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RADICAL FEMINIST NUNS: SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM, CATHOLICISM,
AND THE POWER OF (SISTER)HOOD

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Based on the readings of authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa, AnaLouise Keating, Leela Fernandes, and others, throughout the course of this semester, I have been able to develop my own definition of spiritual activism that I believe integrates the theories and concepts that these scholars have written about with my own experiences. Having done both intensive self-study and academic research, I have come to understand that spiritual activism is the act of transforming one's self through personal and communal reflection in order to work towards transforming the world and set it on a pathway towards equity and social justice. Based on this definition, and my own interest in the topic, I decided to conduct research on specific groups of Catholic Sisters, and investigate both how they act as spiritual activists, and how spiritual activism plays a role in their daily lives. My research explores the question: are these nuns' definitions of spiritual activism different from mine, and if so, how are they different?

Additionally, the term “radical feminist nuns”¹ was popularized by the Vatican in 2012 after concern grew among clergy officials that several nuns in the United States were practicing forms of radical feminism and embracing feminist ideals. An investigation by Vatican officials into the daily lives of US Sisters began shortly thereafter. This particular incident was how I first came to hear of nuns practicing social justice, but through research, I have found that these Catholic Sisters are not the only ones, nor were they the first to do so. With this realization came many more questions I was excited to explore such as: does the term “radical feminism” used in describing these nuns have the same meaning as “radical feminism” as used by gender and women's studies scholars?

¹ Barbato, Lauren. December 16, 2014. “Vatican ‘Nun Report’ Is Surprisingly Uplifting — But What About Those ‘Radical Feminist’ Sisters?” Bustle.com. Bustle.

As a woman who was raised practicing Catholicism, the existence of nuns, in general, has always interested me. The idea of a woman completely giving up certain comforts, material possessions, and then living in small communities (in the case of cloistered nuns), in order to be closer to a higher power seemed like a very powerful feminist statement. However, knowing the strictures of the Catholic church as a whole, the position became very anti-feminist in my head. This changed during my junior year of high school when I had to spend several days with a group of cloistered nuns as part of my confirmation process. It was then that I began to question the idea that Catholic nuns were inherently socially conservative or against feminist values. Their convent, Christ the Bridegroom in Northeastern Ohio, demonstrated qualities that I now know to be deeply important parts of feminist praxis. They practiced deep listening, radical openness,² and lived each day of their lives knowing and understanding how their actions would affect each other and those around them. These nuns, in turn, helped me to decide on my confirmation name, Joan of Arc. While they had such a huge impact on my life, at the time I couldn't help but think about how these nuns most likely didn't share my values in regards to social justice. However, after completing the research for this project, and learning what it means to be a Sister to many of these women, I'm not so sure that members of this convent didn't share many of my values, and if they didn't, I now know of several sisters who do.

The remainder of this paper is organized into three parts. I begin with a review and summary of the literature I used for my research. After this, I will continue with the body of the paper. Through the exploration of different groupings of Catholic nuns, past and present, I present my research and the findings that came with it. (This includes answering the question I

² hooks, bell. 1989. "Choosing The Margin as a Space of Radical Openness." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 15-23. www.jstor.org/stable/44111660.

previously stated on the nuns being regarded as radical feminists). The nuns I have decided to focus on include Hildegard Von Bingen, Sister Mary Antona Ebo and the Sisters of Selma, activist sisters from the Philippines during the 1970s, groups of environmentally conscious nuns that scholar Sarah McFarland Taylor calls “The Green Sisters”, and finally, the nuns at the center of the 2015 documentary, *Radical Grace*. Throughout my investigation, I also explain how each of these nuns or groups of nuns participates(ed) in spiritual activism in their daily lives. Finally, I will end with a conclusion, in which I will piece together the nuns’ definition(s) of spiritual activism, and how it/they compare or contrast with my own.

