

## 'To Save Them from the Dangers to their Faith': Documenting Student Life at Catholic Women's Colleges

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Fernanda Perrone

## **Documenting Student Life at Catholic Women's Colleges**

### Introduction

The archives of Catholic women's colleges and former women's colleges contain rich documentation of student life at these institutions. They reflect a unique Catholic women's culture which developed in the early twentieth century, persisting until the 1970s. Like student culture at other women's colleges, it was molded by the forces of class and gender. Catholic women's colleges were characterized, however, by a particular emphasis on feminine propriety, service, and of course, religious faith, which helped acculturate the daughters of immigrants into Catholic middle-class culture. With a few exceptions, such as the work of Sr. Mary Oates, C.S.J., Catholic women's colleges have been neglected by historians of women's education.<sup>1</sup> Those who have written about these colleges have focused more on the origins and growth of the institutions, rather than on the experience of students.<sup>2</sup> Recently a collection of essays sponsored by the Lilly Foundation, *Catholic Women's Colleges in America* (Johns Hopkins, 2002) has helped to rectify this omission. This work includes a chapter on student life at three

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<sup>1</sup>Sr. Mary Oates, C.S.J. is the editor of *A History of Higher Education for Catholic Women* (New York, 1987), an anthology of primary documents.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Patricia Byrne, C.S.J., "A Tradition of Educating Women: The Religious of the Sacred Heart and Higher Education." *U.S. Catholic Historian* 13, No. 4 (Fall 1995): 49-79 and Mary Hayes, S.N.D., "The Founding Years of Trinity College Washington, D.C.: A Case Study of Christian Feminism," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 1991.

Philadelphia-area colleges by David Contosta of Chestnut Hill College, and a survey of Catholic women's college alumnae by Jane Redmont. Contosta's chapter is based on his research in the archives of Rosemont, Chestnut Hill and Immaculata Colleges, primarily using student publications. As the editors of this pioneering volume note, "With so little work to build on, these essays are necessarily preliminary, and we are very aware of what remains to be done, but we trust that other scholars will take up the work and continue the exploration."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the archives remain the best source for information about Catholic women's colleges, and present many opportunities for further research. In this essay, I will suggest how a Catholic women's culture can be documented using student life records at Catholic women's colleges and former women's colleges.

### Historical Background

The first Catholic women's colleges date from just over 100 years ago. Because of opposition from conservative church authorities, higher education for Catholic women in the United States did not begin until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, almost 50 years after the establishment of the first Protestant women's colleges. Like them, the Catholic women's colleges were extensions of existing girls' academies. The first Catholic women's college, the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, near Baltimore, was established in 1896, by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. It was followed by the College of St. Elizabeth in Morristown, New Jersey in 1899, and Trinity College in Washington, D.C. in 1900. Trinity College, founded by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, was the only one of this early group founded expressly as a

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<sup>3</sup>Cynthia Russet and Tracy Schier, *Catholic Women's Colleges in America*, p. 7.

college rather than as an extension of an existing girls' academy.

In the next decade, however, as Church authorities realized that Catholic women were flocking to state colleges and universities, the numbers of Catholic women's colleges expanded exponentially. In 1921, there were 38, in 1930, 74, and by 1955, there were 116 four-year colleges and 24 junior colleges. As Mother Grace Damman, president of Manhattanville College wrote succinctly in 1942:

The fundamental reason, however, which was at the base of all these enterprises from 1899 to today was the desire to afford Catholic girls a Catholic atmosphere during college years and to save them from the dangers to their faith which many were meeting in secular colleges.<sup>4</sup>

This rapid growth led to certain problems. Historian of Catholic women's colleges Mary Oates of Regis College remarks that in the 1930s, average enrollment was under 300 students; in 1938, only one in five was accredited nationally by the Association of American Colleges; and in the 1940s, one in five students was a nun at graduation. The eagerness of orders to establish colleges imbued by the particular charism of that congregation led to a proliferation of colleges in some cities, which all competed for funding and students. Their small size and lack of funds restricted the number of courses these colleges were able to offer, particularly in the natural and social sciences. At the same time, they attempted to fulfill a dual purpose of preparing suitable Catholic wives and providing vocational training, primarily for teachers. The Sisters, who made up most of the faculty in the early years, were often ill-trained and overburdened by

