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RADICAL SISTER:
LUCY FREIBERT AS FEMINIST NUN, ACTIVIST, AND EDUCATOR

By

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B.A., University of Notre Dame, 2004

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Louisville
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Women's and Gender Studies
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A thesis approved on

April 14, 2014

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ABSTRACT

RADICAL SISTER: LUCY FREIBERT AS FEMINIST NUN, ACTIVIST, AND

EDUCATOR

Jessica Whitish

April 14, 2014

Sister Lucy Freibert is a Sister of Charity of Nazareth, women's studies scholar, and a feminist activist. Most importantly to Lucy, she is an educator; she taught the first women's studies course, "Women in Literature," at UofL in 1973, leading the charge to bring feminist scholarship and the fight for women's equality to the university campus. In an oral history with Lucy, I have explored how she has combined her commitments to her faith and her Church with her commitment to feminism, particularly as she navigated the two transitional storms of Vatican II and the women's liberation movement.

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INTRODUCTION

Decades before “Nuns on the Bus” campaigned for social justice in 2012, Catholic nuns¹ like Sister Lucy Freibert supported feminist reforms while remaining devoted to their Church and their communities. During the late 1960s and 1970s, these feminist nuns navigated two transitional storms: as sisters, their place in the Catholic Church shifted after Vatican II; and as women, they entered the political arena of the women’s liberation movement. As a Sister of Charity of Nazareth, a women’s studies scholar, and a feminist activist, Lucy² was criticized during the 1970s for her outspoken pro-choice stance and progressive Catholic beliefs, but she remained steadfast in her faith and rooted in her religious community. Through oral history interviews with Lucy and a survey of her vast manuscript collection, I explore in this thesis how she navigated this personal journey with political outcomes. As a radical feminist activist and educator, she remained devoted to a traditional faith and a patriarchal Church, balancing her personal commitment to a contentious institution with her political commitment to feminism. Lucy’s story is important not only because it adds to the historiographies of religion and feminism, but also because she serves as a model for feminists who feel grounded in their traditions—of faith, family, or beyond—but are eager for drastic change.

¹ Most accurately, the women I discuss here are sisters or women religious, not nuns. Both “woman religious” and “sister” refer to women who have joined communities with “active” ministries; though common language conflates the terms, nuns live a cloistered, contemplative life, while sisters do not. I use the terms interchangeably.

² Because this research is situated within a personal narrative, I have chosen to refer to Lucy by her first name throughout this thesis. Interviewees, along with those at the university and in the community that know her, refer to her as Lucy. In addition, many sisters are commonly referred to by their first names.

Much of the historiography on Catholicism and feminism addresses the conflict between the two: The Catholic Church opposed the Equal Rights Amendment and continues to rebuke feminist views on abortion, contraception, and sexuality. Feminists, meanwhile, have criticized the Church's teachings about the role of women in the family and the Church's refusal to ordain women. While there is certainly significant friction between feminism and the Catholic Church, both in official teaching and in congregations, there is also a tradition of women religious and laywomen advocating for change as both feminists and Catholics. These women balance their faith and their relationship with the Catholic Church with their feminist identities, and this process of balance and renegotiation impacts both their religion and their feminism. Lucy's journey as a sister and a feminist demonstrates this reciprocal personal development of religion and feminism.

In my interviews with Lucy, she never directly addresses this development and rarely connects her faith or her role as a nun with her feminism. While I do not think she would contest the content I present here—and certainly not the importance of it to the history of both feminism and Catholicism—my narrative is not the story she would tell. When I have asked Lucy about feminism or sisterhood, she immediately connects them to her life as an educator, illustrating what she describes as her calling; for Lucy, faith, feminism, and activism are lived through her teaching. Katherine Borland describes the performance of a personal narrative as “a fundamental means by which people comprehend their own lives and present a ‘self’ to their audience.”³ I offer an analysis that foregrounds one aspect of Lucy's identity—that is, her life as a feminist nun—and

³ Katherine Borland, “‘That’s Not What I Said’: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research,” in *Women’s Words: the Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 71.

builds upon her personal narrative; rather than conflicting with Lucy's presentation of herself as an educator, my interpretation of her narrative complements and adds depth to that presentation.

I have assembled this narrative through a series of five interviews I conducted with Lucy, along with three interviews with her friends and colleagues. I also incorporate numerous documents found in Lucy's manuscript collection or the University of Louisville archives, including two transcripts of earlier oral history interviews. This narrative that Lucy and I co-create here through oral history is a product of what Michael Frisch describes as "shared authority."⁴ Lucy has authority as the owner of the experiences and accounts she shares, but I am choosing a very specific lens with which to interpret these details. While I have informed Lucy of my intent with our interviews, and with this project in general, Lucy has not reviewed—or expressed any interest in reviewing—my analysis, choosing instead to grant me free license in utilizing her memories. Consequently, our authority, at least in terms of this analysis, is not shared equally. Furthermore, Lucy is reflecting upon her experiences decades after they occurred, and now, at the age of 91, admits that her memory of specific events often fails her. I have filled in those gaps in her memory by incorporating earlier interviews and documents from her manuscript collection, many of which are consistent with my emphasis on the connection between Lucy's feminism and her nunhood.

Frisch writes that oral history becomes more relevant with "its increasing proximity to a very turbulent mainstream,"⁵ and my interest here is Lucy's proximity to the turbulence within the post-Vatican II Church and within the women's movement.

⁴ Michael Frisch, introduction to *Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, ed. Michael Frisch. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), xv-xxiii.

⁵ Frisch, xix.

