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THE SOCIOLOGY OF STAYING: PERSISTENT ACTIVISM AND THE BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF ERIE

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THE SOCIOLOGY OF STAYING:
PERSISTENT ACTIVISM AND THE BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF ERIE

An Essay Submitted to
The Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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By
Theresa Avila-John (née Rotuno)
2018

The essay of Theresa Avila-John is hereby accepted.

Advisor - Dr. Kristen Tobey

26 November 2018
Date

I certify that this is the original document.

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INTRODUCTION

For increasing numbers of Catholics in modern times, the drastic divide created by the Church's prescribed gender roles is nothing short of problematic. In recent decades, it has become increasingly common, if not the norm, to hear the phrase "I was raised Catholic"—followed by an itemized list of reasons for leaving the faith tradition. While the Church often finds itself in contention with political candidates or the current cultural climate on a variety of issues, it is often the Church's outdated view of women that has droves of Catholics heading for the door. As feminism and gender sensitivity take an increasingly firmer position in the public eye, the theology and stance of the Catholic Church on gender has become an irreconcilable difference for many believers.

Despite this undebatable fact, there are plenty of Catholics who are staying. Though numbers are on the decline, a recent Pew Research study has shown that affiliation with the Catholic Church remains larger than any other singular religious institution in the United States, with approximately 51 million adult Catholics in the country today.¹ While it can be said that many Catholics likely endorse the beliefs of the Church in its entirety, to say that every single self-proclaimed Catholic today agrees with every last Church teaching would be unreasonable and false. This, of course, raises some fascinating questions. Why would someone stay in a Church that preaches doctrine with

¹ David Masci and Gregory A. Smith, "7 Facts About American Catholics," Pew Research Center, Accessed October 18, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/10/7-facts-about-american-catholics/>.

which they disagree? How do people reconcile the many facets of religious identity?
Why are people still Catholic?

The purpose of this study is to investigate one such example of this reconciliation, this rationalization for staying: an example that is found not in a randomly selected group of Catholic individuals, but rather in a community of Catholic nuns. The Benedictine Sisters of Erie are a community of vowed religious sisters in Erie, Pennsylvania who live the 1,500 year old monastic spirituality of St. Benedict, and who serve in a variety of ministries in Erie and the surrounding areas.² Despite having dedicated their lives to the Church at the expense marriage and family life, this community of sisters finds itself, like many others do, caught in the thick of battling identities.

While the sisters are plainly Catholic, so much so that they have chosen the religious life, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie also live in such a way that paints them as distinctly feminist. In everything from their communal life to their liturgy, to their ministries and to their publications, the Erie Benedictines live their faith in a way that tries to strike a balance between their Catholicism and their feminism. In short, they disagree with the gender exclusive teachings of the Church to which they dedicate themselves, and it impacts everything about their lives.

In the essay that follows, I ask the complex question, “How do these women maintain their advocacy for a gender inclusive Catholicism in the context of a vowed Catholic religious order despite being potentially at risk of repercussions by the

² Teresa Watanabe, “The Nuns Who Defied Vatican's Order to Be Silent,” *The Los Angeles Times* (August 5, 2001); <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/aug/05/news/mn-30832>.

Vatican?” More simply, “Why are these women still Catholic when they disagree with so much?” The answers to these questions lie primarily in research within the realm of sociology of religion. This research will primarily investigate liturgical ritual, communal living, and other forms of socialization and their impact on identity and maintenance of high-risk activism. The essay will also include thick observations of the sisters’ liturgy.

The point I hope to prove, and my argument in the pages that follow, is that the Benedictine Sisters of Erie are a classic example of a lived religion that is deeply rooted in the social. Though the work of the sisters hinges on their mission statement—a statement grounded in a prophetic and gender inclusive theology of their own creation—there are clear and vital forces of socialization at work here. According to author Phil Zuckerman, socialization can be defined as “the process of informally learning and unconsciously internalizing the norms, beliefs, and values of our family, peer group, society, nation, and so on.” He adds “So much of what we know, do, feel, think, and believe comes from how we were/are socialized.”³ It is this process of socialization that enables the women of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie to not only form and nurture a dual identity that is both Catholic and feminist, but to defend that identity in the face of possible retribution. Sociological research has proven that liturgy and community form a person’s identity and their choices, whether or not they are cognizant of the impact—and the Erie Benedictines are no exception. In the socialization that comes from the communal life and liturgical practice of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, the sisters are

³ Phil Zuckerman, *Invitation to the Sociology of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 48.

given the tools to “persistently resist,” and to continue to function within the “sexist Church they love,” whatever risk that may create.⁴

⁴ James Downton and Paul Wehr, *The Persistent Activist: How Peace Commitment Develops and Survives* (Boulder: Westview, 1997); Joan Chittister, *In the Heart of the Temple: My Spiritual Vision for Today's World* (Erie, PA: BenetVision, 2004).

**THE BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF ERIE:
PROPHETIC VOICES IN A DANGEROUS
DESERT**

While the Benedictine Sisters of Erie may not be a household name in the average family, the sisters have been in the spotlight on occasion, and, for many, have been an emblem in the fight for gender inclusivity in the Catholic Church. In 2001, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie made national headlines when the Vatican sent a letter demanding that Sister Joan Chittister, an acclaimed author and likely the most famous member of the community, not speak at a conference in Dublin, Ireland. The conference was one in support of women's ordination—an issue for which Sister Joan Chittister, in perpetuity of the sisters' commitment to inclusivity, has historically, and again, quite famously, advocated.

When the Catholic magisterium caught wind that a vowed religious sister, a Catholic nun, was set to speak against the Church's position on women, they reacted. A letter was sent to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, insisting that Sister Joan's appearance at the conference would "create scandal" in the Church; the letter concluded with a warning that informed then-Prioress of the community, Christine Vladimiroff, that Chittister would be punished were she to attend the conference.⁵ The letter, as well as conversations that followed, made it very clear that Chittister and Vladimiroff were risking expulsion from their order and from the Church, and that the whole community was under surveillance for its potential to be disruptive and radical.

⁵ Watanabe, "Nuns Who Defied."

In response to the letter, Vladimiroff first flew to the Vatican, along with canon-law experts, to argue that Chittister had the right to speak. Next, she met with every single one of the Benedictine sisters of Erie to discern what was best for the community and what action the community would take. Then, as news reporter Teresa Watanabe related in one of the many news articles that published the story, “All but one of the 128 Erie nuns signed a letter of support. So did 22 Benedictine women monasteries in North America.” Vladimiroff wrote a response to the Vatican, assuring them that neither she nor her sisters would stand in the way of Sister Joan’s attendance of the conference on women’s ordination; in fact, they stood by her come hell or high water. In her letter, Vladimiroff vehemently exclaimed that the Benedictine spirituality to which the sisters prescribe holds an idea of faith that is different from “that which is being used by the Vatican to exert power and control and prompt a false sense of unity inspired by fear.” The sisters even gave Chittister a group blessing before she left, who was quoted as saying, “We’re not going to let a little letter from Rome get us down.”⁶

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie have resided at their current residence on a back-country road in Erie, Pennsylvania for decades. To look at their convent, simple yet beautiful, one would not notice anything particularly astounding or out of the ordinary; one would not envision a group of women so prepared to fly in the face of the Catholic magisterium. Set on a rolling green lawn with a statue of St. Benedict (the inspiration for their 1500-year-old spirituality) in the front, the structure is unassuming and silent; quite

⁶Watanabe, “Nuns Who Defied”; David Van Biema, Deborah Edler Brown, Greg Burke, and Lucy Fisher, “A Nun's Dangerous Talk,” *Time* 158, no. 7 (August 20, 2001), 69.

like the sisters at first glance. On the surface, they seem like any other religious order or group of nuns: they pray together three times a day and sing psalms together. They “feed the poor, train the illiterate” and “live on donated clothes and a monthly stipend of \$70 each.” The vast majority of the sisters are in their 70s, and many entered as teenagers.⁷ The sisters live in community and dedicate their lives to the service of others. They are, in that sense, fitting of the classic role of nuns.

And yet, as the anecdote suggests, they are different.

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie fall into the category of what sociologist Michele Dillon would call, “Institutionally marginalized American Catholics.” She explains the category as, “Catholics who choose to stay Catholic even though their understanding of Catholicism is denounced by official church teaching.”⁸ In the case of the sisters, this juxtaposition emerges in their tactical brand of advocacy for a more gender-inclusive Catholic Church, one that more readily incorporates women into its ministry, language, and theology. In other words, the sisters toe a line, seeking a delicate balance. They try to find the middle ground between devout Catholicism and committed feminism.

The “Corporate Commitment” of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, the mission statement around which they aim to structure their lives proclaims: “As Benedictine Sisters of Erie we commit ourselves to be a healing presence and prophetic witness for

⁷ Watanabe, “Nuns Who Defied.”

⁸ Michele Dillon, *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 4.

peace by working for sustainability and justice, especially for women and children.”⁹ It is this commitment, this mission of empowerment that the sisters use as the tape measure with which to measure their faith; a statement that often places them in opposition to the very Church they serve.

