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Religious Life (Nun): An Enforced Vocation for Women in Ireland

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Abstract:

The present research paper explores the lives of mid to late twentieth century post-independent Irish women how in a specific sociopolitical and religious circumstance settle in for the vocation of Nuns. It throws light on the austere religious life led by these Nuns abiding by the Canon Laws and the rulebooks of the Congregations. It mainly explores the reasons how women of Ireland were enforced to take religious life as an only vocation other than becoming mothers. It also unveils the false aura that curled around the profession of Nuns till it loses its signification

Keywords: Canon Law, Pre-Vatican. Catholic Church, Postulant, Entrant, Covent, Monastic, Lent, Virgin Mary, Habit, Rulebook, Conservative, Progressive, Permissive, Punitive Celtic, Congregation, Religious, Penal code, hegemonic, permanent celibacy, Diocese.

Ireland was a British colony almost for 800 hundred years. British colonization of Ireland embarked in 1169 with the Anglo-Norman invasion and continued and totaled in by 1652 in the regime of Cromwell. Since then, the British began to implement their hegemonic agenda in Ireland. Being an agrarian society, much of Ireland's population resided in the rural parts of the country. The British Government programmed its hegemonic agenda by displacing the native Irish farmers from their land and replaced the farms by loyal colonist. Penal codes, an apartheid code prohibited the people of Ireland to hold the land, horses and practice the religion, or educate their children. The invasion both by the Normans and by the British affected the Irish community in general and had adverse effects on the lives of women in particular along with men. In the Celtic Ireland before the conquest, women enjoyed equal privilege to their counter parts the men. Women in those days enjoyed equal legal rights, which are unparallel even today in most of the countries. Moreover, women were the sole heirs of the properties they brought at the time of marriage and "neither partner could enter into any contract or business deal without the others' consent" (Cannavan par 2). Women had the right to divorce their male partner and vice versa. A wife was able to take divorce on several grounds, even in matters such as the smear of her or on the ground of husband's impotence. Women also availed legal shield in common laws and transient relationships. A very significant privilege availed by women in Celtic era was that no children outside marriage was treated as unfathered. But the British conquest brought Ireland's

independent legal system to an end and abolished most of the traditional legal right enjoyed by the women.

The conquest also introduced sexual prudery in Ireland that did not exist earlier in Ireland's culture. Celtic Ireland was noticeably liberal to female sexuality. In the twentieth century, Ireland's agrarian economy slowly changed to industrial economy and Ireland became totally dependent on the multinational companies. But women had very less employment opportunities in these multinational companies because of the marriage bar. Due to poverty, women had to choose jobs in service sector. The Church and the State succeeded in keeping women's conditions underdeveloped till 1970s and the authorities always endeavored to keep the status quo. Even in the early years of the 1990s Ireland was considered to be sexually repressed country and women were still treated worse than subordinate. The States power was still in the possession of Catholic Church. To challenge the Church power was unthinkable till 1990. In such suffocating and narrow socio-familial conditions, very few options of career were left to women in Ireland. As the new social structure in post famine era abolished the greater economic equality enjoyed by the women -- and the shift of power of family entirely is in the hands of men, relegated women to domestic drudgery, reproduction and childbearing. Women were forced to spend most of their time in cleaning and washing in laundries, compared to the less household work privilege enjoyed by the women pre-famine. The vulnerable condition of women to man gave birth to dowry system in post-famine Irish society. The monitory support of women to family reduced. Her importance in the family was depended upon the fortune, she brought with her at the time of marriage. As because the daughters had no voice in her parental house other than dowry to take with her as a marriage prospect, this in fact made her totally reliant on their husband and had to become reluctantly subservient – snatching the right to choose a mate which she was granted pre-famine. As in Ireland the women's life was confined to the walls of home and her prospects to get employed outside home were knocked off by the constitutional laws. As consequence, a sizeable number of women preferred to remain away from marriage. Women either had to opt to join the convent, or remain permanently celibacy or else they had to live Ireland and immigrate. As a reaction to this unfavorable condition in the society many women in Ireland choose to join convent and become a 'Nun'. So several women who reach a perfect age to enter into the conjugal life or those hoping to make career outside the country, choose to become a Nun as "convents offered single women one of the few avenues for gaining respectability and power" (Hayes 117). And on the other hand getting access to the convent would give high social status to a novice and her family too. A nun is a woman who belong to a religious order or congregation devoted to active service or meditation, typically living under bounded vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience

The only lucrative and exceptional vocation other than becoming wives and mothers was to enter Religious life. In a traditionally conservative and orthodox society like Ireland, it was a prestigious thing for a woman to lead a life of a Nun. The reason to bestow such respect to them was their permanent celibacy and the selfless service that they render to the society. And the

society also granted higher status to the family these Nuns belonged. Under such social circumstances, thereupon, the number of religious increased in the nineteenth century and as the social contacts of these nuns grew with the outside world later in the middle of twentieth century. The craze for convent life began to dwindle significantly. But for chosen few, it still was a popularly favorite vocation. As said earlier the number of the religious began to rise since 19th century. By 1900 according to McCurtain there were over 8000 nuns and thirty five female religious orders in Ireland and the number of convents was more than 368 (p 146). This growth was due to the appeal, the Catholic Bishop made to the community, as to establish convents in their respective dioceses for the sake of providing education for girls of all age group.

As reported in the conference of secondary schools in Ireland (1949) one out of every four hundred women sought admission to the convent and the number almost doubled till 1950s. There were some social reasons behind this huge increase in the adoption of sisterhood as a vocation. One of the main reasons was that it was a matter of prestige to enter the religious life in those days. But there were also some grave reasons, why women adopted for this particular vocation. The secret of it was hidden in the sociopolitical and religious context. The prominent reasons were the conservative notion of womanhood in Ireland and the Catholic Church's objection to any other identity for women other than a mother. Virgin Mary was considered as iconographic figure and women were to follow her footsteps blindly. Sexuality other than progeny was repressive. Employment as workforce for women was banned by the State under the influence of the Catholic Church. Poverty and dowry system, unavailability of birth control mechanism, ban on fertility control and population explosion etc resulted in huge number of emigration, and permanent celibacy in Ireland, along with choosing religious life.

In short, circumstances in Ireland for women from 1930s to 1960s were highly suffocative. Only women from better-off families could manage emigration. But for the poor, to become celibacy or a wife were the only options left. Under such conditions, to embrace religion was the only escape from marriage, so it was thought by women quite good to be a Nun other than be a wife. And it also had a social status and prestige. The vocation of nun was venerated in those days for their service, the devotion and hardships they undergo.

It was to receive the social acknowledgement; women became nuns and sacrificed their lives for the sake of religion. Women in Ireland adopted religious life even though it was full of hardships. The life of Nuns was confined within the Code of Canon Law. The set of laws limited their lives. For instance, they had to observe "weekly confessions, daily Eucharist, set hours for prayers including meditation, laws of fast and abstinence were strictly enforced in convents during Lent and Advent and each Friday of the year" (Mac Curtain p 149). This schedule was so rigorously implemented that many a times it would have adverse affect on the health of the Nuns. Simultaneously, they had to engage classes in the schools run by the Church and also had to serve in the hospital wards. Even few death cases were also reported in such situations.

Nuns in the convents were expected to behave in chaste manner. They were expected to display an image of docility and submissiveness. They had to remain always covered head to toe in attire which was black, blue or white in colour. Nuns were obliged to speak in a low voice and

abide by the laws of mannerism. Nuns were expected to play instrumental roles in the implementation of the State ruled welfare policies which were palpably weak and underdeveloped. At the same time nuns in the schools had to shoulder the responsibilities of dealing with the extra-curricular activities along with the strenuous teaching workload. All this hardships was considered common as “sisterhood represented eternity on earth” (Mac Curtain p 150). But neither the Church nor the State and the Community ever took cognizance or acknowledged their undoable burdens of hardships.