Oral history is powerful, as it adds personal experience, nuance, and depth to the historical record. Amy Koehlinger incorporates numerous oral history interviews into her research with nuns active in the civil rights movement. For Koehlinger, oral history allows us to better understand the feelings of uncertainty and tumult that these sisters experienced in their own proximity to one such turbulent mainstream:

Even the best historical writing based on meticulous research is an exercise of recovery and interpretation that trades the immediacy of human experience for the analytic advantage of historical hindsight. Historians hear the thunderous cacophony of the past as faint voices that survive in archive boxes, and then amplify and systematize those whispers into a meaningful story—the most accurate one we can reconstruct—about the past.⁶

This incorporation of this human experience into the historical record is particularly valuable for feminist history because, like feminism, oral history “has a political agenda and integrates women into scholarship.”⁷ Quite literally, the refrain “the personal is political” can be interpreted as “the personal is historical.” Just as Koehlinger has done in her analysis of nuns in the civil rights movement, I interpret and politicize Lucy’s experiences and the experiences of other Catholic sisters. Though Lucy acknowledges the political implications of events in these recent interviews I conducted, I refer to her earlier interviews and her document collection to extrapolate a more radically feminist narrative.

Born in Louisville, Kentucky—a mid-sized southern border city with an active Catholic community—in 1922, Lucy Freibert joined the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in

⁶ Amy Koehlinger, *The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 18.

⁷ Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Patricia Lina Leavy. *Feminist Research Practice*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 153.

1945.⁸ Her life as a nun mirrors that of many other women religious; she is a highly educated teacher and community advocate, and she has experienced significant shifts in the Catholic Church in the past several decades. But Lucy is also distinct as a sister. While it is not unusual for a sister to receive a PhD and teach at the postsecondary level, most have appointments at Catholic colleges or universities. This was particularly true during the late 1960s and 1970s as the many sisters with PhDs formed “the backbone of a burgeoning system of Catholic colleges and universities.”⁹ Lucy chose to leave a Catholic school, Spalding College, to begin teaching at a secular institution, the University of Louisville, a large, urban public university, where she became a professor of English. Her social justice ministry is also significant, as it not only focused on advancing the lives of women—a common mission for Catholic sisters—but was categorically feminist in its scope and in Lucy’s definition. My research examines how Lucy represents both the continuity within and the departure from prevailing religious and feminist history.

The connection between religion and feminism remains underexplored even as feminist historiography continues to grow. Ann Braude argues that the uneasy relationship between Christianity and feminism has led to the scarcity of literature analyzing the connection between the two, particularly in post-women’s liberation movement discourse. Among many critical accounts of religious feminism and feminist history, Braude finds a consistent rhetoric of religion and feminism as “inherently

⁸ Lucy Freibert, notes on *My Feminist Life*, 2001, Sister Lucy Freibert Papers, Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Archives. (Hereafter cited as *My Feminist Life*.)

⁹ Koehlinger, 107.

incompatible.”¹⁰ Although there exists a more fluid inclusion of religion in the study of nineteenth and early twentieth-century feminisms and related social reforms, religion disappears in later decades of this historiography, in part because of the connection between women’s liberation and shifts in American religion. Young leaders of the women’s movement who then became historians of the movement tend, according to Braude, to see religion as one of the many patriarchal systems they worked to overturn. Braude summarizes the many resulting publications that have overlooked religion or portrayed religion as oppositional to feminism, by noting that “Religion and feminism, it seems, are skewed lines, traversing divergent planes of American culture.”¹¹

Braude points to women like Sister Joel Read and Sister Austin Doherty as historical examples of leaders who are both feminist and religious as early members of the National Organization for Women (NOW). NOW leaders of the 1960s and 1970s utilized these sisters’ role—and even their habits, which they often wore only for public NOW engagements—to “juxtapose a visual icon of female subservience with the possibility of change represented by the new organization.”¹² Iconic feminist Betty Freidan recalls Sister Joel Read as being instrumental in curtailing the competing personalities and ideologies that threatened to derail NOW’s first meeting, remembering Read as “particularly eloquent and commonsensible, breaking through the quibbling over details that could have kept the organization from getting born.”¹³ When asked about this incident later, Read did not recall even speaking at the meeting and remembered her role as mostly symbolic. Braude posits that this lapse may be because, as a member of a

¹⁰ Ann Braude, “A Religious Feminist—Who Can Find Her? Historiographical Challenges from the National Organization for Women.” *The Journal of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2004): 557.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 557.

¹² *Ibid.*, 562.

¹³ *Ibid.*

religious community in which individual needs submit to the needs of the group, maneuvers to ease squabbling and reach consensus would have come naturally to Read and therefore would not have been memorable. What matters here is not whether or not Read did in fact mitigate meeting disputes; rather, it is Freidan's vigorous assertion of the importance of religious leadership to the feminist movement.

Historian Mary Henold also writes on Catholicism and feminism and agrees that the impact of faith on feminism is largely underestimated, at least in part because American feminism is predominantly led by secular feminists who are skeptical of incorporating religion into a feminist identity.¹⁴ But Henold argues that many Catholic feminists root their feminism in their faith and interpret it as a Christian principle, exemplifying what she describes as a "gospel mandate for social justice, liberation, and radical equality."¹⁵ Faith is, therefore, a significant dimension to consider in the formation of a feminist identity and in the advancement of the feminist movement. Religious women faced, and continue to face, conflicting loyalties, and it is not reasonable to expect a woman to abandon her faith when developing a feminist consciousness. For Henold, "Catholic feminists needed to make complicated choices about what to love, believe, challenge, and abandon in their religion, feminism, and daily lives. These choices were emotionally charged and full of risk."¹⁶ Women must continually renegotiate their faith and feminism in the ongoing process to balance the two. They come into feminism from and with their own traditions, and feminism has been influenced by these traditions; studying the connection between religion and

¹⁴ Mary J. Henold, *Catholic and Feminist: the Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

feminism is as much an analysis of the impact of religion on feminism as it is an analysis of feminist shifts for religious women.

