but because she was a convert, she may have misunderstood some of the things she heard and saw during her time in the convent. Like many young women, she was probably not prepared for a religious life. Documents reveal that other women, such as Anna Gertrude Wrightt, were not prepared for life in the convent. Her dispensation from the Order of the Visitation states that she embraced the religious life at the "tender age of fifteen years." In time, "she made her profession and took her vows . . . Having to renew these vows every month according to the rule, but having an aversion to doing so because of the

---

[148]Ibid.

[149]Ibid., 221.

difficulties involved in following them . . . she resolved to leave the convent and find peace outside the convent."[150] Most of the time, women were free to leave the convent after receiving dispensation. Sister M. Etienne Hall, Mother Superior of St. Joseph's, stated that "Miss B.'s extraordinary mode of leaving our house was as unnecessary as it was surprising. She could have left at any hour of the day, and by the front door."[151]

Not knowing what went on behind the walls of a convent, books such as Bunkley's may have attracted curious readers. The book resembles the sensation novel, a popular literary genre of the time. Like *The Testimony of an Escaped Novice,* sensation novels were fiction written as if they were fact, and despite antebellum social conventions, they typically sexualized encounters between men and women. While anti-convent novelists may have helped to satisfy the sexual curiosity of their readers, they also imparted anti-Catholic sentiment.

Anna Dorsey's novels sought to dispel some of the myths found in anti-Catholic literature. Archbishop Kenrick and Dorsey hoped to make a favorable impression on Protestants so that they and successive generations would become more tolerant of the Church.[152] They also hoped that if the myths

---

[150]Dispensation of Anna Gertrude Wrightt, 31 July 1831, Archdiocese of Baltimore Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

[151]Bunkley, *The Testimony of an Escaped Novice,* 249.

[152]Allitt, *Catholic Converts,* 131.

about Catholicism were eliminated, more non-Catholics would convert. *The Sister of Charity* addresses many of the issues brought up by Bunkley, including worship of the Virgin Mary and other saints, and whether or not nuns were kept in the convent against their will. While the sexual theme is not addressed in Dorsey's story, the priest and the nun are depicted as kindly and virtuous.

The *Sister of Charity* first appeared as a serial in the *Catholic Mirror* in the 1840s. The novel tells the story of the Leslies, a prominent Protestant family who live on the southeast coast of North Carolina. The story begins as twin sisters Blanche and Corrine and their father witness a shipwreck. The twins and their father work hard to rescue the victims of the wreck. Among the saved is a Sister of Charity who remains with the Leslies for some time.

Meanwhile, the Leslies' cousin, Edgar, arrives with a priest he met in Europe. Edgar, now a Catholic convert, and the priest build a chapel near the Leslies' home. They invite the townspeople, who are mostly Protestant, to the chapel for Mass and are successful in dispelling some of the myths about Catholicism, such as idol worship. When Corrine asks her cousin Edgar if it was true that Catholics worshiped images of the Virgin Mary, he responds that "We do not believe that any virtue resides in those sculptured marbles, or painted effigies, for which they ought to be

honored."[153]

When Blanche Leslie asks the Sister of Charity if women were kept in the convent against their will, she responds: "No! . . . After a novitiate of five years we make a vow of poverty, charity, and obedience, the obligation which ceases at the expiration of every year, when we renew it if we remain in the community." Blanche replies: "Oh, I like that, one feels more like a human being when one has a small particle of human will left; but do many leave at the expiration of the appointed time?" The Sister of Charity replies, "it is rare."[154]

The novel was both a response to anti-Catholic literature and an adaptation of other novels written by Protestant women. But, Dorsey's book was also meant to instruct young girls on morality. A closer look reveals that Dorsey also illustrated why it was sometimes better for women to remain unmarried. A man from one of the wealthiest families in North Carolina asks Blanche to marry him. However, he reveals that he is an agnostic, which makes him an unsuitable marriage partner in the Leslies' eyes. Instead of marrying the man, Blanche becomes a Sister of Charity. Years later, a haggard, sick, and destitute stranger arrives at the convent. He is Blanche's former beau, who, after the death of his father, had gambled away

---

[153]Anna H. Dorsey, *Sister of Charity* (New York: Edward Dunnigan, 1846), 111.