The Church was always obsessively concerned about the encroachment of the anti-Christian elements like the alien life ways that damaged the model of morality. “In particular, the church was concerned with the dubious behavior and comportment of young women. Fearing the fate of women who resided outside the custody and sanctity of marriage” (McKenna 43). The religious teaching recurrently referred to the figure of Virgin Mary therefore the young women were expected to internalize her traits. According to the church teachings Virgin Mary was the embodiment of sufferings and service. At the same time, she was biblically a Virgin mother figure, with virtues of asexuality. It is apparent under such tendencies, the Church was circuitously anxious of the ‘coming of age’ of the young girls. It meant that the church was heedless of the personal world of humans against the church strictures, especially, the psychosomatic needs of human race, in the process of evolution. So under such circumstances, life outside Catholic framework for women became impossible or determined. The rising number of emigration and the soaring rate of celibacy in one sense can be taken as a revolt against the obligations to lead a modeled life, full of morality.

But, unfortunately the option of emigration and celibacy was possible for privileged few. The rest due to poverty and undependable family pressures had to yield and reluctantly accept married life or choose a religious life. As Walter views, the most important model of womanhood outside married motherhood was religious life, it was the only form of womanhood the Catholic Church publicly espoused (18). This selfish support to the religious congregation was adhered by the church because it severed the purpose of acceptable behavior within Irish society. It also blurred the difference between womanhood (motherhood) and religious life, as it invests the renunciation of the self. Taking into account these grim realities women in Ireland in McKenna observations hardly looked seriously to any other vocation other than marriage or religion (46). It is clear from the interview given to McKenna by one of the religious, she says that she was counseled by the priest to get married or be a nun and was advised not to be an old maid as they do not make good prospect. So in Ireland “spinsterhood was tended to be regarded as an unfortunate situation foisted on a woman rather than one she might willingly choose herself” (45) so if any prestige or power did woman gain, its was not outside marriage or religious life. “Outside this lay the marginality and misery of spinsterhood or the deviance and depravity of fallen woman” (46)

Along with these social and cultural reasons, there were also few familial and personal facts upon which the decision of choosing religious life was grounded upon. Many Irish women entered convents to begin religious life, because they wanted to do something different other than get married or be a mother figure rest of the life. In Ireland in those days, due to ignorance about fertility control and the ban on use of contraceptives, homes were found full with children. On an average in a family, there were eight to ten children born to a mother. It is quoted in McKenna's essay that to have a large family was part of Irish ethos of the time. Women were socially pressurized to bore many children. Women were psychologically molded in such a way that they regretted having less than 8 to 10 children (47). In many cases women were found bearing children until they stop menstruating. These circumstances engaged women only in giving birth to children most of their life. This ultimately resulted in their deterioration of health condition and they were prone to serious chronic health complains. But women in Ireland were dolefully inhabited from ages to endure and were immune to such miseries. Women were hardly found voicing their malady. In Inglis words it was like "conforming to the stereotype image of mother as strong, hardworking and uncomplaining self-sacrificing figure" (Inglis 201). It was a fact that along with their unending pregnancies, women especially mothers had to work hard on a farm and even at home. Heedless to what ailments they had to bore out of drudgery. As McKenna has noticed hardships and harsh domestic conditions rendered by the women both in rural and urban Ireland was due to the economic stagnation and structural underdeveloped condition of Ireland (48). Certainly, the younger girls of the families in Irish society were not blind to these sufferings, hardships and maladies born by their mothers. At the same time elderly girls in the respective families, had to assist their mothers in rearing children. And it was also the part of tradition that the mother had to prepare her daughter to these routines households and make their daughters fit to be an ideal mother for the future. Consequently, all such apathetic domestic eventualities caused aversion in the mind of the young towards the conjugal life. The freedom or diversion from such compulsions was to enter religious life-the only option left for such girls.

