Unconventional Sisterhood
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If taking up the religious vocation as a Missionary Benedictine already represents a radical move, formation, a matter of voluntary resocialization, encourages further sociocultural radicalization. As intimated earlier, though, convent life isn’t for everyone. And not everyone makes it through formation. During Sister Micha’s time, for example, the casualties were numerous. She entered with seven others, but only two of them made their first profession. Three left on their own initiative. The others, one a good friend of the sister’s, were “made” to realize that they wouldn’t be able to cope due to “character issues.”

After all, Sister Micha explained, much of formation is a matter of working through personal hang-ups under the guidance of the formation superiors, who are ultimately responsible for weeding out candidates lacking the psychological makeup to become Missionary Benedictine. Nor is it always obvious who will and won’t make it. Usually, all sorts of different personalities are represented during the postulancy, and almost everyone needs at least some help in the transformation process. It is very intense, with little room for blaming mistakes on anyone or anything but oneself. One really has to take a hard look at both one’s strengths and weaknesses in the absence of outside distractions to hide behind.

And Sister Micha admitted to having had her own share of personal quirks. For example, she had had difficulties with silence. She was “a natural talker,” and, when she first entered, she hadn’t been able to keep quiet after 10:00 P.M. in accordance with convent rules. In fact, early on, she decided to drop out because of it. But her superiors asked her to wait a few months, and the problem resolved itself once she began to understand inner silence—not to mention the importance of listening to others.

For her, then, formation was successful. But her friend, who had very
much wanted to remain within the convent, hadn’t been so fortunate. The novice mistress felt the candidate was too set in her ways and wanted her out. And all Sister Micha could offer by way of comfort was a shoulder to cry on. But perhaps God intended her to play that role. After all, it had been very difficult for her friend to distance herself from the whole thing—partly, no doubt, because this was already her second try. Having left after entering ten years earlier, the woman had been sure she’d be able to make it this time around.

Of course, the veil hadn’t made it any easier to leave. In the veil, Sister Micha explained, one already felt like a professed sister. And, in the early 1980s, canonical novices already received veils, albeit without the blessing. In fact, the postulants, who wore simple white blouses and blue skirts, had been the only ones not in habit. Now, though, novices also wear white blouses and blue skirts (with blue ties and tucked-in tops to mark their graduation from the postulancy), making the transition back to lay life a bit less dramatic for entrants pushed out.

The Missionary Benedictines are now more selective about the candidates they accept, too. Previously, a good many applicants were admitted at once, without much close interrogation. Now, however, the sisters are spending more time on the screening process, resulting in a noticeable reduction in their postulant and novice dropout rates. While fewer entrants on average are accepted, more are staying in: the sisters joke that now there is quality instead of quantity.

**Postulant Prerequisites**

How is applicant potential assessed, though? Sister Virginia herself admitted this could be difficult—notwithstanding her self-proclaimed intuitive abilities. After all, interested women themselves don’t always know for sure whether or not they have a vocation for quite some time. Some think they do, but their interest in the congregation is really about other life problems. Some, on the other hand, don’t start off imagining themselves in the convent but eventually realize that they really do want to follow Christ by serving others.

The Missionary Benedictines also maintain certain standards. For one thing, education is important; like many other Philippine congregations, the sisterhood requires at least four years of postgraduate schooling (or the equivalent) of all applicants. Moreover, entry is contingent upon at least two years of prior work experience, like Sister Josephine’s teaching or Sister Micha’s stint as a chemical engineer.
Such worldliness is deemed desirable because it both insures the ability to negotiate alternatives and guarantees that entry represents a conscious decision made with an understanding of other possibilities.

There are other prerequisites, too. For example, all applicants are required to complete a physical exam before entering: although convent work is not unduly taxing, being a sister does require stamina (many sisters get only a few hours of sleep per night, and most have to be able to walk considerable distances in the course of at least some of their convent assignments), the ability to manage a certain amount of basic physical (and particularly domestic) labor, and general bodily discipline.

Furthermore, as Sister Micha gleefully announced during one of the searches in, the congregation prefers entrants with prior romantic experience. Not that the nuns automatically turn away women without such experience. Nor do they expect candidates to have engaged in sexual intercourse—far from it. Nevertheless, the Missionary Benedictine brochures encourage prospectives to take the time to get to know “several nice boys” while contemplating the advisability of a religious vocation precisely in order to better decide whether or not God might be the “Number One Love” of their lives. Women with experience, the ever controversial Sister Micha assured us, are better able to successfully deal with being celibate; otherwise, the vow to chastity isn’t as meaningful and the “what if” of sexual and emotional intimacy is harder to get past.

**Advancing to Aspirancy**

Even that isn’t all, though. As intimated earlier, serious candidates are expected to regularly attend searches in, make multiple and often overnight visits to various congregation houses, and participate in convent retreats. In addition, applicants have to pass a battery of tests before being admitted as aspirants. Indeed, as someone long involved in vocation and formation work, Sister Mary Peter told me the exams were often very revealing. To begin with, prospectives are asked to complete a preliminary questionnaire concerning personality, past experience, and family relationships. Next, candidates take what is essentially an IQ test, modeled on IQ tests used in the United States. According to Sister Mary Peter, the congregation doesn’t want “dull people” who might have a hard time managing convent assignments, getting along with other community members, and grasping the true
essence of the religious life. After all, she observed, every sister ultimately has to be able to implement the congregation’s values and mission herself in positions of significant responsibility. Every sister has to be able to think for herself, make moral judgments for herself, and anticipate the consequences of her actions.