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<sup>4</sup>Mother Grace Damman, "The American Catholic College for Women," in Roy Deferrari, ed., *Catholic Education in the United States*, 1942, p. 180.

responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Oates divides Catholic women's colleges into two tiers: a small group of elite institutions which aspired to the academic standards, curriculum, and faculty of the non-sectarian Eastern women's colleges, and the majority, local colleges which provided vocational courses for a primarily working-class clientele. Among the superior colleges numbered Trinity College, Manhattanville, the College of New Rochelle, St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, and the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota. These colleges shared the support of liberal bishops and the presence of crusading leaders who encouraged their Sisters to enroll in Ph.D. programs, and sought the aid of lay faculty. Lacking such visionary leaders, the less prestigious colleges nevertheless performed an important function in that they provided a low-cost education for local women, often the daughters of immigrants, who could not have afforded the elite Catholic women's colleges.

All Catholic women's colleges shared a Catholic atmosphere, characterized by the presence of nuns on campus, religious rituals and observances, the prominence of religious-inspired art and architecture, and generally stricter regulations than the non-sectarian women's colleges. Religion was an important part of the curriculum and religious clubs and societies were important extra-curricular activities. A survey in the early 1930s found that hours of rising and retiring were regulated, mass was voluntary but encouraged, visiting hours were limited and chaperones mandatory, and some colleges required students to wear uniforms.<sup>6</sup> The most

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<sup>5</sup>See Oates, "Introduction," to *A History of Higher Education for Catholic Women*.

<sup>6</sup>Sister Mary Mariella Bowler, *A History of Catholic Colleges for Women in the United*

popular extra-curricular activities were religious organizations such as the Sodality of the Children of Mary, the League of the Sacred Heart, the Mission Crusade, and Catholic Action.<sup>7</sup>

Catholic women's colleges began to change in the 1960s. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council ended, resulting in a call for greater ecumenism, modernization of the liturgy and an expanded role for the laity. At the women's colleges, this trend was reflected by increased involvement of the laity in college government, leading to the gradual transfer of control from religious communities to lay boards of trustees. During the 1970s, the Catholic women's colleges faced declining numbers, as many Catholic men's colleges and universities began to accept women. A crisis in funding and student unrest often resulted. To meet these challenges, many colleges introduced accelerated programs and evening classes to attract students. They also reached out to minorities and in many cases admitted men students. Some colleges closed or merged with larger institutions. The remaining colleges somewhat lost their "appearance of Catholicism," as the dwindling numbers of sisters were increasingly replaced by lay faculty members, and those remaining often stopped wearing religious habits. In 1983, there were about 35 four-year Catholic women's colleges in the United States, and, as of 1999, according to statistics maintained by the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU), there were 29.<sup>8</sup>

### In Search of a Student Culture

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*States of America* (Washington, D.C., 1933), p. 87.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup>The ACCU maintains a website at <http://www.accunet.org>.

The Catholic women's college experience was clearly significant for thousands of students--42,900 were in attendance in the academic year 1956-1957 alone.<sup>9</sup> These colleges helped acculturate many daughters of Irish, German, Eastern European and Italian families to middle-class American society, at the same time creating a specifically female and Catholic culture on the college campuses. In the second part of this paper, I will show how college archives illuminate this experience, an experience shaped by femininity, faith, and the service ideal, which was at the same time complex and constantly changing. This study, which is still very much a work in progress, is based on surveys of the archives of eleven colleges, and actual visits to seven--Marymount Manhattan; Trinity; Felician College in Lodi, New Jersey; Chestnut Hill, Immaculata, and Rosemont Colleges in the Philadelphia suburbs; and the College of St. Elizabeth in Morristown, New Jersey --all the in mid-Atlantic area. Catholic women's colleges are, however, spread across the country and have many individual differences. Their archives document numerous aspects of college life from the early years of the century to the present. In this essay, I will focus on student life from about 1920 to 1970, but topics such as college governance, faculty, and curriculum are also well-documented in the archives.