[154]Ibid.

the family fortune. Although she is sympathetic to his condition, Blanche knows that she had made the right choice when she joined the convent.

Like some Protestant women authors, Dorsey suggested an alternative to traditional female roles. Blanche Leslie illustrated why it was sometimes in a woman's best interest not to marry. No longer having control over their money and property, women were not protected if a husband's business pursuits failed, if he made a poor investment, or if he spent money frivolously. The same argument can be made for women of modest means. If they were gainfully employed or inherited a deceased husband's estate, remarriage meant that their husbands would gain control of their assets. In many cases, widows, like Dorsey, chose not to remarry.

Writing was also Dorsey's primary means of support. However sincere her sentiments, it is true that pro-Catholic literature sold. Dorsey wrote numerous short stories and novels for the Catholic press and periodicals. A letter from Dorsey to Father Edward Sourin on September 25, 1889, illustrates how important writing was to her financial interests:

> Did you dear Rev. Father ever give authority in writing or otherwise to Mr. Patrick O'Shea a New York Publisher to copyright and bring out a story of mine which had appeared in the *Ave Maria* in 1869 called "The Flemmings?" It was expressly agreed and understood between us that after the story was completed in the *Ave Maria* it was to revert to myself to be brought in book for my sole

benefit.[155]

Dorsey's novels were sufficiently lucrative that O'Shea tried to publish *The Flemmings* without her knowledge. She continued by saying that she did not know anything about O'Shea's intention until she found a circular he had sent to the publisher. The circular stated that "Patrick O'Shea had in press and would issue in a few days a new Catholic novel, *The Flemmings*, by Mrs. Anna H. Dorsey." O'Shea must have known that he stood to gain by selling a book with Dorsey's name on it, or he would not have published it without her permission. He also issued other stories that debuted in the *Ave Maria,* "The Old Gray Rosary," and "Corina."[156]

As the letter continued, Dorsey revealed that she was not about to let O'Shea or Sourin rob her of the success she earned from her books. She wrote sarcastically: "why, when everything was in my own hands, and success was assured, I relinquished my intention, and for the sake of others, determined to wait for the reparation which I firmly believed Divine Providence would order for the injustice done me?" She suspected that Sourin was involved in the scheme and informed him that she was preparing a law suit against O'Shea. Dorsey was going to prosecute for her own interests as well as to establish a precedent that would

---

[155]Anna H. Dorsey to Edward Sourin, 25 September 1889, Indiana Provincial Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

[156]Ibid.

protect other writers.[157]

On the surface, this episode confirms Allitt's thesis that convert women did not conform to the Catholic ideal of submissive wife and mother. But, here again, Allitt's depiction of Catholic ideals is shown to be too simplistic. Ann Herron also challenged the board of trustees of Norfolk's female academy and orphan asylum. Herron told the board that she did not want anyone but the Sisters of Charity involved in the institution's administration. Financial well-being and a sense of identity were the motivating factors in both of these cases. If the board of trustees did not comply with Herron, one of Norfolk's important philanthropists, they lost vital support for the orphan asylum and female academy. Dorsey fought to control her authorial identity and the financial support she received as one of the premier authors of Catholic novels, and against the efforts of a Catholic publisher who stood to lose a substantial amount of money if he lost the lawsuit.

Although the incident with O'Shea was unfortunate, it does suggest that organized religion offered far more than spiritual well-being to many women. It often gave them autonomy, prestige, power, and authority. While there were many Protestant women writers, there were only a small number of Catholic female writers. Dorsey supplied Catholics with numerous novels and short stories written from their perspective. As a result, she gained

---

[157]Ibid.

considerable autonomy, money, and prestige as one of America's foremost Catholic authors.