To introduce this topic, it is important to note that the amount of literature on nuns in social justice is vast. My research includes a wide range of sources, such as scholarly articles and dissertations, documentaries, websites, and zines. My analysis on this topic began with researching the Vatican’s 2016 investigation and censure of American Catholic nuns. I read a 2014 Bustle magazine article which gave a brief description of the timeline of the investigation, how it affected the everyday lives of the sisters, and after all was said and done, what the sisters needed from the Vatican to move forward. The most helpful source in understanding this particular moment in history was the documentary *Radical Grace* directed by Rebecca Parrish. This documentary follows the lives of three nuns, Sr. Simone Campbell, Sr. Chris Schenck, and Sr. Jean Hughes as they pursue social justice within the confines of the Catholic church and under the oppressive rule of the Vatican. The documentary ends with a focus on the organization NETWORK and its sub-committee “Nuns on the Bus” which were both founded by Sister Simone Campbell. The NETWORK website was also a valuable resource for this paper and continues to provide the public with information on how to organize a grassroots movement. My

research revealed several other groups of nuns in addition to those featured on the “Nuns on the Bus” who are currently participating in acts of social justice. One scholarly article entitled, “Nourishing the Earthbody” from a larger work by Sarah McFarland Taylor exposed me to the work of the Green Sisters, a group of American nuns who center their faith and activism around environmentalism and sustainable living. In addition to learning about modern nuns who are participating in forms of feminist praxis, I found several sources which explain feminist theory in relation to theology, and some in relation to Catholic theology specifically. These sources have been useful to my analysis and include: “(Un)Natural Bridges, (Un)Safe Spaces” by Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, “Renegotiating Aquinas” by Lisa Sowle Cahill, and “Ministry and Community for a People Liberated from Sexism” from *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*” by Rosemary Radford Ruether.

Another facet of my research focused on the vast history of nuns who have participated in acts of social justice and nuns who have held feminist ideals. These sources include excerpts from *The Scivias* written by Hildegard von Bingen, “Review. Sisters of Selma: Bearing Witness for Change” by Bentley R. Anderson, “Making Feminism Holy” by Mary J. Henold, “Redefining Sisterhood: The New Nuns, Laywomen, and Catholic Feminist Activism, 1953-1992” by Alexandra Michaelides (dissertation), “Radical Nuns: A Feminist Fanzine and Coloring Booklet” by Cait Olds, “The Religious Roots of Women's Oppression: Feminist Nuns and the Filipino Woman” by Mina Roces, and “A Well-Behaved Woman Who Made History: Sister Mary Antona's Journey to Selma” by Cornelia F. Sexauer. The expansive theological history of Catholic nuns is critical to understanding the intersectionality³ that shapes Sisterhood. As I will

³ Term coined by race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. “Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that

demonstrate in what follows, the differences in the identities and backgrounds of nuns (such as the political history of their country of origin) is often what leads them into acts of social justice and gives them a passion for both social reform and the reformation of the Catholic institution.

A general definition of the concept of radical feminism based on gender and women's studies scholarship is; "Radical Feminist theory analyzes the structures of power which oppress the female sex. Its central tenet is that women as a biological class are globally oppressed by men as a biological class. We believe that male power is constructed and maintained through institutional and cultural practices that aim to bolster male superiority through the reinforcement of female inferiority. One such manifestation of the patriarchy is gender, which we believe to be a socially constructed hierarchy that functions to repress female autonomy and has no basis in biology. Radical Feminists also critique all religions and their institutions, and other practices that promote violence against women such as prostitution, pornography, and FGM. The subjugation of women is a social process that has no basis in biology or any other pretext, and thus can and should be challenged and dismantled."⁴ In other words, radical feminists focus on dismantling social institutions that uphold systems of domination such as patriarchy and white supremacy, rather than striving to reform them. Using this definition, I will question whether or not some or all of the nuns that I discuss fall under this label. But first, I will decide whether or not their work qualifies as spiritual activism as defined in our class readings.

there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things." "Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later." June 8, 2017. Columbia Law School.