GENDER CONTROVERSY IN THE CHURCH:

A RECENT HISTORY

To understand the ways in which the Benedictine Sisters of Erie often find themselves in opposition to the Catholic Church—and to conceptualize the implications of such opposition—it is necessary to have a general knowledge of the magisterium’s position on the roles of women. It is hardly a secret that the Catholic magisterium famously does not allow women to be ordained to the priesthood; it is also relatively common knowledge that the Church takes very seriously the traditional norms it has set regarding classically gendered roles for men and women. Even in the midst of an intense clergy shortage, even in an increasingly gender sensitive political climate, the Catholic Church today still continues to maintain that doctrine regarding the roles of women is untouchable.¹⁰

While the history of women in the Church is as long as the history of the Church itself, there has been an increasing spike in the discussion and debate of women’s

⁹ Linda Romey, “Benedictine Life as a Path of Life,” *The Mount Magazine*, Summer 2011, 5.

¹⁰ Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 5.

equality in Catholicism since the 1970s.¹¹ During that time, an era when many Protestant denominations were famously and publicly allowing for the ordination of women, the Catholic Church found its back against the wall, forced to announce and subsequently explain whether it too would allow for women to become priests. Such pressure followed with documents such as the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Inter Insignores* in 1975, Pope John Paul II's *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* in 1994, and others.¹² These documents explained that position that the Church today still maintains: "The Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination...a position which will perhaps cause pain but whose positive value will become apparent in the long run, since it can be of help in deepening the understanding of the respective roles of men and women." These respective roles for men and women, something that politically causes great outrage in the modern world, are not viewed as an issue of women's equality by the Church, as being called to the priesthood is not considered a human right. The Church in these statements emphasizes that, "Equality is in no way identity, for the Church is a differentiated body, in which each individual has his or her role." In the theology promulgated periodically by the Catholic magisterium, women are often encouraged to remember that they have their own

¹¹ Watanabe, "Nuns Who Defied."

¹² Franjo Cardinal Seper and Jerome Hamer, "Declaration Inter Insignores: On the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," *Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, 1976; Pope John Paul II, "Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*," *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, May 22, 1994, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html, 3.

unique place and mission within the Body of Christ.¹³ John Paul II in his writing rather famously encouraged women to look to the examples of holy women, pointing specifically to martyrs, virgins, and mothers as inspirations for ways to live the faith in a feminine manner.¹⁴

The theology as to why women cannot be ordained to the priesthood, as well as why they are called to fulfill certain roles within the Church are extrapolated often in Vatican responses to activism. They are, though they may be disagreed with by many, considered final.¹⁵ In 1992, Auxiliary Bishop Austin B. Vaughn of New York City was quoted as saying, “In the year 2000, 20,000, or 2,000,000, there will still be a Catholic Church and it will still have an all-male clergy. A woman priest is as impossible for me to have a baby.”¹⁶ With that said, advocacy for altered roles of women in the Catholic Church are not supported by the magisterium in general; they are also not taken lightly.

THE PLIGHT OF THE CATHOLIC FEMINIST

It is true that feminists in the Catholic Church today often feel a “sense of dislocation.”¹⁷ How is a woman, particularly a woman who considers herself a feminist, expected to reconcile the fact that her religion has told her there is a sacrament she cannot

¹³ Seper and Hamer, “Declaration,” 3.

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, “Apostolic Letter,” 3.

¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, “Apostolic Letter,” 3.

¹⁶ Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 88.

¹⁷ Mary Jo Weaver, *Springs of Water in a Dry Land: Spiritual Survival for Catholic Women Today*, (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 9.

receive? A role she cannot fill? A life she cannot lead? How is a woman expected to relate to exclusively male pronouns for God, to praise her God in prayer and liturgy in language that rings with the sharp sting of patriarchy? These questions, these quandaries are the very real struggle for many women in the Church today; and despite what may be assumed, vowed religious women such as the Benedictine Sisters of Erie are not necessarily an exception to this struggle.

The obvious path to someone facing such a contradictory set of identities would seem to be to leave the church; indeed, many have. But there is another movement among feminist Catholics that is interesting and fascinating. There are those who do not leave. These pro-change Catholics, such as the Erie Benedictines, “choose to maintain links with the institutional church and to work from within to effect change”; a movement all the more intriguing when applied to a vowed religious order.¹⁸ This refusal to leave, this act of staying put certainly leads to further questions about the true nature of a dual, competing identity, a forced blending between the seemingly unmixable oil of Catholicism and the water of feminism.

Such is the duality of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie as they live out their faith at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery in Erie, Pennsylvania. Grounded in a history of activism and a corporate commitment that gives birth to its own brand of prophetic theology, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie remain vowed to the Catholic Church for the duration of their lives, while simultaneously advocating for a more inclusive, revitalized church.

¹⁸ Dillon, *Catholic Identity*, 4.

PROPHETS OF RESTORATION

Mary Jo Weaver writes of the plight of the feminist, “Patriarchal Catholicism worships a limited God and demands that women fit into a spiritual system where we cannot, by definition, find a place for ourselves...we suffer because we try to fit our spiritual aspirations into a space that is more restrictive and less magnificent than we know to be true.”¹⁹ Such a statement, in sum, perfectly defines the modern position of groups like the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. On the one hand, the sisters feel distinctly Catholic—so Catholic, in fact, that they have taken perpetual vows to a religious order; on the other, they cannot reconcile the limitations put upon them as women in their own religion. To quote sociologist Michele Dillon on the lives of pro-change Catholics, “These Catholics occupy a cultural space that challenges the assumption of a dichotomized opposition between the affirmation of difference and the maintenance of solidarity.”²⁰

While to some this seems to be a scenario of being caught very firmly between a rock and a hard place, for the sisters it is something much richer and much more meaningful. For the sisters, this is not necessarily a question of simply finding balance—rather, such a dichotomy becomes central to their mission. It is in this duality of identity that the Benedictine Sisters see themselves as modern prophets, living with the intention of restoring the Church. Grounded in their corporate commitment and emphasized in their communal and liturgical life, the sisters nurture their unique identity in all they do.

¹⁹ Weaver, *Springs of Water*, 11.

²⁰ Dillon, *Catholic Identity*, 4.

Indeed, what we will refer to as the “prophetic” theology of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie is essential to their Catholic identity. In a strategy that sociologist Michele Dillon calls “using doctrine to critique doctrine,” the sisters create a world for themselves in which they are the ones who are loyal to the Gospel—as opposed to the ousted ones that the hierarchy calls “radicals.”²¹ By molding for themselves an identity in which they support each other as voices crying out in the desert for a return to the Lord, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie can turn their attention to their mission goal: restoration of the Church. This is a goal that is lived out in every facet of their daily lives; and this is a truth that makes them a sociological marvel.

Many Catholics accuse groups such as the Benedictine Sisters of Erie and people like their most famous sister, Joan Chittister, of trying to destroy the Church with their prophetic theology or their advocacy for gender inclusivity; but such a claim is far from what the community itself would attest. Indeed, for these prophets, it is the goal of restoring Catholicism, of resurrecting a Catholicism inclusive and supportive of all people regardless of gender, that allows them to hang on to their Catholic identity. In one of her books, Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister writes of the state of the Church, “The pauperization of women in the name of sanctity...flies in the face of the Jesus who overturned tables in the temple, contended with Pilate in the palace, chastised Peter to put away his sword, and, despite the teaching of the day, cured the women with the issue of blood and refused to allow his own apostles to silence the Samaritan woman.”

²¹ Dillon, *Catholic Identity*, 164.

Comparing themselves to the Jesus who came to upend the old law and to establish the New Covenant, the sisters see themselves as a restoration of the kingdom—a kingdom that must find itself once more in the Church. For Chittister:

It is time to realize that because we have not seen women as persons, full of grace, made in the image of God, that we have a world governed by one-half of the human heart, understood by one-half of the human mind, and grown to only half the stature of the human soul. We are a handicapped people and a handicapped Church.²²

It is this handicapped Church that the sisters wish to restore; it is this purpose of restoration that further grounds their identity. In this, they fit again into the research of Dillon, who explains that, “Pro-change Catholics want a transformed church that is inclusive in practice, but they want to integrate this with what they consider to be core aspects of Catholicism as their community of memory.” The sisters see in themselves something that is truly prophetic; a renaissance of the Gospel message that must take root in the world. In this, they use “identity construction mechanisms” to marry their Catholic and feminist identities: not for their own selfish gain or desire, but for a broader purpose.²³ Here, in this purpose, they are living the Gospel message. Here, in this purpose, they not only find a way to maintain their Catholic identity, but find a way to justify that they are truly the Catholic ones.

²² Joan Chittister, *In the Heart of the Temple: My Spiritual Vision for Today's World* (Erie: Benetvision, 2004), 142-143.

²³ Dillon, *Catholic Identity*, 7.