Like Dorsey, the Catholic Church also aided Eliza Allen Starr (1824-1901) in her intellectual pursuits. Starr apparently converted to Catholicism to satisfy her spiritual and intellectual needs. Starr thought she found spirituality and intellectualism in the Unitarian Church; however, in 1846, at the age of twenty-two, Starr heard the preaching of the Boston Unitarian, Theodore Parker:

> I was prepared for an intellectual and spiritual banquet, which would mark an era in my life. It certainly did so mark it, but in a way how different from that which I had anticipated! For as sentence after sentence came from the lips of the renowned preacher, first a tremor, then an actual chill came over me, as with smoothly flowing language, but irresistible logic, I found him demolishing every foundation-stone of my religious faith, and even hope.[158]

An excerpt from Starr's journal reveals that Catholicism offered Starr a new arena in which she could exercise her intellectual pursuits:

> In 1848 I went to Philadelphia where for the first time in my life I came in contact with educated Catholics; for the first time in my life set foot in a Catholic church, but very seldom caring to attend a service, and without the slightest intention of becoming a Catholic. Why should I? And yet, week after week, month after month, was being solved, without discussion, the question of an authorized faith in the Holy Scriptures.[159]

Like Dorsey, Starr befriended Archbishop Kenrick, and with his guidance, converted to Catholicism in 1854. Letters

---

[158]James J. McGovern, ed., *The Life and Letters of Eliza Allen Starr* (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1904), 33.

[159]Ibid., 35.

between the two reveal that Kenrick also helped Starr publish short stories and poems in *The Catholic Mirror*. Thus, like Dorsey, Starr also tried to dispel the myths about Catholicism. Yet, unlike Dorsey, Starr did not characterize Catholics as more virtuous than Protestants. She believed that Know-Nothingism stemmed from ignorance and hoped that her writing would encourage a Christian reconciliation.[160]

Like Dorsey, Starr remained unmarried; however, because she had been born into wealth, she did not have to rely on her writing for support. The identity she obtained from her writing, however, gave her freedom to pursue many activities. She presided over a Chicago salon, wrote seven books on Catholic art, and founded the art department at Saint Mary's College of South Bend, Indiana. She was also among the founding members of the Catholic Women's League, which established day-care centers, helped working women to find jobs, and advocated votes for women.[161]

While Catholicism satisfied Starr's spiritual needs, she also found ample opportunity to pursue intellectual and reform activities as a Catholic. Mary Kelley maintains that women's literary activities, including salons and literary societies, helped them to subvert gender roles.[162] Although

---

[160]Allitt, *Catholic Converts*, 131.

[161]Ibid.

[162]Kelley, "The Making of the Learned Woman in Antebellum America," 401 - 404.

reform and intellectual activities were needed, most Catholics were from the working class. Thus, there were boundless opportunities for elite women, such as Starr, to pursue literary and reform activities in the Catholic Church.

Emily Mason was another unmarried woman who created a place for herself in American society through various benevolent and literary activities. Emily Virginia Mason (1815-1909) was a great-niece of George Mason. It is not clear whether she converted or was born into the Catholic faith. Her obituary states that she was engaged to Lewis Cass, a former governor of Michigan; however, "Just why this affair never culminated in marriage was never known beyond the fact that the high spirited Virginia belle could ill brook the domineering ways of her would-be lord and master."[163] The two remained friends until Cass's death, so much so that Cass named Mason as one of his beneficiaries and executor of his estate.[164] Like Herron, Mason inherited a substantial sum of money. Elite women had many advantages over their lower-class counterparts, and privilege often led to personal and public autonomy.

Mason, like Herron, spent much of her life supporting benevolent activities. During the Civil War she worked as a nurse, and established a hospital at White Sulphur Springs.

