

# CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS: DECLINE AND REVIVAL

RODNEY STARK

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

ROGER FINKE

PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

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*This essay attempts to explain the dramatic, recent decline in Catholic vocations--in the number of persons becoming priests, nuns, or monks. Appropriate data force rejection of gender-based explanations, such as increased secular career opportunities for women. Cross-national data show that the declines began in Europe and North America immediately following actions taken at Vatican II which greatly reduced the rewards of the religious life while maintaining the high costs of vocations (including celibacy, obedience, and poverty). That the declines in vocations were long delayed in Portugal and Spain (as well as in less developed nations) adds credibility to our proposed explanation that young Catholics became far less likely to take up the religious life because they recognized that vocations now entailed a negative cost/benefit ratio. Seeking stronger confirmation of this explanation, we propose that vocations will continue to flourish to the extent that a positive cost/benefit ratio has been retained or restored. A positive ratio can be achieved by reduced costs or by restoration of benefits. The former has not occurred, but in some orders and dioceses, a return to tradition has led many young Catholics to once again find the religious life attractive, as is demonstrated by data on ordinations and on the growth of religious orders.*

**F**or the past three decades, a rapid decline in Roman Catholic religious vocations has been underway in North America and most of Western Europe. For example, in 1965 there were 181,421 nuns, 12,255 brothers and 48,046 male seminarians in the United States. Just five years later, in 1970, there were only 153,645 American nuns. During that year, 4,337 Catholic women (most of them young) left the religious life, a defection rate six times higher than prevailed in the early 1960s. Meanwhile, the number of seminarians had declined by 40 percent to 28,819 and the number of brothers had dropped to 11,623. By 1995 the number of American nuns had dropped to 92,107, brothers to 6,578 and seminarians to 5,083.

Table 1 shows similar drops in Canada and several nations of Western Europe. Notice the immense similarity in the percentages of decline in the number of women religious from 51 percent in the Netherlands to 44 percent in France. The percentage declines in male religious and in male seminarians are even higher than those for women religious

**TABLE 1**  
**Declining Catholic Vocations, 1965-1995**

	<b>% Decline</b>
<i>Canada</i>	
Female Religious	46%
Male Religious	77%
Male Seminarians*	72%
<i>France</i>	
Female Religious	44%
Male Religious	68%
Male Seminarians*	69%
<i>Germany (united)</i>	
Female Religious	48%
Male Religious	81%
Male Seminarians*	54%
<i>Netherlands</i>	
Female Religious	51%
Male Religious	78%
Male Seminarians*	81%
<i>Great Britain</i>	
Female Religious	43%
Male Religious	82%
Male Seminarians*	54%

\* Diocesan and Religious Seminarians combined

and, being based on far smaller numbers of cases, are somewhat more variable across nations. In any event, these data make it clear that whatever caused the decline in vocations it was something that transcended national differences and which came into play suddenly and simultaneously in each society.

Understandably, changes of such magnitude have prompted a great deal of concern and many explanations have been offered. Although we will present data revealing that some of these explanations are inadequate, we would like to acknowledge the very careful scholarship and concern for objectivity that characterizes the large literature on this subject.

The most popular explanation of the loss of vocations blames the refusal of the Church hierarchy to respond to new generations of Catholics unwilling to accept the traditional sacrifices required of priests and the religious, chief among these being vows of celibacy,

obedience, and, in the case of those entering orders, poverty. In support of this explanation, a number of studies conducted during the late 1960s and the 1970s found celibacy to be the most common cause given by ex-priests for having defected (Greeley 1972; Schneider 1973; Schoenherr and Greeley 1974). More generally, the decline in vocations has been linked to the intransigence of local bishops in response to the aspirations of the religious for liberal reforms. In particular, the bishops have been blamed for responding "traditionally, sternly, and in a disciplinarian manner" (Seidler and Meyer 1989:123) and thereby reaffirming the traditional demand for obedience rather than allowing the religious greater participation in decision-making.

However, some studies of nuns have not blamed their decline on failures of the Church, instead emphasizing how secular social changes have reduced the attractiveness of the role of nun as a career option for young Catholic women. Specifically, the rapid decline in Catholic women's religious orders is attributed to rapid changes in the secular opportunities of women (Ebaugh 1993, 1977). The argument is made that, faced with greatly increased secular career opportunities, Catholic women especially in economically developed nations became less inclined to pursue careers within the confines of religious vows. A recent empirical study (Ebaugh, Lorence, and Chafetz 1996) appeared to clinch the case. Using data for 50 nations, several measures of the extent of secular opportunities for women were found to be quite strongly related to the rate of decline in the number of women in religious orders. In nations where a larger proportion of women in the labor force are managers and professionals, and where a higher percentage of women pursue higher education, there has been a greater decline in religious vocations among Catholic women.

Finally, some propose that the decline in Catholic vocations was caused by the radical revisions in religious roles adopted by Vatican Council II (1962-1965). They argue that, as many of the most central sacred aspects of the religious roles were dismissed or discontinued, the sacred gratifications of religious vocations were thereby greatly reduced as were features of the religious life that sustained and even generated these gratifications. For example, as will be discussed in detail later, the Council withdrew the doctrine that the religious life is morally superior and equated the holiness of the religious and the laity. Or, as the orders dispensed with their distinctive dress, in response to the Council's directive to modernize, the religious became unrecognizable and thus no longer the object of special treatment and respect in public. These losses came without any offsetting decreases in the costs of the religious life or any increases in its secular rewards. (Finke 1997; Wittberg 1994; Iannaccone 1994; DiIanni 1993, 1987; Finke and Stark 1992; Greeley 1982; Falk 1980). That the declines began immediately upon the conclusion of the Council has been cited in support of this thesis.

