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## Seeing the Light, Hearing the Call: Women Religious as Spectators and Subjects of Popular Nun Films

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## Seeing the Light, Hearing the Call: Women Religious as Spectators and Subjects of Popular Nun Films

### Abstract

Though popular films like *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945), *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957), *The Nun's Story* (1959), and *The Sound of Music* (1965) have routinely been criticized for circulating polarized stereotypes about nuns, convent memoirs indicate that some women felt the stirrings of a religious vocation from watching these movies. This article arose out of interest in whether other women heard God's call through nun films, and is based on a survey of 86 sisters from 28 different communities who had entered the convent between 1947 and 2007, and were prepared to discuss what they saw in these popular films, how they responded to their stereotypes, and what religious meaning they found there.

### Keywords

popular-nun-films women-religious-spectators nun-stereotypes spiritual-gaze vocational-meaning

### Author Notes

Maureen Sabine is an Honorary Professor in the School of Humanities at the University of Hong Kong, and has worked in the Departments of English, Comparative Literature, and History. She is an interdisciplinary scholar with research interests in literary, religious, feminist, psychoanalytic, film, and cultural studies; and has written books on the erotic and religious poetry of the 17th century metaphysical poets John Donne and Richard Crashaw; the life writing of Maxine Hong Kingston on her diasporic Chinese family; and most recently, *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film*. This current article explores a line of inquiry that she did not have the opportunity to pursue in this book.

“Remove the darkness that surrounds us, Oh Lord, and give us your light.”

What might this evening prayer mean for young women who wondered if God was calling them to religious life, who watched the screen light up in a darkened cinema or TV room, and who were drawn to popular films that illuminated the hidden world and work of nuns?

The nun<sup>1</sup> began her rise to prominence on the Hollywood screen in *The Song of Bernadette* (1943) and *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945) when the Second World War breached the barriers that the enclosed convent erected against the outside world, and when soldiers came to appreciate the prayers, succor, and valor of sisters who served on the warfront.<sup>2</sup> The heroism of sisters in wartime was a recurrent theme in the popular postwar films *Come to the Stable* (1949), *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957), *Sea Wife* (1957), and *The Nun's Story* (1959), and indeed reappeared in *The Sound of Music* (1965) before fading out in *The Trouble with Angels* (1966). Although these films reflect a renewed respect for the active ministry of sisters in the field of human conflict, they have regularly been criticized for their mass circulation of visual images that turned habited nuns into popular cultural icons, kitsch figures, and black-and-white stereotypes stripped of their vivid and dramatic history.<sup>3</sup>

Recently I studied how women religious are portrayed on the postwar screen; and my close readings invited viewers to revisit a range of postwar films that have

been critically plundered for their popular stereotypes, and to consider whether they might contain a more serious and complex visual message.<sup>4</sup> In the course of my research, I came across convent memoirs indicating that some women religious felt the stirrings of a vocation from watching popular films like *The Bells of St. Mary's*, *The Nun's Story*, and *The Sound of Music*, even though they have been routinely dismissed as diminishing nuns or misrepresenting their religious life.<sup>5</sup> This article evolved out of my interest in whether there were other women who heard God's call through nun movies; when and why they watched these films; how they responded to the dominant stereotypes; and what specific films and scenes might have held special religious meaning for them.

## Survey

Sister Rose Pacatte, F.S.P., Director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles, further piqued my interest in this topic when she affirmed that *The Trouble with Angels* “influenced my decision to enter the convent very much.”<sup>6</sup> At her suggestion I conducted a survey of women religious, and received thoughtful responses to my questions from 86 sisters who had entered the convent between 1947 and 2007, and ranged in age from 28 to 89, with nearly two-thirds in their fifties, sixties, or seventies. The Daughters of St. Paul constituted the most representative group; but 27 other communities also took part. The majority of

respondents were Americans, largely from European immigrant backgrounds, but also included Native, African, Asian, and Latina Americans, with a minority of British, Irish, French-Canadian, German, Singaporean, Filipino, and Mexican nationals. Collectively they embody the nun Cardinal Leon Joseph Suenens summoned to go forth from the closed convent into the world in the wide spectrum of their apostolic activities, the international reach of their communities, and their tours of service across the globe.

## **Nuns and the Cinema**

Almost all respondents began religious life in the 1950s or later,<sup>7</sup> when Catholic suspicion of film's moral dangers and the traditional convent's restriction of access to the outside world through the mass media steadily eased. The 1950s were the tail end of the great American movie-going era when up to one-hundred million people went weekly to the cinema.<sup>8</sup> These numbers would plummet over the course of the decade with the debut of early television and subsequent development of color TV, but make film releases of the past accessible to a large home audience. By the end of the fifties even convents were purchasing televisions for their religious community.<sup>9</sup> Sister respondents were no different from other children and adolescents of the modern postwar era in that their worldview and sense of personal and social identity were shaped, in part, by the American culture

of movie-going and TV-watching in which they grew up.<sup>10</sup> The survey showed that sisters had seen, enjoyed, and sometimes been edified by approximately 18 popular nun films or TV series stretching back over 70 years from *The Song of Bernadette* in 1943 to *Call the Midwife* in 2012. Indeed these nun films had a cross-generational appeal irrespective of the decade in which sisters entered the convent, with only one respondent, who became a religious in 2005 at 26, calling them “‘old’ films outside of my generation,” and wondering “if other ‘young’ sisters like myself may not have been influenced much by films about sisters.”

### **Popular Cultural Stereotypes of Nuns**

Only three respondents had nothing good to say about such films, with one who entered the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in 1947 remarking that she has frequently been “repulsed” by Hollywood’s “childish, ... stupid and cute” representation of nuns when American sisters are “the best educated women IN THE WORLD.”<sup>11</sup> Her indignation has been echoed by the sisters and religious experts who contributed to Bren Ortega Murphy and Michael T. Whalen’s documentary, *A Question of Habit* (2011), which explores the images of nuns that have been peddled in popular culture. Even while recognizing that the popular cultural fascination with nuns stems from the fact they remain powerful symbols of total consecration to God, sisters who spoke at a recent international symposium on

*The Nun in the World* continued to despair at the ‘funhouse mirror’ images that distort the history, mission, and lived experience of women religious.<sup>12</sup>

## **Women Spectators**

In her monumental study of women’s films from the 1930s through to the 1950s, Jeanine Basinger contests the assumption that women spectators left their brain at the entrance to the cinema and uncritically bought the female stereotypes these films projected. Instead she argued that they recognized them as shorthand for conventional definitions of appropriate and transgressive gender behavior. They identified with the forceful female stars who dominated Hollywood by exploiting, complicating, and subverting these stereotypes, and who held on for dear life to their position at the center of the film action. They engaged in a willing but selective suspension of disbelief as they saw how these stereotypes were embedded in stories that gave vent to their secret desires and longings; and so entered into what Basinger memorably calls “the joyful conspiracy of moviegoing.”<sup>13</sup>

In the postwar period nun films emerged as an offshoot of women’s films, and circulated stereotypes that reflected not only the patriarchal, ecclesial, monastic, and canonical restrictions imposed on sisters throughout their religious history, but gender prejudices all too familiar to a secular female audience – of bossy, difficult, neurotic, sweet, simple, or silly women.<sup>14</sup> However women

religious characters laid special claim to the female nobility and sacrificial courage personified by great woman stars like Ingrid Bergman and Deborah Kerr. Indeed these two charismatic actresses played a leading role in promoting nun films with their iconic performances in *The Bells of St. Mary's*, *Black Narcissus* (1947), and *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*.<sup>15</sup>