Carole Garibaldi Rogers also views religion as an important yet understudied aspect of identity and argues for its inclusion, along with other social categories—such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender—in oral history projects.¹⁷ The connection between faith and feminism is particularly salient for Catholic sisters like Lucy, and Rogers is interested in them as narrators because she views Catholic sisters as having experienced more acute change in the last half of the twentieth century, in all areas of their lives, than any other group of American women: “For the last 50 years, nuns have lived at the epicenter of change—change in their personal lives, in their work, their church, and their country.”¹⁸ Rogers also suggests that, among feminists, there is discomfort with women religious. She describes how during discussions of her research with colleagues or at presentations, she has been “challenged to explain how and why these women are agents of change in their own lives, not simply pathetic victims of an outdated hierarchical system. How can nuns, having chosen to live within such a patriarchal world, believe in and struggle for political, social, and economic equality for other women? How, in other words, could a nun be a feminist?”¹⁹

What Rogers continued to find in her interviews was a series of deep and nuanced explanations of how Catholic sisters negotiated this seeming contradiction between faith and feminism. Julia Lieblich²⁰ and Yvonne McKenna²¹ also conducted interviews with

¹⁷ Carole Garibaldi Rogers, "Overlooked Narrators: What Women Religious Can Contribute to Feminist Oral History." *Frontiers* 19, no. 3 (1998): 164.

¹⁸ Carole Garibaldi Rogers, *Habits of Change: An Oral History of American Nuns*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xi.

¹⁹ Rogers (1998), 164.

²⁰ Julia Lieblich, *Sisters: Lives of Devotion and Defiance*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992).

Catholic sisters and, like Rogers, they spoke with multiple women who expressed a strong feminist consciousness even if they did not describe themselves as feminist. For these authors, feminist values are one of the many ways that nuns challenge stereotypes about the role of sisters, and arguably women in general, in the Catholic Church.

These feminist values figure strongly in the field of feminist theology; while other scholars may have overlooked the connections between religion and feminism, particularly since the 1960s, feminist theologians have broadened their field significantly. In a 1960 essay, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” theologian Valerie Saiving called for a theology that incorporated women’s experiences specifically, as all doctrine and scholarship focused on men’s experiences:

Contemporary theological doctrines have, I believe, been constructed primarily on the basis of masculine experience and thus view the human condition from the male standpoint. Consequently, these doctrines do not provide an adequate interpretation of the situation of women—nor, for that matter, of men, especially in view of certain fundamental changes now taking place in our own society.²²

Soon after Saiving published this article, other theologians, among them Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sally Cunneen, and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, began to call for a gendered interpretation of traditional doctrine.

For theologian Susan Ross, this feminist reinterpretation “reveals both the historical forces that worked to silence women’s voices and the retrieval of women’s active involvement and significant achievements.”²³ Feminist theology is based on the lived experience of women, often at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, and

²¹ Yvonne McKenna, “A Gendered Revolution: Vatican II and Irish Women Religious.” *Irish Feminist Review* 1 (2005): 75-93.

²² Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View.” *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (1960): 101.

²³ Susan A. Ross, “Catholic Women Theologians of the Left,” in *What’s Left? Liberal American Catholics*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 20-21.

reclaims Church history and theology. Through the reclamation of feminist theology, the history of women in the Church is being rewritten to feature women as active agents of their struggle for equality. Lucy's story, then, contributes to both a historiography and a theology that emphasize the personal experiences of women in the past and the future of women in the Church.

Lucy is also representative of liberal Catholicism, a more open and progressive interpretation of the Church that relates to its role in modern society. As editor of *What's Left?*, a volume about liberal Catholicism, Mary Jo Weaver acknowledges that disagreements over the nature of the Church, including its ministry, teachings, policies, and language, have formed the basis for scholarship both in that work and in the field at large. Weaver's characterization of liberal Catholics is consistent with my own as those who welcome resistance, experimentation, and newness with regards to elements of the Church, often relating to the interpretation of the Holy Spirit and the example of Jesus.²⁴ Lucy's homilies and writings about her faith illustrate her reinterpretations of traditional Church teachings and are consistent with other liberal Catholics and with feminist theologians.

The influence of liberal Catholicism and feminist theology on nuns like Lucy became more apparent beginning in the late 1960s; by the 1970s many sisters' personal beliefs and public ministries reflected feminist values. This timeframe is particularly useful for examining sisters' relationships to both feminism and the evolving Church; as a result, my research with Lucy culminates with a discussion of her feminism in the 1970s. This decade is critical not only because it was the height of the women's

²⁴ Mary Jo Weaver, introduction to *What's left? Liberal American Catholics*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 1.

liberation movement, but also because it immediately followed the Second Vatican Council, also called Vatican II, a series of Church proclamations between 1962 and 1965 aimed at modernization. Among these proclamations were calls to work toward social justice as the redeeming love of God, along with a transformation of religious communities and the movement of more women religious into public roles.²⁵ By the late 1960s, nuns were active in civil rights, the peace movement, and feminism, in part as a result of Vatican II. Lucy and other sisters like her believe their vocation compels them to not only be faithful, but also to live their faith in their communities. While these sisters had opportunities for leadership and fulfilling ministries prior to Vatican II, the post-conciliar Church offered many new apostolic paths.