In this essay we attempt to bring appropriate data, properly analyzed, to bear on all of these explanations. For reasons that will be clear, we begin with an investigation of the decline in women's religious orders and demonstrate that the "secular opportunity" explanation does not hold. In doing so, we will demonstrate why it is inappropriate to seek separate explanations of the decline in female and male vocations, that any adequate explanation must include both. We then propose such an explanation whereupon we test it via the *principle of reversibility*. That is, if we have correctly identified the factors that caused the decline in religious vocations, then should these factors be reversed, the trend in voca-

tions also should be reversed. Thus, we shall show that our explanation accounts for recent instances of increased vocations. Finally, our most fundamental purpose in this essay is not to explain this specific historical development, but to test more basic theories concerning why "strict" religious organizations are strong and the basis for high levels of commitment. Readers are asked to keep in mind that we do not suggest that religious organizations *ought to be* strict or that religious organizations *ought to rely* on very high levels of motivation.

## NUNS: OPPORTUNITY AND DECLINE

It is a commonplace in writing about Catholic women's religious orders that at one time, while non-Catholic girls wishing to be teachers, nurses, or social workers could seek these positions through secular education, Catholic girls found these careers linked to the role of nun. This was so, not only because most of these positions within Catholic life were filled by nuns, but because the orders provided educational opportunities appropriate to these occupations. The orders were a primary "avenue of social mobility for Catholic girls, many of them from immigrant, working class, and/or farm families, who otherwise had virtually no opportunity for upward mobility." (Ebaugh et al. 1996:174). Moreover, nuns could aspire to executive careers largely denied other women, Catholic or Protestant. Because nuns ran the hospitals, schools, orphanages, and other charitable institutions, nearly all North American and western European women in important executive positions during the nineteenth and early twentieth century were members of Catholic orders (Thompson 1986).

It is implied in much, but not all, of this literature that, although women in religious orders dutifully fulfilled their religious obligations (devoting hours daily to prayer and meditation, observing enclosure rules, being obedient, accepting poverty, wearing distinctive and often extremely impractical habits, and the like), it was primarily the occupational and educational opportunities that drew most of them to the orders. From this perspective it is no surprise that the immense recent shift in the opportunities for women in the secular world would have a devastating impact on Catholic women's religious vocations. As Helen Rose Ebaugh and her colleagues (1996:174) put it recently:

*"As educational and career opportunities expanded for women...during the last three decades, the unique rewards of upward mobility traditionally provided by religious orders no longer outweighed the costs of membership, namely a celibate life of poverty and obedience to superiors."*

This argument is so elegant and plausible that it seems a shame to challenge it. Moreover, as noted, Ebaugh et al. have offered impressive empirical support for this view based on cross national comparisons of 50 nations. But, challenge it we must.

Table 2 is based on all nations for which there are data on the number of members of religious orders in 1965, immediately prior to the onset of the decline. Lack of data eliminates nations under Communist rule in 1965 and results in a total of 103 cases. Following Ebaugh et al. (1996), we then eliminated 37 nations having fewer than 500 nuns in 1995 (although the results were only slightly weaker when these cases were included), for a final *n* of 66 cases. The data are from the *Catholic Almanac*.

**TABLE 2**  
**Correlates (R) of Rates of Decline (Increase)**  
**in Religious Vocations, 1965-1995**

	Decline in the Number of Women Religious	Decline in the Number of Women Religious per 1,000	Decline in the Number of Male Religious
<i>Secular Opportunities</i>			
Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM)	.48** (57)	.31** (57)	.48** (58)
Gender Inequalities Index (GDI)	.40** (61)	.37** (61)	.48** (62)
<i>Economic Development</i>			
Per Capita GNP	.60** (63)	.56** (63)	.60** (64)
Per Capita Electricity Consumption	.61** (66)	.49** (66)	.50** (66)
Cars per 1,000	.62** (65)	.50** (65)	.63** (66)

\*\* p < .001

The primary dependent variable is the decline or increase in the *number* of nuns in each nation from 1965 through 1995. Ebaugh et al. attempted to take cross-national changes in and variations in the size of the Catholic populations into account by basing their measure of decline or increase on the number of nuns per 1,000 Catholics in 1960 and 1990. This results in a somewhat unreliable measure because estimates of the size of the Catholic population often are extremely inaccurate, especially in "Catholic nations" (Stark 1992). Thus, while the statistics on the number of religious are very accurate, this accuracy is gravely compromised if the number of religious is divided by a very unreliable population denominator. An additional source of unreliability stems from the fact that Catholic populations, whatever their actual size, also vary greatly in their age composition and thus in the size of the potential pool of recruits to religious orders, a problem acknowledged, but then ignored by Ebaugh et al. Use of the absolute numbers of nuns in 1965 and 1995 gets around these measurement problems, since each nation is, in effect, its own control because our measure is based on the growth or decline in the number of nuns from Time 1 (1965) to Time 2 (1995). However, for the sake of comparison, we also calculated a measure based on nuns per 1,000 Catholics (column 2 in Table 2). Overall, the measure of change based on the absolute number of nuns produces results offering far stronger support for the increased secular opportunity explanation, as might be expected when substantial measurement error is eliminated.

The first "opportunity" variable shown in Table 2 consists of a gender empowerment measure (GEM) developed by staff social scientists at the United Nations and published in the *Human Development Report, 1995*. This index estimates the relative power of women in societies based on such things as the percentage of females holding political offices and appointments, the percentage of females among managers, professionals and technicians, and women's share of earned income. The correlation with the decrease (increase) in the number of nuns is strong (.48) and highly significant — the higher a nation's score on the GEM the greater its decline in the number of nuns. This independent variable also is significantly correlated with the rate of change when the number of nuns is calculated as a rate per 1,000 Catholics, but the correlation is substantially weaker (.31). The second "opportunity" independent variable is a gender development index (GDI), constructed and published by the same source as the GEM. The GDI indexes gender inequalities in both opportunity and achievement, paying particular attention to education, literacy, occupation, and health. As would be predicted by the secular opportunity explanation, this variable also is highly correlated with a decrease in nuns. Both indices are based on data for the 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

Ebaugh and her co-authors reported that the decline in Catholic vocations was limited to the economically more developed nations. The lower half of Table 2 strongly confirms their finding: all three measures of development are highly correlated with a decline in vocations. Clearly, it would be appropriate to examine the opportunity effects under controls for development.

