Widening the Open Circle: Attending to Gender When Examining Catholic Higher Education

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Fr. James Heft's book offers a compelling and hopeful analysis of Catholic higher education today. However, I believe some of Fr. Heft's reflections, particularly in chapter 2, "Mary and the Intellectual Life," call us to interrogate the ways historically single-sex education, based in particular teachings on gender, continue to shape how we think about Catholic higher education. One way to begin this rethinking is to draw greater attention to the unique stories of Catholic women's colleges founded by women religious. I believe we have much to learn from these institutions, the congregations of women who founded them, and the students they have educated over the years. Yet, all too often their stories are ignored or underrepresented in narratives of Catholic higher education. They are, Sr. Mary Jeremy Daigler observes, "the Invisibles."[1] Ignoring these stories leads to the fallacious assumption that women's participation in Catholic higher education really began when Catholic men's colleges began to admit women. It ignores the various ways women religious influenced the mission and identity of Catholic colleges and universities.

Over sixty of the nearly two hundred Catholic colleges and universities in the United States were founded by women religious congregations.[2] Relegating these stories to footnotes or parenthetical statements perpetuates the androcentric assumptions that Catholic colleges founded by and for men define what it means to be a "real" Catholic university in the United States. By contrast, attending to the ways gender has shaped the history of Catholic higher education will nuance and widen our understanding of Catholic higher education in ways that will help us better diagnose and tend to some of the daunting challenges and hopeful opportunities Fr. Heft addresses.[3]

Catholic Colleges Founded for Women, by Women

Catholic women's colleges began to emerge in the late nineteenth century as a response to the growing number of Catholic women attending

Protestant leaning colleges. Some bishops who were otherwise skeptical of education for women reasoned that Catholic women's colleges could protect and cultivate young Catholic women's moral and religious virtue, educating "true Catholic women," that is, good wives and mothers. The women religious who founded, operated, and staffed these colleges, however, embodied a distinctive version of what it meant to be a Catholic woman. Compelled by their spiritual and intellectual commitments, many of these founders insisted that Catholic women's colleges needed to be grounded in the humanities and the Catholic intellectual tradition. The colleges also focused on professional and vocational training, particularly in education and nursing, that allowed their graduates to work outside of the home. Responding to needs in Catholic education and health care, the number of Catholic women's colleges continued to grow well into the 1950s, during which time the men's colleges continued to be closed to women.

It would be anachronistic to refer to the women religious who founded Catholic colleges or the young women they educated as feminists. Nevertheless, the existence of these institutions naturally challenged perceived notions of proper Catholic womanhood and the intellectual capabilities of women and thus laid the groundwork for Catholic women to claim their human dignity and equality with men. Mary J. Oates observes, "The College of Notre Dame of Maryland and other Catholic women's colleges rejected traditional views of women's subordinate place in public and private life and offered their graduates new opportunities to participate as equals in every sector of US society."[4]

Being Catholic, Serving Women: Liberal Arts and Pre-Professional Programs

Fr. Heft offers helpful reflections regarding the challenge Catholic universes face today in maintaining strong commitment to the Catholic intellectual tradition through the liberal arts while also building successful pre-professional programs. The history of Catholic women's colleges can offer important contributions to this ongoing discussion. By the 1940s and 1950s, Catholic women's colleges made significant curricular changes that placed greater emphasis on the Catholic liberal arts, including theology. Women religious were expected to serve as the faculty at their institutions, yet many roadblocks prevented them from earning graduate degrees in these disciplines that were foundational for Catholic education. Theology serves as the best example. Fr. Heft recounts that the Sacred School of Theology founded by Sr. Madeleva Wolff, C.S.C., at St. Mary's College in South Bend, Indiana, opened new space for lay Catholics, most of whom were

women religious, to study graduate-level theology. In her autobiography, Sr. Madeleva describes her motivation from John Henry Newman's *The Idea of the University*. For Sr. Madeleva, the Catholic identity of St. Mary's College depended on access to theology, a discipline that women had long been barred from studying.[5] To this day, women theologians, particularly those who identify as feminist theologians, continue to be held in suspicion. The story Fr. Heft offers about the bishops' unprofessional treatment of theologian Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., reminds us that women theologians are often undermined and disrespected, especially when they subscribe to and promote feminist, womanist, and liberation theologies.