The structure of this thesis is largely chronological, beginning with Lucy's decision to join the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth and her early years as a sister. Chapter two discusses how Vatican II affected Lucy's education and professional life. Chapter three considers her role as an educator and feminist activist during the women's liberation movement and post-Vatican II. I do not endeavor to write a comprehensive biography, but rather to utilize elements of Lucy's narrative as representative of Catholic sisters who championed feminism in the wake of Vatican II.

Sister Marie Augusta Neal is a Harvard-trained sociologist who has surveyed nuns nationally. She agrees with other authors' descriptions of nuns as social justice-oriented and generally liberal within the Church, but in an interview with Julia Lieblich, she characterizes Lieblich's other interviewees as "among the five percent of prophetic sisters on the radical rim." While Neal's comment can be seen as calling into question

²⁵ Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching, 1891-present: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis*. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 34.

the feminist contributions of the other 95 percent of sisters, she goes on to say, “They go in and get things ready for the rest of us.”²⁶ It is unclear whether Neal’s “us” refers to Catholic sisters, feminists, or women in general; in Sister Lucy Freibert, we find a model for all three. What follows is not simply the story of a woman, a devout sister, a teacher, or even a feminist, but rather the story of a radical agitator who represents all of those identities simultaneously.

²⁶ Lieblich, 26.

CHAPTER ONE

“THE.EPITOME.OF.THE.GREAT.LIFE”:.POSTWAR.SISTER.FORMATION. AND EDUCATION

In the years between World War II and the Second Vatican Council, from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, the Church struggled to hold on to traditions while negotiating its mission in the modern world. During this time, Catholic sisters carved out a path unique to their identity in the Church and found renewed agency that would expand even further with the ushering in of Vatican II. It was within this conservative, yet rapidly evolving, Church climate that Lucy joined the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth and spent the first two decades of her ministry as a teacher.

Between World War I and World War II the Church had adopted a “cloister mentality” that isolated many women religious and turned them “inward toward the Catholic community, where it was believed sisters would be more safely insulated from the polluting influence of the outside world.”²⁷ The Church began to restrict the activities and ministries of women religious as never before, eventually systematizing these restrictions in the first Code of Canon Law in 1918.²⁸ This concern about sisters’ protection reflected broader societal apprehension about the development of women in the inter-war era. Women’s suffrage had granted them new political power, and wartime industries introduced new economic opportunities, particularly for middle-class women.

²⁷ Koehlinger, 6.

²⁸ Ibid.

Amidst a globalizing and modernizing society, women found both progress and conservative resistance.

This tension between conservatism and change became even more pronounced after World War II, as the end of the war brought worldwide concerns into baby-booming American living rooms. In the postwar era the United States struggled to contain and maintain, even as modernization and suburbanization drove consumerism and distance between families—literally and figuratively—to unprecedented levels. Many white, middle-class families moved to the suburbs, creating segregated neighborhoods and isolating nuclear family units from their extended family. Rebounding from women’s wartime employment and assumption of masculine roles, the country now celebrated and consumed domesticity. More than ever, women were expected to maintain happy, healthy, modern homes for their families, especially their husbands.²⁹

Accordingly, post-World War II suburbanization and renewed emphasis on domesticity created a new model for Catholic women. As urban ethnic communities dispersed geographically, extended families and networks no longer regulated women’s behavior, leaving Church leaders and Catholic press to fill the gap in defining and monitoring womanhood. At the same time, these women experienced expectations of idealized housewives as the epitome of womanhood. In this way, Catholic women were not only expected to be devoted to their homes and husbands; they were also expected to be devoted to their faith, church, and traditions.³⁰

²⁹ Amy Swerdlow, “The Congress of American Women” in *U.S. History as Women’s History: New Feminist Essays*, edited by Linda Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathleen Kish Sklar. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.)

³⁰ Henold, 25.

The popularity of the myth of the “eternal woman” during this time illustrated the cultural insistence upon a model of a uniquely Catholic womanhood. Philosopher Gertrud von Le Fort published *The Eternal Woman* for American readers in 1954, and her ideas became part of popular Catholic rhetoric through the mid-1960s. Insisting that women had a special role in humanity’s redemption and that “woman” was a fixed, eternal, essential being, this archetype promoted women’s surrender, sacrifice, grace, and virtue. Catholic publications and Church leaders encouraged women to become temporal representations of the eternal woman and to emulate Mary’s devotion in her commitment to God, her family, and her church.³¹ Modern Catholic women, then, not only surrendered to their husbands; they also sacrificed for humanity.

Alongside this trend toward conservatism and containment, however, young Catholic women also developed new perspectives unlike previous generations. Catholic devotional culture and emerging Catholic social action since the 1930s inspired women—at least, those who were not already part of religious communities—to apply their faith to worldly concerns, and women were now more than ever integrated into non-Catholic American society.³² It was this fresh perspective that Lucy, and many other young nuns like her, took to their new religious communities.

When asked about her decision to become a sister, Lucy did not emphasize devotion to Christ or a desire to live as a virtuous woman of the Church, and she certainly had no interest in a cloistered lifestyle. Rather, she touted a desire to help and teach others. In a 1976 oral history interview Lucy described the possibilities for service she saw in the life of a nun:

³¹ Ibid, 26-7.

³² Koehlinger, 32.