**TABLE 3**  
**Controlling for Economic Development Dependent Variable:**  
**Decline in the Number of Women Religious**

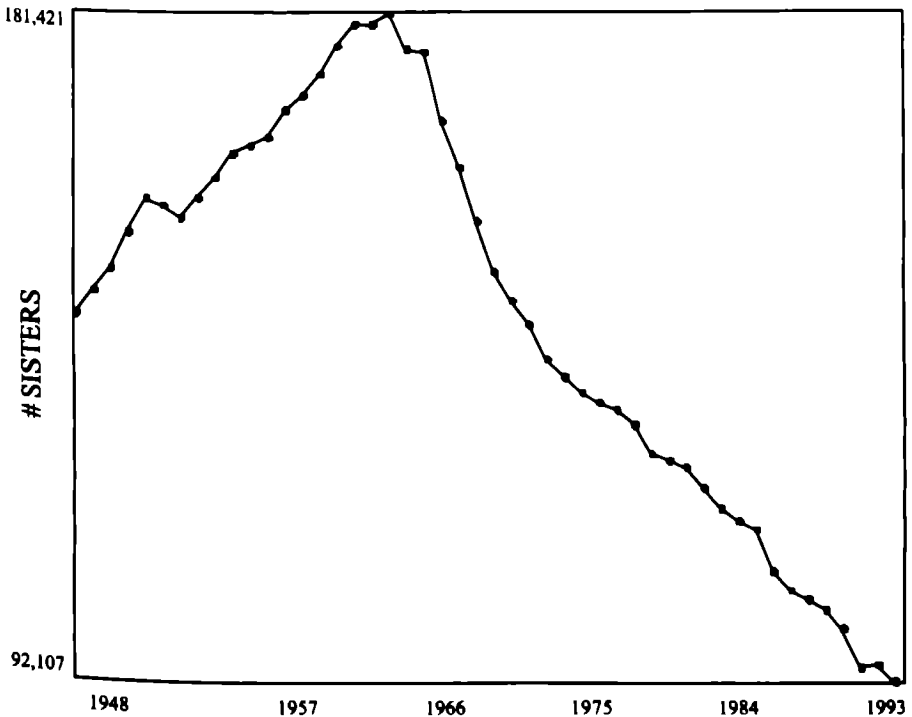
	Standardized Beta	T Value
Index of Gender Inequalities (GDI)	0.080	0.474
Per Capita GNP	0.637	3.789**
	$R^2 = .334$	
Gender Empowerment (GEM)	0.107	0.595
Per Capita GNP	0.493	2.752**
	$R^2 = .336$	
** $p < .001$		

Table 3 shows that these effects entirely evaporate when Per Capita GNP and each opportunity measure are entered into regressions — each of the other development measures produced the same results. Thus, we must conclude that it is economic development that is the real causal factor and that female opportunity measures have no net effects of their own. Later, we suggest why the declines have not taken place in many less developed nations. An even more compelling reason for dismissing the female opportunity explanation is revealed by these data. The third column in Table 2 shows the high, positive correlations between increases in secular female opportunities and declines in membership in *male* religious orders. These correlations defy the claim that expanded opportunities for women led to a decline in women's religious vocations, for surely increased secular opportunities for women could not plausibly cause men to cease becoming monks. Thus it is necessary to seek an explanation that applies to both male and female vocations. We shall return to this matter in the next section.

### AMERICAN VOCATIONS: 1948-1995

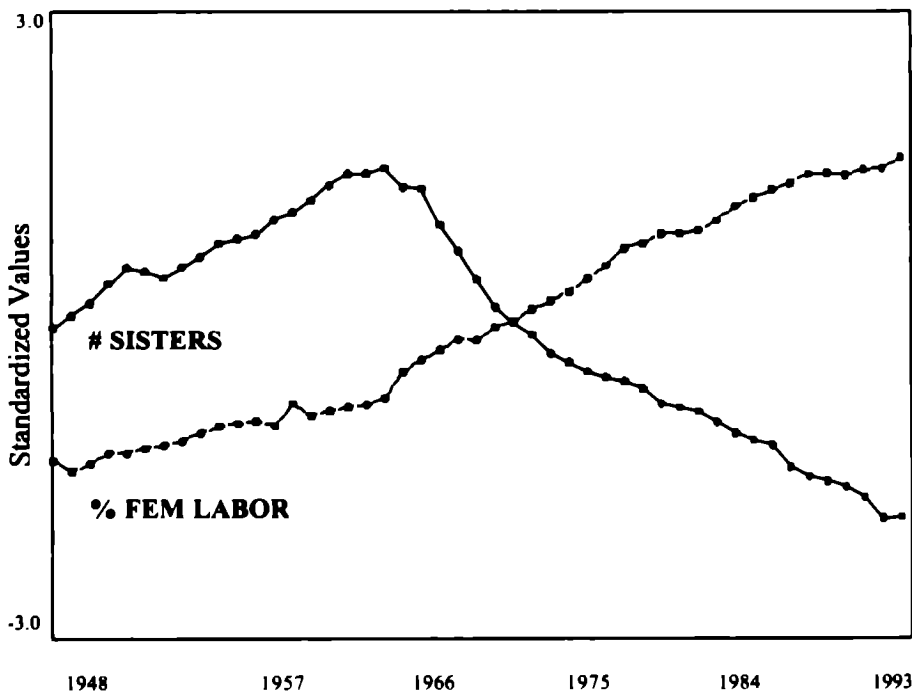
There is a direct and powerful way to test the thesis that American women ceased to become nuns because of the immense increases in their secular opportunities. Consulting *The Official Catholic Directory* we assembled data on the number of female religious for each year 1948 through 1995. We also assembled data on female labor force participation rates for the same period.