Along with these reasons, women of Ireland had certain fascination to this profession. There fascination grew for the nuns as they were been taught by nuns in the schools. They observed from their school days; to what extend nuns were revere by the society. But, most of the girls were completely unaware with the nun's personal lives. The girls who were aspiring to enter religious life were under an impression that Nuns lives was away from domestic hardships. To put in McKenna's words the girls associated nuns with social work, travel, and a life of spirituality, professionalism, responsibility, power and purity as their mother's lives to them was a stark contrast (49). The religious women were always engaged in activities which were in complete opposition to the mothers. Mothers were destined to undying domestic hardships and childbearing, whereas nuns were seen involved in professional jobs and social works. The younger had very romantic ideas about the religious life. They were attracted to the glamour associated to it. Supposedly, the missions such as the social works, teaching in schools, serve in

hospitals and most importantly the journey to exotic lands for missions' or promotional purposes was in their view.

But the reality was astoundingly different than what was assumed by the younger. In those days Nuns lives were totally governed by the Codes of the Canon Laws. They had to follow strictly the Canon laws. These laws confined the lives of these religious to the walls of the convents. To the fact, it was mandatory for them to live their lives according to the monastic rules. These rules were mainly framed to restrict their behaviors. Public life was a rarity from them, unless orders were issued to go out under unavoidable circumstances. The nun's life in the convent was governed by the stipulated set of rules observed under the absolute authority of the superiors. The rules were concerned primarily with the "appearance and deportment to behavior and thoughts" (McKenna 50).

Women in convents as religious worked in different capacities for the congregation. They worked to wield social and religious ties in their vicinity among villager. They had to organize a drive for "religious based philanthropic activity... organizing female prayer meetings," (Hayes 117) perform role of a teacher, persuade people to finance church building and numerous other works. They also worked for the welfare of the single mothers, the homeless, the ill and the destitute. The daily routine in the convent include exhaustive work of teaching in the schools, prayers, extra-curricular that demanded physical and mental labour. The purpose of such a tight schedule was to transform entrants into a thorough Nun, which demanded a complete renunciation of the outside world both in words and in deeds. All in all, the religious life involves denial of the self. One had to resurrect in such life. The clothes, the appearance, the name, all had religious touch. To the postulants it was the end of the previous identity they had one in public life. These restrictions intended to ingrain the values and virtues of denial and constrains. Specially, through repression of the traits of sexuality-the women body was targeted in this course of transformation.

This limiting begins with the clothes they were given to wear. The 'Habit' as it is called. This was considered wholesome and suitable to do away with their body. But in reality it was bunglesome, awkward, comfortless and more importantly, it was restrictive. In short, all sorts of measures were taken to move them away from their femininity. The dress was almost like wrapping the body from head to toe, leaving any chance to disclose their identity of being a woman. It would not be an exaggeration if you say that they were firmly fastened in these Habits. Often, putting them in an embarrassing situation, while performing daily works. In this way, they were taught to treat there bodies 'inferior' and obliged them to concentrate total attention on "divine spirituality calling of a vocation... accentuating the female body as 'wrong' and serving as a reminder that the body was 'other' to its spiritual vocation" (McKenna 50-51). At the same time the nuns were constructed to be heedless of their appearance. Any

object that may display the appearance was banned in the convent. Even mirrors were not the part of convents in those days.

Though the dress nuns wore covered them from head to toe, still they were forbidden to keep long hair. Precautions were to be taken, that the hair remains hidden always, as they reveal the body curves. The nuns were always kept busy either in work or in prayers. Idleness and self-entertainment was taken to be 'sin'. Nuns were often reprimanded if found exhausted while performing the assigned work. In an interview one of the postulant told Elaine (a press reporter) about the admonishment she had to confront as she was found careless with the task assigned to her. The postulant reported that they were not supposed to think that they were giving the Lord the full service, if they are not enough tired to drag themselves up to the bed at night. And else upon they should feel that they are very eager to do as much as possible they could (McKenna 50).