I really wanted to do as much as I could for other people, and this, of course, is a part of the Christian tradition. The idea of Christianity is, I think, to love God and love one's fellow man. And in order to show one's love for God, the only concrete way one can do it is by doing as much as possible for other people and showing devotion and love for them, trying to help them in every way. I saw the kinds of things that sisters do—teaching, being nurses, or doing social work—as three really good ways of helping people, and I could see at that time—I was just out of high school about three years—I could see that I really could enjoy working in any of these three capacities and being able to do a lot for other people.³³

Beyond her view of nuns as instrumental in helping others, Lucy also saw sisterhood as an opportunity to have experiences outside of marriage and motherhood, including continuing her education and pursuing a career as a teacher. By joining SCN, Lucy rejected post-war feminine expectations of domesticity in exchange for ministry as a sister. In a 1976 *Louisville Times* article, Lucy reflected on her decision to become a sister:

When I entered the community back in 1945, there were not as many opportunities for women to do the kinds of things I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to stay single. I was a terrible perfectionist and I wanted to control everything about my life. I don't think I knew as clearly then why I became a sister, as I know now. I looked around to see how best a single woman could do what I wanted to do. In the religious life, I knew people wouldn't always be saying—but when are you going to be married?³⁴

In the interview, Lucy reported living her Christian faith as a nun by loving and helping others; but she also acknowledged quite literally at the same time—the article was published the same year as the oral history interview—that her role as a sister afforded her more individual freedom and agency than she felt she would have if she were a wife and mother. Her motivation was simultaneously personal, benevolent, and feminist. In

³³ Lucy Freibert interview by Stephanie Maddox, April 19, 1976, transcript, Oral History Center, University Archives and Record Center, University of Louisville. (Hereafter cited as Freibert Interview, 1976.)

³⁴ Dianne Aprile, "Lucy Freibert? A nun!? Her vows are her 'habit'," *Louisville Times*, February 7, 1976. (Hereafter cited as "Lucy Freibert? A nun!?")

order to be her most complete and effective self, and to best contribute to others, she needed a role that allowed her to pursue professional goals without the responsibility of a family.

Lucy's family was extremely supportive of her decision to become a nun and to work as a teacher. As active members of the Church community, her parents were fond of men and women religious, and Lucy even suspected that her father might have wanted to become a priest, and her mother a sister, but were unable to do so. Lucy's father maintained priests' cars when he owned a garage, and her parents entertained priests in their home. Their fondness for the Church and for religious life contributed to Lucy's enthusiasm and goal of becoming a sister, though they never pushed her to join the sisterhood: "I thought that being a sister was just the epitome of the great life, you know. Momma had thought, and Daddy, too, that priests and sisters were the saviors of the world, they were special."³⁵

Lucy wanted initially to join Mother Katharine Drexel's community, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, who were working with poor Native American and African American families near and around New Orleans.³⁶ Her family priest curbed her plan, however, and insisted that, as the oldest of five children and the only daughter, she needed to stay closer to home: "When I decided I wanted to be a sister I wanted to go to Mother Drexel's sisters in New Orleans, and Father Schmitt said, 'no, you can't go there because you'd never see your parents again. You would be going south, and you'd never

³⁵ Lucy Freibert interview by the author, September 27, 2013, Oral History Center, University Archives and Record Center, University of Louisville. (Hereafter cited as Freibert Interview, September 27, 2013.)

³⁶ Margaret McGuinness, *Called to Serve: A History of Nuns in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 83.

get back to Kentucky.’ He said, ‘you go out and visit those Charity and see if you wouldn’t like to be one of them.’³⁷

Many SCN sisters were teachers in local Catholic elementary schools, and with a girls’ high school and Nazareth College, a commitment to SCN presented many teaching opportunities for Lucy. After interviewing with SCN superiors, Lucy decided that the community would be a good fit for her. This was a significant decision and, in many ways, a more compelling commitment than marriage or family would have been because she was shedding her individual, worldly identity and making an eternal, spiritual commitment to God and her sisters. In the SCN community, a new group of eight or ten women would take their vows each year on “vow day,” usually in May after high school or college graduation. One by one, they would approach the altar in the community’s chapel of St. Vincent, professing their commitment to God and their community. Lucy remembered her own vow day:

We came in and sat, on either side [of the altar] in the front, and when it was time, we would get up and walk over and sit down and say, ‘I, Sister Lucy Marie, though unworthy of appearing before you...do make my vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience in the community of the Sisters of Charity, so help me God.’ And then we would get up and go to our seat, and then the next one would be kneeling there already, ready to say hers.³⁸

After taking their vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity, new sisters spent two years as postulants and then novices, studying scriptures and learning the customs and routines of their communities. A hierarchy of women oversaw religious convents and communities—a leadership structure that Lucy would later refer to as a model for leadership in the women’s liberation movement. At the time, however, the discipline of

³⁷ Freibert Interview, September 27, 2013.

³⁸ Lucy Freibert interview by the author, February 15, 2014. Personal interview. (Hereafter cited as Freibert Interview, February 15, 2014.)

community life and rigidity of her mothers superior intimidated Lucy. During daily mass, for example, the superiors and generals sat in the back of the chapel while the novitiates sat in the front. Masses that featured the SCN choir were simultaneously invigorating and nerve-wracking for Lucy; a gifted singer, she had to stand in front of the mother superior in the choir loft. “She was a perfectionist,” Lucy recalled, “I was afraid she would know if I was off even a syllable.”³⁹

In many ways, community life was disorienting. Particularly prior to Vatican II, women who became nuns left their homes to join religious communities and often never returned; this was the reason that Father Schmitt prohibited Lucy from joining the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament so far from home. To symbolize their new identities as sisters, most women changed their names upon joining a community. Lucy was born “Mary Lucy,” but because another Mary Lucy was already an SCN sister, she changed her name to Lucy Marie: “That was my name. That was my first name. And then when I entered the community we already had a Sister Mary Lucy, and they wouldn’t let me keep my own name. So...I had to turn it around.”⁴⁰ Though Lucy was able to continue seeing her family—who still called her Mary Lucy—after joining SCN, she had to adjust her support system from her family of origin to her congregation of sisters.