By the time nun films reached the height of their screen popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, American sisters had established themselves as major providers and exemplars of higher education for women.<sup>16</sup> The women religious in this survey are no exception in possessing an impressive roster of educational and professional credentials; and they certainly did not abandon their powers of critical intelligence when they took their seat inside the cinema or in front of the TV. However the stereotypes they saw on screen did not necessarily prevent them from being entertained or even enlightened by nun films. Those working in mass media communications, like the Daughters of St. Paul, were particularly receptive to the potential religious value of popular films. Indeed as one member of their congregation remarked: “I loved to watch movies about sisters. This gave me some ... insight into the life of sisters, even if from the point (of view) of Hollywood.”<sup>17</sup> All sister respondents demonstrate a commitment to lifelong learning and further training for new ministries; and this commitment reflects the core desire at the heart of both the woman’s film and the religious film – a longing to do something more in life, something beyond what we already know.<sup>18</sup>



## Women Religious Spectators

A significant number of sister respondents first saw nun films in childhood or adolescence. Over 50 entered the convent as teenagers, usually after high school at 17 or 18. However some started their religious formation prior to graduation between 14 and 16. The movie and TV era in which these postwar entrants were raised made them familiar with a non-Catholic world. Not only did they bring this secular knowledge to the convent, but they brought their Catholic sensibility to the cinema and TV screen.<sup>19</sup> Like the vocation books which began to appear in the 1950s, nun films had strong appeal for teenage aspirants at a time when they were impressionable, emotionally receptive, and undergoing the process of spiritual discernment. Sister Rose Pacatte, F.S.P saw *The Trouble with Angels* and *The Song of Bernadette* as a fifteen-year old and remains fond of these films because they “spoke to me when my heart was open and then found a home there.” The respondents who took nun films to heart when they were growing up did understandably identify with protagonists who were close to them in age like Bernadette Soubirous in *Song* and Mary Clancy in *Trouble*. Bernadette is depicted as a childlike character and Mary is a teenager; but this did not mean that young aspirants were endorsing the stereotype of the ‘good sister’ who was a perpetual little girl. Rather, like earlier female viewers of women’s films, they saw characters

who were something more –someone “they wish they were or believe they could be or actually are inside.”<sup>20</sup> These were women role models who made a different kind of love their meaning, not in marriage or motherhood, but in religious life. Sister respondents suggest another way of looking at nun movies, not only with a female but a spiritual gaze,<sup>21</sup> receptive to film as a medium for soulful reflection and to moments of enlightenment and revelation they would ponder in their heart.

### **The Religious Call in Popular Film**

John Lyden has argued that “traditional religions might benefit from learning to listen to the religions of popular culture just as they are learning to listen to one another.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise viewers might learn from listening to what women religious spectators say about nun films and see by making film-watching a spiritual exercise. Again and again, sister respondents spoke of how these movies drew, “fascinated,” and “enthralled” them, touched their heart, or spoke to their deep self at a time when they were struggling to discern whether they had a vocation. A sister who entered the convent at 19 in 1991 recounts seeing *Agnes of God* (1985) around 1988 when she was “trying to ‘decide’ what kind of a person I wanted to become” but knew that she “wanted meaning ... wanted God” in her life. The film’s lurid depiction of the cloister repelled another respondent who watched *Agnes of God* as a professed nun. However the respondent who saw the film at 16 was not affected by its

mysterious *hocus pocus* but by a scene most high school teenagers could understand – in which Anne Bancroft’s Mother Miriam steals a smoke outside with Jane Fonda’s Dr. Martha Livingston. It sparked her interest in nuns because it made her see them as down-to-earth human beings. A Daughter of St. Paul recalls how *The Song of Bernadette* “touched” her as a teenager when she was studying to become a Catholic, and how it inspired not only “a real interest in the life of sisters,” but a lifelong veneration for Our Lady of Lourdes and devotion to St. Bernadette. Another Daughter of St. Paul who saw *Song* when she “was preparing for the Sacrament of Confirmation,” was so “profoundly” moved by the film that she added Bernadette to her baptismal name Mary when she professed her vows. Sister Margaret Kerry, who became a *Daughter of St. Paul* at 16 in 1974, remembers seeing *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1972) after a shopping excursion with a girlfriend, and being struck by the contrast between the consumer culture drawing young women to the mall and the film’s projection of the “simplicity and joy” found through religious renunciation and a life of holy poverty.

### **Nun Films as Vocational Agents**

Not all responded so immediately to these films. For some they had a slow, gentle influence over time. A Sister of Nazareth who became a postulant in 2005 at age 40 mused that *The Bells of St. Mary’s* and *The Sound of Music* “probably

planted the (religious) seed in mind since I was a child and impressionable. But (it) took me a long time to get there and make the commitment.” A School Sister of Notre Dame remembers being “drawn” as a child to *The Sound of Music* and *The Trouble with Angels* because they portrayed women religious positively, and she “already had an attraction to religious life.” She first saw *The Sound of Music* when she was six or seven, and watched it again annually with her family. She began to realize around 10 that “I loved it in a way my sister did not!” In the private journal that she kept in junior high, she began to reflect on the religious longings that drew her to these nun movies and eventually led her to the convent at 26. When she watched *Trouble* again a few years ago, she realized that its “homey” representation of community life, and the humanity and “deep goodness” of the sisters in both films had made a lasting impression and “helped to validate” a religious vocation. A Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet who entered the convent at 17 now realizes that films like *The Bells of St. Mary’s*, *The Nun’s Story*, and *The Sound of Music* appealed to young women because they were “so idealistic.” Yet she freely admits that even as a mature nun, “they still touch me with the simplicity and the core values that are part of the call to religious life.” As she and other respondents acknowledge here, and as I will show in more detail when I focus in the second half of this article on specific movies, sister respondents remained partial to nun films that elucidated essential qualities of religious life for them.

## **Nun Films as a Connection to Women Religious and their Life**

Cinematic theologian Gerard Loughlin thinks that the movies we watched when we were young can stay with us because we saw them at our most impressionable; and they retain the power to re-awaken that impressionability.<sup>23</sup> It is certainly true that nun films continue to evoke in sister respondents the spiritual feelings, dreams, and ideals of their youth. While some sisters first saw and responded to nun films as sensitive and idealistic teenagers, others, as we have seen, were captivated as impressionable children. Traditionally young women who seriously contemplated a religious vocation were most likely to have attended a Catholic school where they were taught by sisters; and this did not change until women religious began to move out of parochial school teaching and into other apostolates after Vatican II in the mid-sixties.<sup>24</sup> Revered sister teachers in Catholic elementary and high school could inspire an interest in films that extolled their religious life. A Sister of St. Louis who entered the convent at 21 in 1981 knew that she wanted to become a nun at five and emulate the sister who taught her in kindergarten. “I would watch any movie about nuns after being in her class.” Sister Clare Stephen, F.S.P., who took her first vows in 1974, sat through two showings of *The Trouble with Angels* as a teenager, and remains a great fan of the film because she saw a “totally believable” likeness between the nun characters who run St. Francis Academy and the sisters who taught her. However as Sister of St. Joseph

of Orange, Mary Elizabeth Nelson, notes, schoolgirls were also curious about “what they did after school,” and as another respondent remarked, *Trouble* gave “a peek into religious life.” Lead actress, Rosalind Russell, who attended Catholic high school herself, interpreted the Mother Superior in *Trouble* as an astute authority figure who is tolerant of her teenage boarders’ interest in the hidden life and body of women religious, and recognizes that her most inquisitive and meddlesome student, Mary Clancy (Hayley Mills), is secretly drawn to the cloister and prayer life of the community.