WHAT THEY RISK

On paper, a group of nuns who advocate for gender inclusive language and aim to share a theology that calls for greater incorporation and celebration of women in the Church does not seem so bad. In fact, the sisters often make headlines as examples, as hope for those Catholics who feel it is time for the Church to update its outdated understanding of gender. It seems, to many, not that big of a deal.

The reality is that the actions, words, and choices of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, and those who share their views, have gotten them into trouble. As evidenced by the earlier referenced and rather public incident of Sister Joan Chittister's refusal to agree to the Vatican's demands that she skip a women's ordination conference, which was not the first of its kind for the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, the sisters are often taking a risk with their actions. The sisters, and Joan Chittister in particular, remain the object of strict Vatican surveillance and displeasure.

In 1990, the American Catholic bishops responded to the perpetual presence of organizations like the sisters, writing that they "caution Catholic women not to advocate, as some radical feminist groups do" those things which were already deemed by the hierarchy as immoral; indeed, to advocate would perpetuate "a danger to those women whom the bishops regard as 'loyal Catholic women.'"²⁴ As recently as 2015, the Congregation for the Doctrine on the Faith conducted a Doctrinal Assessment on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an organization to which the Benedictine

²⁴ Weaver, *Springs of Water*, 7.

Sisters of Erie belong, for promulgating an understanding of women that the Vatican deemed dangerous and inappropriate. When events like this occur, it is not in the habit of the Church to merely brush them off; rather, as in the case of the LCWR, the hierarchy sends a delegate to help get the organization back on track. Expressed perhaps most clearly in the language of the Doctrinal Assessment: “We hope that the secularized contemporary culture, with its negative impact on the very identity of Religious as Christians and members of the Church, on their religious practice and common life, and on their authentic Christian spirituality, moral life, and liturgical practice, can be more readily overcome.”²⁵ The magisterium of the Catholic Church remains firm in its understanding of the roles of men and women and the ways that those are understood by believers; so deeply felt is this belief that opposition to it, especially within the Church itself, is not taken lightly.

In many cases, such as the letter sent to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie or the action against the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the Church has proven its position—and demonstrated that there is, in fact, risk involved in opposition. To be in such a position as a vowed religious sister, and to be so vocal against the teachings of the Church jeopardizes much. From Vatican critique to surveillance and even to possible expulsion or other punishment, shirking Church teaching is a great risk: a risk that is exacerbated all the more for people like the Benedictine Sisters of Erie who have given up their entire lives for the Church. If a sister, for example, were to be expelled, she

²⁵ “Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious,” *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, 6, 3.

would not just lose her opportunity to go to Mass or to receive communion. With an expulsion from the Church, a Benedictine Sister of Erie would lose...everything. She would have to leave her home and the familial community she has promised herself to; she would have to leave her work and ministry that she poured herself into; she would have to leave the faith for which she has given up so much. Though the phrase high risk activism is often reserved for conversation about risk of death or prison time, the reality of an activism that could lead to loss of home, family, livelihood, and faith tradition in one fell swoop is arguably high risk in its own right.

What in the world makes them willing to take such a risk?

WHY THEY STAY: A THEOLOGICAL

EXPLANATION

The simple answer to why institutionally marginalized Catholics such as the Benedictine Sisters of Erie would stay put is that the Church offers the sisters things that they cannot find elsewhere. Access to the sacraments, the beauty of the liturgy, a faith steeped in deep and ancient tradition: all of these are unique to Catholicism, and each one may exert a certain need on many of the disenchanted faithful.²⁶ Joan Chittister herself has even asserted in her writing, “I stay in the church because there is nowhere else I know that satisfies in me what the church itself teaches us to seek.” In other words, there

²⁶Stephanie Campbell, *Vision of Change, Voices of Challenge: The History of Renewal in the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, 1958-1990* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2001), 358; Weaver, *Springs of Water*, xi.

are spiritual needs held by these women that they feel they can find nowhere but the Catholic Church.

The prophetic theology of the sisters would be another reason why the sisters would stay. In their theology, the sisters do not only believe that they are the ones who *could* restore the Church to its fullness: they believe that they *must*. For all the pain, humiliation, and suffering they experience, for all the threats and the bullying, the sisters believe to their very core that they are deeply Catholic—and that therefore it is their responsibility to restore the Church. They stay for a purpose that is far beyond themselves. They stay because they feel that their prophetic Catholicism demands it of them.

Sister Joan Chittister famously wrote:

People do not question because they reject the church. They question the church because they love the church. They question because they seek a spiritual life.... Most of all, they question because the church itself has created an ideal which too often it then does not itself seek. That is what happened to Martin Luther, and Catherine of Siena, and Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton. They did not question because they did not believe what the church taught; they questioned because they did.²⁷

This simple answer, one grounded in faith and theology and in courageous commitment makes perfect sense. In all honesty, it even has a romantic and inspiring sort

²⁷ Chittister, *In the Heart*, 152, 151, 136.

of air about it. It would be possible for us to leave the conversation here, citing such an explanation as solid enough.

The fact of the matter is, however, that there is a more complicated answer: an answer that is steeped not only in the unique prophetic theology and purpose of the sisters, but within the realms of sociology. To the well-trained eye, it can be asserted that there are sociological forces at work that allow the sisters to maintain their risky perspective in a Church that could evaluate them, excommunicate them, or punish them at any time. In many ways, it is these social forces—encompassed primarily in the sisters' communal life and liturgical practice—that allow the sisters to maintain what we will continue to refer to as high risk activism. Only in understanding and recognizing these social forces at work can we begin to understand the dual Catholic and feminist identity maintenance, as well as the risk it creates for the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. In unpacking the sisters' daily lives, we can begin to paint a richer and more accurate picture of why they stay.

WHY THEY STAY: A SOCIOLOGICAL

EXPLANATION

In considering the Benedictine Sisters of Erie from a sociological perspective, we must agree to consider the fact that some social forces could surely be in play to enable the sisters to maintain their prophetic theology, often at the risk of scrutiny, punishment, and even expulsion from the Church they hold so dear. While it was surely a deeply held sense of belief that enabled 127 sisters to sign that petition of solidarity with Sister Joan Chittister under scrutiny from the magisterium, could not more than belief be at work

here? Is cognitive thinking and individual affirmation of belief for the vast majority of people really enough to risk everything?

Research in the field of sociology of religion would argue that even though belief is certainly important, belief is often rarely just belief. Such an understanding is essential to our consideration of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. Author Mary Ellen Konieczny once explained in the midst of her sociological research that, “These conflicts are not just about beliefs, but also have experiential and emotional dimensions in their concrete implications in people’s lives. They are at once rational, emotional, and personal.”²⁸

Although there is certainly a level of moral obligation, of a personal responsibility to act, and a fiery passion for justice that shapes the types of activism in which the sisters and others engage, a person’s decisions are inarguably complex, often involving forces and experiences that transcend direct consciousness.²⁹ As famed sociologist Peter Berger proclaimed, “ The reality of the Christian world depends on the presence of social structures within which this reality is taken for granted and within which successive generations of individuals are socialized.”³⁰ In other words, religion is intensely social—completely attributed to the sum of its parts—and this is a reality that can define everything, whether it is recognized or not. Belief is rarely just about belief.

²⁸ Mary Ellen Konieczny, *The Spirit’s Tether: Family, Work, and Religion Among American Catholics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

²⁹ Sharon Erikson Nepstad, *Religion and War Resistance in the Plowshares Movement* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 7.

³⁰ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1967), 46.

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie are no exception. We can view this community as “persistent resisters”—people who continue to advocate for their beliefs consistently, despite the existence of high-stake consequences.³¹ They maintain a gender inclusive practice and theology both in their daily life and often in their ministry work—often in ways that directly violate what the Church has deemed true.

In their theology and ability to persistently resist, it is necessary to remember that this commitment takes determination and courage—but it also takes much more than that. While these qualities are admirable ones, the ability to keep fighting a losing battle cannot be solely attributed to strength of character and moral fiber in *every* scenario. Such a limited view lacks an appreciation for the inner workings and complexities of the social world. As author Sharon Nepstad made clear in her study of the Plowshares movement, “While strength of devotion is important, it is essential to recognize that movement commitment is a multifaceted phenomenon.”³² James Downton and Paul Wehr, in their book *The Persistent Activist: How Peace Commitment Develops and Survives* would add that, “To maintain commitment over a long period, an activist’s values, purpose, anger, action, and affiliation must be brought into harmony with the rest of life, including family, friendship, and work.”³³ It takes a variety of elements to take a stand. Belief is certainly one of these elements, but it is hardly the entire list.

³¹ James Downton and Paul Wehr, *The Persistent Activist: How Peace Commitment Develops and Survives* (Westview Press, 1997).

³² Nepstad, *Religion and War Resistance*, 23, 89.

³³ Downton and Wehr, 12

So how do the sisters bring their own influences into harmony with their theology? What forces enable them to construct a narrative in which they are the “good Catholics?”³⁴

In order to answer these questions, it is important not only to recognize that there may be social forces at work here, but that these social forces may play out in religion that is *lived*. In other words, while doctrines and dogmas and Benedictine spirituality can play a role in someone’s articulation of their faith tradition, it is in what they actually *do* that religion begins to take hold of identity. Practice makes perfect is how the old adage goes, but in the case of sociology of religion, practice, in many cases, makes faith.