For Lucy, the most difficult part of her postulancy was the daily silence. Until she entered the convent, she was unaware of the imposed silence, “Oh, I didn’t have any idea that we would keep silent! None whatsoever. That was the biggest surprise.”⁴¹ As with other aspects of community life, the silence was rigorous:

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Lucy Freibert interview by the author, December 23, 2013. Personal interview. (Hereafter cited as Freibert Interview, December 23, 2013.)

⁴¹ Freibert Interview, September 27, 2013.

When we came to the community at that time, we kept silent. In what they called “ordinary silence,” that’s what you kept from the time you got up in the morning until you went to lunch. You didn’t talk at all, except if you were working in a particular place, and you had to talk to whoever was in charge, you could talk to them about business things....And then at noontime, if the mother general gave recreation to everybody in the dining room, you could talk, and if not, you kept silence all during the meal. And some of the superiors were more lenient. They liked to talk themselves while they ate, and so they were more likely to give recreation. But other than that, you would have reading during the meal.⁴²

The silence was not meant to be a limitation or to mold sisters into obedience; instead, it created opportunities for study and reflection for women who were training themselves to become effective sisters. Lucy laughed when she remembered her surprise but was appreciative later of how she became more reflective as a result of the imposed silence. In this way, the silence was a source of strength, not restriction. Years later Lucy gave the welcoming address to incoming students at the University of Louisville’s freshman convocation and encouraged them to seek wisdom in reflection:

If you would like to grow in wisdom, set aside at least fifteen minutes each day to look back over the experiences of the day to see how it has been spent. This reflection will show you how you are molding your life, what habits you are forming, what you value, what kind of person you are becoming. It will show you whether you are becoming selfish or generous, whether you are honest and just to others. The reflection time will help you gain an inner calm that will not give way to temper tantrums or sharp words or snap judgments that you will regret afterward. This kind of reflection will help you develop tolerance for others, respect for their cultural or gender or racial differences. It will help you become sensitive to young and old, to look at a bigger picture than what you see in your mirror.⁴³

For Lucy, silence and reflection not only provided a path for self-improvement, but also equipped individuals to become more effective advocates for social change by appreciating difference and developing a larger worldview.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Lucy Freibert, 1991 Freshman Convocation Address, Sister Lucy Freibert Papers, Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Archives.

In the same way, silence encouraged a person to listen for God, the primary source of wisdom for Lucy. “Set aside 15 minutes in the morning and 15 minutes at night to talk to God,” she later advised a friend. “Some of that time should be spent listening, for the reply. Don’t argue or worry. Just sit and listen. That is the way to peace and calm. The answer may not come the first few times, but be patient and it will come to you.”⁴⁴ Lucy credited her faith in God’s wisdom as supporting her willingness to take risks in her career and her ministry, along with forming the foundation for her feminism. The years she spent in silence as a novitiate prepared her to hear God’s voice; as a result, she was ready for later Vatican II reforms which encouraged her to act boldly as a person of God and to develop her own personal relationship with God.

Even before Vatican II, sisters’ lives were shifting within the Church. As other Catholic women were called to be closer to home and closer to the Church, modeling both domesticity and devotion, nuns in the 1950s found increasing opportunities both within and outside their religious communities. After World War II, the Catholic educational system grew rapidly, and local parishes faced heightened demand for sister teachers. Even the 21 percent postwar vocational boom could not keep up with the more than 200 percent growth in student population, and in order to meet this demand, congregations assigned nuns to classrooms without providing much, if any, training.⁴⁵ By the early 1950s, communities recognized that they needed new strategies for recruiting and training sisters; at the same time, recently published studies revealed how

⁴⁴ “Sister Lucy: A Legend in the Classroom,” *The Journey*, Vol. III, 2010, 26.
<http://issuu.com/journey/docs/journey2010vol03> (Hereafter cited as “Sister Lucy: A Legend in the Classroom.”)

⁴⁵ Koehlinger, 29.

unprepared nuns were for teaching, forcing Church officials to initiate their own plan to foster sisters' development.⁴⁶

The resulting sister formation movement sought to increase the educational level of, and professional capacities for, sisters. The Sister Formation Conference (SFC), composed of major superiors, college presidents and faculty, and newer members of women's communities, assembled in 1953 at the request of the Vatican and served as the guiding force for sister formation.⁴⁷ While American sisters pressed forward with reforms specifically because they needed to meet the demands of Catholic schools, Pope Pius XII supported this movement because he wanted to see sisters as more effective generally in their service. Amy Koehlinger writes that, "For Pius XII, improving the functioning of the apostolate among women religious meant discarding impractical regulations and encouraging congregations toward cooperative action."⁴⁸ Even when local bishops and priests objected to the disruption that Conference reforms caused in meeting the immediate needs of local Catholic school staffs, Vatican officials strongly advocated for practical action and supported these women in attaining their educations and becoming more competent and successful.⁴⁹

The Conference brought together sister-superiors from diverse communities to develop strategies to increase efficiency, efficacy, and educational attainment. Koehlinger calls the resulting networks, programs, and bodies of literature "vectors for information" that functioned to disseminate research, ideas, and theological discourse.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Lora Ann Quiñonez and Mary Daniel Turner, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁸ Koehlinger, 24.

⁴⁹ Quiñonez and Turner, 6-7.

⁵⁰ Koehlinger, 28.

