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“In the world but not of it”: Adrian Dominican Sisters Negotiating Modernity Through The Body, 1933-39

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*“In the world but not of it”:*  
*Adrian Dominican Sisters Negotiating Modernity Through The Body, 1933-39*  
by Elizabeth Dilkes Mullins, UC Santa Cruz

In her first letter to the community as Mother General, Mother Mary Gerald Barry of the Adrian Dominicans in southeast Michigan instructed Sisters to put God in the center of their lives and pray for others. Pray for patience, she instructed.

Be a joy to your Community now and always. See that you have the right disposition; that you are a real Dominican; ...It is not so much what we do but the spirit in which we do it that marks us as religious.<sup>1</sup>

To be “religious” meant to be a part of a religious order, a person professed to a life in the service of God and the Church- the opposite of which was “worldly.” She concluded her advice to the Sisters with “We are in the world but not of it” a frequently used phrase to remind Sisters of the place they occupied as Catholic women religious- inside but not attached to a mainstream “world” of material objects and ideas incongruent to Church doctrine. To be “in the world but not of it” spoke of a requirement for all Sisters<sup>2</sup> set by the Church before Vatican II.<sup>3</sup> They must live in two environments simultaneously- the larger world of schools, hospitals, and retirement communities where they served and the convent, built on rules from the Middle Ages, where they lived. The measuring stick by which they were judged to have the “right disposition” and be “imbued” with religious spirit existed within the signals given off from their well-trained bodies.

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan, O.P, Mary Philip, *The Charity of Christ Presses Us: Mother Mary Gerald Barry's Letters to Her Community*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Bruce Press, 1962, 6.

<sup>2</sup> I will use the terms “religious,” “nuns,” “women religious,” and “Sisters” interchangeably though historically the term “women religious” emerged after Vatican II as the umbrella term to describe both cloistered nuns and semi-cloistered Sisters. Recent usage fuses all terms as synonyms. I tend to use the term “religious” used during the 1930's as a word to describe a person, male or female, in a Catholic religious order. The lack of gender demarcation, before Vatican II, I believe is quite significant.

<sup>3</sup> Pope John XXIII called The Second Vatican Council in 1962 and it met until 1965.

Mother Gerald's advice and instruction on manners through her frequent letters to the congregation educated women and girls to become nuns by recoding women's bodies in a fluid conception of gender. Following the ideas of Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter*, I argue that Mother Gerald's practices of repeating and enforcing the movements of nuns bodies formed "the regulatory norms of 'sex'" in "a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and more specifically to materialize the body's sex."<sup>4</sup> Manners at the convent materialized nuns' bodies by making transitional/symbolic gender categories to preference male over female or female over male depending on which gender would serve the aim of the task at hand. This fluidity made it possible for nuns to be "in the world" but the fluidity itself made them distinctly modern – able to switch between differing frames of reference according to situations and demands as they arose.

To illustrate this point I'll present two examples. One of male gender identity and another of female gender identity as it was presented in the 1930's to Adrian Dominican Sisters by Mother Gerald Barry in her letters to the congregation. Nuns entered religious life as young as thirteen or fourteen to as old as twenty-five.<sup>5</sup> The first two years of life at the Motherhouse education around bodily practice re-gendered these young women to think of themselves as primarily female but able to either switch between genders or distance themselves from their femaleness through male cultural practices. For example, many nuns were given male "religious" names at the time of taking first vows when they began their training as religious in the novitiate. Women named Elizabeth during the

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993). 2

<sup>5</sup> Interviews in Adrian and Santa Cruz, 2006 and 2007.

ceremony of first vows suddenly became re-named a male name such as Sister Thomas Jerome never to be called by their “family names” again. As Mother Gerald detailed in a letter discussing worldly and religious practices on August 28, 1933 “No one should use the family name of a sister when calling or asking about your welfare.”<sup>6</sup> A woman’s former life as a girl sat within the symbolic taking of a new name. When that new name was male it validated the nun’s realization of herself as a Dominican, part of an order of preachers (a male station in the Church), and further distanced women from their gender in order to pursue their unmarried lives and still be considered whole.

