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Book Review

Into Silence and Servitude: How American Girls Became Nuns, 1945-1965

Brian Titley

Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press (2017)

281 pages; \$35.00 USD (hardcover)

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<https://www.mqup.ca/into-silence-and-servitude-products-9780773551411.php>

Reviewed by John White

A story is told concerning the night in the 1950s when Boston's Sister Alice Gertrude (Keating), Sister of Notre Dame de Namur and President of Emmanuel College, was invited to attend a dinner at the home of Dr Nathan Pusey, the President of Harvard. The presidents of Boston College, Boston University, Tufts, and other area college dignitaries were also present. To attend, Sister Alice Gertrude first had to request permission from her superior; she was required to bring another sister along (her "secretary"), and when the dinner and conversation went later into the evening than she had planned, she and her companion were required on their return to the convent to do some sort of penance before the Superior for having been out late. Although the story may be apocryphal, it captures the tension and contradiction experienced by many American religious women in the postwar era as they taught in schools and worked in hospitals and orphanages for many hours each day while living lives according to Rules and Constitutions with their origins in the contemplative cloister. In *Into Silence and Servitude: How American Girls Became Nuns, 1945-1965*, Brian Titley offers an examination of the methods used to recruit and initiate thousands of young women into this system and way of life, most of whom became teaching sisters in Catholic schools.

In the nineteenth century, American bishops repeatedly urged the construction of Catholic schools, finally issuing a decree in 1884 mandating that each parish construct a school. These schools had to be completely funded by the church and her people and could make no claim on state aid. The entire cost of building, maintaining, and staffing schools fell to the individual parish or to the local diocese. Religious women, who were trained in a semi cloistered life of poverty, chastity, and obedience, also were taught that religion was their life and that teaching was their

job. From the hierarchy's perspective this made them an ideal and inexpensive workforce for such a massive national undertaking.

Titley is primarily concerned with the first few years of initiation into religious life. Girls sometimes entered a quasi-religious life in their early teens in boarding schools called aspirancies, although this was far from the norm. Most entered after high school for six or more months as postulants, after which they took their first vows and formally were accepted into their chosen order as novices. The book's greatest contribution is in Titley's examination of how teenage girls were recruited into religious life. He does this by analyzing published and unpublished memoirs as well as by looking at recruitment manuals, brochures, and other materials used to assist girls in the discernment process. From the beginning there were never enough sisters to staff parochial school classrooms, but the increase in the birthrate during the postwar era gave a new urgency to recruitment. Most recruitment was informal, and involved high school girls seeking vocational advice from trusted or admired sister-teachers. A more structured and systematic approach was adopted by many orders in the 1950s, with trained recruiters visiting schools making rehearsed presentations designed to encourage vocational discernment. Using many of the same psychological and sociological strategies as secular advertisers, recruiters were methodical and prepared for most eventualities, including devising ways to meet and defeat typical parental objections to a girl's entry to the convent. Titley suggests that some of these methods were manipulative and less than honest, playing upon Catholic parents' respect for and trust in the church. The recruitment of 12 to 14 year old girls into aspirancies and the incorporation of tactics generally associated with high pressure sales people into the discernment of a religious vocation makes for uncomfortable reading. Most teaching orders did not have aspirancies, and accepted postulants only after graduation from high school. The shift to universal high school that began in earnest during the Depression and a cultural shift leading to prolonged adolescence made most of the aspirancies close by the 1960s. Titley sees these schools as the most egregious example of a system of recruitment that was ethically flawed.

Where the examination of recruiting strategies is the book's greatest strength, the attempt to uncover the inner experiences of girls and young women in formation from aspirancy through postulancy and novitiate suffers from a lack of sources. Titley reconstructs the daily rhythm of life in these houses of formation for the reader, but is quite limited in his ability to get at what a broad cross section of postulants and novices experienced internally.

Titley writes that he applied for, and was denied access to the archives of several religious orders, which limited his sources. He claims that this was because he works in a Canadian state-sponsored, rather than a Catholic university, and insinuates that these orders were choosing to hide information that might be damaging to the order. While there may be some truth to this, it is also true that many Catholic archival collections, particularly those dealing with clergy or religious' personnel matters are sealed for 50, 75, or even 100 years. As many women who were postulants or novices in the 1960s are still alive, it should not be surprising that records concerning their time in formation have not been released to scholars.

As a result, Titley is forced to rely heavily on published memoirs written by women who went through postulancy and the novitiate in the postwar era. Most of these women left religious life in the decades after Vatican II, and had mixed if not largely negative memories of religious life in that era. We do not find a single anecdote about parents who were grateful or proud that their daughter chose religious life, nor is there any woman's voice explaining the spiritual growth that often flowed from disciplines and symbolic actions designed to put the "old man" (in this case the "old woman") to death. The anecdotes concerning the custom of shearing the new novice's hair on the day that she is given the habit and is admitted to religious life illustrate the shortcomings of a limited number of sources with similar negative memories. The removal of hair as a sign of a religious change of state can be found in the earliest centuries of the Christian era, be it the clerical tonsure or in nuns having their hair shorn. Yet most of the sources quoted are those who tell us that this powerful and symbolic ritual was deeply traumatic and left them in tears, or shocked and unable to touch their heads or look at themselves in a mirror, as one sister compared the experience to that of prisoners in Auschwitz. The reliance on published accounts without accounting for the authors' often antagonistic perspective on religious life can be misleading. Most of the writers Titley cites are women who left religious life, and their memoirs are often polemical in their opposition to traditional convent life. In a sense, they often read like twenty-first century feminist versions of escaped nun narratives, complete with an exaggerated emphasis on sexuality. This set of biases is to be expected, but Titley seldom balances it nor does he encourage the reader to take these authors with the proverbial grain of salt while reading the book. There are other important sources that could have been examined but were not looked at. For example, in examining the decline in numbers in the sixties and beyond, Titley relies on surveys and secondary

sources but fails to take advantage of Sister Marie Augusta Neal, SNDdN's series of "Sister Surveys" that attempted to measure sisters' thoughts and feelings with regard to virtually every aspect of religious life.

Titley often conflates silence and servitude by presenting the experiences of orders with very different charisms as though these differences did not exist. He moves freely between active teaching orders like the Sisters of St Joseph and contemplative orders like the Carmelites or the Poor Clares, often within the same paragraph. Women being prepared for a cloistered life of prayer and work had very different experiences than those preparing for the life of a teacher who led a semi cloistered life after hours. An attempt at comparing these differences would have been helpful. The tension between the active and cloistered life was arguably most keenly felt in orders like the Benedictines and Dominicans, who made significant alterations to their Rules and disciplines so that they might teach. A reader unaware of the rich diversity in Catholic religious life would never pick up on the often-striking differences in the way religious women live their lives.

As with all books that attempt to break new ground, *Into Silence and Servitude* points toward several areas for further research. Where most of his subjects were training for careers as teachers, a chapter on how teacher preparation was a part of the novitiate would have been welcome. Of course, the decline in vocations is also an area awaiting further research. Titley admirably attempts to address some of the issues behind the spectacular collapse in vocations and in convent life, but clearly this is an area demanding more than one chapter appended to a study of religious recruitment and formation.