An example of one such “vector” was the *Sister Formation Bulletin*, which began publication in 1954 with the stated purpose of becoming a “publicity medium on new things in Sister-formation.”⁵¹ Nearly all local communities subscribed to the *Bulletin*, and superiors recommended that sister members read it. Through the *Bulletin*, communities shared new initiatives, including changes in their customs books, daily horariums, and orientation periods. The *Bulletin* also published articles written by sisters, along with abstracts of work by prominent contemporary thinkers of the Catholic revival, including Leo Suenens, Karl Rahner, and Bernard Haring.⁵² Lora Ann Quiñonez and Mary Daniel Turner describe the *Bulletin* as “convey[ing] strongly the image of a movement underway (and gaining momentum) to make both the individual sister and the community relevant to and confident in the times.”⁵³ Through the SFC and sources like the *Bulletin*, women religious embraced a spirit of change and modernization in the American church prior to Vatican II, and they “entered the conciliar period with an intellectual and theological sophistication unparalleled in other sectors of the Church.”⁵⁴

The SFC’s may have initiated theological and spiritual shifts for individual sisters and entire communities, but sisters’ newly increased levels of education were even more impactful. Superiors were sending members to full-time college study at the baccalaureate, master’s, and PhD levels, and sisters began to “think of themselves as competent professionals, not just nameless servants in the Church.”⁵⁵ Religious communities’ process of recruiting, orienting, and encouraging new sisters illustrated this shift, as the SFC “advocated the integration of spiritual, intellectual, and professional

⁵¹ Quiñonez and Turner, 9.

⁵² Ibid, 10.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Koehlinger, 33.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 34.

disciplines in the initiation programs for newer members, thereby eroding long-espoused distinctions between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘worldly.’”⁵⁶

Lucy embraced the new educational opportunities the Sister Formation Conference afforded her, along with the deeper connection between spiritual life and material life. She had begun studying for her bachelor’s degree at Ursuline College in 1940, but only spent one year there before transferring to Spencerian for one year of business school. She then worked for two and a half years as a secretary before joining the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in 1945. Because she already had experience and some college coursework, the sisters assigned her to work as the secretary to the congregation’s secretary general for two years until, like many sisters, she began teaching in local Catholic schools.

Even in the 1940s, SCN sisters attended Nazareth College, now Spalding University, to earn their bachelor’s degree. Beginning in 1947 Lucy attended Nazareth while she was teaching elementary and high school, taking one class per semester on Saturdays and classes during the summer session. She originally wanted to be a math major because she would have more time for her own reading, but the sisters asked her to switch to English:

She asked me if I would mind changing, and I said ‘No,’ because the reason I took a math major was you could always finish your math in a minute and then you had lots of time and I could spend that reading. And I always did that when I was a math major. I read novels all the time and, and so I, I didn’t mind at all except that once you become an English major you never have time to do anything because you never catch up.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Quiñonez and Turner, 7.

⁵⁷ Lucy Freibert interview by Catherine Fosl, February 21, 2001, transcript, Women’s Rights in Kentucky Oral History Project, Kentucky Oral History Commission, Kentucky Historical Society. (Hereafter cited as “Freibert Interview, 2001.”)

Lucy finally graduated from Nazareth in 1957, seventeen years after taking her first college course. By then the Sister Formation Conference was underway, and just as the sisters had asked her to become an English major, they now asked her to begin her master's degree. Lucy recalled, "When I was first sent away for my master's in 1957, I was told to go to St. Louis University to study."⁵⁸ Though Lucy never indicated any resistance to obtaining her master's degree, she was clear that the community initiated the endeavor and chose the university she would attend. She received her master's in 1962, after six summers at St. Louis University, and as a result of the changes in the Church—including the Sister Formation Conference and the early years of Vatican II—she asked for and received permission to study next for her PhD. "By the time that I was sent or was assigned to get the doctorate," Lucy explained, "the Church had changed so much that the community asked me to find some places that I would like to go."⁵⁹ She eventually began studying at the University of Wisconsin in 1965, and while I will discuss Lucy's experience at Wisconsin in greater detail in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, even at this early juncture in her career, we can already see that Lucy's path to feminism began in the increasing educational opportunities of the Sister Formation Conference.

Quiñonez and Turner assert that it is "difficult to overemphasize the seminal importance of Sister Formation in the changing of American nuns."⁶⁰ Not only did sisters dramatically increase their educational attainment and professional capacity, they also developed significant connections between communities and demonstrated to Church officials their power in leading a movement for change.

⁵⁸ Freibert Interview, 1976.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Quiñonez and Turner, 11.

The Vatican likely underestimated the impact of the Sister Formation Conference. Though the upper realms of Church hierarchy supported sisters' educations, Mary Henold argues that they "did not foresee the consequences of encouraging women religious to seek higher education or of gathering so many sisters in one place."⁶¹ Koehlinger agrees, saying, "National conferences of sisters that began as obedient responses to papal mandate often developed into vehicles for the particular aspirations of American women religious."⁶² Sister formation created a group of women committed to their own education, a deeper understanding of the Church, and modernization. While other lay women may have experienced a period of disempowerment, or at least uncertainty, between World War II and Vatican II, sisters experienced new opportunities for growth. Lucy, and other nuns like her, were, as historian Leila Rupp and sociologist Verta Taylor have put it, "surviving in the doldrums" to develop an emerging feminist consciousness and lay the groundwork for feminist activism.⁶³

⁶¹ Henold, 20.

⁶² Koehlinger, 28.