Conversely Mother Gerald went to great length in letters to the community to detail specific ways in which a nun should move her body. Almost all of these warnings mentioned or assumed a female gender identity that required proper discipline. Warning nuns to keep one’s body restrained was a typical admonition for a nun and had been for hundreds even thousands of years, but Mother Gerald wrote these warnings with a far more modern set of concerns.<sup>7</sup> Mother Gerald warned that among other activities, loud speaking,<sup>8</sup> eating without silence,<sup>9</sup> gum chewing,<sup>10</sup> knee crossing,<sup>11</sup> and moving one’s body without thinking would lead to evil. Bodily deportment was linked both to spiritual

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<sup>6</sup> Ryan, *The Charity of Christ*, 26. Letter from August 28, 1933

<sup>7</sup> See the work of Caroline Bynum and Peter Brown: Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), ———, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), Caroline Walker Bynum and Stevan Harrall and Paula Richman, ed., *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).and Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, ———, ed., and Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Ryan, *The Charity of Christ*, 26. Letter from Oct. 10, 1934

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 40 Letter from June 14, 1935

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 34 Letter from May 7, 1935 “ugly habit” shows lack of “self-control”

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

uplift and public image. Mother Gerald sums up her connection between education, gender, manners, and worldliness in a 1934 letter:

Education should make you a better Christian; I beg of you to have a Christ-like spirit in your study. Education should not lead you away from the ideals a lady possesses, and therefore I bid you be a lady. The habit you wear signifies that you have been chosen Queen and that this choice will remain unto eternity if you prove yourself faithful. Beware of worldliness, then, in our study, in your actions, in your postures and in your habits in general. Recall the reference made in other letters about manners. Be an honor to the Community in your sincerity, in your modesty, in your humility, and especially in your charity. 'Let your light shine.'<sup>12</sup>

In the advice above she links education to Christianity to female identity of a special sort. Her language reveals a complex interplay of class and gender and its link to the bodily practice of proper religious life. Mother Gerald begins by making a markedly eighteenth-century plea for education not to corrupt the “ideals of a lady.” She does not say that education will make them male or less female, but rather that education will somehow corrupt class and femaleness simultaneously. Suddenly, in the instance of education, it seems that to be female and of a high class serves Mother Gerald’s views of what the order must do both to serve and to remain religious. Following her advice, nuns are to appear and identify as female and of a high class in order to succeed in their vocation. She goes further in her next sentence declaring that the habit shows that a nun has “been chosen Queen” perhaps the greatest height for a lady to reach. Finally, Mother Gerald asserts that nuns can be transformed away from their proper place in the world and denied their shot at “proving [themselves] faithful” through corruption of their gender, class and religious orientation. If her logic was linear then what she most feared was that education could open up a Sister to the influences of “the world” if not approached with the vanguard of proper posture and manners of a Catholic woman religious. Bodily

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22. Letter from June 20, 1934

deportment was linked both to spiritual uplift and public image and both had to be maintained through female gender identity in deportment. In this case, proper conduct in the body had to be recognizably female and even regally female in order to promote the proper image socially and have the proper effect spiritually.

Mother Gerald's understanding of appearing one way while being perceived as another reveals her as the modern woman that she was. She asked Sisters to be "not of this world" by understanding by remaining fluid in how they were women "in the world." By promoting a strategic management of nuns' gender to remain fluid and respond to situations with one or the other depending upon need she maintained the requirement for nuns to be "in the world but not of it." By doing so, Mother Gerald betrayed the fact that she was already modern – negotiating what the anthropologist Charles Hirschkind named "disparate systems of power within modernity" while never appearing to be doing so and without official church permission.<sup>13</sup>

What effect did this fluidity of gender identity have on women in the congregation? How did the choice of what was male and what was female reflect changing gender roles of the time? Did this fluidity change in the fifties or during the war? If so how? How did gender identity change curriculums and rules for deportment at girls' schools that the Adrians owned and staffed? How did gender identity change once the congregation became international after 1946? How might their ideas and practices about gender fluidity have affected nuns' transition so readily into the post-Vatican II period and in conflict with male religious and the institutional church? These are

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<sup>13</sup> Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 21.

questions I will explore in my dissertation *Making Girls, Women, Ladies and Nuns:*  
*Sister Mary Philip Ryan, OP and Femininity in American Colonial Spaces, 1923-1995.*