Given the deportment, strict and detailed instructions were given to the nuns. For example "the head...should be kept straight and bent a little forward...the eyes should be usually be cast down...the lips should be neither compressed nor too much open...the hands should be kept still and placed modestly"(Congregation of the sisters of St. Mildred, 59-60). The Catholic teachings believed that, mind should be molded to internalized modesty and the body will give in automatically thereafter.

According to the Catholic belief women were considered the weaker lot, both bodily and mentally. Therefore, doubts were raised on their capacity and ability to understand things. Women's perspective was regarded as short. Even literature which was issued to the nuns to read was either restricted or was censored. Only the food that was provided was adequate as because the nuns should survive the strenuous work that was assigned. But many a times as an act of humility nuns were counseled to fast regularly. All these restriction were the part of rulebooks as to "guard women against the natural inclination to satisfy sensuality"...as "women were more intimately associated with body and the senses than the mind and its intellect" (McKenna 52). In the convents the nuns were cultured to neglect the body as body and its functions were the embodiment of shame. Nuns were under pressure at the time of menstrual, given the inadequate sanitary facilities. In such situation there was always a tussle regarding what is correct and incorrect in the minds of the nuns. The nuns who were capable to strive and achieve perfection by conforming to the Canon laws were rewarded to be good. But ironically they all were bad as their body is an embodiment of shame. Hence they were even prohibited to handle the vessel of Sacrament during the time of menstrual.

This meant that, for Nuns to conform to the Canon Laws caused great mental strain, while overcoming their mundane bodily changes. It diminished their value by "reducing them to their essential impurities" (53). In the convents much emphasis was given to women's body as it

was considered to be powerful and vulnerable – associated with sexuality and procreation. Many of pre-Vatican rulebooks are full with sexual references. As a result Nun's conducts were watched round the clock, fearing the power of desires. In short they were forced to follow the rules and avoid every phenomenon that was associated with sexuality, even though many rulebooks were full with sexual references.

Rules were also laid if the religious happen to come in contact with the outer world. Even though there were very few occasions to come in contact with outer world. In public the Nuns had to keep their face covered, eye contact had to be avoided and restrain emotions and feelings by a chant of prayers. The seniors were given rights to monitor the conducts of the juniors. As the rule book says “to preserve virtue in all its integrity, the sisters will, with the help of grace, exercise the greatest vigilance over all their senses interior and exterior alike. They are allowed to do so... and as idleness leads to the loss of all virtue but especially of chastity, they will never remain without some useful occupation.”(Congregation of the Sisters of St. Marie 41-42) In the convents not only contacts with men were monitored but the relations among religious were also watched. Religious who were found getting too intimated with one another were immediately separated. It was also very crucial for the religious to tame their relations with their own body. They were commanded via rulebooks how to deal with their naked bodies. For example they were taught to keep the chaste positioning while they behave. Prayers to be chanted while fall sleep, so that mind should occupy the thought of god instead of wandering amok. McKenna posits the irony by stating that “despite the church's official teaching that nuns were asexual. According to the rulebooks, at least, the women would have had to think, though not speak, about controlling their sexuality. In this way, rulebooks offered a discourse of sexuality. In which the existence, albeit repressed, of heterosexuality, lesbian sexuality, and autoeroticism were often referred to in veiled or less-veiled terminology.” (55-56)