Meredith McGuire defines lived religion as, “Constituted by practices people use to remember, share, enact, adapt, create, and combine the stories out of which they live. And it comes into being through the often-mundane practices people use to transform these meaningful interpretations into everyday action.”³⁵ The ways in which people live out their religion, the ways in which they creatively use ritual to achieve certain ends, has a special kind of impact—an impact that roots itself at the level of identity.³⁶ The transcendent, the big picture, the strictly theological is essential; but at the same time, “Individual’s lived religion is experienced and expressed in everyday practices—concrete ways of engaging their bodies and emotions in being religious.”³⁷ There is a notable and

³⁴ Konieczny, *The Spirit’s Tether*, 67.

³⁵ Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 98.

³⁶ Konieczny, *The Spirit’s Tether*, 29.

³⁷ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 208.

essential dynamic at work here when it comes to religion; theology and how it is lived are constantly in communication and communion with each other. In an almost dialectic fashion, theology informs practice while practice informs theology.

As vowed religious sisters whose very life revolves around such a religious dialectic, there are countless practices to consider among the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. Though the variety is not to be ignored or downplayed, there are two social forces, two aspects of lived religion that most seem to perpetuate the sisters' activism.

These are community life and liturgical practice.

Community Life: A Social Force

By the very nature of the title of the field, sociology of religion has always been interested in the ways in which the social world influences religious practice. This interest in many ways can become of a particular and unique intrigue when considering vowed religious communities.

As a vowed religious community, it is notable that the Benedictine Sisters of Erie live together as one cohesive group of women—truly, as one big family of sisters. They make vows not only to God but to each other, committing themselves to a life of intentional unity, to considering each other when making decisions, and to spending time together in prayer and meal fellowship daily. It is, to be sure, no small commitment—it is one that defines the entire trajectory of a woman's life, as well as how she lives out her day to day.

The sisters help define each other's faith not only through prayer, liturgy, and spiritual exercises, but through the nuances of community life that often go unnoticed. It is in the notion of lived religion that this comes to the fore; as Meredith McGuire

explains, “Although lived religion pertains to the individual, it is not merely subjective. Rather, people construct their religious worlds together, often sharing vivid experiences of that intersubjective reality.”³⁸ This has always been of interest to the sociologist—and naturally, is of utmost importance in consideration of identity maintenance among the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. While their faith may be important to the explanation of their continued risk, the bonds of community cannot be ignored.

A Simplified Sociology of Community

It was famed sociologist Peter Berger who once said, “To maintain faith, people must form groups where they ‘huddle together with link-minded fellow deviants—and huddle very close indeed.’”³⁹ As sociological research suggests, it is often the relationships and bonds that community members form with each other that define not only their decisions, but their beliefs. Religious belief has been proven time and time again to be intimately tied to “social solidarity”—and so has defense of religious beliefs.⁴⁰

In her insightful study of the influence of parish environment on personal religious practice, Mary Ellen Konieczny found that the religious identities nurtured in particular communities help to support and shape parishioners responses and opinions on certain issues regarding family life.⁴¹ People not only choose religious communities that

³⁸ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 12.

³⁹ Nepstad, *Religion and War Resistance*, 92.

⁴⁰ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 51.

⁴¹ Konieczny, *The Spirit’s Tether*, 7.

support their predisposed beliefs, but they are also continuously nurtured and reinforced by the theology that they find in those communities. In this reinforcement, the relationships among community members becomes stronger, as people in community find not only common ground but common cause.

Such emphasis on the bonds of community in perpetual activism is central to the work of Sharon Nepstad, famed for her study on the Plowshares movement. While day to day practices such as Bible study, prayer, and liturgy are absolutely forms of reinforcement, it is often the bonds of friendship and community that provide the ultimate fuel for not only maintaining belief, but for maintaining belief in the face of potential risk.⁴² Sociologist Doug McAdam similarly found in his work that bonds within the activist community and within the organization they supported provided both support and accountability that overcame reservations and maintained involvement.⁴³

While this may seem the obvious answer for the field of sociology of religion, research has proven time and time again that bonds to community and to specific relationships drives people who are activists or advocates for a cause to keep fighting the good fight, even when they may have countless reasons not to. Whether it is out of love or out of a desire to not disappoint the community, relationships make a difference, and people who persistently resist usually persistently resist together.

⁴² Nepstad, *Religion and War Resistance*, 217.

⁴³ Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Relationships, of course, are not built overnight; they also, in most cases, require a certain amount of shared belief. As James Downton and Paul Wehr asked of community,

What relationships need to exist for people to perceive that community exists? Among persisters, the following were important: embracing a common vision of social change, sharing similar principles, the struggle, and the work; giving support to people who needed it; being able to receive support offered by others, feeling cared about, having close personal friendships in the community; and sharing experiences with other members of the community over a long period.

People who feel like they are friends “in the trenches” have stronger bonds, and begin to connect commitment to a movement with commitment to people who are important to them.⁴⁴ This not only makes it easier to find the courage to stay standing when the going gets tough; it also makes it exceptionally hard to walk away for fear of letting down one’s community.

Such a point, it seems, would be much exacerbated among a religious community such as the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. Unlike the study of Konieczny, looking at parish life, or Nepstad, looking at the Plowshares movement, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie make a *public* commitment to each other. They take vows and sacrifice marriage and family life in order to live out their call to the religious life. For them, a sense of

⁴⁴ Downton and Wehr, *The Persistent Activist*, 63, 64.

permanence, a sense of disappointment at leaving could be considered far more extreme—which, in some ways, makes their jeopardizing of such a lifestyle all the more extreme.

Sociology of community, then, certainly applies to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie; arguably, in the extreme. Armed with this knowledge, we must consider what inspires a woman to join the Erie Benedictines, and how community life in and of itself helps to shape the belief and advocacy of the sisters.

How Benedictine Community Forms

To read the bi-annual publication of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie (*The Mount Magazine*) is to read many testimonials on the beauties of community life. Many sisters, when interviewed following their personal jubilee celebration, produce witnesses along the lines of, “She finds, ‘the strength and beauty of community prayer and mutual love and support’ to be the greatest gift of her community” or “Community life and her own work enliven a hope that we will all live in ‘Openness to the call of the Spirit by facing our future with hope and joy as we struggle to reshape our lives to meet the needs of these times.’”⁴⁵ The sisters consistently speak of their love for the community, of their commitment to each other and to living the Gospel the way they see fit. It is one of the key points that every single issue of the magazine emphasizes.

The sisters, like most religious communities, are completely welcoming of the involvement of as many people as possible in their work. They allow for many different ways for both men and women to be involved—saying in their publication,

⁴⁵ Mary Ann Luke, “Jubilee Years,” *The Mount Magazine* (Spring 2006), 13–14.

The Erie Benedictines have long worked to share Benedictine spirituality, to make it accessible to women and men in any walk of life. Those associated with the community share in the core of monastic life: prayer, community, and ministry. They are invited to support the community's commitment to reaching out to the marginalized and working for justice and nonviolence, living sustainability and ongoing formation.

Whatever ways in which someone lives out their connection to the Erie Benedictines, the sisters market to those affiliated with them; those who have a passion for seeking God in community.⁴⁶ All this is true—but there is more at work than just warm welcome.

James Downton and Paul Wehr explained of their sociological findings on activists, “Persisters were drawn to their peace organizations partly because those groups were pursuing courses of action with which they generally agreed.”⁴⁷ In other words, people who join certain communities do so because they feel that the work of the organization aligns with their own ideals. The same, in many cases, is also true in the reverse; namely, that organizations often market toward or are more accepting of those who they know will fit nicely into their mission. This is true of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, evident especially in the lengthy process of joining the community.

⁴⁶ Linda Romey, “Benedictine Life as a Path of Life,” *The Mount Magazine*(Summer 2011), 4.

⁴⁷ Downton and Wehr, 58.

The process of joining the Benedictine Sisters of Erie is one that takes, at minimum, between five to six years. This intense and committed process is detailed frequently in *The Mount Magazine* (an interesting means of socialization in and of itself). As the sisters themselves explain the process, it is a long and slightly arduous one, primarily focused on integration into the community. A woman wishing to join the Benedictine Sisters of Erie comes to live at the monastery and, “She participates fully in the life of the community and learns the community history, its visions and values and must decide at every step of the way if she shares those values and wants to continue the formation process.”⁴⁸ As previously mentioned, it is after five years at the very minimum that a woman would make her perpetual monastic profession; she first has to go through several structured steps.

Women considering monastic life in the community of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie begin as postulants, participating in a 12-month program working 32-hours-a-week in ministry, and spending the rest of their time in prayer, education, and formation with the rest of the community.⁴⁹ The postulancy is followed by the novitiate, an intense year of prayer and study in which a woman continues to discern whether she can make the level of commitment that the community requires, and whether she can live out the Gospel in the way the sisters have deemed their mission. A sister then spends 3–6 years in formation at the level of First Monastic Profession, then even more time in the

⁴⁸ Romey, “Benedictine Life,” 4.