As regular, natural, and close contact with sisters in parochial school or parish neighborhoods declined, media stories increasingly became the channel through which potential aspirants were introduced to their religious life.<sup>25</sup> Therefore it is understandable that sister respondents who were not raised Catholic, “did not know any nuns growing up,” or entered the convent in the last four decades, should be more likely to learn about them first through film, and feel that they were given there “a vision of religious life, its meaning and purpose (they) could not have gotten any other way.” One sister was attracted to the happy and buoyant picture of community life, the inclusive vision of the Church as the exultant people of God, and the ministry through popular music she beheld in *Sister Act* (1992). “I remember thinking if I could be a sister who had as much fun as those sisters in the movie then I’d be one.” She met her match in the Daughters of St. Paul who “knew how to laugh and enjoy life while still serving God.”<sup>26</sup>

Nun films also served a more grave purpose, and helped some respondents withstand parental opposition to their entering the convent. Though American sisters worried that Kathryn Hulme's fictional memoir *The Nun's Story* was a setback in their "great battle with parents over the right of their daughters to follow the call of Christ,"<sup>27</sup> and that Fred Zinnemann's big screen adaptation would actively discourage vocations,<sup>28</sup> his film gave one sister the fortifying grace to persist at 13 when "my mother told me I had no vocation .... (and) couldn't be a nun." A Sister of Charity recalls watching and reflecting on *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* at 10 or 11 while waiting for her mother to come home from work. She became a Salesian aspirant at 15, but her mother would not permit her to start her postulancy with them at 17, and insisted she return home for another six years. She received no answer from the Salesians when she re-applied at 21; and like Sister Angela in the film may have wondered if this was a sign that "Dear Mr. Allison, perhaps God doesn't want me to take my final vows." Finally at 24 in 1974, "much to (her) mother's chagrin," she entered the Sisters of Charity, and has been a nun for 40 years.

Some respondents identified with a particular nun film because it uncannily mirrored their life story. One Irish sister saw parallels between her own religious history and *The Nun's Story*. "I was a novice in Belgium, and we had Sisters in the Congo ... the whole story echoed my experiences in Community with a Belgian Order." She also felt a kinship with the young heroine in *The Song of Bernadette*

because she too “was raised in a very poor family.” Sister Susan Francois watched *In This House of Brede* (1975) when she was applying for entrance to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace and was “a little overwhelmed by the enormity of the call.” She felt an affinity with the nun protagonist Philippa Talbot because she also “worked as a government official before entering.” “Seeing her say goodbye to colleagues as I was preparing to do,” “show up” at Brede abbey, and trust in God to “keep her there” strengthened her own resolve to try her vocation. A Sister of Notre Dame who first saw *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* in the novitiate and was struggling to make the adjustment from “a very transitory and free life” outside, still remembers the film as “a touchstone” reassuring her of “God’s fidelity holding me” when she worried about her ability to persevere in religious life. Another sister continues to find consolation in the mystical vision of religious community in *Brede* – “this place is all the world to me, all the world wherever I go. Brede will be there. I am Brede” – when she faces transfer to a new religious assignment. As she explains, “that’s a very powerful statement and very true in a way of life where you move from place to place. I think we don’t leave places. We take them with us.”

While a number of sisters greatly admire *Dead Man Walking* for its honest and ‘no frills’ depiction of modern religious life, it does not feature at all in their formation stories; and this may well be because only eight of the respondents became nuns after the film debuted. The majority entered a different convent world which had all but disappeared by 1995, and is nostalgically glimpsed only in the



family home movie of Sister Helen Prejean's clothing ceremony as a bride of Christ at the beginning of the film. Long before they saw *Dead Man Walking*, women religious in communities with active apostolates had modernized their appearance, rethought their identity, reformed their convent life, and forged new ministries. When the film has been cited as religiously influential, it is for spiritually renewing the original call to God's service. Sister Clare Stephen, who entered the Daughters of St. Paul 40 years ago, indicates that other nun films also have the spiritual power to inspire a reaffirmation of religious vows. Her annual viewing of *The Trouble with Angels* is a validation that "I still want to be a nun." Sister Mary Sophie Stewart, F.S.P., who saw *The Song of Bernadette* after making her first holy communion, attests that the movie has continued to play a sacramental role in the "confirmation of my vocation (and) a shared life with St. Bernadette as a sister."

## **Spiritual Ways of Seeing**

Sister respondents also demonstrated how adept moviegoers can be at alternative readings which were not intended by the filmmaker but which articulate the spiritual outlook and subliminal desires of the viewer.<sup>29</sup> While David Morgan, contributor to the documentary *A Question of Habit*, has suggested that popular cultural images of nuns can plumb "unseen, often denied worlds of fear and desire," sister respondents showed how filmic depictions of women religious could become

a spiritual means of self-discovery and vocational enlightenment. Sister Bernadette Mary Reis, F.S.P. recalls that when film protagonist Bernadette pondered aloud the words of Mary, “I cannot promise to make you happy in this world, only in the next,” she heard God telling her that “I would not be happy in this world unless I became a religious.” Another sister was inspired by the tragic end of *The Nun’s Story* that caused so much consternation to vocation directors in 1959 before the ex-nun became an increasingly common figure. This respondent had observed that though Sister Luke (Audrey Hepburn) finally leaves after 17 years in the convent, her young nurse protégé comes in as she goes out. This is what religious film critics call “an ‘Aha!’ moment, when the spirit awakens us” to an awareness of the sacred.<sup>30</sup> “Bingo!!” is how the sister herself described it. She prayed after seeing the film at 13 that “God (would) give (her) the vocation of someone who no longer wanted theirs,” and entered the Daughters of St. Paul’s in 1964 at 18 despite her mother’s strong objections. Though she realizes now that the idea of a “hand-me-down vocation” was religiously naïve and theologically uninformed, she has continued to draw meaning from her interpretative vision of *The Nun’s Story*’s close – that, in the words of T.S. Eliot, “to make an end is to make a beginning. /The end is where we start from.”<sup>31</sup>

## **Nun Films that held Special Vocational or Religious Meaning for Sisters**

Sister respondents repeatedly mention eight popular films about nuns as being viewing favorites, influencing their vocational decision, or holding special religious meaning – *The Song of Bernadette* (1943), *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945), *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957), *The Nun's Story* (1959), *The Sound of Music* (1965), *The Trouble with Angels* (1966), *In This House of Brede* (1975), and *Sister Act* (1992). As I indicated earlier, *Dead Man Walking* (1995) is much admired as an “authentic” and “gutsy” film about contemporary religious life, but is not cited as formative. *Come to the Stable* (1949), *Sea Wife* (1957), *The Miracle* (1959), *Lilies of the Field* (1963), *In This House of Brede* (1975), *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1972), and *Agnes of God* (1985) receive sporadic mention along with three TV mini-series, *The Flying Nun* (1967-1970), *Brides of Christ* (1991), and *Call the Midwife* (2012-). *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* (1958) and *Entertaining Angels* (1996) are excluded from this list because the characters in these films are not professed religious but non-vowed women committed to apostolic service. Controversial films *The Nun's Story* and *Agnes of God* evoke strong and divided feelings in sister respondents.<sup>32</sup>

In the second half of this article, I proceed to examine four nun films which are associated with the popular cultural stereotype of the girlish ‘good sister’ and

her antithesis, the authoritarian mother superior. However these same films – *The Song of Bernadette* (1943), *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945), *The Sound of Music* (1965), and *The Trouble with Angels* (1966) – touched sister respondents to the quick, drew them to religious life, or acted as a vocational catalyst; and generally showed their knack as spectators for seeing through and beyond the superficial stereotyping, and gleaning essentials of religious life on screen. I begin my discussion with *The Song of Bernadette* and *The Trouble with Angels*, two films that were equally influential in some vocation stories though they were made 20 years apart, and present dramatically different pictures of religious life.