As they sought to build stronger departments in the liberal arts, Catholic women colleges continued to provide training in professions like education, nursing, social work, nutrition, and "domestic sciences," all of which were seen as appropriate occupations for women. At times, it seems Catholic women's colleges had to figure out how to be "everything to everyone" with fewer financial and human resources than the men's colleges—a challenge many Catholic campuses face today. If nothing else, I believe that studying the curricular history of these colleges encourages us to interrogate our own often gendered assumptions of what constitutes rigorous education. [6]

Navigating Change: Lessons from Catholic Women's Colleges

The most significant change that Catholic women's colleges navigated was the transition of Catholic men's colleges to co-education. Fr. Heft rightfully applauds the national trend towards coeducation a sign of progress toward rectifying problematic Catholic teaching on women. However, it is a bit misleading to suggest that gender equality was the only or even primary factor motivating men's colleges to admit women. Financial instability and the need for higher enrollment were usually the deciding factors in the decision to admit women. Seeing an opportunity for property expansion and a source for new student enrollment, many Catholic men's colleges sought to merge with nearby Catholic women's colleges, often with little care for the founding congregation's particular history or charism. [7] The move to coeducation raised considerable concerns for Catholic women's colleges that found themselves in competition with men's institutions boasting larger endowments and more faculty per student.

Catholic women's colleges responded in different ways. Some closed. Some merged with nearby men's colleges—to varying degrees of success. Many went co-educational themselves, expanding their educational mission in graduate studies and to serve other educationally marginalized

populations. A few managed to stay committed to women's-only undergraduate education, rooting their mission in a commitment to women's education as a critical expression of Catholic mission in higher education.[8] A detailed analysis of the transition from single-sex education to coeducation from the perspective of Catholic women's colleges raises some critical questions about the role and value that women-centered approaches to education offer, particularly to Catholic education.

Honoring the Founding Charisms of Catholic Women's Colleges

Many of the surviving Catholic colleges founded by women religious understand their Catholic identity through the lens of the founding charism. However, as Fr. Heft shows, the living endowment religious offer on colleges campuses continues to dwindle, raising critical questions about the continued catholicity of these institutions. Several women's congregations have done significant work in planning for a future when they may no longer be serving on these campuses. The Sisters of Mercy, for example, founded the Conference for Mercy Higher Education to help the seventeen Mercy colleges and universities cultivate and articulate their mission and values. More theological and spiritual research must be done on the many charisms and stories of founding women religious congregations so we may know and honor these critical spiritual legacies that have inspired, served, and shaped the Catholic church in the United States, yet often go underrepresented in Catholic theological reflection.

Conclusion

A brief analysis cannot do justice to the complex history of Catholic women's colleges and the ways gender has profoundly shaped Catholic higher education in the United States. The point I hope to make is that, although gender is certainly not the only factor that has shaped the landscape of Catholic higher education, it is an important one that rarely receives adequate attention in studies of the present state and future of Catholic higher education. It is simply not enough to namedrop a few Catholic women or to mention the Catholic women's colleges in the footnotes. Examining how gender has shaped Catholic higher education compels us to widen our narrative approach to integrate the stories and contributions of institutions founded by and for women. It will also will likely expose underlying causes of some of the daunting financial, enrollment, and curricular challenges many small Catholic colleges face today. These analyses will also highlight creative and adaptive strategies that saved many of these institutions,

including innovative approaches to sponsorship, intentional collaboration and formation of lay leaders, and commitment to a Catholic vision of education that serves the marginalized. Furthermore, widening the narrative to include Catholic women's colleges helps us name and confront the androcentric tendencies that continue in the Catholic church today. Doing so will help us more honestly and thoughtfully examine, challenge, and transform patriarchal tendencies in education and the church that continue to prevent the flourishing of all.

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[1] Mary Jeremy Daigler, *Through the Windows: A History of the Work of Higher Education among Sisters of Mercy of the Americas* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2001), 1–11.

[2] See "Catholic College and Universities Founding Orders," Association of Catholic Colleges, https://www.accunet.org/About-Catholic-Higher-Ed-Founding-Orders.

[3] This paper is based on my dissertation research. See further Katherine A. Greiner, *There Is a Wideness to God's University: Exploring and Embodying the Deep Stories, Wisdom and Contributions of Women Religious in Catholic Higher Education*, PhD diss. (Boston College, 2017).

[4] Mary J. Oates, *Pursuing Truth: How Gender Shaped Catholic Education at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 3.

[5] Madeleva Wolff, C.S.C., *My First Seventy Years* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 114–118.

[6] Educational philosopher Jane Martin warns that, when we assume that educational subjects and content traditionally assigned to men are superior to those subjects and training women received, we risk losing valuable human knowledge and skills. See Jane Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 194–199.

[7] In her study of the College of Notre Dame in Maryland, Mary J. Oates recounts the tensions between Loyola College and the College of Notre Dame in the 1960s and 1970s, as Loyola College sought to merge the two institutions along with a third institution, Mount St. Agnes, in order to acquire needed real estate and financial resources. This complex narrative is just one example of how the move away from single-sex education threatened the existence of Catholic women's colleges with little regard for their commitment to women-centered education and the unique charisms of the founding religious congregations. See Oates, *Pursuing Truth*, 184–195.

[8] Leslie Miller-Bernal, "Introduction," in *Challenged by Coeducation: Women's Colleges since the 1960s*, ed. Leslie Miller-Bernal and Susan L. Paulson (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2007), 11.