Figure 1: Number of American Nuns, 1948-1995



A glance at Figure 1, which graphs the number of American nuns, reveals that most discussions of the decline in female religious vocations in the United States have ignored a vital fact that following World War II there were nearly two decades of consistent and substantial growth in the number of nuns: from 141,083 in 1948 to 181,421 in 1965. Only *then* did the numbers begin the decline. In contrast, the percentage of females participating in the labor force grew slowly and consistently during the entire period.

**Figure 2: Number of Nuns and % Women in the Labor Force, (USA 1948-1995)**  
(Reported in Z-Scores)



Thus, Figure 2 (which graphs both variables on the basis of their Z-scores to take account of their very different magnitudes) shows that the “opportunity thesis” is either strongly rejected or strongly supported by the data, depending upon the era examined. From 1948 through 1965, as female opportunities increased so did the number of nuns, resulting in a huge *positive* correlation of .92. Had anyone examined this time series in 1966 they probably would have concluded that for many Catholic girls, becoming a nun was *their way of participating* in the labor force. But then came the incredible news that number of nuns had dropped by 4,750 during 1966, thus beginning the long, uninterrupted decline in membership. Meanwhile, the percentage of women participating in the labor force continued to increase. Consequently, subsequent to 1965 the two rates are *negatively* correlated (-.97). As is obvious to the naked eye, when the entire period is examined



(and the curvilinearity of the data is taken into account by removing the quadratic of the trend), there is no significant correlation between female labor force participation and women's religious vocations. These findings were replicated when the percentage of women receiving advanced degrees was substituted for female labor force participation.

Those proposing the secular opportunity explanation probably should have anticipated this outcome since it was obvious all along that the expansion of secular opportunities for Catholic women was a long, gradual process, but that the decline in female religious orders was extremely sudden and rapid and thus that the former could not explain the latter. Moreover, as already noted, an equally obvious shortcoming of the secular opportunity thesis lies in the *failure to include men*.

The curves for the numbers of male religious and seminarians from 1948 through 1995 are extremely similar to the curve for nuns. All three rise until the mid 1960s, then all three plunge. The only important difference being that, once the decline began, the number of males declined more rapidly and further. Changes in the number of female religious is correlated .98 with changes in the number of male seminarians and .88 with changes in the number of male religious. The similarity of the curves precludes all gender-specific causes and let it be noted that most explanations of the decline in male vocations have been as narrowly gender-biased as those advanced for women. Indeed, the voluminous literature on the decline in seminarians and male religious seldom even mentions the decline in women religious, and vice versa.<sup>2</sup>

However, by far the most important feature of these curves is that together they strongly discourage any explanation based on *gradual* social changes. The declines are *sudden* and *simultaneous*. This very strongly suggests that the explanation lies in a *causal event*.

## VATICAN II AND VOCATIONS

Let us return to October 11, 1962, when Pope John Paul XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council in Rome, a gathering of all of the bishops of the Church to reassess and restructure doctrine and practice. In preparation for the Council the Pope used the word *aggiornamento* (which means updating) so often to describe his intentions to open the Catholic Church to new ideas and influences, that for a time it entered the vocabulary of the news media. And "updating" there was. By the time the last session ended on December 8, 1965, an extraordinary set of revisions in basic doctrines and practices had been adopted by the Council resulting in a period of extremely rapid change as, almost overnight, core doctrines and liturgical practices that had stood for centuries were abandoned or greatly revised. And no one felt these changes as acutely as did the religious.

Three documents published by the Council impelled a revolution in the religious life. The first, *Lumen Gentium* declared that *all* Christians were called "to holiness" simply by having been baptized, and those who pursued a religious vocation could no longer aspire to a superior state of holiness. Previously the Church had taught that priests and the religious were in a superior state of holiness. Now, despite their vows, they were just like everyone else. As Patricia Wittberg (1994:214) put it:

*"The importance of this...statement cannot be stressed enough. In one stroke, it nullified the basic ideological foundation for eighteen centuries of Roman*

*Catholic religious life. The traditional ideology had postulated...that only vowed members of religious orders could achieve true spiritual perfection (emphasis in the original)."*

This change was especially devastating for women religious. Unlike males, they had never been granted ordination, and now their holiness was reduced to that of all other lay Catholics. The second document, *Gaudium et Spes* ("The Church in the Modern World), revoked centuries of preference for withdrawal from the "sinful world" and proclaimed that it now was inappropriate for the religious to pursue a cloistered life, but that they should become full participants in the secular world. Indeed, this document stressed the need to modernize the entire lifestyle of the orders.

The third document, *Perfectae Caritatis* (usually referred to as the "Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life") was released in October of 1965, just as the Council came to a close. Although it was quite vague on the outcomes expected or the methods used for renewal, a single sentence opened the door for dramatic revisions by religious orders, most of them by then primed for radical changes: "The manner of life, of prayer and of work should be in harmony with present-day physical and psychological conditions of the members" (quoted in Flannery 1992, p. 613). This statement was warmly received by most of the religious who had long chafed under many of the restrictions and requirements to which they were subject. At once, all manner of suggestions arose for changing the religious life to harmonize with modern conditions and an era of extraordinary changes began. Dissenters who raised issues concerning the loss of the essentials of the religious life were drowned out in the rush to "update." Soon, entire orders abandoned their convents for a new life as scattered apartment dwellers, often without roommates, and dressed like everyone else.