### ***The Song of Bernadette* (1943)**

In vocation talks she now gives, one sister respondent always acknowledges “the impact of good films on my vocation and of this film in particular.” Henry King’s *The Song of Bernadette* is a movie that had special meaning for young aspirants as they struggled to come to terms with a religious calling. One sister recalls being selected by her principal for an outing of Dublin Catholic schoolchildren to see *The Song of Bernadette*, and being made to feel she “was ‘good enough’ to go to a holy movie.” Perhaps this early experience of being personally chosen for a cinematic trip that took on the aura of a visual pilgrimage to Lourdes planted the seed that she was “good enough” to become a sister. Yet this

1943 film presents a singularly cold, joyless, severe, and stifling depiction of religious life. Bernadette Soubirous (Jennifer Jones) does not become a nun because she feels she has a vocation. Instead she sacrifices her hope of making a good marriage and accepts without question the superior judgment of the Dean of Lourdes (Charles Bickford) that the cloister is the most safe and seemly sanctuary for a celebrated visionary. If Bernadette hears a heaven-born call, it comes from the Mother of God and not from her Son. Her Marian devotion remains all absorbing, and love of Christ never features in her convent prayers, longings, or dark night of the soul on her deathbed. Her veneration for the Blessed Mother stems from a folk theology that makes Mary a dear, familiar, and approachable face, most closely akin to a God who is “far above” the humble inhabitants of Lourdes.

Bernadette projects the stereotype of the nun as a pure, idealistic, and unworldly girl who has her head in the clouds; but the community that she joins is contaminated by social snobbery and religious arrogance, and could have little appeal to American teenagers. The Sisters of Charity of Nevers are uncharitable *grande dames* who have internalized the ancient French class system; look down their Gallic noses on Bernadette as an ignorant peasant girl and “non-entity;” belittle her baptismal name as a “childish and trivial diminutive;” and complacently assign her as lay Sister Marie Bernard to the lowly job of scullery maid. The only relationship Bernadette has inside the convent is one of inescapable subjection to heartless superior, Sister Marie Therese, who is her dark polar opposite. Fresh from

her performance as devouring matriarch in the 1942 woman's film *Now Voyager*, Gladys Cooper now plays the fairy-tale evil stepmother contending with the Mother of all godmothers for the soul of Bernadette's Cinderella. In a performance which looks forward to the melodramatic film noir nun in *Black Narcissus* (1947), she hams it up as the saint's petty tormenter at school, twisted mistress of novices, and jealous rival for heavenly favor through a psychopathology of suffering. "What do you know of suffering ... Why should God choose you? Why not me ... I know what it is to suffer. Look at my eyes. They burn like the very fires of hell."

If Sister Marie Therese does not make an edifying spectacle, neither does Bernadette's untreated and eventually incurable tuberculosis of the bone. For it highlights her misguided belief that the cloistered nun should suffer in silence, and not call special attention to herself by seeking medical help. The puzzle is how this 1943 film could have drawn modern young women in the postwar period to religious life, especially when its underlying theme of selfless, saintly sacrifice evokes the "horrible" pain and waste of young life in wartime. Respondents say they were inspired by Bernadette's "total commitment" to religious life, and the quiet courage and perseverance with which she faced its hardships, even if these were largely the evil doing of Sister Marie Therese. Her dedication to a life of prayer and holiness dramatizes a core religious desire that continues to attract aspirants to the convent. Her devotion to Mary expressed a precious feature of their

Catholic faith and made the common practice of the rosary more deeply meaningful.

Young aspirants “wanted to be like her” in goodness and piety, but this identification is still problematic. For Bernadette is depicted as slow and ill-educated, and seems to embody the worst stereotype of the nun as “stupid” and dumbly submissive to high-handed or malicious superiors. This stereotype traduces the reputation twentieth-century American sisters were earning for their top achievements in teaching and learning. However, sister respondents looked at this filmic stereotype through the lens of the gospel passage in which Jesus thanks his Heavenly Father for having hidden essential things “from those who think themselves wise and clever, and revealing them to the childlike” (Matt 11:25). They saw comforting proof in the film that if a teenage nobody like Bernadette could be singled out by the Mother of God, then they might be chosen by her Son for religious life. A Daughter of St. Paul vividly remembers how impressed she was by the scene in which Our Lady of Lourdes asked Bernadette “‘will you do me the favor?’ As a kid I thought that was pretty cool for the Mother of God.”

The lives of the saints were favorite reading for many respondents; and like that other revered teenage saint, Joan of Arc, Bernadette’s responses to her ecclesial interrogators were remarkably clear, confident, canny, and courageous in their directness. In her sweet, simple, and trusting faith she prefigured the young, cloistered French saint, Therese of Lisieux, who would also suffer terribly at the

hands of an unfeeling and unhinged superior, die tragically young of tuberculosis, and be so popular with Catholic schoolgirls. *The Song of Bernadette* functioned as a filmic extension of their spiritual reading and, as one sister explained, “made me feel holy in my own teenage way.” Jennifer Jones brought to the role of saint-in-the-making a radiant beauty, artfully enhanced by Hollywood lighting techniques,<sup>33</sup> which visually belied the view that she was a forgettable “nonentity,” and cleverly offset any narrative impression that her suffering was disfiguring. Her luminosity is characteristic of reflective cinema,<sup>34</sup> and would become a distinguishing attribute of Ingrid Bergman’s Sister Mary Benedict in *The Bells of St. Mary’s*, Deborah Kerr’s Sister Angela in *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*, and Audrey Hepburn’s Sister Luke in *The Nun’s Story*. The incandescence these film stars emanated helped to stereotype the film nun as a higher spiritual being who transcended the frailties and failings of the body, but could also be read as the visual sign of the ‘good sister,’ making viewers see inner holiness as a highly attractive and charismatic human attribute. Bernadette’s disappointed suitor Antoine Nicolau (William Eythe) speaks not only for teenage aspirants but all those who respond to the religious power of film to “make the unseen seen”<sup>35</sup> when he exclaims, “as long as I live, I’ll never see anything more beautiful than the face of that girl.” This is a face which has no need of the holy card which Sister Marie Therese spitefully withholds, a face transfigured by the living picture of our Lady of Lourdes, a face which will be venerated as an icon of sacred sight when Bernadette is canonized.



### ***The Trouble with Angels (1966)***

While *The Song of Bernadette* presents a dark, enclosed, otherworldly picture of 19<sup>th</sup> century religious life, *The Trouble with Angels* portrays a modern American community which – unlike Bernadette’s Sisters of Charity of Nevers – is not only active but happy in this world. The light-hearted film comedy *Trouble* also departs radically from the somber hagiopic *Song* in dramatizing the realistic view articulated by vocation directors in the mid-sixties. “If a girl believes that only saints become sisters, she isn’t likely to be able to picture herself in the convent.”<sup>36</sup> Described as “part insubordinate teen comedy, part sensitive coming-of-age film,”<sup>37</sup> *Trouble* reassured young women who knew they could never be as holy as Bernadette that they were “good enough” to answer God’s call.

