

# An American History Lesson

## Are Lay Leaders Paying Attention?

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BY SR. MARY HADDAD, RSM, M.B.A., M.S.W.

In the wake of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act's passage in March 2010, reverberations abound — particularly for NETWORK, the Catholic social justice lobby, for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) and for the congregations of women religious who signed a letter of support for the bill's Senate version.

These organizations and religious communities sent their letter to members of Congress in March and urged them to vote for passage. Just days before, Sr. Carol Keehan, DC, the Catholic Health Association's president and chief executive officer, released a statement supporting the bill. Many believe the public support from women religious provided the much-needed momentum that led to the federal health care reform bill's passage.

This article does not intend to discuss the fallout some religious congregations have experienced as a result of signing the letter, much of which already has been reported in the news. Rather, it is an invitation for us to consider what will be needed to ensure a similar level of influence by members of the laity who are entrusted with the health care ministry as religious congregations cease to sponsor these works.

As most readers of *Health Progress* know, some health care ministries sponsored by religious congregations have in recent years transitioned to the public juridic person model of sponsorship, which usually includes both religious and lay members. This trend most likely will continue. Newly formed public juridic persons receive canonical recognition from the Holy See and are thereby authorized to assume sponsorship of a health ministry with accountability to church authorities.<sup>1</sup> Sponsors are designated persons who collectively act in the name of a public juridic person.

In order to grapple with the future, we must first consider the past. Why are congregations of women religious so influential in this country, and how did they garner such political clout? American history tells the story.

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The first Catholic sisters, the Ursulines, arrived in the United States from France in 1727, and within seven years established the first hospital to care for those who were without means. This marked the beginning of a long history of service to this country by religious communities of women. Along with providing care and compassion to the poor, sick and uneducated, they responded to acute crisis during yellow fever and cholera epidemics and were called upon to minister to the wounded during the Civil and Spanish-American wars. Sisters established the nation's largest private school system, including more than 110 colleges and universities; built and established hospitals, laying the foundation for the nation's largest number of not-for-profit health facilities; and built and established orphanages and charitable institutions that have served millions of people.<sup>2</sup>



**In 1965 during the height of the civil rights marches in Selma, Ala., six Catholic sisters led a group of protesters. They got only a few hundred feet from a black church before the police blocked their way.**

In addition to performing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, sisters have been “activists and diplomats of peace and justice for some of the most at-risk populations...”<sup>3</sup> Sisters participated in the civil rights movement, marching in Selma, Ala., during its peak. They supported the empowerment of migrant farm workers, and they continue to serve as advocates for those in society who experience discrimination and who are marginalized in any way.

In 1971, 47 sisters from various congregations gathered to explore how they might speak in one unified voice to our federal government advocating for those who suffer injustice. Their efforts resulted in the formation of a network of sisters “to lobby for federal policies and legislation that promote economic and social justice.” This gathering laid the groundwork for the creation of NETWORK, a national Catholic social justice lobby that includes individuals and organizations representing over 100,000 people.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the advocacy efforts undertaken within this country, many congregations have

formed non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and have participated at the United Nations, working on global issues such as climate change, human trafficking and global poverty. Their work for a just world does not come without a price. Since 1980, at least nine sisters from the United States have been martyred while working overseas for social justice and human rights.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, theirs is quite a story, one that warrants public recognition. On September 22, 2009, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed House Resolution 441 to honor and commend the historic contribution of Catholic women religious for their service to this nation. This resolution recognizes “the social, cultural and political contributions” of sisters and the vital role they have played in shaping life in the United States. Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio) stated in her extension remarks on the resolution, “Since 1727, Catholic sisters have fearlessly and often sacrificially committed their personal lives to teaching, healing and social action... these women have offered so much to the world yet their stories have

rarely been narrated or honored in our history. Though long overdue, the lives, works and legacies of Catholic sisters will finally be recounted.”<sup>6</sup>

Contained within House Resolution 441 is support for the goals of the *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America* traveling exhibit, a project sponsored by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious to recognize the historical contributions of Catholic sisters in the United States. The leadership conference is an association of the leaders of congregations of Catholic women religious in the United States. The conference has approximately 1,500 members, who represent more than 90 percent of the 59,000 women religious in the United States. Founded in 1956, the conference assists its members collaboratively to carry out their service of leadership to further the mission of the Gospel in today’s world.<sup>7</sup>

The *Women & Spirit* exhibit opened on May 16, 2009 in Cincinnati and has continued to make its way around the country. Those who have had the opportunity to view the exhibit have described how this experience has enhanced their awareness of the immeasurable contributions of women religious to this country. Such sentiment was conveyed by news analyst and author Cokie Roberts, who wrote, “Over the centuries these courageous women overcame many obstacles — both physical and cultural — to bring their civilizing and caring influence to every corner of the country. Understanding and celebrating the history of women religious is essential to understanding and celebrating the history of America.”<sup>8</sup>