These sweeping changes, plus the doctrine denying that special holiness attached to religious vocations, transformed the remaining sacrifices of the religious life into gratuitous costs having no special standing or significance — rules of chastity, obedience, and (for the orders) poverty had not been revoked. Doing the work of a teacher, nurse, or social worker was never seen as having special *religious* rewards. The rewards that once distinguished nuns and monks who performed these tasks from lay people who also performed them were inherent in those aspects of the religious life which modernization led the orders to abandon: the separated life in a religious community, the daily devotions, the habit which resulted in instant recognition and special treatment by a laity who acknowledged the greater holiness of the religious. Although secular social scientists often have some difficulty comprehending the phenomenology involved, it is quite obvious that many people find the religious life, thus defined, to be deeply rewarding. Moreover, few people (if any) lead religious lives unreflectively — even those who accept martyrdom seem to carefully weigh the costs and benefits of their actions (Stark 1996; Iannaccone 1994). Entirely consistent with this theoretical view, in the absence of the primary rewards of the religious life, few potential recruits found it any longer an attractive choice. Indeed, many teaching or nursing nuns now compared their circumstances with that of lay women performing the same occupations and asked themselves, "Why?" Why be a nun in addition to being a teacher? What does a woman gain in return for her vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience, if she lives alone in an apartment where her devotional life is not ampli-

fied by collective participation, and who acquires no special holiness thereby, while spending her working hours side-by-side with married women who now are officially seen as her equal in terms of virtue, but who are free from her obligations?

To sum up our view, many of the most distinctive aspects of Catholic liturgy, theology and practice abandoned by the Council turned out to have been crucial for generating and sustaining vocations, especially vocations sufficient to meet the high costs of Catholic religious life. As Andrew Greeley (1982:88) put it:

*"...anyone save an academic or a bishop would have anticipated that, when you change that which was unchangeable for 1,500 years, you are going to create a religious crisis. Attempts to put together a new system of religious symbols were half-hearted, unplanned and, most of all, insensitive to the actual religious needs..."*

Consequently, as they jettisoned many sacred traditions and thereby reduced the rewards of vocations, the church did not adopt positions that would have substantially reduced the costs of religious life a "worst of both worlds" position, as Laurence

**TABLE 4**  
**Vatican II and the Decline in the Number of Female Religious**

	United States	Canada	France	Germany	Netherlands	Great Britain	Portugal	Spain
1962	177,154	47,045	101,665	90,392	32,654	17,773	6,459	67,426
..... Vatican II begins, Oct. 11, 1962 .....								
1963	180,015	49,352	105,543	89,876	32,667*	18,272	6,872	67,584
1964	179,954	51,725	106,151	90,191	32,680	18,279	7,157	75,280
1965	181,421	52,760	106,810	89,038	31,773	18,115	7,090	77,492
..... Vatican II ends, Dec. 8, 1965 .....								
1966	176,671	51,770	105,131	89,204	30,776	18,294	6,958	79,704
1967	176,341	50,653	102,103*	87,255	30,194	16,148*	7,150	80,443
1968	167,167	50,565	99,074	87,053	26,740	14,266*	7,036	81,076
1969	160,931	48,111*	96,899*	86,994	23,038	13,195	7,500	88,817
1970	153,645	45,656	94,724*	80,583	24,400	13,215	7,787	89,976
1980	122,653	38,858	87,791	68,782	22,034	11,968	7,818	80,524
1995	92,107	28,498	60,027	46,366	15,463	10,316	6,950	68,750

\* corrected total

Iannaccone put it (1994:1204). Thus, we argue that the rapid decline in Catholic vocations was in response to a cost/benefit ratio that had suddenly gone from positive to negative. (It is only fair to acknowledge here that in several of her studies, Helen Rose Ebaugh (1977, 1993) noted that these changes greatly reduced the attractions of the religious life. But, being convinced that such a life is entirely incompatible with modernity, she regarded the changes as inevitable and rejected the possibility of any return to traditional ways.)

We think that a very crucial factor in favor of our thesis that actions by Vatican II caused the collapse of vocations is *timing*. Table 4 shows in rather dramatic fashion that the declines began suddenly and in the immediate aftermath of the Council's pronouncements. Moreover, the exceptions to this generalization offer even more compelling evidence that Vatican II was the causal event.

The data are based on the female religious because their much larger numbers provide greater statistical stability (but data for seminarians and male religious display similar patterns). Most of the data were taken from the *Catholic Almanac* and several obvious errors were corrected, as indicated by the asterisks. Italy was omitted because its totals fluctuate so greatly in response to the comings and going of foreign religious.

Now, examine Table 4 with care. For the six nations to the left (the USA through Great Britain), membership rose during the early 1960s. Then, the era of rapid decline ensued. In the United States, Canada, France, and the Netherlands the decline registered in 1966, while it did not show up until 1967 in Germany and Great Britain. Once in motion, the decline in the numbers of female religious was very steep in all six nations. But now, look at Portugal and Spain to the right of the table. Here, the number of nuns *continued to rise* throughout the remainder of the 1960s! Why? In both nations an extremely conservative hierarchy refused to endorse or even publicize many decrees of the Council, particularly those concerning the religious. The insulation of the national church in both nations was greatly facilitated by authoritarian governments with profound commitments to traditional Catholic piety and having the power to veto all appointments to bishop (Barrett 1982). With the fall in 1974 of the dictatorship instituted by Antonio de Oliveira Salazar (Salazar ruled Portugal from 1932 until his retirement in 1968) and the death of Francisco Franco in 1975 (who had ruled Spain since 1936), new democratic governments ceased to control appointments to bishop and both state and church became far more liberal. And, under these new conditions, religious orders in both nations began to decline.

These findings also shed light on the negative relationship between modernization and religious vocations. Just as the hierarchy in Portugal and Spain delayed the decline in vocations by resisting Vatican II changes, vocations continue to increase in some less developed nations because a pre-Vatican II traditionalism still prevails.