*Trouble* depicts Mary Clancy – played by British teen star Hayley Mills as a genteel tear-away – who appealed to young aspirants because like them, she is “trying to ‘decide’ what kind of person” she wants to become. Her hijinks at St. Francis involve the odd cigarette, wisecrack, and sneak into the cloister, but nothing so unladylike as alcohol, drugs, or sex. Behind her debutante delinquency lies a troubled family history. The Mother Superior (Rosalind Russell) moves away from the nun stereotype of the stern disciplinarian who quells a class of rambunctious

teenagers after discovering that Mary has been left in the guardianship of her wealthy playboy uncle. She shows the humanity that aspirants would admire in this film when she enters into the reality of Mary's life and realizes that the precocious teenager is at heart a 'motherless child.' Her decision not to expel Mary and her sidekick Rachel Devery (June Harding) stems from a recognition that the so-called 'children of plenty' can also suffer from neglect, and despite their ostensible affluence and privilege, need the sisters' care, guidance, and education.<sup>38</sup>

Up until the mid-sixties, strictly raised Catholic girls had a limited opportunity to explore their identity and exercise independence as they made their way along the closely chaperoned passage from the family home, through school, and into marriage.<sup>39</sup> Though St. Francis Academy looks like a Victorian fortress, the film uses the open convent school window as a metaphor for the safe space Mary Clancy is now given to be playfully imperfect, experiment with different versions of the self, finish her growing up, and so 'discern' the unique attributes that she will eventually bring to religious life. *Trouble* reassured a School Sister of Notre Dame that "God's call is often mysterious and ... one doesn't have to be perfect to become a sister." Mary's rebelliousness, "will of iron," and non-conformity are no longer a religious impediment, as they were for Sister Luke, who struggled to fit into the mold dictated by her congregation and was haunted by her failure to achieve spiritual perfection in *The Nun's Story*. Mary's "scathingly brilliant ideas" will be respected and nurtured in the convent because, as the Mother

Superior appreciates and as Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister remarked, “women religious know their history ... that they are in a long line of troublemakers.”<sup>40</sup>

The Mother Superior is the pivotal film figure who not only inspires Mary’s surprising vocation but also features in the vocation story of some sister respondents. Rosalind Russell had played strong and quirky career women in comic women’s films of the 1940s; and she brought the sheen of her past screen roles as lawyer, judge, psychiatrist, and women’s college dean – and a touch of Auntie Mame “opening a new window” with the gusto of Vatican II *aggiornamento* – to the role of Mother Superior.<sup>41</sup> She did not have the “impossibly glamorous”<sup>42</sup> or luminous beauty of Deborah Kerr and Audrey Hepburn as film nuns. Their stereotype of “flawless beauty” is reserved for minor character, Sister Constance (Camilla Sparv), in *Trouble*. However Russell did, by her own admission, bring a “vitality” and “joy in living” to her performances which she regarded as more important than conventional good looks and talent in an actress.<sup>43</sup> Young aspirants were charmed by the fact that her Mother Superior had a ‘worldly’ past, enjoyed a cosmopolitan life in Paris, trained as a talented seamstress in haute couture, and dreamed of creating her own fashion house before finding “something better” in the convent. Indeed her character communicates a sense of “movement and mystery” in the habit that appears directly imported from this Paris fashion world, and is a nostalgic reminder that nuns revered the habit for the religious meaning, dignity, and identity it bestowed on the wearer. Russell interpreted the Superior as

a religious leader who was both worldly and spiritually wise, and so successfully merged the older cloister ideal of the prayer-centered convent with the modern and apostolic model of active service and outreach.<sup>44</sup>

Looking at the convent from the outside and wondering rather nervously whether they could survive inside, aspirants took heart from the glimpses the Mother Superior gave Mary of core qualities of religious life: the nun's inner prayerfulness, attachment to her community, and loving friendship with her fellow sisters. As in *The Song of Bernadette*, this prayer life includes devotion to Mary and rosary meditation, though these activities now take place in spacious and bucolic convent grounds which conveyed the romance of the cloister to idealistic young women. Whereas *Song* emphasized Bernadette's solitude as a visionary, even during communal worship, *Trouble* shows how the nun is sustained by the power of collective prayer and a common way of life. Like *The Nun's Story*, *Trouble* portrays a religious community as one, inter-generational body; and the corporate solidarity of the sisters as they keep silence and speak to each other, laugh and lament, makes religious life a beautiful sight in Mary Clancy's eyes. Unlike *The Nun's Story*, *Song*, or *In This House of Brede*, *Trouble* glosses over the challenges of community living in close quarters with difficult personalities.<sup>45</sup> Instead director Ida Lupino depicts the convent as a school of friendship to which God has called an eclectic and sometimes unlikely group of women such as the horse-racing enthusiast Sister Liguori (Marge Redmond) who runs her "last race

of Pimlico” when she dies of a sudden heart attack. The Mother Superior’s grief is not reserved for her close friend Liguori but extends to apparent loners like the school portress Sister Ursula (Marjorie Eaton). When Mary Clancy thoughtlessly mimics the nun’s heavy German accent, the Mother Superior chastises her by recounting how Sister Ursula hid 34 Jewish children in the cellar of a destroyed convent outside of Munich. At the same time she reminds a film audience that nuns were war heroines who faced imprisonment, torture, rape, and death for the courage of their convictions.

*Trouble* is a testimony to female sisterhood, loyalty, and solidarity in other ways. Lupino made the oddball friendship between teenagers Mary Clancy and Rachel Devery the centerpiece of her film, and deftly suggested at the same time that boarding school can inculcate the tolerance for others that will be needed in convent community life. *Trouble with Angels* is unique among popular nun films in expressing a wholly female vision of religious life shaped by an influential and creative team of prominent Catholic women – pioneer woman filmmaker Ida Lupino, film star Rosalind Russell, screenwriter Blanche Hanalis, and advertiser/novelist Jane Trahey. Trahey’s fictionalized memoir, *Life with Mother Superior* (1962), was a humorous and affectionate account of Catholic boarding school escapades in the 1930s, and gave the film its basic story line and ‘coming-of-age’ character. Troupers Mary Wickes, Marge Redmond, Binnie Barnes, and Portia Nelson good humoredly played with their ‘fun nun’ stereotypes. Fresh from

her role as singing Mistress of Novices in *The Sound of Music* (1965), Portia Nelson took on the role of art teacher Sister Elizabeth who never opens her mouth in *Trouble*. She would don the habit again in a TV episode of *The Big Valley* (1965-69). Binnie Barnes featured in both *Trouble* and its sequel, *Where Angels Go, Trouble Follows* (1968), playing Sister Celestine who teaches music and conducts St. Francis's school band of buxom beauties. Marge Redmond played the Mother Superior's assistant and confidant Sister Liguori who "should have been a bookie" had her passion for betting on the 'gee-gees' not been displaced by a religious calling. She would go on to feature in *The Flying Nun* (1967-70). Wickes played Sister Clarissa as the school's ungainly physical education director and deadpan-comic bus driver. She reprised her role in *Where Angels Go*, and would earn the distinction of being put back in the habit more often than any other film actress when she took on the role of the acerbic Sister Mary Lazarus who's still alive and kicking in *Sister Act* (1992) and its sequel *Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit* (1993). Like the nuns they played, film actresses were in the vanguard of women who forged long and eventful careers over the course of the twentieth century, and sometimes worked, like the amazing Mary Wickes, for four decades or more.<sup>46</sup>

While these experienced supporting actresses give *Trouble* humor, character, and warmth, Rosalind Russell's Mother Superior is the woman religious role model in the film, and through her deep, sonorous voice, young aspirants heard God calling them. She situates the cinematic nun within the earlier woman's film genre

in which she had excelled, starring sophisticated female stars who projected a commanding persona and played confident and powerful roles on screen.<sup>47</sup> She conveyed the message to the young women who contemplated a vocation that religious life did not require denial of core identity or professional ambitions, but rather their development and deployment in God's service.

### ***The Sound of Music (1965)***

*The Sound of Music* is the top favorite nun film of respondents, and is mentioned 40 times not only for its entertainment but religious value. Yet it was panned on its premiere for its twittering chorus of saccharine, "silly, stereotyped nuns" and for "the absence of any real religious feeling."<sup>48</sup> Unlike the first critics, sisters did not slate this film for trivializing them and were not put off by the stereotypes, but "loved" it just as much as general viewers. Popular film hits are characterized by their ability not only to gratify and captivate a large audience, but express needs, longings, and aspirations deep in the collective unconscious.<sup>49</sup> In the 2015 Oscar tribute to *The Sound of Music* on its fiftieth anniversary, Lady Gaga's vocal rendition of a medley of songs from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical communicated the joy and elation which many felt when they first saw the film. However *The Sound of Music* held special and fluid religious meaning for sisters. Though it can be categorized as a Catholic comfort film like *The Song of*

*Bernadette*, its narrative was alive with a polyphony of sounds, voices, and lyrical stories which sisters selected for spiritual reflection at different points in their own life history.

