

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 19, 2013 at 9:21pm

A Case of Mistaken Identity With Benefits

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NCR Today

As I've traveled around the country asking questions about American religion recently, I've been hearing something that may fleetingly imply a surprising trend among American sisters.

It's a matter of hearing a word that sounds like another word with a different spelling, something linguists call a homophone. For real.

So I'll be interviewing someone who seems to make a claim that Catholic sisters are growing rapidly. The comment rattles me for a moment until I remember to unscramble the puzzle.

What the person has said is something like, "N---- are the fastest growing group in the country." What the person is referring to, of course, is the hottest category in religious survey research, the so-called "Nones" who identify themselves as belonging to no religious group. Over the past few years the percentage of Americans who would come right out and say so has more than doubled, from roughly 7 to near 16 percent. And climbing. This datum has become the empirical evidence that makes church officials nervous. It undergirds what most already knew in an "unscientific way," that organized religion is on the downslide. It's become a flash point for discussion and debate. To be a "none" has become something of a status symbol rather than the mark of an outcast.

The verbal blurring of "nones" with "nuns" may give sisters something of a temporary advantage. Americans love growth and winners and success is usually defined by upward trends. It's what the "Mad Men" and their heirs would call aura. Seeing the difference in print naturally removes that possibility, but chances of that are slim in an increasingly reader averse society and the hearer may wander away with an entirely mistaken impression. I'm assuming that nuns themselves aren't looking for any such benefit, however pyrrhic.

You may want to alert yourself to this quirky exchange of same-sounding words, however. It just might pop up in conversation and, if so, recall your fondness for sisters and the slipperiness of words.

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