⁴⁹ Stephanie Schmidt, “Seeking God as a Postulant,” *The Mount Magazine* (Spring/Summer 2013), 8.

Scholasticate, living as a fully engaged sister before making her Perpetual Monastic Profession.⁵⁰

The Perpetual Monastic Profession, in which a sister formally joins the community, in many ways encapsulates the level of intensity and the seriousness of community commitment that those joining the Benedictine Sisters of Erie undertake. A sister who is professing must answer in a public ceremony the following pledge:

We are called to an abiding faithfulness to one another, living together over a lifetime, growing in faith, in mutual love, and in reverence. Is it your intent to join us in this expression of stability? We are called to see God with an openness which expands our hearts and frees us to be transformed each day, every day. The way of life set forth in the rule provides an opportunity for this transformation to take place. Is it your intent to join us in this expression of fidelity to the monastic way of life? Sister, ... after praying, studying, and living as a Benedictine woman, is it your intent, with God's help, to live the rest of your life as a woman religious in this Benedictine community?

To this the woman replies, "It is my intent."⁵¹

⁵⁰ Stephanie Schmidt, "A Blessed Ministry," *The Mount Magazine*, Spring/Summer 2015, 14; Stephanie Schmidt, "Initial Monastic Formation," *The Mount Magazine*, Fall/Winter 2017, 8.

⁵¹ Dorothy Stoner, "Sister Katherine Horan, OSB: Perpetual Monastic Profession," *The Mount Magazine*, Summer 2007, 20.

Benedictine community is formed carefully, over time, and with great intention. While the sisters are certainly welcoming to all, it is those whose ideas align with theirs, those who are willing to lay everything down for the greater good of the community, who they pursue. Community, as organic as it may seem, forms with the help of inorganic structures—it requires, among other things, a test of commitment and ideology. It has some hefty social implications—and these implications often influence a great deal.

The Implications of Community

To join the Benedictine Sisters of Erie is no throw-away decision or speedy process. The inculcation into community—and the trials of commitment that come along with it—take years. While in many ways this is indicative of the truly contemplative nature of the spirituality of the Benedictines, this fact also speaks truth regarding the hefty implications of joining of the sisters.

Research, such as that of Jerome Baggett, has shown that people who hold certain religious mindsets and viewpoints are likely to gravitate toward parishes—or, to extrapolate to the case of the sisters, religious orders—that fit their perspective.⁵² There is, in the discernment of joining a religious order, not only a commitment to a group of people, but a commitment to a way of life and to an ideology of being; a commitment that is bound to strengthen over time. In Downton and Wehr’s study of what they call “persistent activists,” they found that people who were able to persist in some form of activism against all odds over a long period were typically people who found

⁵² Jerome P Baggett, *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith* (PLACE: Oxford University Press, 2008), 42–43.

compatibility of belief with the organization they joined. Over time, this created higher level of “ideological agreement”—something that strengthened overall commitment to the organization itself.⁵³

This seems to be the case of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. Women who join the Benedictine Sisters, usually professionals in their 40s and 50s, are no strangers to the unique theology of the sisters when they come knocking at the door. They are people, according to *The Mount Magazine*, who “come from varied backgrounds and come with a common desire to seek God and change the world.” Besides solely the fame and attention that Joan Chittister has commanded in her writing and time in the spotlight, the order takes great pains to seek bonds with others, both laypeople and those discerning religious life, who share their common goal. Creating relationships grounded in ministry and their Corporate Commitment has long been an aim of the community. As stated earlier, “As Benedictine Sisters of Erie we commit ourselves to be a healing presence and a prophetic witness for peace by working for sustainability and justice, especially for women and children.”⁵⁴ *The Mount Magazine* frequently includes a call to anyone who is willing to take on the task of joining the sisters, and of living the Gospel the way they do. The sisters even promulgate blogs and in-house podcasts as means to continuously reach and form those whom they feel are on their team. In this, the Erie Benedictines draw a certain clientele: they seek those who support their unique theology and their mission goals and encourage them to join.

⁵³ Downton and Wehr, *The Persistent Activist*, 57.

⁵⁴ Romey, “Benedictine Life,” 4, 5.

Once those bonds are made, great time and effort is devoted to integration into the community. It seems no mistake or coincidence that for those women seeking to make a Perpetual Monastic Profession to the community spend years on end fully immersed in the life of the community—in prayer, in ministry, in liturgy. In this, too, lies indication of socialization. When people share common beliefs and lifestyles, bonds of solidarity are often forged; indeed:

Research indicates that strong commitment is correlated with trust in movement leadership, intensity of moral convictions, and the extent of members emotional ties to other activists, movement organizers must continually reinforce dedication by reaffirming the legitimacy of their goals, tactics, and leaders, and by deepening interpersonal relationships among participants.⁵⁵

Time spent in community builds friendships, friendships build loyalty and loyalty builds commitment. Such commitment can even be strengthened when groups are acting in opposition to others—when there is a cause being advocated, a battle being waged, people cling to each other even more tightly.⁵⁶ This, it would seem, rings true for the Erie Benedictines—even if the group they often act in opposition to is the Church to which they have dedicated their lives.

⁵⁵ Nepstad, *Religion and War Resistance*, 23.

⁵⁶ Konieczny, *The Spirit's Tether*, 240.

In community, people do more. In the case of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, their sense of friendly or familial obligation roots them more and more deeply in their prophetic theology and in the ways that this theology is lived out in the world. Though they practice this theology in their individual ministries and practices, it is in the community that they become who they are. The sense of kinship, of support, solidarity and of “kindred spirits who shared their peace and social justice vision” is one key component to the maintenance of the dual identity of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie as Catholic sisters and activists for change.⁵⁷ This community is found most obviously within the walls of the monastery, in the commitment they have made to each other. Notable as well, however, is the support the Benedictine Sisters of Erie seek beyond Mount Saint Benedict that assists them in continuing along the path of resistance; or perhaps, more accurately, the path to change.

The Support of Laypeople

As previously mentioned, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie approach with great care the task of finding those beyond the monastery who will share in their mission. They approach this in several ways. They facilitate online communities and small faith sharing groups through their “Monasteries of the Heart”—a ministry aimed at providing lay people with access to Benedictine spirituality. They offer what they call the Sister Benedicta Riepp Program—a program that allows women in any stage of life to come and live with them for 6–12 months, simply to learn more about the community and grow in faith. They invite college students to learn more about their work through spring break

⁵⁷ Downton and Wehr, *The Persistent Activist*, 94.

trips and immersions, and even welcome great numbers of lay people in attendance at their Sunday liturgies. Despite their location, which may make them seem as if they are tucked away and shut off from the outside, the sisters—and their theology—are very much in the world.

Perhaps the greatest way that the Benedictine Sisters of Erie build community beyond the walls is with their oblates—men and women who enter into a particular commitment and relationship with the community. Becoming an oblate requires years of study, public commitment in ritual ceremonies, and obvious forms of support for the sisters and their ministries.⁵⁸

The sisters' relationship with lay people is an important point to make when considering their retention of their risky manner of Catholicism. Though it regards community beyond those with whom they live, the outer community of the sisters has major social implications for them as well.

The first such implication is that the testimonies of lay people can offer some specific insight into the message that the sisters share with the world, the sort of church they imagine. As people who are technically outside the community, but still deeply affiliated, oblates demonstrate a perspective on what the prophetic theology of the sisters offer; a perspective, that in many ways, can strengthen commitment all the more. The sisters in their publications frequently reference the opinions of their oblates, using their witness as fuel for their continued commitment.

⁵⁸ Romey, "Benedictine Life," 9, 7, 6.

One such testimony was offered by an oblate in a relatively recent issue of *The Mount Magazine*. Speaking of a trip to Rome that forced her to confront her struggles with the gender dynamics in the Catholic Church, one oblate wrote:

In this place, in our community, the Erie Benedictines are the people, the community in the Church, who have given me hope for the future. It is here that I have come to feel what I know intellectually, that I am made in the image and likeness of God. Not in spite of my womanhood, but with my womanhood. It is this community that trusts me as one called by God to ministry. This community sees that as natural rather than an oddity or a problem to figure out. It is in the chapel in Erie, in the dining room, in the halls, that I know myself to be most loved, and that I can trust most that I am enough for God. How can we, as women, speak this truth and find our voice in the Church, and in our Benedictine family?⁵⁹

The prophetic theology of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie is not silent. It is shared among those who support their cause and used to inspire those like-minded individuals on the path to within Church activism. This, of course, says much about the community itself—of their impact and their courage.