⁴ "What Is Radical Feminism?" RadFem Collective. Accessed February 7, 2020. <http://www.radfemcollective.org/what-is-radical-feminism>.

To better demonstrate nuns acting as social and spiritual activists throughout time, I will present each nun or group of nuns that I have studied in historical order. In regards to the history of Catholic sisters, women entering nunhood on the pretense of social transformation is far from a new concept. In theory, nuns are groups of women who have left their traditional societal roles to pursue their devotion to Jesus Christ. For many centuries, nun-hood was one of the only ways that women could receive any kind of education based on scholasticism. A perfect example of this concept is Hildegard von Bingen, who during her time as an Abbess at the Monastery of Saint Disibodenberg around the year 1160, expressed and fought for several ideas that were considered liberal and even radical in the eyes of the Benedictine church, such as the allowance of divorce, the allowance of holy burials for those who were excommunicated, and the equality of men and women within marriage and the Benedictine institution. While her views can be qualified as socially liberal, her actions also fall into my definition of spiritual activism. One act in particular that showed her devotion to social justice early on was her approach to writing the *Scivias*, a contemplative text that outlined the hierarchal problems she had with the Benedictine church. For example, on the common practice of child marriage, Hildegard writes, “A man should be adult to marry and take only a wife of marriageable age”⁵. While her views would not be considered radical or revolutionary today, they were for the time. In addition, her approach to listening to the issues women faced in regards to oppression from the church and then in turn writing an academic text to challenge this oppression is, in my opinion, an example of a developing stage of spiritual activism.

⁵ Hildegard, Columba Hart, and Jane Bishop. *Scivias*. New York: Paulist Press. 1990.

An extremely important moment in history that saw several convents and groups of nuns participating in acts of social justice was after the announcement of Vatican II in 1962. This moment in Catholic history had its problems in regards to gender equality, but did offer a slight restructuring of Catholic theology. Vatican II was a series of sixteen documents that set out to redefine the nature of the Catholic church, specifically as the church of the poor.⁶ Vatican II had huge implications for Catholic sisters and their practice of social justice, however, there were sisters making large strides in Catholic social reform in the 50s and early 60s before the commencement of Vatican II. In the 1950s, after their formal education, many sisters from around the globe participated in the Sister Formation Movement, a program that provided them with an advanced education, and also provided them with tools to network, and organize. Several scholars argue that the Sister Formation Movement had a larger impact on nuns and their social work than the Second Vatican Council did, and even inspired some to begin the fight towards women's ordination into the priesthood.⁷ While Vatican II saw the beginning of nuns forming more interpersonal relationships with those outside of the church, and therefore fostering a larger collective participation in social justice, there were nuns doing this work long before it became more commonplace.

This leads my discussion to the role that many nuns played in the US civil rights movement. One Catholic sister who made enormous strides in regard to religious women's participation in civil rights was Sister Mary Antona Ebo. As one of the first black nursing sisters,

⁶ Roces, Mina. "The Religious Roots of Women's Oppression: Feminist Nuns and the Filipino Woman" In *Women's Movements and the Filipina": 1986-2008*, 35–51. University of Hawai'i Press. 2012.

⁷ Michaelides, Alexandra. "Redefining Sisterhood: The New Nuns, Laywomen, and Catholic Feminist Activism, 1953-1992" Dissertation, ProQuest LLC. 2012.

Antona devoted her life to caring for other human beings and serving her community.⁸ While Sister Mary's approach to change within the Catholic church was largely based upon reformative strategies, as the nuns were still living a semi-cloistered lifestyle, the strides made by her and other nuns in the fight for civil rights and specifically equal voting rights were vital. The height of this work came when Sister Mary Antona Ebo and several other religious leaders, including many nuns, attended the Selma March in 1965. These nuns are often referred to as the "Sisters of Selma", and they made headlines and magazine covers all over the country. Their role as spiritual activists is clear to see, as their methods of peaceful protest and prayer to achieve social justice and racial equality under the law were demonstrated throughout the movement and inspired the actions of other Catholic activists.