---

[163]Emily Virginia Mason's Obituary, Mason Family Papers, The Historical Society of Virginia, Richmond.

[164]Ibid.

Mason compiled and edited a book of poetry, *The Southern Poems of the War*, the proceeds of which provided southern orphans "the means of education, that they may be enabled in time to earn their own living."[165] After the war, she spent fourteen years as a faculty member of a "fashionable girls' school" in Paris.[166]

The Catholic Church helped to expedite the careers of Dorsey and Starr, but Mason did not need help. Her wealth, family status, and connections gave her opportunity to perform benevolent and reform activities. In a letter to John McGill, the Bishop of Richmond, on Easter Day 1851, Mason suggests that she gained comfort from Catholic theology and sacraments: "The Blessing of the Holy time be upon you! I hope it is as bright and charming as it has been for us . . . The Sacraments never seemed so delicious, Father Ryker, never so eloquent, the Church services, never imposing--so comforting--beautiful . . ." She asked McGill to visit her for it would do much to help her "theological sanity." As the letter progressed, she pleaded that McGill visit because he would "do much good amongst these evangelicals."[167]

In summary, all four of these women, Herron, Dorsey, Starr, and Mason reveal that a new feminine ideal was

---

[165]*The Living Female Writers of the South*, 439-440.

[166]Emily Virginia Mason's Obituary, Mason Family Papers.

[167]Emily Virginia Mason to John McGill, n.d. Diocese of Richmond Archives, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

beginning to emerge during the antebellum era. The new ideal, embraced by Catholic as well as Protestant women, countered the image of the submissive wife and mother. These women wielded much respect and authority as they pursued philanthropic and literary endeavors. Converts and women born into the faith also found greater autonomy in female religious orders. While the convent offered single and widowed women an alternative to marriage, it also gave them the opportunity to devote their lives to leadership in the provision of social services.

Because most American Catholics were from the lower classes, Protestant women often found ample opportunity to pursue charitable, reform, and literary activities in the Catholic Church. Those who pursued literary careers often won influence, authority and financial well-being in their communities. The very public roles these women played thus calls into question the separate spheres ideology.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This thesis has investigated the roles of Catholic women during the antebellum era of American history. An analysis of documents from the Archdiocese of Baltimore suggests that the Catholic Church, like other organized religions, offered a legitimate arena wherein women could exercise their skills and activities outside the home. This study is significant because it challenges the perception that the hierarchy and theology of the Catholic Church limited women's opportunities to develop some of the same leadership skills as their Protestant counterparts. Documents from the period suggest Catholic women in fact had considerable opportunities for autonomy and influence in their organized benevolence, and that Catholicism offered women alternatives to marriage that allowed them to devote their lives to the provision of social services. Indeed, the opportunities to play roles in public life drew many converts.

Although a priest had considerable authority over his parish, it was often mediated by his relationships with his parishioners. As with Protestant women and their ministers, Catholic women and their priests shared especially close relationships. Women and priests worked together to ameliorate the condition of the less fortunate. Catholic parishes were larger than most Protestant parishes and there

were far fewer priests than ministers. The limited number of priests and the large size of the parish gave women more opportunity to engage in charitable work.

Converts and women born into the faith also found significant autonomy in the female religious orders. The convent offered single and widowed women an alternative to marriage. Founding and administering orphan asylums and schools gave women institutional authority and a sense of identity. Moreover, since the priest's workload prevented him from managing the daily operation of the order, women enjoyed a considerable amount of personal autonomy. In his study of Catholic converts, Patrick Allitt states that the women found themselves joining a community that shared a range of ideas and beliefs at odds with their own. A convert woman's decision not to marry meant that she did not conform to the Catholic ideals of submissive wife and mother. Documents reveal that Catholic converts were not the only women who chose to remain unmarried. Some "cradle Catholics" also chose single life over marriage or religious orders. In each instance, the women who chose not to marry were wealthy, which suggests that financial concerns, not necessarily religious ideology, contributed to a woman's decision to remain single. Analysis of unmarried women's interaction with their communities suggests that a new feminine ideal was emerging. Single women of the elite class could exert their social authority and gain independence through philanthropic and literary activities.

