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FIELDWORK REPORT by Anna I. Corwin

DURING FIELDWORK this summer in a Franciscan convent in the midwestern United States, I met two Sisters who had returned to the convent after many decades of hard work. They returned to the place where they come as teenagers when they made a commitment to leave their families and to serve God as religious sisters. When they joined the community, they took the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. This community of a few hundred women became their family, and this convent became their home. It is the place where they have returned every summer since the day they joined the community, it is the place where they retire, and it is the place where their bodies will one day rest.

This convent is an active Catholic order, meaning that the Sisters work outside convent walls as teachers, nurses, in parish ministries, or in other capacities. These two Sisters, like many others now living in retirement at the convent, have returned to the convent because they can no longer work

in positions outside the convent. One of them is battling Alzheimer's disease, a brutal degeneration of the mind, and the other is struggling with an aging and painful body that restricts her mobility. Each evening, the two women walk with each other around the beautiful grounds of the convent. Sr. Noella, who struggles with the fear and disorientation of the progressing Alzheimer's disease, is nevertheless concerned that Sr. Agatha, whose body confines her to the infirmary, won't get any fresh air without her help, and so she helps her physically navigate the hallway, the elevator, and the paths around the convent grounds. Sr. Agatha, however, does not see it quite the same way. Each evening, Sr. Agatha musters the energy to guide and orient Sr. Noella in what are to Sr. Noella the increasingly confusing and disorienting paths on the grounds around the convent.

These two Sisters might not overcome their ailments alone; yet, together they



make it outside for a nightly stroll. Each sees herself not as the one being helped, but as a friend putting herself second in order to serve another Sister.

Epidemiologists have noted that nuns have longer lives and age more “successfully” than their lay counterparts, and I believe that this example highlights a number of key elements that contribute to this model of successful aging. First, as many studies have shown, regular exercise and physical activity contribute to successful aging (Snowdon 2001:38). There is drive towards activity and service in the community that leads the sisters to keep physically active in many ways—serving as teachers, missionaries, and in many other positions for as long as their bodies permit. As this example shows, even after retirement most community members contribute in whatever ways they can to each others’ lives as well as to ongoing projects in the convent. This model of continuing physical activity helps people age more successfully.

Second, many studies have shown that having an engaging and fulfilling social life can contribute to good health. These sisters are in the unique position of retiring and aging within the community they have shared almost all of their lives. They therefore have a built-in buffer against the many stresses and hazards associated with loneliness (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008) and the reduced social circles many aging individuals experience. There are a number of other possible factors that epidemiologists have pointed out, including the positive correlation between education and longevity (Snowdon 2001:40). The Sisters in this convent all benefited from excellent educations, and many have received graduate degrees.

To me, as an anthropologist, far more interesting than the concept of longevity is the joyfulness and emotional richness of many of the lives led by the Sisters I encountered during my fieldwork in the convent. The questions that arose during this preliminary fieldwork focused on this ethos of joy and peace. My continued work will address the following

questions: What is it about living as a nun (or alternatively, about the people who are called to join the community) that contributes to this grace, and the relatively smooth transitions into retirement and old age? What cultural and linguistic practices influence the nuns’ experience of aging and illness? I cannot yet fully answer these questions, but based on my preliminary ethnographic work in the convent, I can begin to discuss a few aspects of the Sisters’ lives that might influence their experiences as they retire and enter old age.

First, when the Sisters enter the convent, they take three vows: vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The vow of poverty means that the Sisters spend their lives living without many material possessions. They do not own the individual beds, apartments, or cars that they use, which belong to the community as a whole. Since Vatican II in the mid-1960s, Sisters have much more freedom to own smaller things (a modest wardrobe, toiletries, and even room decorations),

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yet they still live with fewer possessions than most Americans.

The vow of obedience requires that in many aspects of their lives the Sisters give up a certain amount of self-determination. Until Vatican II, the sisters received “obediences” from their superiors telling them where they would work and live each year. If the superior saw that there was a need for someone to minister in a certain area, she would reassign a Sister to that area to minister in the new position.

As I continue my research, I will investigate how the Sisters' prayer life and faith may affect their experiences of transitions into retirement and old age.

Until the 1960s, the Sisters had little to no say in where they went and were required to accept each change in obedience. Since Vatican II, however, obedience has been reinterpreted as obedience more directly to God, and there has been a shift towards collaboration and conversation with leadership.