One of the most critical additions that came out of Vatican II was that nuns now had permission to, and were required to leave their convents and go overseas as part of their training. It was also encouraged by Cardinals and other clergy, at this time, that religious leaders of Catholic parishes spend some time living amongst the poor. During the 1970s when Vatican II was just coming into effect, a specific group of Filipina nuns took advantage of these opportunities. During their pilgrimages overseas, the already vastly educated nuns received (in addition to their many degrees) a feminist education.⁹ Their return home saw them living amongst the impoverished population of the Philippines, and also happened to coincide with the introduction of Filipino martial law¹⁰, a time in which, as Mina Roces states in one chapter of her

⁸ Sexauer, Cornelia F. "A Well-Behaved Woman Who Made History: Sister Mary Antona's Journey to Selma." *American Catholic Studies* 115, no. 4: 37-57. 2004.

⁹ Roces, Mina. "The Religious Roots of Women's Oppression: Feminist Nuns and the Filipino Woman." In *Women's Movements and the Filipina": 1986-2008*, 35-51. University of Hawai'i Press. 2012.

¹⁰ Britannica.com, "In September 1972 Marcos declared martial law, claiming that it was the last defense against the rising disorder caused by increasingly violent student demonstrations, the alleged threats of

book, *Women's Movements and "the Filipina"*, the Filipino wealth gap became even more pronounced. This combination of events led to the nuns' politicization, and led to their rallying for women, the poor, and victims of martial law. The nuns organized several grassroots movements, and even worked together as a community to examine the victimization of women that is often utilized and enforced by the Catholic church. In other words, the nuns recognized how the Catholic church promoted women's suffering, and the suffering of those who had been affected by colonization, as a good thing, and necessary for their entrance to Heaven. This was an embedded aspect of Catholic liturgy that the nuns sought to change. These several Filipina nuns were one of the first large groups of women religious participating in acts of social justice that I believe most aligns with my definition of spiritual activism. Furthermore, in *Transforming Feminist Practice*, author Leela Fernandez states, "At another level, movements for social justice that rest on strategies of retribution that are violent either in physical, material or spiritual terms also limit the possibilities of a deeper lasting form of transformation because they ultimately mirror the kinds of structures of oppression they seek to overturn"¹¹. The Filipina nuns' practice of sitting with others and their practice of deep listening mirror Fernandez' preferred social justice method of peaceful activism.

To reflect on and review the nuns I have described, I would like to compare their work to the scholarship by the authors we read in class. In summary, while authors AnaLouise Keating, Gloria Anzaldúa, Leela Fernandez, and Claudia Hortwitz all have different points of view on spiritual activism, they all seem to be in agreement that spiritual activism requires a long,

communist insurgency by the new Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), and the Muslim separatist movement of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)."

¹¹ Fernandez, L. *Transforming feminist practice: non-violence, social justice, and the possibilities of a spiritualized feminism*. Aunt Lute Books. 2003.

never-ending process that includes taking time for self-reflection which will hopefully lead to self-transformation. They also agree upon the importance of using that never-ending self-transformation to gain a better understanding of interconnectedness as a concept that applies to all living things and the Earth, and to a global transformation. Each of the nuns I have mentioned thus far has demonstrated a certain understanding of one or more of these elements, but the Catholic sisters from the Philippines seemed to be practicing spiritual activism before the term was even articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* in 1987. By leaving their convents, the nuns were able to take time for self-reflection. This led the sisters to self-transformation through their education, devotion to God, and pilgrimages to other countries. The sisters returned from their pilgrimages with the full intention of inspiring social change through their newfound understanding of those outside of religious life. They also returned with a better sense of the ongoing struggles of impoverished women.