Of course, the degree to which the test really measures intelligence is questionable. In fact, the use of IQ tests developed in the United States and administered in English favors women with greater cultural familiarity with the West—in other words, cosmopolitan, wealthy Filipinas with greater access to the world of international exchange than their poorer and more rural counterparts. Nor are all the sisters happy about such testing. Sister Micha, for example, told me about a Bacolod catechist she had thought good convent material. Although very poor, the woman exhibited confidence, strength of character, and the ambition to make something of herself; moreover, she developed a parish program of study remarkably similar to the modules used in formation. So as Bacolod vocation promoter, the sister recommended her for the exams. But the catechist failed, a fact Sister Micha attributed to her lack of familiarity with the English language.

Admittedly, the woman also did poorly on the second, projective, set of exams during which candidates are asked to complete sentences, write about themselves, and take an MMPI multiphasic personality test, all in order to assess prospectives’ ability to make sacrifices for the greater good, obey superiors, and successfully live in community. Successful applicants must demonstrate what Sister Mary Peter termed a “strong sense of self,” must be psychologically stable, and must be free of “major personality blocks.” And this is where things got sticky for the Bacolod catechist. She confessed not only to having been raped by her uncle but also to having taken it upon herself to threaten him with death by her own hand should he touch her or her younger cousins again. Unfortunately, none of this sat well with the rather conservative sister administering the exam—who, in Sister Micha’s opinion, exhibited unusual rigidity in claiming such childhood trauma an insurmountable obstacle to successful sisterhood.

Prospectives who pass the tests, on the other hand, commence an intensive period of aspirancy. At this point, candidates are individually invited to stay at one of the congregation’s community houses, typically at some distance from their home environment, for one to six months. Here, they are given the opportunity to participate in the community’s apostolate and prayers. This not only gives interested prospectives the chance to get a good taste of the Missionary Benedictine life before
finally committing to it, it also gives the nuns a chance to better assess how specific applicants might respond to the vocation in varied situations. Concrete behavior is at issue here: Is the aspirant considerate? Is she friendly? Is she on time for prayer? Is she willing to work hard? Can she effectively deal with diverse personalities?

The input of all host sisters on such counts is critical, and at times, Sister Mary Peter admitted, communities complain about applicant inflexibility or difficulties with obedience, for example. In such cases, aspirants are advised to take up another way of life. On the other hand, a collective entrance date is set for those aspirants to whom the congregation generally responds positively—usually ten to twenty per year, though the number can vary.

**The Stages of (De)Formation**

Upon successful negotiation of the aspirancy, entrants are asked to assemble various practical necessities (toothbrushes, underwear, and extra T-shirts) and important papers (baptismal certificates, college transcripts, certificates of medical clearance, and a formal, notarized, declaration of person and intent under oath) before relocating to Marikina, an hour or two away from Manila proper. Here, new initiates at last commence formation—or, as Sister Micha aptly put it, “de-formation.” Nor is it easy, as I learned during my own visits to the formation house.

My primary hostess in Marikina was Mona, a lively, bright-faced, bespectacled second-year novice who picked me up at the priory parlor one sunny morning amid a flurry of activity. This was the regular Marikina chauffeur, Mang Carlos, and she had to mail a package for Sister Gregory, and would I mind stopping in Cubao, at some distance from St. Scholastica’s, to fetch the canonical novices? As part of their training, they were taking classes from the Holy Spirit Sisters every Tuesday—along with over one hundred novices from other congregations, which, Mona observed with a bare hint of disapproval, meant a lot of revenue for the Holy Spirit Sisters, as they charged fifty pesos per person.

While I would have liked to know what the Holy Spirit Sisters were teaching for such money, however, we arrived at Cubao too late in the day to get much out of joining the others—eight of them in all, and all, they told me, hungry and tired and looking forward to both their lunch and afternoon siesta. Nor was Marikina ill suited to such activity.
Notwithstanding the faraway cries of schoolgirls from the associated Academy lingering in the air, the postulants and novices do not have to contend with the sort of chaos surrounding the priory grounds in Manila. Here, the initiation process is negotiated in highly controlled fashion, with the novices in the main house and the postulants in a newly constructed building next door, at a distance from both St. Scholastica’s Academy (serving kinder though high school students) and the Marikina Community (composed of school faculty and administrators) at the other side of the complex. Indeed, entrant contact with such external influences is limited to weekday morning Masses at the school chapel and occasional school assignments.

Isolation of this sort, of course, is typical of group rites of passage across cultures, facilitating the manipulation of emotional allegiances and ideologies. And, for the Missionary Benedictines, the process begins with an often tearful ceremony at which new entrants bid their natal families good-bye. Moreover, during their yearlong postulancy, new initiates are stripped of many of the physical trappings and daily expectations decorating their past lives, encouraged to unlearn previous cultural assumptions, and introduced to new behavioral models. Such resocialization is accomplished through the practice of mandates to obedience, poverty, and chastity; through disciplinary schedules; and through the study of basic congregational texts and history under a nun expressly trained to do initial formation work.

Then, in their second year, postulants begin the novitiate. The first year of the novitiate proper is canonical; as required by canon law, canonical novices are cloistered inside as much as possible. They are confined to the grounds of Marikina, aside from official excursions outside for educational purposes or purposes of specifically religious celebration. What’s more, while postulants are permitted to write letters home and allowed visits from family and friends on the third Sunday of every month, first-year novices must forgo such pleasures: communication with the outside world is forbidden. Indeed, canonical novices are subject to even stricter rules and regulations than those binding professed sisters, not only as part and parcel of a general attempt to break them of old and familiar habits but also to facilitate immersion in the congregation and its charism, or the “graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference 1994). In addition, the cloister affords entrants an opportunity to engage in intensive prayer with minimal outside distractions.