In a sense, the purpose of the Canon Laws was to redefine the gender of the women who enter convents for religious life. At the same time, codes of the Canon Laws aimed to re-discuss the previous civility the religious bring with them, while entering the convent. Much of the parameters the law laid were ironically gender oriented. Hence the restrictions on the total behavior of the nuns indicate that the laws were preoccupied with gender and its distinctions and it is reflected in the monitored life, the religious have to endure. It is apparent from the precautions they take in accordance to the dress code, the burden of the specific works, the prescriptively limited lifestyle; the censors on the books they read and the frequency of the prayers, all was gender specific. Thus the ultimate goal of the laws was to maintain purity and therefore the religious were trained to resign to their feminine traits and renounce the eternal bodily desires. But at the back of the mind one question always dwell – was it possible for the religious in truer sense to rise above their femininity. Fact was “the religious do embody womanhood.”(55) The rationale behind it was, in the convents most of the task assigned to the Nuns was basically of a mother. Thus it was hard to believe that religious had transcended

femininity, rather it can be asserted that through imposed obligations and practiced behavior Nuns endeavor to flinch away from the aspects of femininity overtly.

Thus, it seems that, the most important aspect of human existence – individuality or individualism, had minimal admiration in religious life. Selfhood was a thing of contempt in the convents. Inglis had rightly argued that the discourse and rhetoric of self-denial were centered to Irish morality (136) as it was a necessary quality in Irish life. “In this respect Irish womanhood writ large” (McKenna 56) pertaining these qualities the religious life was never a threat to the Catholic beliefs and to the “private patriarchy” (Walby 173). Instead it helped to strengthen the foundations of patriarchy. Therefore this vocation was venerated next to Catholic Church.

Whatsoever the religious life provided women a place of dignity, favored with authority and power to some extent. Also gave the advantage of having a distinct identity in the society. Whether due to economical or social enforcement this identity gave the religious an advantage over married life. The benefits, the religious life necessitated were to get educated, received training, gained opportunities to serve and travel for noble cause and lead a spiritual life, otherwise it was never a possible dream in a conservatively orthodox Irish society. Though, the women under economical and social circumstances accepted religious life, it gave a meaning to their living.

But the influence of the changing world began to be felt after mid 20th century in Ireland. Consider the interference of the European Union (EU), the industrializations on large scale and the Feminists and the Women’s Liberation Movement etc. With the changing world, the Nuns began to come in contact with the outer world more frequently than earlier. As a consequence, the outer world influenced the mind of the religious. Thus gradually some religious began to register their protest and started to interrogate the repressive life of the convent. Since, 1970 onwards Ireland began to change gradually from agrarian economy to industrial economy, generating sufficient job opportunities for all. The State laws which were against women in workforce were reformed. More and more women sought employment in the public and private sector. All these factors drastically affected the number of women entering religious life. The media in 1970s was successful in scaling the Trojan walls of the convents and revealing to the public many of the malpractices, which earlier otherwise was quite difficult to leak out.

In the 1970s the local newspapers were full with the notorious stories of the priests and nuns. These anomalies necessitated the decline in the status of the Church and church run institutions. People began to question the authority of the Church. The Media was quite instrumental in exposing the hypocrisy of the Church. Thus with the change in Ireland’s ethos, the women also changed herself. “Women began to question in thought and deed the society they lived in and the particular constructions of womanhood espoused by it” (McKenna 59), to such institutions were the locus of patriarchy. Numerous cases of revolt were noted since the famous

rape case (X case) of Ireland. As the media endeavored, to make people aware, of the church hypocrisies. Morally wrong activities done by the priests and nuns became public and it was shocking as they were the sole preachers of social values and evils of abortion to the society. News of priest's arrest and nun's dismissal for their adulteries was frequent in the newspapers. "The exposure to this gross hypocrisy, gave courage to the people who had been abused physically and sexually by the priests and nuns under the old repressive regime." (Horgan n pag) The transformation of the Irish society from conservative to progressive society and the advancement in its economy since 1970s brought a drastic and lawful change in the lives of women. As a result, women participation in workforce increased, irrespective of age and marital status. Thus the vocation of religious lost its attraction and women thereafter preferred to make their career in the public sector and women in workforce too increased thereafter.

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