Looking to the present, the term “spiritual activist” would be a near-perfect descriptor for several nuns who practice social justice today, as in within the last twenty years. Just as we read in the chapters “Practice”, “Ritual”, and “Healing” in Horwitz’s book, *The Spiritual Activist*, spiritual ritual plays an important role in spiritual activism. The Green Sisters are a group of environmentally conscious Catholic nuns who value religious rituals and practices such as fasting in order to preserve the environment and communal lands. The sisters are committed to performing these rituals and daily spiritual practices to strengthen their connection with the Earth. Their goal, in their words, is to heal the planet. The inspiration behind these practices comes from the idea that our bodies and the Earth are one, and that by honoring the Earth, we are in turn honoring both ourselves and God. This concept, even without the Catholic theological

intent behind their practices, is deeply spiritual. The sisters focus on reinventing Catholic spiritual practices through eco-spiritual and sustainable food choices in order to fight for environmental justice and to end eco-racism.¹² When speaking about food as a spiritual necessity, Green Sister Miriam MacGillis states, “It has become clear to me that the concept of food itself is key to the transformation of our ecological crisis. Unless our human species can open itself to the contemplation of food as a holy mystery through which we eat ourselves into existence, then the meaning of existence will continue to elude us. Our present cultural experience of food has degenerated into food as fuel, for supplying the energy of our insatiable search for what will fill the hungers of our soul. When we understand that food is not a metaphor for spiritual nourishment, but is itself spiritual, then we eat food with a spiritual attitude and taste and are nourished by the Divine directly”¹³. In addition to contemplative food choices as a spiritual practice, fasting as a spiritual practice is specifically mentioned by author Claudia Horwitz. With this, the Green Sisters alter their view of the practice of fasting in a way that more closely aligns with Horwitz’s. Fasting, for the sisters, should not be about suffering, as most catholic teachings promote, but instead, if done safely, should be a holistic cleanse of the body.

The last group of Catholic nuns that I have decided to study as spiritual activists are also the nuns that inspired my research. These are the nuns at the center of the 2015 documentary *Radical Grace*, directed by Rebecca Parrish. Their names are; Sister Simone Campbell, Sister Chris Schenck, and Sister Jean Hughes. These women were three of the sisters who were targeted beginning in 2012 after the Vatican launched an investigation into US sisters. This, as

¹² Taylor, Sarah McFarland. “Nourishing the Earthbody.” In *Green Sisters: a Spiritual Ecology*, 166–82. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2009.

¹³ Taylor, Sarah McFarland. “Nourishing the Earthbody.” In *Green Sisters: a Spiritual Ecology*, 166–82. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2009.

previously stated, began after fear was rising of these women practicing “radical feminist ideals” that were in opposition to the Catholic church. Before I discuss whether or not these nuns might be considered radical feminists, however, I will describe the ways these sisters have practiced and continue to practice spiritual activism. As I have previously stated, and also based on what I have read throughout this entire semester, the authors of our readings have constantly reinforced the idea that interconnectedness is what is at the heart of spirituality, and in turn spiritual activism. Interconnectedness is also at the heart of each of these women’s commitment to social activism. In the documentary, Sr. Simone Campbell states, “The role of Catholic teaching is to counter [that] individualism with a keen knowledge of solidarity.” She also states, “We are only fully human when we are connected to one another.”¹⁴ With these two statements, each of the Sisters presented in this film voiced their dissatisfaction with the individualistic approach that the Catholic church has been leaning towards especially within the past few decades, an approach that also mirrors United States capitalism. This dissatisfaction was felt by the nuns when US Bishops announced their disapproval of the Affordable Care Act. To counter this, the US Sisters voiced their approval of it. The reason behind the sister’s approval of the ACA speaks volumes about their commitment to spiritual activism. In their interpretation of the Bible and of Catholic theology, Catholicism is about helping the downtrodden, holding yourself accountable, and caring for others. These are the reasons why the nuns pledged their support for the ACA, as they knew it was legislation that would help millions of people under the poverty line receive access to quality healthcare. For them, it was the Catholic thing to do. After outrage from the Vatican, a newfound passion for spirituality and social justice was felt throughout all of the sisters. In turn,

¹⁴ Parrish, Rebecca. *Radical Grace*. Interchange Productions. 2015.