The shared experience of formation in the absence of other, external, sources of support not only renders congregation values all the
more compelling, however, but also fosters community feeling. Nor is this insignificant. For one thing, Sister Micha told me, one really got used to being solely with women. In other words, formation affords a viable alternative to a patriarchal family models wherein women are configured as dependents and men as protectors. Moreover, formation is intended to be persuasive of the possibility of a highly structured but in many respects mutually supportive and concerned collective wherein character and action (as judged according to Missionary Benedictine understandings of Christ and God) are of greater importance than appearance or material wealth.

After all, as Sister Virginia observed, while it is perfectly possible to serve God and others outside of the convent, part of the congregation’s allure lies in the companionship of others harboring the same life ideals. The prospect of living in community, in fact, figured prominently in her own decision to enter the convent: she believed that living with other religious sisters would help her to further develop her faith. Likewise, Sister Josephine emphasized the importance of the collective:

The charism, what makes us Benedictine and is specific to us, is that we live in community under a superior. . . . Benedictine life is the balance of prayer and work, lived in community. It’s lived in community always, [and] for us, the least number of members in a community would be four sisters. . . . The test, the challenge, and also the beauty of religious life for us Benedictines is community life, living together. . . . It’s like if you’re outside, you’re not in the convent, you also have problems with relationships with your coworkers. . . . The edge over being outside is that inside, everyone is trying to do her best, is trying to be better every day. And we also have these very regular chances for reconciliation.4

Then, too, one of the congregation pamphlets states, “the point of the Christian life is not the service of the individual, rather it is a service in the context of a witnessing community. The very existence of that community and its communal service . . . bear witness to the tangible presence within the society of God’s Kingdom of Love, justice and peace, the Kingdom that is already here and is not yet.” Being Missionary Benedictine, for the sisters, thus amounts to more than the personal pursuit of salvation. It also signifies belief in and commitment to participation in a religious cooperative, both as present and future promise.

And, given that, life at Marikina is structured in a highly deliberate
attempt to encourage mutual love and consideration as well as poverty, obedience, and chastity. Indeed, congregation formators are chosen carefully with such goals in mind. The postulant and novice mistresses—in this case Sister Ambrose and Sister Gregory, respectively—are expected to serve as good examples and to resolve their own conflicts with others peacefully. Of course, the postulants and novices themselves are generally on their best behavior during formation, too, given the need to prove themselves fit for the vocation. All in all, then, Marikina serves as something of a model for the religious life; my informants in fact often referred to it as an “ideal community” and talked of the formators as “ideal sisters.” Nor is this trivial; such instances of successful Missionary Benedictinism are more generally persuasive of the possibility of utopia not only within but even beyond the convent walls, however necessary social reform may be to the realization of community perfection on a larger scale.

**An “Ideal Community”?**

Of course, in actuality, the success of formation as an ideal ultimately meant to promote responsible sisterly activism depends quite strongly on the regulation of individual behavior during the postulancy and novitiate. In fact, life in formation is very much run by hours and minutes, notwithstanding sometime exceptions for celebratory or educational purposes. My first morning in Marikina, for example, began to the tune of the chapel bells at 4:50 A.M., allowing twenty minutes for showering and dressing before lauds in the formation house chapel. Lauds itself commenced with ten minutes of silence culminating in Sister Gregory’s sharp knuckle rap, the agreed upon signal to rise and sing the Lord’s praises, portions of which were chanted by those novices assigned to the part for the week, leaving the rest of us responsible for the psalm and hymn responsorials. Then, we relocated to the somewhat larger school chapel. Here, one of the various Jesuit, Benedictine, or other priests enlisted for the purpose by day of the week said Holy Mass for both the Missionary Benedictine formation and teaching communities, not to mention a scattering of students and faculty. Finally, the faithful lined up to take communion: the sisters first, then the novices, the postulants, and any visitors, row by row—all but me, although Mona repeatedly urged my participation because it was “supposed to be for all God’s people.” Didn’t it matter that I wasn’t even
baptized Catholic and had never gone through confirmation or gone to confession? Not to Mona: in her opinion, all that was important was whether or not I felt moved to participate in the Eucharist.5

Mona was gracious enough to hide her disappointment when I abdicated my place in line, though—and cheerfully engaged me in “meditative conversation” while showing me around the grounds over the thirty minutes of “silence” scheduled after mass. Next came breakfast—rice, fish, and mangoes—and then class with the formators from 8:30 to 9:30 A.M. After this, the morning’s chores had to be done: washing up, cutting vegetables in the kitchen, polishing the pews, arranging the liturgies, and shining the chapel floor with a coconut shell. Novices are assigned such menial duties on a rotating basis every weekday until 10:30, whereupon they take up other responsibilities—piano practice, book reading, homework, and so on. Indeed, such work represents their introduction to the Benedictine mandate to labor: although most nuns eventually receive jobs of a more administrative or educational nature, all Missionary Benedictines are supposed to be willing and able to do anything asked or needed of them. And the work is not just work: the idea is to find God or to feel oneself practicing a form of prayer while scrubbing dirty food off plates, chopping *kangkong* for communal meals, or dusting well-worn wooden benches.

