

Documentaries turn the camera on sisters

Colleen Dunne | Nov. 30, 2013

A growing number of films focusing on the lives of women religious are currently drawing viewer interest.

"The Nuns on the Bus movement sponsored by NETWORK and the [Leadership Conference of Women Religious] dialogue with the Vatican has brought religious women within a secular spotlight and has sparked people's curiosity," said Charity Sr. Rejane Cytacki of Leavenworth, Kan. "Now is a time of renewed interest about how religious sisters live and work."

Along with Mary Fishman's film "Band of Sisters," which is currently showing across the country, news about other documentaries profiling women religious has been circulating around the Internet and social media.

"Sisters," produced by Robert Gardner along with Mercy Sr. Carol Rittner, profiles the stories of five sisters from different communities and is currently available on Vimeo.com [1]. "Women and Spirit" showed to limited audiences on NBC affiliate stations in several states in September and October. Sponsored by LCWR, that documentary tells the history of women's communities in the U.S.

NCR contributor Sr. Rose Pacatte, a member of the Daughters of St. Paul, recently wrote about "Trailblazers in Habits," a film that portrays the work of the Maryknoll sisters.

Fishman says she believes "Band of Sisters" is a source of hope for young people who have their lives ahead of them to do the work women religious have been doing since the foundation of their U.S. communities. Further, she says, there is still much for Catholics to learn about the changes sisters made after Vatican II.

"You have the very powerful images of convent life prior to Vatican II, contrasted with contemporary sisters in a life of activism for social justice, but with a deep contemplative underpinning," Fishman said. "I think that most lay Catholics and people of other faiths had no clue about how and why sisters stopped wearing habits and living in convents."

Writing about "Trailblazers in Habits," Pacatte said, "This 65-minute documentary is filled with wonderful footage, photos and interviews about 'extraordinary women doing extraordinary things,' beginning with the foundation of the Maryknoll Sisters in 1912, just a few months after the beginning of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers."

St. Joseph Sr. Donna Del Santo of Rochester, N.Y., says sisters have come into the spotlight under less-than-ideal circumstances as a result of the Vatican's apostolic visitation of women's communities that began in 2009 and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's assessment of LCWR announced in April 2012.

"I believe all the challenges generated by the church hierarchy like the Vatican investigation of U.S. communities and the LCWR investigation, to name a few ... has helped people to see the injustices done by not recognizing the contributions made by women religious in the past and present. The message put forth by Nuns on the Bus helps to highlight this," Del Santo said. "Yet there is strength in the clarity of vision and

commitment, especially to those on the margins, which our society/communities desire from the witness of these women."

Cytacki also agrees that women's communities have shown great strength and leadership throughout the history of the Catholic church in the U.S.

"People need to know about the role women religious have played in history, especially the leadership roles held in a time period when women could not serve as leaders," she said.

Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Julie Vieira of Monroe, Mich., whose social media work with A Nun's Life Ministry (anunslife.org [2]) is portrayed in Fishman's film, is excited for the stories being told through these films.

"The Internet and social media have provided unparalleled access to religious life across the globe and across 'genres' of religious life," she said. "Film is a great way to dive more deeply into these stories as well as to explore spirituality, commitment, mission, community and other topics that are meaningful to people."

As a vocation director, Del Santo says she hopes these films will address the reality of smaller communities and help those considering a call to religious life.

"This life continues to be a viable choice for a small group of courageous women who are madly in love with God and God's people," she said. "That those who give their lives in this way for the sake of the reign of God are called and are free in responding to that call."

Recent documentaries featuring women religious include:

"Band of Sisters"
www.bandofsistersmovie.com[3]

"Light of Love"
vimeo.com/74036429[4]

"A Question of Habit"
www.questionofhabit.com[5]

"Sister" (in production)
sisterthefilm.com[6]

"Sisters"
vimeo.com/71751194 [7]

"Trailblazers in Habits"
trailblazersinhabits.com [8]

"We Shall Not Be Moved"
www.weshallnotbemovedmovie.com [9]

"Women and Spirit"
www.womenandspirit.org [10]

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Links:

- [1] <http://Vimeo.com>
- [2] <http://anunslife.org/>
- [3] <http://www.bandofsistersmovie.com>
- [4] <http://vimeo.com/74036429>
- [5] <http://www.questionofhabit.com>
- [6] <http://sisterthefilm.com>
- [7] <http://vimeo.com/71751194>
- [8] <http://trailblazersinhabits.com>
- [9] <http://ncronline.org/www.weshallnotbemovedmovie.com>
- [10] <http://www.womenandspirit.org>
- [11] <mailto:cdunne@ncronline.org>