Throughout our American history, the tradition of service upheld by women religious has generated undeniable public trust, and it is without question that this credibility continues to be a force for these times. “The sisters’ extraordinary witness illustrates how huge a gap would be left were their numbers not replenished or their work not taken up by others. . . . They have shown how powerful and authoritative Christian communities can be when they build credible institutions that serve the common good.”<sup>9</sup> Through their works and their organizational structures, women religious have built a strong platform upon which and through which they have given tremendous public witness to the Gospel message as they have exerted remarkable influence. It is

without question that their sponsorship of health care ministries has contributed to the strength of their corporate influence.

New public juridic persons have inherited a legacy that has been cultivated through years of service by religious congregations. Along with this paradigm shift from religious sponsors to lay sponsors through establishment of public juridic persons, there has been a shift in how sponsors steward the ministry of health care. “Traditionally, sponsorship has emphasized a position of corporate strength and independence through ownership and control via reserved powers. Today, as new relations are established with other providers, a presence is required that relies more on the ability to influence.”<sup>10</sup>

Recognizing the changing nature of the ministry of sponsorship and the emphasis on the ability to influence, we must give consideration to new support structures that will ensure and sustain the public influence of the new sponsorship forms.

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The ability to influence is both a personal and group attribute. Therefore we must consider the potential influence of an aggregate of persons, specifically, a public juridic person, rather than focusing solely on individuals.

Over the past years, educational and formation programs have been developed to prepare individuals who will serve as the next generation of sponsors. The personal and theological competencies addressed in these programs provide a solid foundation for the participants. Undeniably, the formation and development of individuals who are being prepared to serve as sponsors is essential. However, it is not enough. Because sponsors work as members of a community of persons, not as individuals, we need to direct efforts to forming and developing the corporate nature of sponsorship as a collective body of public juridic persons. New sponsors have received a rich heri-



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tage; one that is grounded in the spirit and works of women religious. Forming a new community of sponsors will provide the necessary structure not only to ensure this “institutional memory,” but also to provide public witness to a faith community that serves the common good. “By their fruits, you shall know them.” (Matthew 7:16)

Some have suggested that perhaps a new Vatican dicastery is needed to support this new reality in the church. Currently, religious institutes, which are public juridic persons, along with newly formed public juridic persons that include laity, are accountable to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. It is interesting to note that this office, also known as the Congregation for Religious, is responsible for the government, discipline, studies, goods, rights and privileges of religious orders of women and men.<sup>11</sup> For public juridic persons that are no longer sponsored by religious institutes, this reporting relationship does not seem to recognize nor give full appreciation of the sponsorship role of laity.

We have limited structures that adequately, at best, support the changing reality of sponsorship. New sponsors have been entrusted with the responsibility to steward and to ensure the viability of health care ministries into the future; therefore, it is time to develop appropriate means that will strengthen their role and ensure corporate influence.

The *Women & Spirit* exhibit is a remarkable testimony to the incredible works of women religious in the United States. Recent events related to health care reform have demonstrated once more that, because of the public trust engendered through their life-giving service, these women continue to influence our nation. They say that history has a way of repeating itself. For that reason, this is a history lesson we cannot afford to neglect.

**SR. MARY HADDAD, RSM**, is senior director, sponsor services, Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

### **NOTES**

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2. Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America traveling exhibit, [www.womenandspirit.org](http://www.womenandspirit.org).
3. U.S. House of Representatives, 111th Congress, House Res. 441, *Honoring the Historical Contributions of Catholic Sisters in the United States* (May 14, 2009), <http://thomas.loc.gov>.
4. NETWORK: A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby, [www.networklobby.org](http://www.networklobby.org).
5. 111th Congress, House Res. 441, <http://thomas.loc.gov>.
6. U.S. Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio), *Honoring the Historical Contributions of Catholic Sisters in the United States* (Extensions of Remarks, May 14, 2009), <http://thomas.loc.gov>.
7. Leadership Conference of Women Religious, [www.lcwr.org](http://www.lcwr.org).
8. Catholic Sisters in America, [www.womenandspirit.org](http://www.womenandspirit.org).
9. Editorial, “The Sisters’ Witness,” *America* 202, no. 13 (April 26, 2010): 5. [http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article\\_id=12248](http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=12248).
10. Frank G. Morrissey, “Does Canon Law Speak of Sponsorship of Catholic Works?” *Health Progress* 88, no. 1 (January - February 2007): 29.
11. The Vatican, Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsclife](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife).

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