In this case, reprieve from such “spiritual exercises” came at 11:45, with a bell calling everyone to midday prayer—meant, the sisters told me, to remind them to orient their attention toward God after reexamining their morning’s activities in light of their faith. After this, we all ate lunch, followed by siesta until 1:45, at which time the novices commenced an hour of theological studies. At 2:45, we took afternoon *merienda*—Skyflakes crackers, processed cheese, sticky rice confections, and local colas—and the novices scattered in pursuit of various individual assignments. The postulants, on the other hand, had a 4:00 class with Sister Ambrose, who announced that we would be discussing the saints’ martyrdom this afternoon: Did anyone wish to demonstrate? Had any of us been to Rome? No, no, she saw that look, not *Bedrome*!? Seriously, though, the day’s lessons concerned the missal and the Missionary Benedictine Liturgy of Hours (LOH); at present, she told me, they were going through the list of commons, learning which were most important. All sisters are eventually expected to know the whole lot, beginning with Mary, then the apostles, then the saints, then the martyrs. There were also four liturgical cycles to learn, she informed us—and each entrant would ultimately have to construct her own liturgies with the use of various key texts kept in the chapel for that purpose.

The chapel books also provided material for silent meditation while waiting for the community as a whole to convene for evening prayer at 6:00. Vespers is in fact an important part of the sisters’ daily schedule, affording them the opportunity to thank God for their day. Nor is going to vespers simply a matter of keeping to the hours and minutes of the prayer routine. As I soon discovered, it also entails learning to arrange the Missionary Benedictine LOH, the main text used by the congregation during all of its prayer sessions. The rather hefty tome contains locally selected versions of hymns and psalms for every day of the year. And preparing the book for easy reference during the process of praying requires learning the code used to designate particular selections. In this case, we looked to symbols chalked on a blackboard to the front of the room, marking our places in advance with the multicolored ribbons attached to every volume of the LOH. After all, while the vesper sequence is more or less set, the evening’s psalms and readings were new.

Following vespers, dinner was served. And, as the novices were prohibited outside contact during the meal—in preparation for the dinnertime silence expected of fully professed sisters—I ate with the postulants. Afterwards, at 8:00, we attended compline, or as Sister Micha put it in fond recollection of how tired she often was by that time, “complain.” Of course, on Wednesdays and Sundays compline is combined with vespers in order to provide time for evening recreation—Scrabble, walking, talking, or even watching America’s Funniest Home Videos on television.6 The novices have dance exercise every month, too; moreover, the first Sunday of each month is always set aside as a day of prayer and contemplation. This time, however, compline—essentially a fifteen-minute version of vespers intended to provide the sisters a chance to make their peace with God before retiring for the night—was followed by silent prayer until 9:00 P.M., at which point the novices returned to their cells, and I to bed.7

**Marking Time**

In many ways, such routinization of behavior and such scheduled periods of meditation within the cloister facilitate introspectivity. Whether or not young women entering the profession are self-aware to begin with, formation both trains them in and requires of them significant self-reflexivity. Entrants are both expected and provided ample space and time, here, to contemplate what it means to be Missionary Bene-
dictine and to ponder the degree to which they may or may not be suited to the vocation. What’s more, in learning to interrogate self and faith during the postulancy and novitiate, new entrants learn the habit of interrogation as a general practice. While quite specifically educated to particular congregational values, they are simultaneously taught critical thinking and trained to use good judgment in applying the Missionary Benedictine charism to new and unforeseen situations.

The routine helps insure an ideal balance of prayer and work, too. Indeed, the daily schedule is given more importance during formation than at any other point in the sisterhood precisely because it is intended to teach this balance. Moreover, the routine is more possible at Marikina than elsewhere. Postulants and novices have few outside responsibilities—grading and sociopolitical crises don’t interfere in their lives. Again, their world is quite insular and their survival needs are already met. Even their labor is directed more toward maintenance than necessity: their cleaning, laundry, school, and study duties are expressly designed to be easily contained within the strict convent timetables.

While the postulants and novices are on probation and must both learn and prove themselves able to keep the schedule, however, fully professed sisters are granted greater flexibility in light of their more complicated and varied assignments. It is acceptable to skip prayer to attend classes at De La Salle university, nap during evening recreation if feeling a bit too worn out, request home leave for family emergencies, go on retreat with little notice, or even take the anthropologist out to lunch instead of eating with the community—as long as it doesn’t happen “too often.” Nor do most of the nuns abuse their freedom. Most generally keep to the prescribed routine, having internalized the mandate to keep their prayers and labor in balance, a mandate doubtless all the easier to follow precisely because breachable given the necessity.

And all of this is in many respects remarkable within the Philippine context. Time is managed quite loosely in the general course of secular life: few people keep count of minutes or even quarter hours in conducting their everyday business. The best of friends often keep one another waiting an hour or two or even three for prearranged dates. Moreover, official meetings and appointments, not to mention concerts, plays, and other performance pieces, rarely begin when scheduled to do so. Student tardiness to the point of barely making it to class appeared commonplace at SSC, too. Even work hours are often quite flexible: employees are often allowed by default to arrive and depart
when they want, as I discovered upon attempted visits to area doctors out on three-hour lunches and library officials not yet in by early afternoon. Nor do most Manileños respond to such instances of postponement or lateness with impatience; such things are taken in stride, with good-humored jokes about “Filipino time.”

The highly scheduled life of the Missionary Benedictines, then, represents a significant change of lifestyle for women raised with little experience of, and quite possibly little concern for, minute-by-minute scheduling. Learning to manage the exact timing of not only every prayer and work session but also the siesta, daily meals, and recreation entails a marked shift in perspective from that of the stereotypically “laid back” Filipino. Postulant or novice tardiness is not lightly excused, either. Indeed, promptness is prerequisite to graduation from the novitiate, and making it to full sisterhood necessitates successfully internalizing a culturally foreign valuation of time. Where spontaneity and impulse are accommodated in lay life, efficiency and behavioral control are the rule in the religious life, and being timely requires at least some degree of self-awareness and self-discipline.