Sr. Simone Campbell founded NETWORK, an organization made up of nuns and nun advocates committed to pursuing social justice. Sr. Simone and co. have tackled and continue to tackle issues such as voting rights, affordable housing, immigrant rights, and healthcare. On issues that are particularly controversial to the Catholic church such as reproductive rights, the nuns have not outwardly come out supporting access to birth control and safe abortions, but they also have not opposed them either. The nuns in the documentary have stated they are “pro-life”, not “pro-birth.” NETWORK also includes the organization “Nuns on the Bus”, a bus tour filled with Catholic sisters that travel the country around election time to inform people of the issues. By doing this, they are in turn making themselves and their information accessible to as many people as they can.¹⁵

In 2014 the Vatican announced the result of the investigation and probe of Catholic sisters, and the Vatican admitted that they were wrong about US sisters acting against the Catholic church. In 2015, the Vatican removed the censure placed against the nuns as well. Through the entirety of the investigation, what the nuns had left to rely on was their community. This community changes for the nuns throughout the course of the film, after the nuns realize that their community may not be the entirety of the Catholic church, but instead each other, and others who hold their values. The sense of community felt between these women, and the community they were offering to others was another aspect of their nun-hood I found particularly spiritual. In her conversation with author George Brosi, bell hooks explains that one will not be able to overcome oppressive institutions without interconnectedness and love. This requires outreach to other groups of people who do not share your values and beliefs, and in turn creating

¹⁵ Network Advocates. NETWORK Lobby. <https://networklobby.org/>. 2019.

the possibility of forming an interpersonal connection with those people.¹⁶ While these nuns demonstrate beloved community through their outreach towards others, they also represent what Claudia Horwitz describes as a spiritual relationship. In other words, the nuns feel at home with one another, which is an aspect that energizes them to follow through in their spiritual and social activism.¹⁷ “Being together, what a radical thought” is the last line in the film, spoken by Sr. Simone. This is a statement that I believe both encapsulates spiritual activism and additionally will lead me into my discussion of whether or not the acts of all the nuns I have discussed are radically feminist.

When deciding whether or not any of the nuns I have mentioned throughout this paper could be considered radical feminists, I look towards Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory on *Nepantla*. Anzaldúa and Keating describe *Nepantla* as a sort of unknown, “in-between” space where one is always in conflict with oneself. This liminal zone, as the authors put it, is one that can often make you feel displaced, or uncomfortable.¹⁸ Over the course of the semester, I have thought about this concept in regards to the way the nuns balance being feminists within the Catholic church. This internal conflict, in combination with their passion for social justice, must mean the nuns would be described as reformative feminists, rather than radical feminists. For one, they are still working within the confines of an institution, and radical feminists by definition are those who work to completely dismantle social institutions. So, could any of the nuns I have written about throughout this paper be considered radical feminists? By definition, no. However, I do

¹⁶ Brosi, George, and Bell Hooks. "The Beloved Community: A Conversation between bell hooks and George Brosi" *Appalachian Heritage* 40, no. 4 (2012): 76-86. doi:10.1353/aph.2012.0109. 2012.

¹⁷ Horwitz, Claudia. *The Spiritual Activist: Practices to Transform Your Life, Your Work, and Your World*, 73–95. New York: Penguin Compass. 2002.