A Sister of St. Louis who first saw *The Sound of Music* as a young child found herself “intrigued with the lifestyle of the sisters, the prayer, the convent, the music.” Sister Kathleen Bryant, who has worked in vocation promotion and discernment, and saw *The Sound of Music* two years before she entered the Religious Sisters of Charity in 1967 at 18, was influenced by “the joy, laughter and beauty” pervading the religious life depicted on screen. A sister fan of *The Sound of Music* who entered the convent in 1960, prior to Vatican II reform of religious life, now views the film with nostalgia for the large, close-knit religious communities that were united by prayer and purpose in the past, before nuns steadily declined in numbers and total institutions were replaced by looser and smaller associational models. It is evident from these remarks that *The Sound of Music* projected qualities of religious life that sister respondents still hold dear, cherish as beautiful, or regard as essential to their calling. These include attachment to a community which has a cohesive identity and is joyful, welcoming, inclusive, and understanding; the infectious company of sisters who are happy because they have found in the convent the home to which they feel called; and the sense of being uplifted by the powerful interaction of a common prayer and community life, especially when the sisters raise their voices in choral song.<sup>50</sup> Maria embodies the



jubilant heart of the film; but the religious perspective of sister spectators made them acutely aware of the hidden world that constitutes the soul of *The Sound of Music*. This is the cloistered abbey where the holy paradox of contemplative silence and sublime sound, separation from the world and compassionate closeness to its pain, fear, unhappiness, and yearning is reverently lived out. In their spiritual perception of the cloister as a “poetic and vibrant world, ripe with mystery,”<sup>51</sup> sister respondents transform *The Sound of Music* from religious comfort film into devotional cinema.

For a number of respondents, the most meaningful and uplifting point in the film is when the Abbess, played by Peggy Wood, addresses “Climb Every Mountain” to Julie Andrews’s Maria after telling her “these walls were not built to shut out problems.” Sisters read this scene not only through the lens of their own religious experience and spirituality but Vatican II documents like *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, and repeatedly noted how it expanded their understanding of a vocation. *Lumen Gentium* was published a year before the debut of *The Sound of Music* and altered the Catholic lay view of women religious as a spiritual elite with an exclusive claim to a vocation by declaring that all Christians are called to holiness. A School Sister of Notre Dame remarked on how “the Mother Superior helps Maria really come to understand her vocation,” alluding to the film moment where the Abbess counsels Maria that “the love of a man and a woman is holy too,” and her attachment to Captain von Trapp (Christopher Plummer) and his family

doesn't mean she loves God – or implicitly the sisters who have become her kinswomen – less. Sister Stefanie, F.S.P. recalls being forbidden as a young sister to watch the film because her superior thought the Abbess was asking Maria to leave the convent, and that this order would discourage those starting out in religious life.<sup>52</sup> When she finally saw the film years later as a mature nun, she thought “it showed both vocations: religious and married in a very good way.” Other sisters were in agreement, noting with approval that *Sound* presented a positive portrait of the discernment process and that the postulant Maria is given the freedom by her religious superiors to decide whether she has a genuine religious calling. Sister Carmel Therese Somers admired “the guts” Maria showed in realizing the cloister was not “the right place” for her and answering God’s call to a “vocation as a mother and wife.” She entered the Religious Sisters of Charity in 1957; and her film reading reflects the sea change that would take place after Vatican II in the attitude to women who left the convent or chose marriage instead. Sisters’ uniform approval of Maria’s decision and respect for the ‘holiness of the heart’s affections’ are consistent with the 1965 conciliar document *Gaudium et Spes* which affirmed marriage as a vocation alike in spiritual dignity to that of religious.<sup>53</sup>

*Gaudium et Spes* also called on the Church to show solidarity with the people of the world in their “joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties,”<sup>54</sup> a solidarity which the Abbess and her entire community extend to Maria and the von Trapp family. The School Sister of Notre Dame who admired the wise and benevolent vocational

advice the Abbess gave Maria, also singled out the closing scene where the nuns hide the hunted family and remove the car batteries of their Nazis pursuers. The Mistress of Postulants (Anna Lee) and Mistress of Novices (Portia Nelson) are the saboteurs, but they behave like the pesky postulant Maria, playing the kind of schoolgirl prank that will feature again in *The Trouble with Angels*. Sister respondents who found nun films like *Trouble*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Sister Act* entertaining, were attuned through their spiritual and aspirational gaze to look beyond this girlish stereotyping and perceive the humanity, altruism, and faith that shone through the nun characters. “Following Christ,” the School Sister of Notre Dame remarked, “requires one to take action in the face of injustice.” While the wartime heroism of women religious has been recognized by historians, in reality nuns played no part in the escape of the von Trapp family over the mountain. The film not only romanticizes the Abbess and her deputies as mothers of courage, but glosses over the retribution that the Nazis could inflict on the inhabitants of Nonnberg Abbey from dissolution of their community to death in a concentration camp.

Sister respondents were also conscious of the nun’s hidden life of spiritual struggle, longing, and striving; and this mindfulness deepened their appreciation for “Climb Every Mountain.” *The Sound of Music* was released as the Second Vatican Council came to an end and traditional religious life began to undergo accelerated change. In the post-conciliar era of reform, scrutiny, conflict, and

contraction of religious communities, more than one sister heard in this song the “very spiritual message to follow Jesus through all life’s difficulties and problems.” The song lyrics also affirmed their belief that God’s will is found through the “search high and low” to realize their deepest and most exalted desires.

One sister was equally moved by NBC’s recent 2013 presentation of a live stage production of *The Sound of Music*. Audra McDonald stole the show from Carrie Underwood’s Maria with her majestic persona and magnificent voice in the role of Mother Abbess. As the black superior of an Austrian religious community in the 1930s, she came in for ugly racial criticism from some TV viewers, thinly disguised as a literal-minded concern for the historical accuracy of the remake. Religious and cultural commentator, Shannen Dee Williams, defended the selection of McDonald, citing recorded examples of black women religious present in Europe from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and indeed active just over the border from Austria in Fascist Italy during the Second World War.<sup>55</sup> McDonald brought an interpretative note of passionate urgency to “Climb Every Mountain” which was absent from Peggy Wood’s serene delivery, dubbed by Margery MacKay.<sup>56</sup> Unlike Wood, McDonald did not have to turn her back to disguise her lip-syncing, and in facing Maria, transformed the lyrics of this great woman’s song into a divine imperative to seek in order that she might find. Although the 2013 TV presentation of *The Sound of Music* has inherent stage limitations, it does show in one respect how revivals and remakes can give old nun films new meaning. For the choice of McDonald reflects

the shift from the white, European immigrant congregations of the past to the more diversified communities of the present day where 42% of those starting religious life are women of color.<sup>57</sup>

### ***The Bells of St. Mary's (1945)***

While *The Sound of Music* was lambasted by movie critics, *The Bells of St. Mary's* has been slated by prominent women religious for typecasting them as “perpetual little girls,”<sup>58</sup> with the protagonist Sister Mary Benedict held up as the direct opposite of the mature, independent, and professional American nun. As an unfortunate result, the film’s actual representation of the parochial school sister who heads St. Mary’s has become lost to view behind the juvenile stereotype that she is said to have popularized. For Ingrid Bergman most certainly did not look or act like a little girl in the iconic role of Sister Mary Benedict. In a nun’s headpiece, she was nearly six feet in height and significantly taller than Bing Crosby’s Father O’Malley. She brought to the role of religious superior and principal of St. Mary’s a screen persona that was ardent, charismatic, imposing, and forceful, one reminiscent of strong women stars like Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, and Rosalind Russell, or idealistic women leaders like Eleanor Roosevelt and Dorothy Day in the thirties and forties. Indeed the first film viewers took her to their heart, and what was there not to love, if only contemporary critics would take another

look at her performance without representational prejudice? She was optimistic and cheerful in running the dilapidated inner city parish of St. Mary's; playful and sporting, whether swinging a baseball bat on the school playground or verbally sparring with Father O'Malley; hard-working and professional in carrying out her teaching, administrative, and pastoral responsibilities; energetic and determined in a man's world shaped by big business and clerical politics; canny and relentless in pursuit of her goal which was a new parochial school for St. Mary's; utterly admirable in her determination not to desert the urban poor, immigrant, and working class families who were financially dependent on parochial school education; and staunchly opposed to Father O'Malley's suggestion that grade standards should be lowered so that the whole class can graduate.