Since most of the members of the American Catholic Church were from the lower classes, there was ample opportunity for wealthy women to pursue literary and reform activities. Catholic priests sought wealthy women who were interested in reform and literary work. By publishing their work in Catholic periodicals, priests helped women embark on lucrative literary careers. However, for the most part, the women had full autonomy over their work.

It is even possible that Protestant women converted to Catholicism because of the extensive opportunities to pursue literary and reform activities. These conversions suggest that although most of their activities were in the voluntary sector, some women pursued career paths. Similar to men who left one business for another, some women may have converted to Catholicism because they saw more opportunity to pursue benevolent and literary activities. This study suggests that the dichotomy between the "private" and the "public" spheres must be reevaluated. The roles of men and women were different during the antebellum era; however, women from all sectors of society played significant public roles. Lower-class women, like lower-class men, worked in the public sector to support their families. Elite women, Catholic and Protestant, were engaged in various reform and literary activities. Rather than two distinct spheres, women and men played different roles in the public sphere.

This thesis makes two contributions to the current scholarly debates over gender history. First, analysis of

documents from the Archdiocese of Baltimore for this period suggest that many Catholic women, like their Protestant counterparts, exerted a degree of autonomy within the auspices of the Church. While many women possessed a strong religious faith, the Catholic Church, much like other organized religions, legitimatized women's roles outside the home as extensions of feminine concerns for the less fortunate. Secondly, some Protestant women converted to Catholicism because the church gave them additional opportunities to pursue charitable and literary activities. Instead of limiting women to the roles of submissive wife and mother, the Catholic Church helped antebellum American women construct a new feminine ideal.

REFERENCES

PRIMARY SOURCES

Bunkley, Josephine M. *The Testimony of An Escaped Novice.* New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1855.

Documents containing statistics of Virginia, ordered to be printed by the State convention sitting in the City of Richmond, 1850-1851. Richmond: W. Culley, 1851.

Dorsey, Anna H. *Sister of Charity.* New York: Edward Dunnigan, 1846.

Gasparri, Peter Cardinal. *Catholic Faith Based on the Catholic Catechism.* ed. Felix M. Kirsch and Sister M. Brendan, IHM. New York: P.J. Kenedy and Sons, 1938.

Hening, William Waller. *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of all the Laws in Virginia, 1619-1792* vol. 1 New York: R.W. and G. Bristow, 1901.

Kelly, Elin and Annabelle Melville, ed. *Elizabeth Seton, Selected Writings.* New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

James J. McGovern, ed. *The Life and Letters of Elizabeth Allen Starr.* Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1904.

Archives

Archdiocese of Baltimore Archives. University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

Baltimore Cathedral Archives. University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

Diocese of Richmond Archives. University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

Herron Family Papers. The Historical Society of Virginia, Richmond.

Indiana Provincial Archives. University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend.

Manuscript Collection. The Historical Society of Virginia, Richmond.

Mason Family Papers. The Historical Society of Virginia, Richmond.

Virginia Census, 1850. Kirn Memorial Library, Norfolk.

Newspapers

Daily Richmond Enquirer

Portsmouth Star

The Catholic Mirror

U.S. Catholic Magazine

SECONDARY SOURCES

Books

Allitt, Patrick. *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

Bailey, James H. *A History of the Diocese of Richmond: The Formative Years*. Richmond: Chancery Office, Diocese of Richmond, 1956.

_____. *History of St. Peter's Church, Richmond, Virginia*. Richmond: Lewis Printing Company, 1959.

Boylan, Anne M. *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Browne, Gary L. *Baltimore in the Nation, 1789-1861*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980.