Successful self-regulation is also taken as a sign of spiritual dedication and capacity within the Missionary Benedictine world, providing the nuns a sense of particular moral worth. In fact, the appeal of the religious life can be attributed in part to the degree to which the injunction to be timely and self-disciplined contrasts with secular laxity. Such dissimilarities render the convent experience all the more extraordinary. Were the boundaries between the Missionary Benedictines and their lay Filipina friends less clearly discernible in differences of dress, duty, and devotion, fewer young women might see any point in becoming nuns. After all, the viability of monastic congregations in many ways depends on the assumption that spirituality and lay life are radically disparate.

There is more to the convent routines than the proof and confirmation of a calling, though. While the temporal discipline required of the sisters constantly redirects Missionary Benedictine energy toward convent-defined goals, thereby perpetuating and maintaining institutionalized power in classical Foucauldian fashion, the extreme orderliness and regularity of convent life simultaneously affords entrants a means of self-empowerment. The sisters’ success in keeping to congregation schedules not only provides reaffirmation of their vocation but also indexes their ability to control their own lives. This is the education of the will, after all, if initially in subjugation to congregation rules and regulation.
Indeed, as discussed earlier, congregation life signifies the possibility of opting and even agitating for more informed and less culturally determined life choices. The fact that the Missionary Benedictine community provides a counterpoint and obvious contrast to the modes of being and thinking characteristic of lay existence means that it offers a potentially privileged vantage point from which a critique of lay existence may be developed. Admittedly, some nuns may rather blindly adopt convent conventions as a new truth, replacing former habits with their new habits with little thought about the implications of such behavioral shifts. Yet at the very least, taking up the vocation entails making a conscious choice to adopt values and practices divergent from Filipino norms. And this, in turn, requires at least some awareness of the culturally contingent nature of community attitudes. The sort of new disciplinary behavioral requirements at issue here are not simply imposed upon new entrants as an inexplicable directive but rather are subject to a good deal of philosophical justification and discussion alike. While the congregation’s teachings are certainly highly biased, the congregation nevertheless encourages its members to consider the ethical implications of and the rationale for their actions: if the convent is rule bound, the convent’s rules are themselves introduced to entrants (and were presented to me) as ideological and logical choices, amenable to alteration where and when necessary in the pursuit of larger and more abstract Missionary Benedictine imperatives.

Re-formation

Even the organization of life at Marikina, although based on traditional conceptions of the stages of religious initiation, is open to revision: the postulancy and novitiate have been subject to numerous modifications in an effort to make the formative experience ever more relevant. Modern-day postulants and novices have more freedom than their historical counterparts, for example. When Sister Mary Peter was admitted to the congregation in the 1950s, new entrants were much more rigidly segregated from the fully professed nuns. The two groups were introduced to one another, could smile at one another, and saw one another at prayer and meals, but could not freely converse except on big feast days. Novices also resided in a different part of the house, where they had contact only with the two sisters responsible for them, the novice mistress and her assistant. The idea, Sister Mary Peter said, was to avoid confusing young entrants. It was felt at the time that “too many cooks
would spoil the meal.” Now, however, the Missionary Benedictines believe collective dialogue helpful and no longer forbid discussion among the postulants, novices, and fully professed sisters.

The nuns also now encourage entrants to commit to social activism as a religious responsibility, the outcome of a radical revision of congregational goals accomplished during Sister Micha’s tenure at Marikina. The sister entered in 1981, during the Marcos years. By that time, she told me, former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos had established his power base so well that even without martial law, his machinery worked. Civilians were arrested without warrants, the courts had no real authority, the Senate was locked out, and so on. And her formator had been into “the signs of the times.” Although the novitiate is traditionally cloistered, Sister Micha’s novice mistress had taken her charges outside the convent walls, partly at the urging of already professed sisters who had experienced military violence in the mid-1970s during a union strike. In the wake of such experiences, the entire community had begun talking about “integral spirituality” and “total human development,” the integration of prayer and action in support of social justice.

Admittedly, there had been tension between the minority “status quo sisters” and those who wanted to “get involved.” According to Sister Micha, the more conservative Missionary Benedictines—especially some of the older ones, who were comfortable with their life as it was—hadn’t been happy about the changes others of the nuns were introducing. Solidarity with the poor “wasn’t their job,” they protested. They were concerned, too, that the congregation was “becoming communist”—a matter of the paranoia of the times, Sister Micha observed, given strong Marcos propaganda against the “reds.” Some old-time nuns didn’t want the novices going out into the streets, either; they complained that the entrants were neglecting their prayers when late to vespers because participating in political rallies.

The more progressive sisters advocating change were articulate and persuasive, though. They argued that being out with the people constituted a sort of prayer, just like labor within the convent. Nor did this in any way make things easier for the postulants and novices. Sister Micha assured me that her life as an entrant had been even more structured than that of the women currently undergoing formation. Her novice mistress had made sure of the usual requirements and then had added more. For example, she had taken them on “exposures” during which they lived with the poor, without bathrooms or running water. Moreover, the novices had attended classes at the Sisters Formation Institute (SFI; now the Institute for Religious Studies, or IFRS), established by...
the Association of Religious Superiors of the Philippines for all interested congregations and known for espousing radical, ground-up liberation theology. Here, they had learned to understand their spirituality as radical action and to recognize the heroic faith not only of the disciples but also of women and the poor, such as Deborah’s female maid-servant, Jael, who saved Israel.

Such lessons had made a deep impression on Sister Micha, too. While some of the novices who had been raised more traditionally and were more invested in the image of Jesus as Santo Niño had found it difficult to accept the idea of Jesus having been in solidarity with the underprivileged and hadn’t wanted to hear about the prophets rallying against the king’s men, she had found it easy to open up to such new ways of thinking about Catholicism. What’s more, she had found the suggestion that God might be feminine positively inspiring. The SFI teachings made her feel as if her “brain was brand-new and had never been used before”—rendering her vocation all the more compelling.