¹⁸ Anzaldúa Gloria, and AnaLouise Keating. “(Un)Natural Bridges, (Un)Safe Spaces” In *This Bridge We Call Home Radical Visions for Transformation*, 1–5. Florence: Taylor and Francis. 2013.

think that each of the nuns discussed here has exerted radical beliefs while working within the confines of a social institution, or specifically a religious institution, as each of them has expressed the desire to radically alter the religious institution they are a part of. In addition to this, it is hard to judge groups of spiritual leaders as radical feminists or not, as gender and women's studies scholars have still not fully accepted the idea of spirituality having a place within feminist theory and praxis. If aspects of Catholicism, an organized religion, are what make up these women's spirituality, and religion is seen as a social institution, then virtually no spiritual leader or religious leader could be viewed as a radical feminist. At the same time, it is also important to recognize the damage and hurt those religious institutions like the Catholic church have brought to many people's lives, and recognize that even transforming the institution will not erase its past history. Regardless of whether these nuns are by definition radical feminists, they all have exemplified ideas and actions that I consider to be radically feminist. Scholars Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary J. Henold, and Lisa Sowle Cahill all argue that a feminist Catholicism is possible. Cahill suggests the theological way around this is by renegotiating Italian-Dominican philosopher Thomas Aquinas and his views on gender equality within Catholicism. Aquinas's philosophies have had a significant impact on Catholic theology especially during the time of Vatican II, and several feminist Catholic authors have reinterpreted his words in order to push towards an equitable Catholicism. Specifically, they hope to use his moral realism and then re-evaluate his thoughts on gender equality.¹⁹ Henold states the importance of remembering the women who fought for gender equality within the Catholic church during the second Vatican council, and also argues that religion as a whole has an

¹⁹ Cahill, Lisa Sowle. "Renegotiating Aquinas." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 43, no. 2: 193–217. 2015.

important place within feminist praxis. Ruether and Henold argue we must continue the push towards women's ordination for a feminist theology to become achievable.^{20 21} This will help to close the gap between the existing and prominent hierarchies and their power over Catholic parishioners. On hierarchies within the Catholic church and specifically regarding nuns, Sr. Jean Hughes states, "I did not join the church in order to feel more powerful than others, but I feel a connection to God in the way that works best for me."²² In theory, a feminist Catholicism could be possible, but it will require a restructuring of the institution as a whole.

In conclusion, it is through my research that I have come to decide that the Catholic sisters I have written about are spiritual activists, and for the most part, share my same definition of spiritual activism. To restate my definition, I define spiritual activism as the act of transforming one's self through personal and communal reflection in order to transform the world, and set it on a pathway towards social justice and equity. Each of their work has defined what it means to be a Catholic sister fighting for social justice and has become critical in the fight for transformative social change. Their work also mirrors the qualities of spiritual activists that Leela Fernandes describes in her book, *Transforming Feminist Practice*. Fernandes states, "What is needed here is the development of a feminist approach to leadership which is based more centrally on qualities such as humility and tolerance; where visibility is a tactic rather than an end; where leadership is understood more appropriately as a form of labor and service rather than in terms of achievement"²³. The nuns work as spiritual leaders within the Catholic church

²⁰ Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "Ministry and Community for a People Liberated from Sexism." In *Sexism and God-Talk: towards a Feminist Theology*, 193–213. London: SCM. 1983.

²¹ J. Henold, Mary. "Making Feminism Holy" In *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement*. 1st ed. 2012.

²² Parrish, Rebecca. *Radical Grace*. Interchange Productions. 2015.

²³ Fernandes, L. *Transforming feminist practice: non-violence, social justice, and the possibilities of a spiritualized feminism*. Aunt Lute Books. 2003.

and thus add the radical love and empathy that is often missing from the Vatican. Through these sister's stories, I have read about a moment of self-reflection regarding their place within the social institution of the Catholic church, realizing that they had the power to change the Catholic church and better the lives of others, and then acted on it. The only difference between our spiritual activism(s) is while they have a definite source that serves as inspiration for their striving for social justice, that source being Jesus Christ, I'm still trying to find my own.

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