It also offers some further understanding of how the sisters can stay so courageous, how they can continue to advocate for strengthened roles for women in the Church. To quote Downton and Wehr once more, “An activist’s commitment may be

⁵⁹ Kelly Adamson, “Rome,” *The Mount Magazine*, Fall/Winter 2013, 13–14.

affirmed and encouraged by others who, while not directly involved in movement work, respect the efforts of people who are...these people can contribute to the maintenance of an activist's commitment by simply respecting and applauding it.”⁶⁰ With the support of their oblates, the sisters once again find encouragement and strength to persist in their prophetic theology under threat of punishment. It is in the social, in the connections with people both inside and outside of their monastery walls, who allow them to stand their ground. The “intimate relationship between religion and social solidarity,” between acting and staying silent, between staying and leaving, relies heavily on community for the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.⁶¹ As much as cognitive thought and personal theology may play a role, it is impossible to deny the profound effect of community on the identity maintenance of the sisters.

Sharon Nepstad, author of *Plowshares*, may have said it best, “Community, therefore, can sustain radical and even highly improbable beliefs. It does so by providing interaction with ‘confirming others’ and by offering explanations that legitimate belief and assuage doubts.”⁶² Whether it is in their support of their community when they come under fire, the prayers and opinions they release in their media, or simply in their daily practices of lived religion, the sisters lean on and are simultaneously formed by community life and relationships.

⁶⁰ Downton and Wehr, *The Persistent Activist*, 94.

⁶¹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 51.

⁶² Nepstad, *Religion and War Resistance*, 93.

With a firm grasp on community, we turn to the legitimizing explanations that enable the Benedictine Sisters of Erie the structure to continue to nourish their prophetic theology and to stand by it in the face of trial. In the case of the sisters, we need look no further than liturgical practice as a means of regularly reinforcing belief and persistent resistance within the Church.

Liturgical Practice and Lived Religion

Of all the ritual practices that bear influence in the communal life of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, there is perhaps none so powerful—and so risky—as liturgy. As a key part of life at Mount St. Benedict, liturgy is a practice that remains consistently present in the lives of the sisters, mooring them to each other and to the Church they will not leave. Liturgy, the Mass, lives at the center of the sisters’ ritual life. It is also one of the primary ways that the sisters break the rules in their Catholic faith.

From a sociological perspective, the presence of such a sustained and in some ways revolutionary ritual is central to the foundations of persistent activism. According to Catherine Bell, author of *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, ritual is a powerful social strategy, whether it is used consciously or unconsciously toward the ends of socialization. Ritual not only “traditionalizes” certain actions, making them the norm and constructing a specific reality, but also produces the things it does.⁶³ To explain such a complicated idea, we can use the example that the way bodies are used in ritual impacts spirituality.⁶⁴

⁶³ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 89, 99–100.

⁶⁴ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 97.

As Bell would explain, the act of kneeling does not simply express an inner sense of subordination; it helps to create the feeling of subordination.⁶⁵ Ritual, in this sense, is extremely powerful—it engrains into the self what it also enacts outside the self.

Ritual, to turn to the work of Mary Ellen Konieczny, also creates metaphors which may unfold, not only in the context of the ritual, but in the lives of participants. The metaphors used and emphasized frequently in the liturgical setting carry great power to shape religious identity and to create feelings of group solidarity. Due to the great complexity of the Catholic Mass, the idea of metaphor becomes particularly powerful in the consideration of its practice. Konieczny explains, “Because of the centrality of the sacrament for Catholics and their highly embodied rituals, worship has the capacity to express core religious metaphors and dispositions and sacredness richly: not only through singing and speech but also through gesture, touch, sight, and the emotions produced in believers through embodied ritual prayer.”⁶⁶ These metaphors, these liturgical practices, are not practiced in a vacuum—they are not contained to the chapel where they are created. To return to the idea of lived religion, sociology of religion has suggested time and again that in the midst of liturgical ritual “congregants also cultivate dispositions and habits they deem useful for moral living, both actively and passively.” In the symbiotic relationship in which ritual shapes practice and practice shapes ritual, a third element takes hold—how ritual and practice shape commitment.⁶⁷ It is impossible to judge a

⁶⁵ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 99–100.

⁶⁶ Konieczny, *The Spirit's Tether*, 8, 29.

⁶⁷ Konieczny, *The Spirit's Tether*, 29, 27.

person's faith separate from how it is practiced, apart from how it is lived. Decades of sociological research say as much.

In the case of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, what does liturgy both engrain and enact? What lived religion does ritual create? As it turns out, the structure and the language of liturgy has a profound effect: both on the prophetic theology of the sisters and in their ability to maintain such a theology in the face of suspicion and threat. In order to make this connection, it is important to have a picture, an understanding of the sisters' liturgy.

Thick Observation of the Liturgy of the
Benedictine Sisters of Erie, July 22, 2018

The monastery, though not far off of I-90, sits on a backroad, feeling far from civilization. Once we left the highway, there were many twists and turns on the map, which took us to Mount Saint Benedict, the monastery and home of the sisters. The building sits back slightly on a hill, surrounded by green space and reached by a long, uphill driveway. There is a tall bell-tower toward the front of the monastery, standing sentinel at what is clearly a chapel toward the front of the campus. There is a statue of Saint Benedict toward the front of the driveway, with a sign clearly proclaiming the home of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. I knew immediately that we had found the place.

As we arrived and pulled into the drive this late July morning, I was surprised to see cars parked not only in two side parking lots, but along the driveway leading up to the monastery as well. Arriving at 9:20 for the sisters' 9:30 Mass, I was caught off guard to see men and women, young and old, approaching the chapel for Mass. It began to be

clear to me that there were lay people who often joined the sisters for Mass, a fact that I for some reason had not entirely anticipated.

We walked through the front doors, down a hallway, and passed a front desk (where there was someone seated, greeting and giving directions) and made our way into the chapel to the right. A sister was waiting to give us a worship aid for today's service, complete with song lyrics, the order of the Mass, the readings, and the creed.

The chapel was stunning. Greeted by a huge but simple fountain upon our entry, we were humbled by vaulted ceilings with beautiful wood beams, and the pretty simplicity of the recently renovated chapel. For all intents and purposes, the chapel has a relatively odd set up for a Catholic place of worship. Seating is "in the round" style, creating an oval space in the middle. On one end of that oval, the end closer to the entrance, is the altar; on the other is the ambo. In terms of Catholic liturgical practice this is unusual—typically, the altar should be the main event, the star, the pinnacle of the space given pride of place for the Eucharist. But here, at Mount St. Benedict, the altar and ambo stand facing each other, as if they are two pillars of equal standing. Behind the ambo there were also a few musicians—both seemingly sisters—one to sing and the other to play guitar. I also took note of a table holding baked unleavened bread and wine toward the back of the space.

We took seats on the altar side of the round in the back row, close to the exit. Before Mass began, I looked around. I saw older women greeting each other, saving each other seats. I saw a young couple with a baby. I saw elderly couples and a few young families, interspersed between the crowds of women who seemed to be the sisters. I also noticed two quite old women wearing full habits. (From my research, I found that there

was another monastery that closed, and these sisters who wear the habit came to join the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.) I also was surprised to notice a man who was clearly the presider sitting among the people as well. He was probably in his late 50s or early 60s in age. He wore an alb—tan and plain—and a simple green stole. No frills. He sat quietly among the congregation. The chapel was about 80–90% full by the time Mass started.

To begin Mass, the congregation rose as two sisters in the space by the ambo lead the assembly in song. Immediately noticeable to me as a lifelong-Catholic was the omission of the title “Lord.” The opening song, “Gather Your People,” is one I have sung since childhood. But rather than the phrase “Gather your people, O Lord,” the congregation sang “Gather your people, O God.” The congregation sang loudly, with the simple but beautiful music echoing to the high ceiling.

As the song ended, there was no gathering of the people. There was no “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” and no “The Lord be with you.” As the song faded to silence, the presider simply stood and said, “Let us pray.” The statement was followed by what seemed to be an exceptionally long pause—the first of many. The presider said a brief prayer, closing the prayer by saying, “Through Jesus the Christ.”

The assembly then sat for the first reading. The reading was read by one of the sisters, who approached the ambo prayerfully and sincerely. The reading was from Jeremiah 23:1–6. Once again, I noted that the use of the title of “Lord” was censored in the readings—usually replaced by “God.” To end the reading, sister proclaimed, “The word of God.” I was surprised by how much these simple changes threw me off. As a long-practicing Catholic, I can admit that I never really recognized just how often the

word “Lord” and other forms of non-inclusive language appeared in the Mass. With the sisters being greatly intentional about eliminating any words to the effect, it became glaringly obvious to me just how prevalent masculine language is within the context of the liturgy. It also became obvious that the sisters have made quite a few changes to the liturgy. The sisters and the rest of the congregation all seemed comfortable with the changes and did not hesitate or stumble. This made me realize a) that they have long-since altered the language of the Mass and b) that those members of the congregation who are clearly not sisters must be frequent attendees of their liturgies.

The first reading was followed, not by a responsorial psalm as is prescribed by the Rites, but by a sung response called “Christ Our Peace,” a short refrain sung through twice under the leadership of two sisters.

The response was followed by the second reading, Ephesians 2:13–18. A different sister read this time, and again I noticed the changes in language. Following the second reading, another long, reflective silence held the room in stillness. The presider then stood, as did the congregation. The Celtic Alleluia was sung, followed by the presider’s proclamation of the Gospel, Mark 6:30–34. The people then sat and the homily began.