**Being Benedictine**

Learning to be Missionary Benedictine also entails the study and reinterpretation of a long monastic tradition with a special emphasis on Benedictinism. Indeed, the importance placed by the sisters on such church history was made particularly clear during a get-together the formators, postulants, and novices hosted in honor of St. Benedict’s Feast Day, July 11. Following both a special Mass and a lavish buffet dinner, those of us invited to the celebration were treated to a show. “Hello everyone, can you hear me?” Sister Ambrose exclaimed, tapping on a microphone set up to one corner. Then she announced the night’s entertainment. First, the postulants’ would take a turn—this being their chance to prove knowledge of one of the central figures in the church canon: St. Benedict himself. In fact, the saint is of general historical importance to Catholicism, having composed one of the most influential set of rules for monastic life. What’s more, all Benedictines, whether Missionary or otherwise and whether female or male, in some sense model themselves after their namesake. Becoming Benedictine implies following the saint’s example, however loosely. Thus, all entrants are required to study *The Life and Miracles of St. Benedict (Bennet) of Nursia*, consisting in a partial and rather fantastical biography of the...
saint’s struggles with temptation and the devil as well as his service to those in need.

Having recently finished reading the aforementioned text, the postulants had decided to imaginatively reenact some of Bennet’s better-known miracles. They dramatized Benedict banishing the devil from the grounds of a new abbey under construction, chastising his monks for attempting to hide their trespasses from him, reproaching King Totilas for trying to fool him by dressing one of his guards in a monarch’s garb, and, finally, calling on God to miraculously revive a field-worker’s dead son. Each episode not only testified to the saint’s significant power but also conveyed important moral messages: devotion is stronger than sin, honesty and obedience are critical, faith and humility can accomplish great things. How could we help but conclude that Benedict had God on his side, as, to a good deal of sisterly and prospective applause alike, the players completed their stagecraft with bows, curtsies, and formal introductions in order of canonical age?

But there is also a more serious and perhaps more strictly historical side to the saint’s biography, as conventionally distinguished from the biography of his miracles. Following a short intermission for compline, then, we were treated to another series of performances, this time executed by the novices, who had been charged with the task of portraying that life. They began with Bennet’s departure from home, a tale relevant in many ways to their own choice to prioritize religious obligations over familial obedience. Then they enacted the story of Benedict’s stint as a hermit in Subiaco, Italy, and the story of his miraculous escape from poisoning by corrupt brothers during his tenure as an abbot. Again, their dramatizations were as much moral as descriptive in character: the hero of the day prevailed because he was dedicated and humble, his integrity affording him salvation from the sins of others.

That wasn’t all, though. The novices also performed the tale of St. Scholastica, Benedict’s twin sister, with whom the saint purportedly reconvened on an annual basis. During one of their yearly reunions, Scholastica made the rather unusual request of her brother to stay by her side until morning. He adamantly refused to linger past nightfall, however, citing his duties as abbot. But his sister began praying to God. And, suddenly, the clear sky turned stormy, preventing Benedict’s departure: The man of God, seeing that he could not by reason of such thunder and lightning and great abundance of rain return back to his Abbey, began to be heavy and to complain of his sister, saying:
“God forgive you, what have you done?” to whom she answered: “I desired you to stay, and you would not hear me, I have desired our good Lord, and he hath vouchsafed to grant my petition.” . . . And so by that means they watched all night, and with spiritual and heavenly talk did mutually comfort one another: and therefore by this we see . . . that he would have had that thing, which yet he could not: for if we respect the venerable man’s mind, no question but he would have had the same fair weather to have continued as it was, when he set forth, but he found that a miracle did prevent his desire, which, by the power of almighty God, a woman’s prayers had wrought. And it is not a thing to be marveled at, that a woman which of long time had not seen her brother, might do more at that time than he could, seeing, according to the saying of St. John, “God is charity” [1 John 4:8] and therefore of right she did more which loved more. (St. Pachomius Library 1995, chap. 33)

Here, then, we have a miracle performed not by Benedict himself, but instead by his twin—in opposition to his stated wishes. And St. Scholastica’s success is due not only to the strength of her faith, itself indexed by God’s attention to the intensity of her prayer, but also the strength of her love. Loving more, in this case, renders it possible for her to do more “of right.”

Nor is the story insignificant within the Missionary Benedictine context. The tale suggests that women and men are equal in God’s eyes and that female devotion can override the prayers of even famous abbots under the right circumstances. Scholastica is no less a saint than her brother, and the favor God extends her is an important message of women’s rights within a church that has historically relegated women to subordinate status. Indeed, Scholastica and Benedict appear representative of a single impulse toward God in the final scene of the biography. According to the text, God sent Benedict a vision of his sister’s soul ascending to heaven in the form of a dove three days after their extended reunion. Thereupon, the abbot sent his monks “to bring her corpse to his Abbey, to have it buried in that grave which he had provided for himself: by means whereof it fell out that, as their souls were always one in God while they lived, so their bodies continued together after their death” (St. Pachomius Library 1995, chap. 34). Such funerary arrangements underscore the equal strength of the twins’ faith, notwithstanding their different social positions.

Of course, Scholastica’s love also transcends the disciplinary nature
of the Benedictine schedule. Her miracle making suggests that true spirituality is neither solely nor necessarily a matter of monastic rules but rather might even take precedence over such rules. The saint’s success in maneuvering the extension of her brother’s visit attests to both the importance of flexibility in the religious life and the importance of love itself (or at least platonic sibling love of the sort indexed in the monastic use of terms like sister and brother) as something arguably more definitive of Christianity than the letter of the law.