Who were the thousands of women who attended Catholic women's colleges? Some demographic information can be found in college publications, most notably, alumnae directories, which, of course, include post-college careers. The Rosemont Directory includes deceased as well as living alumnae. Yearbooks usually give the place of origin of the students as

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<sup>9</sup>Office of Education, *Biennial Statistics of Education* as quoted in Mabel Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education for American Women* (Washington, D.C., 1959), p. 49.

well. A survey of home addresses of students at the College of St. Elizabeth between 1899 and 1910 reveals that 75 percent came from locations outside of New Jersey.<sup>10</sup> At the slightly less selective Chestnut Hill College, the 1929 yearbook indicates that of seventeen seniors, only seven came from outside the Philadelphia area.<sup>11</sup> Often the ethnicity of the students can be roughly derived from yearbooks as well. Since the official students records are closed for seventy-five years by federal regulation, yearbooks and directories currently provide the best source for this type of information. A cursory glance at yearbooks from Marymount Manhattan, Chestnut Hill and Georgian Court Colleges reveal that although Irish and German names predominate, Italian and Polish names are also in evidence, indicating the presence of the daughters of the newer Catholic immigrant groups of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Today many students are from Hispanic or African American backgrounds. The subject of social, economic, and cultural differences among Catholic women's college students and how they changed warrants further study.

### Feminine Propriety

Before the 1970s, the commonalities among Catholic women's college students were more noteworthy than their differences. This common culture is well documented in the records of various college committees and organizations. Up until the 1960s, student organizations at

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<sup>10</sup>I am indebted to Sr. Mary Ellen Gleason, archivist of the College of St. Elizabeth for this reference.

<sup>11</sup>Ononta, Mount Saint Joseph College (previous name of Chestnut Hill College), 1929, Chestnut Hill College Archives.



Catholic women's colleges kept detailed minutes, probably encouraged by the presence of faculty moderators. As well as student government minutes, many colleges kept records of student disciplinary boards. At the College of St. Elizabeth, the minutes of one such body, the Judicial Board, are incredibly detailed. The Judicial Board was a formal body made up of students and faculty members which operated as a court of law in matters of discipline. Infractions brought before the Judicial Board during the 1920s included drinking, entertaining men after a dance, leaving the dormitory after lights out, cutting assembly, sleeping in another student's room, coming back late Sunday night, going home without permission, smoking, "going to the Betty Jane Tea Room without permission, without signing out and missing Benediction and the Office,"<sup>12</sup> lighting the gas in the lavatory and studying there at night, using a candle, missing an organization meeting, and falsifying the register. Punishments ranged from a reprimand for the student using the candle, to being confined to campus for a month for the students who were accused of entertaining men in their rooms. (They claimed the men had escorted them back to their rooms and were waiting for the chaperone.) In one particularly drawn out case in 1927, a student was accused of drinking at a Ball. A long list of fellow students testified for and against her. For instance, one reported that she witnessed "Miss Clohosey laughing loudly, but did not know her well enough to decide whether it was due to drink or not."<sup>13</sup> Although the charge was never proven, Miss Clohosey was barred from social events for one semester. Excessive drinking was a clear violation of the middle-class feminine image which the College of St.

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<sup>12</sup>Judicial Board Minutes (January 19, 1929), College of St. Elizabeth Archives.

<sup>13</sup>Judicial Board Minutes (March 2, 1927), College of St. Elizabeth Archives.

Elizabeth hoped its students would project. Note that the Judicial Board was a student-run organization; the students themselves were enforcing this image.

Of course, during this period, when colleges stood *in loco parentis* to students, most women's colleges had fairly strict regulations. For instance, the New Jersey College for Women (today Douglass College) *Red Book* reflects a similar code of conduct. New Jersey College maintained a student-run honor board similar to St. E's Judicial Board. Major infractions against the honor system were drinking, smoking, and unchaperoned automobiling. Other regulations designated quiet hours and study hours, as well as "lights out" at 11:30 for freshmen and sophomores. Activities which required chaperones included sleigh-riding and eating in non-approved restaurants.<sup>14</sup> It would be interesting to conduct a systematic comparison of regulations at Catholic women's colleges with those at Protestant or non-sectarian institutions. I suspect that Catholic women's colleges had more stringent rules, enforcing standards of propriety, respectability and femininity. Because of anti-Catholic prejudice, Catholic women's colleges may have been particularly concerned with maintaining an appearance of respectability to the outside world, as revealed by records of college and faculty bodies, which give information about students from a different perspective. As can be seen in faculty minutes, in 1930, Dr. Anthony Flynn, the president of Immaculata College, emphasized the need to maintain academic standards, referring to another college that was popularly known as a *Refugium Peccatorium* – a refuge for sinners.<sup>15</sup> Aware of prejudice against Catholic institutions, college

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<sup>14</sup>New Jersey College for Women, *Red Book*, 1929-1930, p. 12-17.