Though I was slightly surprised, the male presider gave the homily. He seemed comfortable there, as if he had preached from the ambo many times. In many ways, his homily was typical of many—the Gospel, in which the disciples were told to rest by Jesus after a long journey of evangelization was unpacked by the priest for context. What startled me and what I remember, though, was the way his focus shifted to what “rest” means. He explained rest as being about resting in Jesus—trusting in Jesus as we go forth to do work in the world. He spoke about immigration laws and the chaotic political

climate and our duty as Christians. He also very pointedly talked about our responsibility to work to heal division in “our country and our world and our church.” The need for reform and unity in the church was something that became a sort of motif, alongside others, in the homily.

Following the homily, the presider returned to his seat, where he invited the people to stand and recite the Apostles’ Creed. Here, perhaps, was one of the greatest examples of the language changes made by the sisters to the liturgy. The Apostles’ Creed, as dictated by the Rites of the Catholic Church, is as follows:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried;
He descended into hell; on the third day He rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father
Almighty; from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church,
the communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

The Apostles’ Creed as written and distributed by the sisters for use in their liturgies is as follows:

I believe in God, Creator of the heavens and the earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into the heavens. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

The creed was followed by the Prayer of the Faithful, again led by a sister, to the response of “Hear us, God.” The prayers focused on the church, political leaders, the sisters’ community, their oblates and benefactors. The gifts were then presented by sisters, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist began.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist, as far as the consecration and the Eucharistic Prayer, was perhaps one of the most untouched parts of the Mass. There were few if any changes to the wording. As the Eucharistic Prayer, led by the presider, was spoken there was only one language change that surprises me. The congregation responded, “May God except the sacrifice at your hands, for the praise and glory of God’s name, for our good and the good of all God’s church.” The response as it is normally said proclaims “God’s holy church”—and the world holy was omitted in the sister’s liturgy. I found this fascinating.

The Our Father, “the words that Jesus taught us” was left untouched. It was the only time throughout the liturgy that the word Father was used.

Following the Our Father and the sign of peace, as the Lamb of God was sung; and again, something interesting occurred. The sisters used true unleavened bread—not the papery wafers that many Catholics are accustomed to, but true baked bread. As the extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist prepared to distribute, I noticed that it was not the priest who was breaking the bread, but the women. Women, sisters, surrounded the table, breaking the bread into portions with their hands. In my experience of Catholicism, I have only ever seen male priests breaking the bread. Therefore, this moment resonated with me greatly.

The presider and eucharistic ministers first took communion to those who could not move well, and then the lines formed. The communion hymn was again led by sisters, this time “Bread of Life.”

When all had received, the sisters stood around the altar, offering each other the remaining bread and wine until all was finished. They then returned to their seats. To close, the presider stood. He said a prayer, then told the people “God be with you,” to which the people replied, “And with your spirit.” He then led the people in the sign of the cross, saying “God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.” The Mass was then ended, and the congregation sang a closing hymn (Christ Be Our Light). I noticed that the priest exited as soon as the song began, and then could be seen leaving the building without his vestments before the song is finished. This made me wonder if he came from another place.

When the Mass ended, the people dispersed—the lay people returned to their cars to go home and the sisters returned to the monastery to go about their daily routine, chatting as they went.

I noted that the presider's name was not listed on the worship aid. I did not hear any of the sisters refer to him as "Father."

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As I pulled up to the monastery this next Sunday, I again noticed the number of cars parked in the parking lot and up the drive. Once again, it occurred to me that a great number of lay people join the sisters for Mass on a regular basis.

This time, as I entered the chapel and received my worship aid, I spotted famous Sister Joan Chittister also making her way to her seat. Wearing a bright sweater of aqua and purple, she took her place among her sisters as they prepared to worship together. It felt chattier and lighter there that day, somehow. There were many conversations going on before Mass began, with sisters who saved each other seats calling out to each other. I also took note of several older married couples and, this time, noticed at least four or five young families who were joining the sisters for Mass. Again, the church seemed mostly full—about 80 to 90% filled. I saw the same presider, wearing his same garments, again seated among the congregation in thought.

This liturgy began a bit differently. When the service began, a sister stood, walked to the ambo, and read from the New Testament—Ephesians 4:1–6. She started the Mass with this reading which, I later figured out, was actually the intended second reading for the liturgy. Following her proclamation was a long silence, followed by the sisters leading the gathering song "Holy is God." This time there was a singer, guitar player, and a woman playing the oboe, who I recognized to be the prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

Following the opening song, the priest again skipped to "Let us pray." After a

brief prayer, the congregation was seated to hear the first reading, II Kings 4:42–44. Again, the reading was approached differently. Two sisters approached the ambo, while a third stood among the congregation holding a loaf of bread. As the two sisters began to read, one taking the part of narrator and one the part of the dialogue, the third walked forward with the bread, proceeding to act out the reading in the center of the congregation. She even spoke the lines by heart of the character she played. I noticed this was the same loaf of unleavened bread that would later be used for the Eucharistic celebration. Following the reading/performance, all three sisters were seated and again a sung response was led. (Just like last week, not a responsorial psalm—this time it was “at the table of the world.”) A long silence was held, followed by the Alleluia and then the presider’s reading of the Gospel in the same fashion as the week previous. This week’s Gospel was John 6:1–15—the feeding of the 5000.

After the Gospel, the congregation again sang the response “at the Table of the World.” This, too, was unusual.

This was followed by the homily. Again the presider gave context to the Gospel, talking about the liturgical year’s divergence from the Gospel of Mark, and explaining this reading as the predecessor to the Bread of Life Discourse. The priest talked about a new perspective on a reading the congregation had heard many times. He talked about how Andrew, the disciple in the Gospel reading, brought forth the boy with the 5 loaves and 2 fish and offered all that he had. The priest compared Andrew’s reaction in the reading to that of Phillip, who immediately jumped to what it would have cost them financially to feed 5000 people. The priest proceeded to turn this into a metaphor of what can happen when we offer to Jesus all that we have. This is what I have—and I trust you

can make something great with it.

Two components of the homily stuck with me—similar to the previous week. For one, the priest commented on how the Bread of Life Discourse is often connected to the Eucharist—and how that’s “fine” and “all well and good” but how that is “not the most important thing.” The most important thing is offering Christ what we have and trusting Jesus to make it something good. To call the Eucharist “not the most important thing” is, undoubtedly, quite unusual in a Catholic Church. Secondly, similar to last week, the priest again spoke of using gifts and talents to be good Christians and work for change and healing in the church and the world. Both of these struck me.

The rest of the Mass proceeded similar to the previous week. The Apostles’ Creed was recited in its edited form. The Prayer of the Faithful was similar, too, as was the presentation of the gifts and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Again, I was struck at how the women took the lead in breaking the bread and in consuming it afterwards. The communion song was “Here at This Table” and the closing hymn “All the Ends of the Earth.” It was not lost on me that all of the sisters’ hymn choices were songs whose lyrics revolved entirely on justice and unity.

Again, words like “Father,” “Son,” and “Lord” were never spoken. They were always replaced by “God” or “Jesus the Christ.” Mary was also not referred to as virgin—a fact I found extremely interesting. The church was not referred to as “holy” and the sign of the cross was said in the name of the “Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier” and was only employed at the close of the liturgy.

In sum, these components define the liturgy of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie—a liturgy that not only has great pride of place in the life of the sisters, but one whose numerous changes demonstrate a certain level of risk in the life of the community.

What Liturgy Engrains

As previously stated, liturgical ritual presents certain metaphors to a congregation and enacts those metaphors in their lives—a truth that makes liturgy very powerful indeed. In the case of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, we see several metaphors, as well as several changes. The structure of Mass is altered to the point that any practicing Catholic would likely start to feel a bit off balance. However, two primary “metaphors” are of special note as they are being ingrained into the life of the community: the first is the removal of masculine language, and the second is the role of women in the breaking of the bread.

Evident in the thick observations of the sisters’ liturgy, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie have long since adopted gender inclusive language into their ritual life. To their prayers and to their Mass, there has been a removal of all masculine language and pronouns. The sisters do not say “Lord,” they instead say “Jesus, the Christ” or “God”; they avoid all usage of the word “Father,” with the exception of the Our Father, “the prayer that Jesus taught us”; they omit any reference to “he,” even in the reading of scripture; and indeed, most famously, they pray not to “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” but to “Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.” The sisters have removed masculine language in a shocking way from the Apostle’s Creed—the profession of faith proclaimed not only by the Catholic Church, but by many Christian denominations. Though on paper these seem

small changes, they are drastic when compared to the practice of Catholic liturgy among most any other community.