If St. Benedict is probably best known for his Rule, then, St. Scholastica, who remains a relatively mysterious figure outside of her brother’s biography, is probably best known for her rule breaking. Nor does it seem inappropriate to find the female of the pair playing the subversive role. As noted earlier, women and men are not granted equal authority within the official Catholic hierarchy (women can’t be priests or bishops or Popes), and women are not always granted full respect as spiritual leaders. But the very marginalization of women by the more conservative Church orthodoxy arguably affords women religious a privileged perspective. Marginalized figures are often in a better position to ascertain what is going on—distance often provides at least a certain degree of objectivity, not to mention freedom of action. And insofar as the Benedictine order only began admitting women monastics late in the day, St. Scholastica was not fully part of her brother’s world. As a mere consecrated virgin, then, Scholastica may have been all the more willing to disregard the Benedictine schedule in order to act on her love.

Moreover, as a female rule breaker motivated by strong love as well as strong faith, she seems a fitting model—even a feminist one—for the Missionary Benedictines. No wonder the congregation’s largest school is titled St. Scholastica’s College: the saint’s statue seems quite at home in the halls of one of the first area educational institutes to include women’s studies courses in its curriculum.

**Eliding Gender, Playing the Generic**

While gender matters to St. Scholastica’s story precisely because the text of Benedict’s biography includes so few women, however, Benedict himself is a much less noticeably gendered figure. Why? Because within both Church tradition and Philippine society, men are effectively the default. The histories of both Catholicism and the republic are populated primarily by male figures, and Filipino English speakers still
widely use he and man to indicate generic personhood. This in itself is problematic precisely insofar as it sends or affirms the message that men, not women, do things and make a difference in society. Indeed, this is why the Missionary Benedictines emphasize the use of inclusive language. Yet the fact that the male is the default within the Philippines has additional ramifications of a rather different sort. While the assumption that the generic person is male subtly but certainly forwards the notion that men matter more than women, it can also be turned on its head after a fashion by women who manage to break through such gender barriers.

Perhaps I can explain better with recourse to my own childhood. As a young girl with aspirations toward adventure and travel—and, I admit, with a certain pride in what was sometimes only a pretense of fearlessness in the face of fast downhill skateboarding, or tree climbing, or highboard diving—I was simultaneously quite aware of and even defensive of my gender, and quite hell-bent on proving, to myself as much as anyone else, that being a girl wouldn’t stop me from doing what I wished. Not that I wanted to be a boy—I simply didn’t want to be limited by my sex. And my favorite female heroines included such capable and courageous characters as Athena and Dorothy and Ozma of the Oz books.

But I didn’t have much problem playing parts inspired by Tarzan, Merlin, and Buck Rogers either. I simply cast myself as a female protector of the jungle or magician or science fiction adventurer. It didn’t matter, in the end, that the originals were men: I could still act them happily enough. The male was enough of a default and my own aspirations were broad enough to allow for such elisions and gender crossings. Nor, in fact, do I think my experience was unusual, at least not with respect to those of my friends equally interested in such imaginative adventuring.

On the other hand, I don’t think I ever saw my brother or any of his friends playing at such gender crossing, pretending to be male Athenas or Dorothys. While my female companions and I not only could and did appreciate and appropriate those female examples of heroism available to us but also quickly learned to appropriate the much more plentiful male models we came across—celebrating gender in the first case and ignoring it in the second—the boys populating my childhood world were more careful about keeping to Spiderman and Superman and Batman. And why not, when their masculine idols were already numerous enough to provide a wide range of possibility at play?

Not, of course, that this is all there is to what is in fact a complicated
process of learning and practicing gender; nor can my own experiences as a middle-class white girl in Ohio (albeit one who always felt an outsider) be mapped with any degree of certainty onto those of my informants. Nevertheless, the Missionary Benedictines have seemingly also learned to appropriate the male default for themselves. In fact, such appropriative tactics make sense for girls harboring activist ambitions in social contexts wherein male models of heroism are far more common than are female models of heroism. Ultimately, the nuns’ use of both male and female models of virtue foreshadows their more radical attempts to cross over into traditionally male domains within Philippine society and to both claim and develop new capacities as women.

While St. Scholastica clearly holds particular relevance for the Missionary Benedictines as an example of specifically female spirituality, then, my informants expressed little difficulty simultaneously identifying with St. Benedict. Indeed, the ease with which the postulants and novices on stage took on the personas of the abbot and his monks, disguised in fake mustaches and loose robes, underlines the relative insignificance of gender for the nuns with respect to the examples afforded by at least the male members of the Benedictine canon. And the creative possibilities afforded by the selective and intentional interpretation of maleness as generic is all the more evident in the sisters’ stated allegiance to Jesus Christ. Admittedly, in many ways, Jesus is obviously male (just as God is traditionally spoken of in the masculine): he is not only referred to as the “Son of God,” the “Lord,” and sometimes simply “He” but also is typically portrayed as very much the man he was in strictly historical terms. Yet this doesn’t stop the nuns from professing the desire to be Christlike. They read Jesus, in other words, not so much as a man but more as a gender-neutral spiritual model, and they can do so precisely because masculinity is already often cast as the default.11 If the term *mankind* encompasses womankind, why should Jesus’s manhood prevent him from serving as a model of religious womanhood?