<sup>15</sup>Faculty Minutes (May 30, 1930), Immaculata College Archives.

administrators were particularly concerned about their college's reputation.

### Religion

The Immaculata College Faculty Minutes also reveal the importance of religious education in student life at Catholic women's colleges. Discussing selection of candidates for a Catholic honor society, the faculty defined the desired qualifications as "character, scholarship, leadership, service and faith."<sup>16</sup> The faculty also frequently discussed the religion curriculum, which it saw as the most important aspect of the students' education; a student who did not excel in religion classes could not receive honors. In September, 1930, a program of class discussions was introduced: "matters of vital moment in the life of a Catholic woman of today will be criticized, deliberated upon, and false principles refuted."<sup>17</sup> Although religion was of paramount importance in the eyes of Catholic women's college administrators, they welcomed students of other faiths. In May 1937, Janet Goldstein was awarded a scholarship to do practice teaching at West Philadelphia High School. That September, a new president, Dr. Francis Furey, requested that members of the Faculty be especially kind and considerate to several new students: "Mary O' Connor, who had spent a year at Temple and whose parents felt had lost her faith; Emily Ann Buckley, a Lutheran; Mary Ellen Barnes, an Evangelist, who had been baptized a Catholic; and Adelaide Arntsen, who had been baptized a Catholic, made First Holy Communion, but seemed

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<sup>16</sup>Faculty Minutes (June 1, 1930), Immaculata College Archives.

<sup>17</sup>Faculty Minutes (Sept. ), Immaculata College Archives.

to be wavering in the exercise of her religion.”<sup>18</sup>

The large part that religion played in the lives of Catholic women’s college students, irrespective of their personal religious affiliation, can be seen in the Annals, a record of daily events routinely kept by religious orders, including those that administered women's colleges. At Rosemont College, Annals were kept for over forty years by members of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, the sponsoring community. The Annals show the involvement of the students in the life of the religious order, reporting the students’ regular attendance at mass and participation in the adoration of the sacrament. The students sent flowers to the college dean on the anniversary of her profession (which women religious celebrate instead of birthdays), and helped sing mass and joined the procession at a sister’s funeral. They also prayed for the canonization of the order’s foundress Cornelia Connelly: in May 1935, the students attended a high mass “in honor of the Rev. Mother Foundress whose body was exhumed during the Easter holidays and found practically incorrupt.”<sup>19</sup> A few months earlier “several Rosemont girls were clothed at Sharon Hill (the order's mother house).”<sup>20</sup> Twenty-four students visited the novices after the ceremony. As well as documenting the daily life of the college, the Annals reveal demographic information about the students and faculty. Every year, the chronicler listed the students, where they were from, and what college offices they held. For those who left the college, reasons were given for

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<sup>18</sup>Faculty Minutes (Sept. 26, 1937), Immaculata College Archives.

<sup>19</sup>Annals (May 2, 1935), Rosemont College Archives.

<sup>20</sup>Annals (March 4, 1935), Rosemont College Archives.

withdrawal. Because the annals were kept for so many years, they enable the researcher to trace changes in the ethnicity and geographic distribution of students.

### Service

A final component of student culture at Catholic women's colleges was the emphasis on service. From the earliest days, students at Catholic women's colleges participated in social service activities, albeit with a specifically Roman Catholic flavor. Indeed, during the 1910s and 1920s, many graduates of Trinity College became social workers, to the extent that social work became part of the curriculum in 1921.<sup>21</sup> Among the most popular student associations in the early years were the sodality, the prayer society for the worship of the Virgin Mary, which also did relief work and sponsored religious speakers, and the Mission Unit, which raised money for Catholic missions abroad. These religious organizations often had a strong service orientation. For instance, at the College of St. Elizabeth, the Children of Mary Sodality sponsored a Christmas party for orphans and did relief work among the poor, while the Mission Unit raised money for a Jesuit Mission in the Philippines. The Confraternity for Christian Doctrine, in addition to its main mission of spreading Catholic teachings, held a dance benefit for a local charity and distributed Christmas baskets to underprivileged families.<sup>22</sup> At Trinity College, the

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<sup>21</sup>Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth McKeown, *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare* (Harvard University Press, 1997) and Sr. Columba Mullaly, *Trinity College: Washington, D.C.: The First Eighty Years 1897-1977* (Westminster, Md., 1987), p. 224-225.