Language, as a force of socialization and a part of liturgy, matters. Catherine Bell in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* reminds us that, “It has been argued that in ritual words themselves are deeds that accomplish things.”⁶⁸ This, in the Catholic sense, makes sense as applied to the Eucharist; further, in the case of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, it also can be applied to their beliefs about God and about women. The language chosen for liturgy—language that the sisters have employed since the 1970s, decades ahead of the curve—not only states the sisters’ beliefs.⁶⁹ It reinforces it, engrains it, and makes its home in who they are. If we consider the true power of ritual as sociologists have considered it for decades, then we must admit that the language of liturgy may have a profound effect on the socialization of the sisters. To speak exclusively of the inclusive within the context of liturgy is not a sentiment that is checked at the chapel doors. It continuously forms and reinforces the lived religion of the sisters and gives them the tools to speak of their prophetic theology to the wider world. Similar to persistent activists in other fields of thought, “Persisters appeared to be held in their commitments by a reality they constructed and shared—a reality represented in similar world views and problem definitions, and in a common discourse that gave meaning and coherence to their movement work.”⁷⁰ The liturgical language of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie provides

⁶⁸ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 111.

⁶⁹ Watanabe, “Nuns Who Defied.”

⁷⁰ Downton and Wehr, *The Persistent Activist*, 88.

them with such a common discourse; a discourse that allows them to keep preaching the Gospel as prophets of inclusivity to an ignorant Church. The metaphor of gender inclusive language shapes their religion, as well as the way they live that religion in the world.

Important also to the metaphors created by the sisters is the role of the sisters in the breaking of the bread in the preparation for the Eucharist. Though it may be surprising given the public beliefs of the sisters that a male priest still celebrates the Mass, there is still risk taken and belief enacted in this role of women in the Eucharist. After the consecration and before the distribution of communion, the priest celebrating liturgy for the sisters sits down. At this time, sisters approach the altar to break the bread to be shared among themselves. In this moment—a moment that defies canon law, as only priests and deacons are permitted to break the bread—a great metaphor is revealed.⁷¹ With the man seated, below them, watching them in their work, it is women who hold the Body of Christ, and prepare it to be shared with the community. Women are the sharers, the bearers of this most important gift of the Catholic community—and this image is not a side note, nor is it lost on the congregation. There is something so intentional in the choosing of this particular moment to incorporate women, and the intention of such a choice resonates far beyond the walls of the monastery.

Again, ritual choice and ritual action does not just inform liturgical practice—it informs the whole trajectory of life. If these women can be bearers of Christ in this richly

⁷¹ Colin B Donovan, “Liturgical Abuses,” *EWTN*, March 25, 2004, https://www.ewtn.com/expert/answers/cdw_liturgical_abuses.htm.

ritualistic way, then they must also be bearers of Christ in a world that would rather keep them in their place. As Konieczny emphasizes, “The conduct of worship enacts particular authority relations”—and these authority relations impact far more than just worship.⁷² Ritual, whether it is in the manner of language or the roles of women in its context, does something. It not only reflects practice but shapes it continually and reinforces what it weaves. This is, we can see, true of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, just as it is for thousands of other religious communities.

What varies, though, what makes the liturgical situation of the Erie Benedictines all the more interesting, is a consideration of what they risk. While their liturgy in many ways prepares and reinforces their prophetic theology and their positions on women in the Church, it is also one of the primary ways that they risk their belonging in the Catholic Church at all.

Defiant Liturgy

The metaphors incorporated into the liturgy of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie—those being the changes to gender inclusive language and the participation of women in the preparation of the Eucharist—are in many ways markedly different than what one would find in nearly any other Catholic Mass. The reason for this is that the changes the sisters have made to their liturgy are, quite plainly, in violation Church Canon Law. These changes are acts of defiance.

Changes to the liturgy which are made without the permission of the Apostolic See, that is, the papal office, are considered to be liturgical abuse. Liturgy is viewed as a

⁷² Konieczny, *The Spirit’s Tether*, 28.

way to protect and perpetuate important, resonate truths of the faith, and therefore, “No other person, even if he be a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority.”⁷³ Liturgy is supposed to be untouched, unless there is a special dispensation addressed by the hierarchy; otherwise, it is to be practiced exactly as the rubrics dictate.

Within the realms of Liturgical Law, the institutional hierarchy of the Catholic Church has even given specific attention both to changes toward inclusive language, and to the preparation of the Eucharist. In recent years, Monsignor Antonio Miralles of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith has responded in a particularly intense way to the usage of “Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier” in place of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” While the argument is directed specifically at those who baptize using such a formula, Miralles defends the use of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” vehemently, and reproaches greatly any circumstance in which it is replaced. His work emphasizes that usage of a formula such as “Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier” is a “grave injustice” that attempts to perpetuate feminist ideas about God at the expense of undermining Catholic faith in the Trinity.⁷⁴ To quote one Canon Law expert, ““If you’re not baptized, you’re

⁷³ Donovan, “Liturgical Abuses.”

⁷⁴ Antonio Miralles, “A New Response of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the Validity of Baptism,” Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20080201_validity-baptism-miralles_en.html, 1-2.

not Christian. When Rome says they're invalid, it means they have zero effect."⁷⁵ No alternatives to "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" are offered in liturgical documents, and this is the way it must stay; for "Trinitarian faith calls for prayerful precision of language."⁷⁶ Indeed, those familiar with Church history would be quick to point out that referring to the Trinity as "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier" was actually condemned as Modalist heresy in the early centuries of the Church's life.⁷⁷ Heresy in the Code of Canon Law is defined as "The obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith, or it is likewise an obstinate doubt concerning the same." Because they knowingly embrace that which is contrary to what the Church teaches as truth the Benedictines Sisters of Erie would be, by Canon Law, considered heretics. The Catholic Church's applicable punishment for those who maintain heresy is excommunication.⁷⁸ The risk is real.

Change in the preparation of the Eucharist is, as one might guess, forbidden as well. According to Liturgical Law, only a bishop or priest, perhaps with the help of a

⁷⁵ Stephan Mirarchi, "Baptisms Must Be Redone," *The National Catholic Reporter* (April 1, 2008), http://www.ncregister.com/site/article/baptisms_must_be_redone.

⁷⁶ Miralles, "A New Response," 2–3.

⁷⁷ Mirarchi, "Baptisms Must Be Redone."

⁷⁸ Colin B Donovan, "Heresy," *EWTN*, https://www.ewtn.com/expert/answers/heresy_schism_apostasy.htm.

deacon, is allowed to break the eucharistic bread before communion.⁷⁹ Only those with admittance to Holy Orders are permitted to participate in this particular part of the Mass. The liturgy of the sisters defies these Liturgical Laws.

In the eyes of the Church, this is a serious offense—indeed, the language of liturgical abuse is certainly strong. Of the liturgical celebration of the Eucharistic meal the Church has stated, “By its very nature, it MUST be either a sign of unity or disunity”—and for those who make it a “sign of disunity” consequences can be rendered.⁸⁰

Such a fact again makes clear the great risk that the Benedictine Sisters of Erie take in their daily practice of the faith. Not only does their ritual life perpetuate and strengthen their prophetic and gender inclusive theology, a theology that is counter in many ways to that of the hierarchical church; but the very way they practice that ritual is in direct and open violation of Church teaching.

And yet they keep practicing.

Former Prioress Christine Vladimiroff once said, in response to the Vatican’s demands that Sister Joan Chittister not attend the Women’s Ordination Conference, “I just think I lovingly disagree, and it is as much my church as theirs. If you separate a person from their truth, there’s a loss of integrity, conscience...that was the consequence I

⁷⁹ “Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion at Mass,” *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/order-of-mass/liturgy-of-the-eucharist/extraordinary-ministers-of-holy-communion-at-mass.cfm>.

⁸⁰ Donovan, “Liturgical Abuses.”

was not able to bear.”⁸¹ While directed at a different occasion, the sentiment in regard to the sisters liturgical practice seems to be the same. Socialized by their liturgical and ritual life, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie continue to find themselves as voices crying out in the desert for change the Church; strengthened for the risk and whatever punishment may come.

⁸¹ Watanabe, “Nuns Who Defied.”

CONCLUSION

Benedictine Sister of Erie Joan Chittister wrote, “I stay in the church because the sexist church I love needs women for its own salvation.”⁸² Such a statement, in many ways, seems to be the unproclaimed motto of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie—and of many Catholic women who are staying put. This bold phrase, inspiring and empowering to so many, has more than just a prophetic theology behind it.

Though the beliefs of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie and those like them may be uplifting, it is in investigating the sociological forces at work that their movement becomes truly fascinating. With the assistance of sociological forces, primarily those of community life and liturgical practice, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie are able to maintain their own unique brand of high-risk activism. This activism, which risks their home, family, faith, and livelihood, is one grounded in a deep desire to reclaim the Church as a place of inclusivity; a place that Jesus would approve of. Despite all they face, the sisters march on—and seem to have no plans of halting in the near future.

Will the activism of organizations such as the Benedictine Sisters of Erie revolutionize the Church or tear it apart? Only time will tell. In the meantime, it seems that the sisters will continue to persistently resist, continue to stand armed for the fight together. What an adventure that will be.

⁸² Chittister, *In the Heart*, 154.

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