Subsequent viewers and feminist cultural critics lost sight of this strong-willed, principled, but warm and fallibly human character and remembered a figure who is only the shadow of her former self. This is because the screenplay abruptly gave her "a touch of (the) tuberculosis" that earmarked Bernadette Soubirous for sainthood, and in the process made her infirm character wholly dependent on her male doctor and parish priest. One early reviewer protested that "the picture's climax, in which the ailing Sister Superior is to be sent away without being told about her illness, is pure hokum and dishonest."<sup>59</sup> Thus screenwriter Dudley Nichols and director Leo McCarey sent Sister Mary Benedict back to perpetual girlhood and obscured Bergman's dynamic performance as a woman great in faith.

This film performance paid tribute to a core vocational desire to serve others, and to the fighting spirit sisters have needed throughout their history to follow “what they perceived as the essence of their religious life.”<sup>60</sup>

A sister respondent who saw this 1945 movie for the first time as a 21<sup>st</sup> century teenager, when she “was actively thinking about what to do with the rest of (her) life,” articulated a perspective free of preconceptions. The scene that struck a chord for her implicitly corrects the view that sisters should uphold an ideal of “untouchable purity,”<sup>61</sup> or actively promote vocations among the immature and impressionable minors they teach in elementary school. In this scene Ingrid Bergman’s religious character gently embraces graduating student Patsy Gallagher (Joan Carroll) and counsels her to wait, look forward to high-school social life, and discover what it is like to be an attractive young woman. Only then can she decide with “complete understanding” whether her heart’s desire is to become a nun like Sister Mary Benedict. Sister respondent Margaret Kerry, F.S.P. expressed a similar view and found that “the dating scene helped me identify my true desires.” Indeed Sister Mary Benedict’s on-screen advice in 1945 is prescient in its vocational discernment that personal development must proceed religious formation, and as Cardinal Leon Joseph Suenens would later state, a sister active in the world must cultivate, not sacrifice, her “gifts of the heart.”<sup>62</sup> The teenager who eventually entered the convent in 2007 at age 20 “learned” from this intimate scene between a sister teacher and her idolizing pupil “that you don’t become a nun to run away

from the world, you become a nun to embrace God and the world,” echoing the approbation which other and older sisters expressed for “Climb Every Mountain” in *The Sound of Music*. Whether they began religious life before or after Vatican II, in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century, sister respondents were united in the view that God’s call was an invitation to live more completely as a woman and more fully in touch with the world – whether this was in the convent or outside it.

## **Conclusion**

Nun movies made women religious visible in the world to audiences around the globe. They made religious life – and young sisters in habits like Sister Marie Bernard in *The Song of Bernadette* and Sister Mary Benedict in *The Bells of St. Mary’s* – look beautiful; but they also suggested the personal hardships nun protagonists faced in attempting to balance work and prayer, apostolic and monastic ideals. With the notable exception of the 1995 film *Dead Man Walking*, cultural critics have rarely seen the spiritual attraction of the Hollywood movies which showcased the lives of nuns; and they have never considered that these popular films might have exerted a vocational influence on women who actually became religious. When they have viewed them, they have been disinclined to look beyond the religious stereotypes that these films both recycle and creatively recast.



Men like Benedictine monk Father Gregory Elmer and Christian minister Robert Johnston have freely admitted that they heard God calling them to his service through the 1964 film *Becket*. If *Becket* made God known to these viewers, it was not because this movie was a ‘worthy’ channel of his grace, but because of the sacramental power that popular film can acquire – whether serious or simply entertaining – to show God’s presence shining through ordinary creation, and not only to men, but to women of faith.<sup>63</sup> My broad survey of sisters across three generations and over a time span of nearly 70 years indicates that nun films could function as a vocational catalyst, inspire young women who had no other way of learning about religious life, and keep the desire to become a sister alive until they were free to enter the convent. Aspirants in the process of discernment could find guidance and reassurance there as they grappled with “the enormity of the call,” or faced strong and sustained parental opposition. As professed sisters, they sometimes watched these films again, continued to reflect on their formative influence, and found consolation and religious uplift in particular scenes. In the diversity of their interior needs and viewing practices, sister respondents transformed film watching into a spiritual exercise, and watched nun movies with their minds open to what God might be showing them through the eyes of the soul, and saying to them in the deepest recesses of their hearts.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is customary now to use the terms “nun,” “sister,” and “woman religious” interchangeably as I do in this article, though I am aware that strictly speaking, a nun belongs to a cloistered and contemplative order, while a sister is a member of a religious congregation with an active apostolate. For the finer canonical distinctions, see Mary Johnson, S.N.D.deN., Patricia Wittberg, S.C., and Mary L. Gautier, *New Generations of Catholic Sisters: The Challenges of Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 32-37.

<sup>2</sup> See George C. Stewart Jr., *Marvels of Charity: History of American Sisters and Nuns* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1994), 404-406, and Suzanne Campbell-Jones, *In Habit: A Study of Working Nuns* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 112-115.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Sullivan comments on popular cultural images of nuns in the documentary *A Question of Habit*, writ. prod. and dir. Bren Ortega Murphy, prod. and ed. Michael T. Whalen, Whalen Films, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Maureen Sabine, *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> See Maria Christine, O.P., “An Extern Sister’s Vocation Story” and Mary Thomas, O.P., “You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you,” in *Vocation in Black and White: Dominican Contemplative Nuns Tell How God Called Them*, ed. the Association of the Monasteries of Nuns of the Order of Preachers of the United States of America (New York: iUniverse, 2008), 51, 76, and Kathleen J. Waites, *Particular Friendships: A Convent Memoir* (Xlibris, 2006), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Rose Pacatte, F.S.P., “The Inner Realities of Cinematic Sisters,” review of *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film*, by Maureen Sabine, *National Catholic Reporter*, February 14-27, 2014, 3-4a.

<sup>7</sup> 10 respondents gave no date of entry, and three entered in the late 1940s.

<sup>8</sup> Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman’s View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930-1960* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 446.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell-Jones, *In Habit*, 124.

<sup>10</sup> See Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier, *New Generations*, 61-62. Several sister respondents said they either were not moviegoers; did not go to the movies or watch TV much before entering the convent; or had parents who “were very strict when it came to the media.”

<sup>11</sup> Another sister felt that popular novels did “a poor job of portraying who we are,” while the third thought that popular films “stereotype nuns as little girls, adolescent, totally docile to ‘Rev. Father.’”

<sup>12</sup> See Bruce David Forbes, “Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 5. Sister Gemma Simmonds, C.J. raised some of these points in “Where do we go from here? Signs of vitality in a much-changed world” (keynote address at the

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University of Notre Dame international symposium on *The Nun in the World: Catholic Sisters & Vatican II*, London, United Kingdom, May 7-9, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> See Basinger, *A Woman's View*, 4-7, 19, 36, 161-164, 212.