Of course, it may well be all the easier for the Missionary Benedictine Sisters to identify with St. Benedict and Christ alike precisely because the masculinity of both men is downplayed within most of the key texts documenting their lives and deeds. Neither appears very markedly male by traditional Filipino standards: neither is sexually promiscuous, neither wields significant political or economic power, neither uses violence or engages in macho posturing. Rather, Jesus in particular is portrayed as a man of patience and tolerance and, often, a
gentleness of spirit stereotypically associated with femininity in the Philippines.

My interviewees assured me, too, that, by their reading of the Bible, Christ was an equal-opportunity spiritual leader. His official disciples may have been male due to historical circumstance, but he also recognized Mary Magdalen’s devotion even when she was ostracized by the general populace. He acknowledged the faith displayed by the sisters Mary and Martha, too, and the Virgin Mother certainly played an important part in his life.

**Names, Veils, and Rings**

What of the remainder of the Missionary Benedictines’ eight-year training, however? While the first two years of formation are completed at Marikina, the first half of the third year is typically completed elsewhere. Second-year novices are placed in one of several different houses scattered over the Philippines, most consisting of four to ten Missionary Benedictine Sisters. Here, they help manage the congregation’s educational, medical, or social-action apostolates, thereby gaining a better sense of what it means to be a nun outside. Six months of debriefing and processing follow, culminating in the rite of first profession, which marks graduation from the Marikina house and the transition to the juniorate.

At this time, entrants make their first vows to poverty, chastity, and obedience, all taken very seriously, if only lay vows. They also publicly mark their official certificates of first profession, “like prewedding contracts,” often signing the commitment cards beforehand in an attempt to avoid nervous mistakes and unsteady hands (or such is the usual practice; ever the rebel, Sister Micha confessed to having signed her card during the ritual itself—her signature she sighed, looked like “chicken scratching.”) Then there is the all-important “Giving of the Religious Names,” prefaced by an explanatory statement from the prioress: “As a sign of the new way of life that you will live, and likewise as a sign that you are now part of our community, we give you your new names as religious.” Notably, every novice is allowed to suggest three appellatory possibilities, ideally taken from the canon of saints recognized by the Benedictines, if also often dictated by the desire for paternal appeasement. Their first choices are usually honored, too, although Sister Micha told me one of her fellow entrants, desirous of greater certainty, had requested Jean, Jeanie, and Omelet, banking on the
fact that the convent superiors wouldn’t want a Sister Omelet in their number.

Finally, the new junior sisters receive their veils (meaning the entire habit) in what is termed the “blessing and presentation of the sign of consecration.” Although markedly less comfortable than the breezier novitiate garb, these visibly signify a major step on the road to full sisterhood. The entrants now look like nuns and now bear the responsibility of their formal religious pledges to at least temporarily subscribe to convent rules and routines that previously were only voluntary.

While the juniorate technically lasts five years, however, the sisters’ first vows are only good for three years; after that, each sister is given the opportunity to renew them for another year and then one more yet before taking permanent vows. First-year junior sisters live in the juniorate house, attached to the main priory building but with a separate library, classroom, and prayer room. During this stage of their formation, entrants study the congregational charism with greater intensity, participate in household duties around the priory, and undertake further formative studies at the IFRS.

Second- and third-year juniors, on the other hand, are again assigned to various provincial Missionary Benedictine communities where for the first time they get a chance to work in the different congregational apostolates as proper sisters wearing the habit and bearing real responsibilities. Fourth-years return to the juniorate house and continue formative studies to gain a better perspective on their experiences in community, while fifth-years commence preparation for their primary, perpetual vows under the tutelage of their juniorate directress (in this case Sister Mary Peter). During this time, focus is placed on intensive reading and thinking about the Benedictine Missionary charism, monasticism, the Rule, the constitution, and the vows. Fifth-year juniors also spend half the day working around the house, cooking and cleaning in the kitchen, doing repairs, and the like.

The reward, of course, is advancement to full sisterhood. Admittedly, usually less than half of every year’s entrants make their perpetual vows. In fact, the eleven novices who made their first profession during my field tenure were applauded as part of an especially large group—usually, only seven or eight make it through the novitiate alone in any given year. What’s more, the rites of final profession I attended testified to a high dropout rate in the juniorate. The first celebration of perpetual vows I observed, in April, was a solo affair, and only two juniors made their final profession during the second ceremony I witnessed, in September.

Nor is the ritual insignificant. Like the sisters’ rites of first profes-
sion, the nuns’ rites of final profession take place in conjunction with and as part of a special Mass in St. Scholastica’s chapel, the primary difference being that the juniors receive rings signifying their fidelity to God and their full congregation membership. Furthermore, their vows are now for life. And more than one of my informants claimed the day of her final profession was the most important day of her life.

The sisters also explicitly liken the ceremony to a wedding. There is the ring, of course. Moreover, the nuns are quick to point out parallels between the vows they make and traditional Catholic marital vows. During their final profession, juniors promise fidelity (through chastity) to Christ as a figurative husband while pledging to consummate the union through obedience, poverty, and service. Juniors are often teased about “marrying” God, too. While preparing for Sister Jacqueline’s rite of perpetual profession, for example, the sisters played with the nervous initiate: Was she ready to be married? Was she ready for the ring? Did she want to back out? Too late—her parents had already arrived! Her parents weren’t the only ones, either—the chapel was crowded with nuns from all over the Philippines, for whom most of the right side pews in the building had been reserved.

While the vocation appears at odds with popular ideals of family and marriage, then, the Missionary Benedictines have managed to appropriate much of the symbolism associated with such ideals for their own purposes. And this doubtless not only helps ameliorate lingering insecurities about the unorthodox nature of the vocation but also renders the sisters’ rites of final profession—marking the end of a full eight years of formation—all the more emotionally compelling.