<sup>22</sup>Yearbook, College of St. Elizabeth, 1932, College of St. Elizabeth Archives.

members of the Wekanduit Society, founded in 1917, did odd jobs for other students, as well as sponsoring plays and skits, and donated the proceeds to the foreign missions. The Society continued well into the 1960s, raising money for Catholic charitable organizations in Central America, Africa, and the Philippines.<sup>23</sup> The Student Council at Trinity was also active in service activities, for instance providing presents, ice cream and cookies for a Christmas party at a local orphanage.<sup>24</sup> In 1965, the College launched its own mission to a depressed region of Northern Honduras, when Sister Francis Gormly and ten students volunteered in a charity hospital during the summer. In that year, a newspaper article estimated that of a student body of 700, 400 were volunteers in some community activity.<sup>25</sup>

By the 1960s, religion, service and social action were closely tied together. These developments are well documented in the Student Life files at Trinity College, as well as in the student newspaper, *The Trinity Times*, and the magazine, *The Trinity Record*. In 1960, during a discussion of how to support civil rights protests in the South, a student commented, "as a Catholic college we believe in justice and charity."<sup>26</sup> In 1961, the Missals for Missiles

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<sup>23</sup>Wekanduit File, Trinity College Archives.

<sup>24</sup>Student Government Informal Association Minutes (Dec. 4. 1951), Trinity College Archives.

<sup>25</sup>Unidentified newspaper clipping, March 1964, Co-curricular Events Files, Trinity College Archives.

<sup>26</sup>Student Council Meeting Minutes, May 3, 1960, Trinity College Archives.

Committee arranged that a prayer for peace be incorporated into the college's regular religious activities. The following month a Nuclear Testing Committee was formed and the students discussed possible civil rights actions, including a boycott of segregated restaurants.<sup>27</sup> While Trinity's Washington, D.C. location and elite status may have contributed to its students' activism, evidence from other Catholic women's colleges reveals a similar emphasis.

### Epilogue

Indeed by the 1960s, the carefully fostered Catholic women's college culture was beginning to break down. As early as 1962, the Trinity students discussed, as a remedy for the chronic problem of lateness to Mass, requiring attendance only once a month or not at all.<sup>28</sup> The Trinity students' growing disaffection anticipated the changes in society which would soon engulf all Catholic women's colleges. The omnipresence of the Roman Catholic faith on campus would gradually decrease as a result of the changes brought about by Vatican II, the shrinking numbers of sister faculty members, and the changing demographics of the student population. As Georgetown and other elite Catholic universities gradually opened their doors to women, and the number of Catholic girls' academies declined, Catholic women's colleges lost their traditional clientele, who were replaced by increasing numbers of minority women and older students, both male and female. Trinity College acknowledged these changes by opening an ecumenical Campus Ministry in 1973. Furthermore, student unrest culminating in the demise of *in loco parentis* in 1972, brought about the end of the rules and regulations so characteristic of Catholic

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<sup>27</sup>Student Council Meeting Minutes (Nov. 6 and Dec. 4, 1961), Trinity College Archives.

<sup>28</sup>Student Council Minutes (March 14, 1962), Trinity College Archives.

women's colleges at mid-century. While the traditional service orientation remained, it took a new form in increased outreach to poor and minority women and local communities.

### Conclusion

The archives of Catholic women's colleges provide rich documentation of a Catholic women's culture which developed at these institutions during the first half of the twentieth century. Clearly, the archives have much to tell us about Catholic education in the twentieth century, and more broadly, what it meant to be a Catholic woman. In this paper, I have suggested that the archives of Catholic women's colleges document a culture based on ideals of gender, faith, and service. This culture, however, developed differently at different colleges, where it was influenced by the demographic profile of the students. As students graduated from college, this culture influenced their choices, as they were in turn influenced by the changing Catholic society in which they now moved. In the late 1960s, this culture would begin to undergo radical changes, changes that have yet to be fully explored by historians. Catholic women's colleges educated thousands of women whose experiences have been left out of most histories of women's higher education. The evolution of these colleges reflects the sweeping changes which have occurred in the place of women, religion, and education in society during the twentieth century. The preservation and exploration of their archival legacy will make a major contribution to this history.