The vow of chastity, of course, means that the nuns live without a husband or partner. This lifetime of practice in poverty, obedience, and chastity trains the sisters to embody a habitus of non-attachment. These vows require that the sisters learn to let go of personal attachment to material possessions, to their

jobs and living situations, and even to individual people in their lives. The structure of their lives, including the fact that they own very few material possessions and that they often serve in many different ministries across the country or, as missionaries, across the globe without a partner or family, means that the Sisters have a great deal of practice in moving on and letting go of attachments to things, people, and places.

The process of retirement and aging therefore looks very different for the Sisters than it does for most Americans. Many of the stresses of retirement and aging that lay people encounter when they can no longer live independently, including leaving their home, moving in with family or a non-family group, giving up material possessions, and learning to share living space with others, are not new challenges for the Sisters. Even if these changes are not easy, the Sisters at least have a lifetime of practice with similar transitions. The process of giving up physical things and familiar

surroundings to enter assisted or group living situations is not as new for the sisters as it is for their lay counterparts, and, therefore, may help Sisters ease into retirement and old age. As Sr. Marie pointed out in an interview, the other side of the vows is that the Sisters are ensured of a certain “security.” As she put it, they never have to worry about “making a bad financial decision” or ending up “out on the street.” So while the structure of the convent requires a certain loss of self-determination, it also reduces some of the stresses lay people encounter as they age.

All of this is, of course, linked to far more than just the three vows. Daily practices, including prayer, faith, and service, teach mindfulness, self-reflection, and introspection. These habits shape the Sisters' experiences as they transition into retirement and old age. One study of deeply religious lay people, for example, found that elderly people who had a “deep religious faith” had a stronger sense of “well-being” and of “life satisfaction” than their less

religious peers (Koenig 1999:24). As I continue my research, I will investigate how the Sisters' prayer life and faith may affect their experiences of transitions into retirement and old age.

Another unique factor influencing life in the convent is that the community holds a united and coherent ideology of death and after-life. Aging brings individuals closer to death, which can evoke fear in many people. In the convent, death is accompanied by a deep faith that when they pass on, they will enter heaven and be met by God and the loved ones who have gone before them. Many people I spoke with described entering heaven as being welcomed “into God's arms” and as a returning “home.” This deep faith in heaven as a place of love and reunion requires that death is not looked at as an ending, but rather as a transition, a movement forward. This does not mean, of course, that Sisters do not grieve the loss of those who are dear to them, or that many of them do not fear this transition, but I believe

it does mean that old age and the end-of-life stage hold a more positive meaning for the nuns than for those who do not have a deep faith in the existence of an afterlife. This argument is supported by a study by Richard Kalish and David Reynold (1976) who found that elderly individuals who are either firmly religious or strict atheists experience significantly less anxiety and fear of death than those who report that they do not know what will happen to them when they die. As one sister told me in an interview, “I just gather that our Sisters are much more ready to meet death and to deal with it. Because part of our life is given to prayer, and to God in our lives.”

Finally, there is a great deal of community support and socialization into old age. Because the Sisters live in this community, they have support and guidance from others as they transition into retirement and old age. This guidance and socialization can be both explicit and implicit. As Sr. Rita pointed out, “[Our situation

is] very unique in that we usually are present when a sister is dying.” Younger sisters are often involved in the work of putting together a folder for each sister in the infirmary, cataloguing her wishes for her final hours of life: whether she wants people in the room with her or not, whether she prefers, for example, music to be playing or to have silent prayer. These administrative duties also work as a socialization process that brings together both the younger sisters and the elderly sisters into a conversation about death. As Sr. Rita noted, the Sisters are physically present when a community member is dying. This means that they have many chances to witness death, a process that Sr. Rita thinks help them pass on more peacefully when it is their own time.

As Sr. Rita put it at the end of our first interview:

I think for us it’s a spirit of gracefulness, of hospitality, charity, being present to people. There is a sense of care here. Just watch the Sisters going through the line [in the dining hall]. People will help

each other carry a tray. It’s not that they have to do it; it’s that they offer. I just think it’s the little stuff.

As I continue my research, I will continue to examine the process of aging as it occurs in the convent. Since previous studies that show that nuns and deeply religious people age more “successfully” and live longer, healthier lives, I expect to find that the factors leading to successful aging are many interrelated practices that include the physical, social, and spiritual aspects of the Sisters’ lives.

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