It is important to realize that to blame the rapid declines in Catholic vocations on changes in the cost/benefit ratios of the religious life, is *not* to argue that the Catholic Church must adopt a conservative solution to its future staffing needs. Indeed, as the quotations by Greeley and by Iannaccone should make clear, we are *not* arguing that only a strict church can recruit a professional staff. What we do argue is that a liberal church cannot motivate the intensity of commitment needed to fill positions requiring high levels of sacrifice and therefore any religious body seeking to recruit people for such roles must be in a position to offer them special religious rewards. Thus, it follows that the Roman Catholic Church can revive vocations in *either* of two ways: 1) by *lowering the costs* (by

adopting the Anglican solution of high pay and virtually no restrictions), or 2) by *restoring the traditional benefits* of the religious life. This essay must not be interpreted as advocating either strategy.

However, over the past several years there have been a variety of attempts to pursue the latter strategy. Pope John Paul II has worked to reassert Catholic traditions and has selected bishops accordingly. In addition, some religious orders have "demodernized" and a number of new orders have been formed, most of them substantially more traditional in terms of their practices. If we are correct about why vocations declined so rapidly, then it ought to be the case that these developments are associated with increases in vocations.

## DIOCESAN CULTURE AND VOCATIONS

Initially, we hoped to identify the prevailing Catholic culture of each American diocese by coding bishops as "traditional" or "progressive." Our intention was to see if variations in culture correlated with the ordination rates. However, this proved impossible. First of all, there are no available objective bases for rating bishops such as voting records on matters brought before the Council of Bishops. Such records are kept, but they are kept secret. Second, when we tried to recruit expert observers to rate the bishops we discovered immediately that no one knows enough about all of them, or even nearly all of them, to rate them. In part this is because there are so many bishops, few of whom gain much national attention, and in part it is because so many are newly appointed. Indeed, so many bishops have been in their current position for such a brief time that they could hardly have made their presence felt and not all of them would appear to wish to do so. Thus, to do what we wished, it would have been necessary in many dioceses to rate one or two previous bishops.

In the end, the best we could do was ask a group of expert observers to identify the ten most traditional and the ten most progressive dioceses. We explained that we were interested "primarily in the cultural context that has prevailed in the diocese over the past 5 years or so. Consequently, if a bishop is new ignore him in favor of his predecessor since it is dioceses, not bishops, that interest [us]." The ability of the raters to focus on the diocese is evident in the fact that most rated San Francisco as one of the most progressive dioceses despite the fact that its new bishop is very traditional. Nine of 11 sent back completed rating sheets. Frankly, we were surprised at the very high level of agreement among the raters, particularly since they were only asked to select a few cases from a long list. Not a single case was rated as traditional by one rater and as progressive by another. The only disagreements took the form of being selected to the list of ten of most traditional or most progressive by one or more raters and going unselected by one or more others. To identify our set of traditional and progressive dioceses, we included only those named by six or more of the nine raters. This resulted in the six traditional and eight progressive dioceses shown in Table 5. Confidence in the ratings is increased by the fact that the selections are not dominated by the major cities, San Francisco, St. Louis, and Milwaukee being the only exceptions. Instead, the lists are dominated by places such as Lincoln, Nebraska and New Ulm, Minnesota. Thus, at the very least our raters were well informed (and in agreement) about otherwise more obscure dioceses. In addition to these ratings, data were obtained from *The Official Catholic Directory* on the number of diocesan (sec-

**TABLE 5**  
**Diocesan Culture and Ordinations**

	Ordinations per 100,000 Catholics*
<b>Diocesan Culture:</b>	
<i>Traditional</i>	
Lincoln, NE	10.6
Arlington, VA	5.1
Bridgeport, CT	3.1
Scranton, PA	2.5
St. Louis, MO	1.8
Camden, NJ	1.7
Mean=	4.1
Mean without Lincoln	2.8
<i>Progressive</i>	
Saginaw, MI	2.0
New Ulm, MN	1.4
Albany, NY	1.2
Milwaukee, WI	1.0
Joliet, IL	0.6
San Francisco, CA	0.5
Rochester, NY	0.3
Richmond, VA	0.0
Mean=	0.9

\* Data for 1994 and 1995

ular) priests ordained in each diocese during 1994 and 1995 we merged two years to increase the stability of the rates (Stark 1997).

Table 5 contrasts the two groups and the differences are quite astonishing. The traditional dioceses are far more successful in attracting young men to the priesthood. Only Saginaw, Michigan, with the highest ordination rate (2.0) among the progressive dioceses, has a rate higher than the two lowest of the traditional dioceses. Thus, the immense difference between the means is a reasonable summary measure these traditional dioceses are about 4 times more productive of priests. Even if we delete Lincoln, Nebraska, the ratio favors the traditional dioceses by 3 to 1, and there is no obvious reason why this diocese, which has been much in the press for its bishop's traditional pronouncements, should be dropped. Indeed, Lincoln would seem to be the truly compelling example in support of our position.

We hasten to admit that these comparisons of 14 dioceses are a poor substitute for an analysis based on the full set of 174 American dioceses (omitting the territories as well as the 14 dioceses following the Eastern Rite). But, the cases were selected prior to any examination of their rates. Several colleagues have suggested that these findings are misleading because young men from elsewhere are attracted to seminaries in the traditional dioceses, thus inflating their rates. This might be so. If it is, surely the relative failure of the progressive dioceses similarly to attract outsiders simply supports our argument about the basis of Catholic vocations. Moreover, these findings about ordinations are entirely congruent with our findings for women's religious orders data which suffer from none of these defects.

## GROWING ORDERS

The renewal efforts of Vatican II initially were viewed as essential for the future growth of religious orders. When older members resisted a "person-oriented" view of religious life, a 1969 report by the Adrian Dominican community posed the question many others were asking: "Are we preserving the Adrian Congregation to provide a tranquil, secure life and retirement for the present membership, or are we building a life style that will provide the vitality and secure the growth of the community in the future?" (quoted in Burns 1992:139). But the euphoria of renewal soon gave way to the realities of declining membership.