Cott, Nancy F. *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.

Danylewicz, Marta. *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987.

Diner, Hasia R. *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture*. New York: Anchor Books, 1988.

Dublin, Thomas. *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.

Franchot, Jenny. *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Ginzerg, Lori D. *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics and Class in the Nineteenth Century United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Guilday, Peter. *The Catholic Church in Virginia, 1815 - 1822*. New York: The United States Historical Society, 1924.

Kerber, Linda. *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1986.

Knobel, Dale T. *America for the Americans: The Nativist Movement in the United States*. New York: Twayne Publishing, 1996.

Lacordaire. "Thou Art a Priest Forever." In *Path Through Catholicism*, ed. Mark Link, 163. Allen Texas: Tabor Publishing, 1991.

Lebsock, Suzanne. *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984.

MacLeod, Anne Scott. *American Childhood: Essays on Children's Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994.

Magri, Joseph. *The Catholic Church in the City and Diocese of Richmond, Virginia*. Richmond: Whittet and Shepperson Printing, 1906.

Morris, Charles R. *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church*. New York: Random House, 1997.

Norton, Mary Beth. *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1980.

Phelan, Thomas P. *Catholics in Colonial Days*. New York: P.J. Kennedy and Sons, 1935.

Ryan, Mary P. *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.

Solomon, Barbara H. ed. *Rediscoveries: American Short Stories by Women, 1832-1916*. New Jersey: Penguin Books, 1994.

Srebnik, Amy Gilman. *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Stansell, Christine. *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986.

Welter, Barbara, "The Feminization of American Religion, 1800-1860." In *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women,* ed. Mary Hartman and Lois Banner, 137-153. New York: Harper Collins, 1974.

Yeakel, Mary Agnes. *The Nineteenth Century Educational Contributions of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent DePaul in Virginia.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939.

Articles

Bloch, Ruth. "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815." *Feminist Studies* 4 (June 1978): 101-126.

Dye, Nancy Schrom and Daniel Blake Smith, "Mother Love and Infant Death, 1750-1920." *Journal of American History* 73 (September 1986): 329-353.

Kelley, Mary. "The Making of the Learned Woman in Antebellum America." *Journal of American History* 83 (September 1996): 401-412.

Lawes, Carolyn J. "Trifling with Holy Time: Women and the Formation of the Calvinist Church of Worcester, Massachusetts, 1815-1820." *Religion and American Culture* 8 (Winter, 1998): 115-135.

Meckel, Richard A. "Educating a Ministry of Mothers: Evangelical Maternal Associations, 1815-1860." *Journal of the Early Republic* 2 (Winter 1982): 403-423.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860" *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151-174.

VITA

LINDA MERRITT MCCUBBINS

Old Dominion University
Institute of Humanities
Norfolk, Virginia 23529 (757) 588-4090

EDUCATION

M.A.: Humanities
Old Dominion University, May 1999

B.A.: History
Old Dominion University, December 1996

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Administrative Assistant, Old Dominion University, Academic Television Services, March 1993 to May 1996.
Executive Secretary, Old Dominion University, Office of the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, Lifelong Learning and Academic Television Services, May 1996 to January 1998.
Program Coordinator, National University Telecommunications Network, January 1998 to March 1999.
Presently employed as Education Coordinator, MacArthur Memorial and Museum, Norfolk, Virginia.

HONORS AND AWARDS

Friends of Women's Studies Essay Contest. March 1996. "Women and Equality in the Catholic Church: What is the Future of the Women's Ordination Movement?" Honorable Mention, Graduate Division.

Phi Kappa Phi, national academic honor society, 1999.
Phi Alpha Theta, national history honor society, 1996.

SCHOLARLY PRESENTATIONS

Old Dominion University Catholic Campus Ministry, Women's History Month Program. March 18, 1999. "Daughters of Charity: Catholic Women and their Communities in Antebellum America."