<sup>14</sup> See Margaret Susan Thompson, "Women, Feminism, and the New Religious History," in *Belief and Behaviour: Essays in the New Religious History*, ed. Philip R. VanderMeer and Robert P. Swierenga (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 142; Mary Ewens, O.P., "The Leadership of Nuns in Immigrant Catholicism," in *The Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1 of *Women and Religion in America*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Keller (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981), 105; Amy L. Koehlinger, *The New Nuns: Radical Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3-5, 39; and Rebecca Sullivan, *Visual Habits: Nuns, Feminism, and American Popular Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 28.

<sup>15</sup> Basinger, *A Woman's View*, 21, 32-34, 167.

<sup>16</sup> See the remarks of Koehlinger, *The New Nuns*, 8, 32-35, 68, 75, and Sullivan, *Visual Habits*, 36, 42.

<sup>17</sup> As vocation director for her province, Gretchen Hailer, R.S.H.M. "constantly had to speak to images of religious life portrayed in the media," but is still a fan of nun films *In This House of Brede* (1975) and *Sister Act* (1992). Another sister felt that *Sister Act*'s "portrayal of nuns, while stereotypical, had a greater humanity to it than ... most 'nun movies'."

<sup>18</sup> See Basinger, *A Woman's View*, 5, and Pamela Grace, *The Religious Film* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Koehlinger, *The New Nuns*, 32.

<sup>20</sup> Basinger, *A Woman's View*, 169.

<sup>21</sup> The female gaze has been problematized, theorized, and complicated by feminist film and cultural critics such as Laura Mulvey, E. Ann Kaplan, Mary Ann Doane, Tania Modeleski, and Teresa de Lauretis. See Basinger's excellent summary in *A Woman's View*, 207-209. I agree with her conclusion: "Can anyone really presume to claim that women's films can be seen one way and one way only? That all women think alike, react alike, and see alike?"

<sup>22</sup> John C. Lyden, "Film as Religion: Myths, Morals and Rituals," in *The Religion and Film Reader*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate (New York: Routledge, 2007), 416.

<sup>23</sup> Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2004), x.

<sup>24</sup> See the discussions of Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier, *New Generations*, 10-13, 29, 70-71, and Koehlinger, *The New Nuns*, 41, 75.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier, *New Generations*, 92-93.

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<sup>26</sup> Bernadette Mary Reis, F.S.P. expressed similar sentiments. “I LOVED *Sister Act*. For those of us who are religious, some of the humor had a deeper significance.”

<sup>27</sup> Mother M. Clotilde, “Letter to the Editor,” in “Reactions to *The Nun’s Story*,” *America*, January 26, 1957, 483.

<sup>28</sup> “‘The Nun’s Story’ – A Symposium: View of Three Nuns,” *America*, June 27, 1959, 470-471.

<sup>29</sup> See Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate, introduction to *Global Perspectives: Filmmakers and Critics*, in *The Religion and Film Reader*, 70, and Grace, *The Religious Film*, 85.

<sup>30</sup> Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 76.

<sup>31</sup> T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” *The Four Quartets*, ll. 217-218.

<sup>32</sup> Two respondents found *The Nun’s Story* “depressing” when they saw it as teenagers, while another felt it “had an anti-religious bent.” In fact, Fred Zinnemann was determined not to make a Catholic faith movie like *The Song of Bernadette*; but in his documentary-like depiction of the cloister, showed the beauty and the arduousness of religious life without sentimentality or concession to either the ‘feel-good’ or ‘feel holy’ factor. See my discussion of this film in *Veiled Desires*, 109-60.

<sup>33</sup> See Paula M. Kane’s discussion of how the Hollywood camera conveyed holiness in *The Song of Bernadette*, “Jews and Catholics Converge,” in *Catholics in the Movies*, ed. Colleen McDannell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 99-101.

<sup>34</sup> See Grace’s discussion of the spiritual or transcendental elements of film in *The Religious Film*, 49-52.

<sup>35</sup> Mitchell and Plate, introduction, 71.

<sup>36</sup> Joan M. Lexau, introduction to *Convent Life: Roman Catholic Orders for Women in North America*, ed. Lexau (New York: Dial Press, 1964), xv.

<sup>37</sup> Ken Anderson, “Review of *The Trouble with Angels* (1966),” October 9, 2014, accessed June 29, 2015, <http://lecinemadreams.blogspot.hk/2014/10/the-trouble-with-angels-1966.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier note in *New Generations*, 10-11, that teaching upwardly mobile Catholic families in suburban parochial schools in the 1950s and 60s was not so socially rewarding for sisters as apostolic work with poor and working-class children in the old urban immigrant and ethnic parishes. Amy L. Koehlinger makes the same point in *The New Nuns*, 10-11, 41.

<sup>39</sup> Sullivan, *Visual Habits*, 135.

<sup>40</sup> Joan Chittister, O.S.B., “Envisioning the Future,” in *Habits of Change: An Oral History of American Nuns*, by Carole Garibaldi Rogers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 292-293.

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<sup>41</sup> Basinger, *A Woman's View*, 177-179.

<sup>42</sup> Sullivan, *A Question of Habit*.

<sup>43</sup> See a short film biography of Russell, along with memorable quotes on the IMDb site for *The Trouble with Angels* (1966).

<sup>44</sup> Koehlinger, *The New Nuns*, 25-26.

<sup>45</sup> See Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier list the pros and cons of community living in *New Generations*, 99-100, 117-120.

<sup>46</sup> Basinger, *A Woman's View*, 164-165, 187.

<sup>47</sup> Despite Russell's strong and dignified performance as Mother Superior, she is stereotyped on the DVD jacket of the film as a free-wheeling nun on a bicycle. No one rides a bicycle in *The Trouble with Angels*, not even the boarding school teenagers in her care to whom she is being visually likened here.

<sup>48</sup> Moira Walsh, Review of *The Sound of Music*, *America*, March 13, 1965, 375.

<sup>49</sup> Forbes, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>50</sup> The sisters Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier questioned echoed the views of my respondents. See *New Generations*, 85, 89, 100.

<sup>51</sup> Nathaniel Dorsky, "Devotional Cinema," in *The Religion and Film Reader*, 412.

<sup>52</sup> *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* was the only other film mentioned as subject to convent censorship because it was thought to represent the Pope in an unflattering light.

<sup>53</sup> See my discussion of *The Sound of Music* in *Veiled Desires*, 161-191, particularly 184-185, 193-194.

<sup>54</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 103.

<sup>55</sup> Shannen Dee William, "Jesus, Santa, and Now Sound of Music's Mother Abbess?," *Portside*, December 16, 2013, accessed July 23, 2015, <http://portside.org/2013.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Barry Monush, *The Sound of Music FAQ: All that's left to know about Maria, the Von Trapps, and our favorite things* (Milwaukee, WI: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2015), 122, 419.

<sup>57</sup> Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier, *New Generations*, 19-20.

<sup>58</sup> See Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., See *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 234 and Koehlinger, *The New Nuns*, 35.

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<sup>59</sup> Philip T. Hartung, "Drama with a Capital D," review of *The Bells of St. Mary's*, *Commonweal*, December 28, 1945, 288.

<sup>60</sup> Thompson, "Women, Feminism, and the New Religious History," 153. See my discussion of this film in *Veiled Desires*, 18-48.

<sup>61</sup> Sullivan, *A Question of Habit*.

<sup>62</sup> Leon Joseph Suenens, *The Nun in the World: Religious and the Apostolate*, trans. Geoffrey Stevens (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1963), 142-143.

<sup>63</sup> Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 38-39, 74-75, 104-106.

<sup>64</sup> Spiritual spectatorship has some kinship with the scriptural art of *lectio divina* or holy reading. See Luke Dysinger, O.S.B., "The Ancient Art of *Lectio Divina*," 1989, accessed June 30, 2015, <http://www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html>.

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