As shown earlier in Table 4, the sharp drops in membership came immediately after the closing of the Second Vatican Council. Timing alone suggests that Council reforms contributed to this decline. But survey data provide even more evidence that the relationship between renewal and declining membership is more than coincidental. Marcelline Falk's 1978 survey of 300 communities, for example, tied the lack of new recruits to the most visible change following Vatican II. Communities without a "distinctive religious habit" and allowing sisters to wear secular clothes at their "own discretion" had significantly fewer new recruits (Falk 1980). Recently, Eleace King's series of essays in the *CARA Formation Directory for Men and Women Religious* suggest that communities attracting new members have held a "fidelity" to their "spiritual tradition" (King 1990, 1992, 1993). Rather than "secure the growth" of religious communities, renewal efforts of the sort projected by Vatican II have been associated with membership decline and a shortage of new members.

These outcomes seem paradoxical. Why should recruitment plummet when religious communities *reduce* the cost of being a member? And why would groups placing more demands on their members attract more recruits? The insights of scholars studying communes suggest an answer. Charles Nordhoff (1875 [1965] p. 392), the nineteenth century authority on communes, wrote that "the fundamental principle of communal life is the subordination of the individual's will to the general interest or general will: practically, this takes the shape of unquestioning obedience by the members toward the leaders, elders, or chiefs of their society." Nearly a century later Benjamin Zablocki (1971:288) offered a similar assessment based on his study of the Bruderhof commune: "it seems undeniable that community, which means bonds, obligations, and mutual interdependence, is fundamentally incompatible with individualism." Moreover, after surveying

dozens of nineteenth and twentieth century "utopian" communities, Stark and Bainbridge (1997) found that only the intensely religious communities could sufficiently overcome free-rider and other organizational problems to have any chance of success.

The recurring theme is that strong communes require members to give up individual freedoms for the benefit of the collective. The demands strong communities place on their members take the form of limiting activities outside the group and can be stated as a proposition: other things being equal, *communities are strong to the degree to which a group limits and thereby increases the cost of non-group activities* (Iannaccone 1994).

Realize that communes, and other demanding social groups, can limit a member's non-group activities in two ways. First, members can be encouraged (or required) to invest so heavily in the group that they have little time, money, or motivation to participate in non-group activities. Or, second, the group can discourage non-group activities through sanctions or requirements that inhibit non-group interaction. Some groups explicitly prohibit interaction with outsiders, but most groups discourage non-group interaction indirectly through rules of conduct that require distinctive dress, grooming, diet, and social activities, or restrictions on smoking, drinking, and sexual conduct. In practice, the two techniques often are used together.

For prohibitions on participation in non-group activities to be feasible, however, groups must provide alternatives. These alternative activities not only reduce the opportunity and motivation to take part in prohibited activities, they increase the contributions each member makes to the group. The underlying principle is that *to the extent that groups can limit non-group activities, they generate higher levels of participation and commitment* (Hechter 1987; Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Bainbridge 1997).

Keeping this principle in mind, consider how changes following Vatican II reduced the community's ability to limit outside activities. When the Vatican II decrees gave the laity an equal claim to holiness and asked religious communities to update their community life and governance, the once formidable barriers preventing outside activity began to fall. The decline in communal living, the loss of distinctive dress, and greater individual autonomy all increased outside activities and decreased the inside activities that once had served to build group solidarity. The religious now devoted fewer resources to their religious community and necessarily they received less in return (Finke 1997).

At first glance, the reduced benefits of the religious life would seem to be offset by a similar reduction in costs as vows of obedience and poverty were relaxed under the new conditions. On closer inspection, however, the costs of membership remained high. Sisters report that the even when reduced, obedience remains a burden and, of course, the full costs of celibacy remain (Neal 1984, p. 22; Nygren and Ukeritis 1993, p. 183). Many of the distinctive rewards of the religious communities were fading, but the high price of membership remained.

As noted, the cost/benefit ratio of joining a religious order can be improved in one of two ways: by further reductions in the costs, or by offering a higher level of rewards. However, the first solution will not sustain the sort of high commitment religious life long associated with Catholic vocations. Without significant sacrifices there is no meaningful difference between the religious and the laity, and in such circumstances to claim to be a "nun" or a "monk" would be at best empty words, and at worst, pure conceit. Nor can the high commitment that characterized centuries of Catholic religious life be purchased for



material rewards — \$150,000 a year might inspire someone to be a good social worker or even a capable teacher, but not an authentic nun. Above all, it is sacrifice that has defined Catholic vocations. Thus, to revive religious vocations it would seem necessary to restore primary *religious* rewards of vocations. Indeed, sacrifice and rewards would seem to be inextricably linked: only those orders that ask much of members are able to give much. For example, by asking members to concentrate their primary social ties within the group, an order is enabled to provide the rewards of intense attachments and interaction. Thus the hypothesis that: *religious orders that offer a more intense level of community and a sharper separation from secular life, will be more successful in recruiting new members.*

The 1993 survey of religious orders conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) allows us to test this conclusion. Requesting detailed information on the number of members in formation programs and those who have taken final vows, the survey allows us to compute a rate of new members in formation. The survey also asked a series of questions about the order's support and involvement in some of the most common post-Vatican II changes. These items included the order's support for living arrangements stressing physical proximity and religious houses, a change in their spirituality (identity and mission) since Vatican II, and whether an order uses an inter-community formation program or conducts its own training. Each item measures the order's adoption (or resistance to) of changes prompted by Vatican II.

Table 6 offers strong support for the hypothesis. Religious orders abandoning the more traditional demands, have far fewer members in formation programs. Orders that still emphasize the importance of religious houses and physical proximity have a new member rate that is over four times higher than those giving less emphasis to these aspects of community (107 to 23). The new member rate for orders that changed their spirituality since Vatican II was only 41 per 1,000 full members (active members who have taken their final vows), compared to a rate of 95 for those that hadn't changed. Orders participating in inter-community formation programs also attracted far fewer novices than those who did their own training (40 to 120).

