Rosalyn Simpson: Demographic Changes in the Franciscan Order

Pre-Filming

I am very interested to learn more about the Sisters of Saint Francis who live and work at Stella Niagara Education Park in Lewiston, NY. Ideally I could speak with a few of the sisters beforehand, gain a bit of background knowledge from them, and talk to them about things they may want to me study or portray. If no suitable subject arises in the course of these meetings, I would like to study the decline in prospective sisters that the order has seen in recent years. Or perhaps the liberal nature of the Franciscan Order in a highly prescriptive religion, as inspired by Heather L. Claussen’s (2001) study of feminist nuns in the Philippines.

I would like to include some narration because I think that it can add really valuable context. It may be interesting to ask the sisters if they have any music that they might want to be included, as music plays a major role in their religious services.

In addition to video footage of interviews and activities I would also like to collect field notes and still photographs, which can then be used to supplement footage in my final film. I may also be required to make use of participant observation, depending on what the sisters think is appropriate. As Heider has said, “an ethnographic film can only be as good as the understanding that precedes the filmmaking,” (Heider 1976:10) so I want to gather a good supply of data before filming.

Interview Questions

Once I made my interview questions known, many of the sisters declined to speak with me, perhaps for fear of saying the wrong thing in representation of their order. However, one sister (Sister Margaret) was still enthusiastic to be interviewed despite the controversial nature of the questions I wished to explore.

Post Filming

This film explores how the changing dynamics of gender roles in the secular world are beginning to influence the demographic of the Franciscan order, according to one sister. Sister Margaret Sullivan is the principal at Stella Niagara Education Park in Lewiston, NY, and is a sister of the order. In addition to several years of observation of the sisters as an employee of the school, I also interviewed Sister Margaret at length.

In some ways, this film documents not only the ways in which the Franciscan order is changing, but also the uniqueness of the order as compared to traditional Catholicism. Sister Margaret agreed that an institutional choice for an order to wear the habit may have the effect of isolating women religious from the secular world. She states that the habit is generally institutionally imposed on cloistered nuns. In fact, Michelman referred to the habit as a “walking cloister” (Michelman 1997:355) Franciscans, according to Sister Margaret, believe that their role is out “in the marketplace, with the people.” In a way, dressing secularly to some extent can create a platform on which the sisters can share an identity with the people they serve.

It is widely known within the Catholic Church that Vatican II (an ecumenical council announced by Pope John XXIII in 1959) (Teicher 2012) revolutionized the institution for women. It opened the doors to a variety of discussions, and allowed a reevaluation of some traditionally rigid doctrines. Post-Vatican II, wearing the habit became a much more controversial and individualized choice. The Sisters of St. Francis at S.N.E.P. may choose to wear a habit, but are under no obligation to do so. Vatican II also opened a dialogue for women who wished to be ordained in the Catholic Church, a freedom previously and currently denied to women.

Mary Jo Weaver states in New Catholic Women, “At bottom, this [ordination for women] is a question not only of justice, but of community… A church that calls for social justice and makes itself vulnerable to the claims of justice is bound by logic to listen to the voices of oppressed women.” (Weaver 1985:143) This is a sound argument, but within the context of the Franciscan order, it seems that it is becoming a less relevant topic as the community ages. The women who were very active in this struggle 15 years ago (at least within the Franciscan order) are now aging. Not only that, but the young women who might have picked up the torch find themselves less and less compelled to join a religious order, in favor of less restricted, and perhaps equally meaningful avenues of social influence.
Much of the research that I read prior to filming focused on the obstacles faced by women religious from within the institution. In some ways the data that I gathered align with these views, and in some ways they dissent. For example, Sister Margaret agreed with Brock, in that men hold the positions of "ultimate power and authority" within the institution. (Brock 2010:474) However, she also made statements that reflect Helen Rose Ebaugh’s idea that, at least in the past, joining a religious order provided an, “…avenue of social mobility for young women who desired both an education and a career.” (Ebaugh 1993:401) Ebaugh also states, "This enabled them to exercise significant control over others' lives and to gain access to resources, even when they were not consciously rebelling against a patriarchal system. Rather, by acquiescing to the system, nuns were able to gain a substantial degree of informal power and influence.” (Ebaugh 1993:401) This is the dynamic that Sister Margaret believes is changing. With so many options available for secular women (or religious laywomen) today to lead educated, influential, and religiously meaningful lives, joining a religious order is no longer the only available route to access these resources.

So although the Catholic Church is inarguably a patriarchal institution, within the context of the Franciscan order, women religious have found that they are able to at the very least enter into meaningful dialogues about their contributions to and ambitions within that institution. At the same time, I found that as feminist discourse becomes more and more open for women religious, it also is becoming less salient in some communities. The changing nature of the secular world is affecting religious communities in a very concrete way. Doors that were once closed for secular women have opened, and what once was offered as a sanctuary of education and influence seems relatively restrictive to modern women. This is very well-written and you made use of some very good sources.

Works Cited:

Brock, Megan P


Claussen, Heather L


Ebaugh, Helen Rose


Heider, Karl G

1976 *Ethnographic Film*. University of Texas Press.

Michelman, Susan O.


Teicher, Jordan G.


Weaver, Mary Jo