Note that we do not suggest that potential recruits are attracted to the high costs of community life, as if shopping for the most "expensive" order available. Rather, recruits tolerate these costs because they are attracted to the wealth of social and religious rewards provided by a stable community of "religious life." Moreover, higher costs select for those most able and willing to contribute to overall communal satisfaction, while screening-out the less committed (both initially and later). Some, who at first were attracted to the distinctive lifestyle and community, will undoubtedly have second thoughts as they progress through formation programs and the full costs of membership become apparent. Hence, we would expect communities requiring more from their members also to sustain higher rates of attrition from their formation program.

Although the survey did not provide retention rates, it did ask for the number of new members entering in 1992 and the number of members taking final vows in 1992. This gives us the chance to look at a single year and compare the number recruited with the number taking final vows. These comparisons also are shown in Table 6 where we can see that the high commitment communities do have a higher rate of attrition. For example, communities reporting religious houses and physical proximity as extremely important have a rate of 48 new recruits per 1,000 members, but a rate of only 22 taking final vows,

**TABLE 6**  
**Recruitment and Commitment to "Tradition" Among**  
**531 Catholic Women's Religious Orders**

All Numbers Are Rates Per 1,000 Members

*Life in religious houses and in physical proximity rated as "extremely important."*

	Yes	No
Number of Novices in Formation:	107	23
Number of Novices Entering in 1992:	48	6
Number Taking Final Vows in 1992:	22	5

*Order has changed its "spirituality" since Vatican II*

	Yes	No
Number of Novices in Formation:	41	95
Number of Novices Entering in 1992:	15	43
Number Taking Final Vows in 1992:	6	22

*Novices are trained only by their own community*

	Yes	No
Number of Novices in Formation:	120	40
Number of Novices Entering in 1992:	56	13
Number Taking Final Vows in 1992:	21	10

All differences are significant beyond .01

for a dropout rate of 26 per 1,000. By contrast, the communities supporting renewal efforts had a dropout rate of only 1 per 1,000. However, as anticipated, the higher levels of attrition sustained by the more traditional communities are offset by far higher rates of new members taking final vows. Even after the attrition, the rate of members taking final vows was still two to four times higher than that of orders that had embraced the Vatican II changes. The data clearly support the thesis that to the degree that religious orders provide an intense communal life, they will be more successful in recruiting new members.

Yet, support for this thesis does not suggest that *all* demands will increase the benefits provided to members. First, religious orders can limit too many activities, just as they can limit too few. The optimal level is high for religious orders because they must generate community supports that justify the vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity, but it is not unlimited. Second, supporting the tradition of high demands does *not* mean that the most effective strategy is a return to the religious life as it existed just prior Vatican II. Indeed, religious orders are constrained to maintain an institutional awareness that an uncompromising embrace of tradition can be quite as harmful as laxity orders can become too rigid to be attractive to new members.

A new generation of religious communities seem aware of this need to balance tradition and adaptation to changing times, for they emphasize the need for *innovative returns to tradition*. Thus, as one founder of a new religious order put it, "our traditions don't go back to 1953; our traditions go back to 1253. Or 453" (Wittberg 1996:155). These new orders are demonstrating that they can return to tradition even though the limits they place on their membership vary from those of the pre-Vatican II Church. Thus, for example, Patricia Wittberg (1996:153) found that while the successful new religious communities have restored distinctive habits, "most also wear secular clothes as needed."

Like most new movements, many of these new orders will struggle to survive even one generation, often stagnating with only two or three members. But a few are thriving and seem poised for success and these offer us a glimpse of the possible. A key element, as Dilanni noted (1993:747-748), is that "members are bound together closely and maintain this closeness through communal practices or a structured way of life, a rule."

## CONCLUSION

We believe the data are conclusive that the collapse of Catholic vocations was self-imposed, not merely incidental to the process of modernity. It was the assembled bishops of the Church who, after collective deliberations, withdrew many of the most compelling motivations for the religious life, while retaining the most costly aspects of vocations. Perhaps orthodox Freudians and other proponents of irrational choice theories might have expected that Catholics would still flock to the religious life out of neurotic need. The fact that the "flocking" went in the other direction testifies that humans subject even their most intense forms of religious commitment to reasoned evaluation. This point is additionally confirmed by the exceptions: some dioceses still generate vocations and some religious orders still attract new members — those able to revivify perceptions of a positive ratio between the costs and rewards of the religious life.

Keep in mind that we *do not propose* that the Catholic Church ought to retain its reliance on costly religious vocations on a church staffed by a corps of what Max Weber called religious virtuosi. Centuries of Protestant experience demonstrate the adequacy of less costly vocations. But, what we *do propose* is that to generate and sustain religious virtuosi requires constant reinforcement from an equally committed community of peers, firm belief in divine appreciation of the relevant sacrifices, and special levels of worldly recognition of virtue.

## NOTES

1. Ebaugh and her co-authors were entirely misinformed when they justified use of 1960 data on the status of women on grounds that "Insufficient educational and occupational data [are available for] 1990" (p. 177). Much better data for a far larger selection of nations are available now than for 1960. For example, the GDI measure is available for 129 nations and the GEM is available for 116. Those wishing a comprehensive, electronic source to contemporary cross-national data are referred to *Nations of the Globe* from MicroCase Corporation which provides data on all 174 nations having populations of 200,000 or more.

2. This seems to be the unintentional result of these studies being dominated by ex-priests and ex-nuns, each seeking to understand his or her biography, and thus failing to examine the larger picture.
3. We encountered several instances of obvious typos, as when a number increased or decreased by an order of magnitude for one year because a digit had been dropped or added, and sometimes data for one nation were simply repeated from the previous year. We corrected these data as indicated. Missing years were assigned the average value of the preceding and the following year.
4. Michael Hechter (1987, p. 52-53) offers a similar argument using the concept of dependence. He proposes that "the solidarity of any group increases to the degree that members are dependent on the group and their behavior is capable of being controlled by the group's agents."

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