⁶³ Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

CHAPTER TWO

“WE.BEGAN.TO.TALK.OF.THE.PEOPLE.OF.GOD”:.VATICAN.II,.NEW. NUNS, AND FEMINISM

By the middle of the 20th century, the Catholic Church was struggling to keep up with modernization. This challenge is evident from the rapid transitions of the 1950s for Catholic sisters and other lay women; as sisters navigated these transitions by increasing their education levels and their professional efficacy, other women felt a conservative backlash. Early in his papacy Pope John XXIII looked to the future of the Church, saying he “hoped to open a window and let fresh air into Catholicism.”⁶⁴ In order to develop a plan for rejuvenation, Pope John XXIII convened the first worldwide council since 1870. Beginning in 1962 and continuing through 1965, thousands of bishops and experts—along with 23 women invited to observe the third session⁶⁵—gathered in the Vatican to begin opening this window. In those three years, the council developed sixteen documents that would serve as the foundation for *aggiornamento*—the bringing up to date of the Church—changing, as Mary Henold has described it, “how the Church prayed, defined itself, related to other faiths, and how it understood itself in the modern world, for the first time openly struggling with the challenges of modernity.”⁶⁶

Vatican II marked a fundamental theological transformation for the Catholic Church. Twentieth century modernization and postwar destabilization created a climate

⁶⁴ Henold, 21.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 22.

of uncertainty for Catholics across the world, and they could no longer rely on the Church to provide their moral guidance. Globalization brought worldwide human concerns into Catholics' living rooms, and just as individual Catholic communities were becoming less insular, the Church needed to provide new spiritual direction to accommodate the shifting concerns of Catholics. The Second Vatican Council responded by issuing what Amy Koehlinger has labeled "theologies of human solidarity and universal human dignity."⁶⁷ Even if much of the hierarchical framework remained in place, Vatican II shifted the Church from a spiritual gatekeeper to a spiritual community composed of the people of God in service to humanity. The monolithic institution became more multi-faceted, malleable, and fallible, and it embraced both the power and the failings that would result from granting greater moral subjectivity.

Vatican II granted spiritual and moral agency to Catholics, encouraging them to look within and follow their individual consciences.

Salvation—neither the power of nor the price for—no longer rested solely in the male hands of Church officials. Lay people, including sisters, who were not recognized as part of the formal Church leadership, now became their own moral agents. Prior to Vatican II, the Church held all knowledge and all power to prescribe, proscribe, and forgive. Through confession and commandments, Catholics earned their way into heaven by following the Church's representatives of God. But as newly appointed people of God, individuals now charted their own paths toward salvation and built more genuine relationships with others who were doing the same. Along with many other lay Catholics, women religious had been reading not only primary religious texts, but also

⁶⁷ Amy Koehlinger, "Are You the Black Sisters or the White Sisters? Women Confounding Categories of Race and Gender" in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*, ed. Catherine A. Brekus (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 257.

modern theologians, particularly after the Sister Formation Conference. In their personal reflections and devotions, they had already developed the spiritual conscience that Vatican II now demanded of them. For these sisters, then, the shift was not one of thought, but of action, as the Church now granted them the opportunity to implement this moral imperative. In a homily decades later, Lucy described this transformation:

We could even store up lots of extra merit by saying scores of aspirations and making sacrifices of time and money; we might even bypass Purgatory! God was the banker, and we became expert depositors....But Vatican II's ideals were so explosive they demolished the banking systems. A new idea of Church as the People of God quickly expanded the concept of who belonged in the City of God....Sisters, brothers, and priests began to remove barriers formed by titles and religious garb....The people of God became conscious of a whole world out there from which they could learn, and missionary colonialism turned into a cultural sharing of ways to reach the Divine.⁶⁸

This is not to say that Catholics did not have any individual spiritual autonomy or were not acting upon personal senses of morality prior to Vatican II. Though the Church did not emphasize personal relationships with God or living the gospel of Christ in the same way that it did after Vatican II, Catholics had long been developing their personal faiths and participating in social action. Lay women contributed to social movements during the Progressive Era, often redefining constructions of Catholic womanhood as they did so,⁶⁹ and Dorothy Day had been a leader in the Catholic worker movement decades before Vatican II. Still, the Second Vatican Council marked a watershed moment for lay Catholics, especially women religious whose responsibility to the Church limited opportunities for public activism.

⁶⁸ Lucy Freibert, Homily, St. William Church, February 17, 1996, Sister Lucy Freibert Papers, Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Archives.

⁶⁹ Kathleen Sprows Cummings, *New Women of the Old Faith: Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

A nun's role in the pre-conciliar Church, particularly after World War I and before the Sister Formation Conference, was singularly religious. Her religious identity served God and the Church, and in joining a community, sisters gave up their worldly lives and vowed themselves to serve God as holy women. The perfect, immutable, sacred reality was separate and distinct from the secular, human, flawed reality. Even in active communities with ministries of nursing, teaching, and caring for the poor, sisters' devotion and sanctity—not their charitable acts—were their primary concerns. Sisters invested in their own eternal lives, and the lives of those they served, through their commitment to the sacred realm, and in order to preserve their sanctity, they often even avoided participation in parish life.⁷⁰ They were, to borrow Lucy's metaphor, the human capital upon which the Catholic Church earned interest.

Vatican II shattered the spiritual piggy bank and opened up new opportunities for sisters to minister and live their faith as people of God. The Council had officially clarified sisters' status as Church laity⁷¹, and Carole Garibaldi Rogers points to two Vatican Council documents as particularly significant in sisters' developing spiritual efficacy: “*Gaudium et Spes* decreed that the Church was to be ‘truly and intimately linked with humankind and its history.’ *Lumen Gentium* asserted that all Christians were called by their baptism ‘to the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of charity.’ Women religious thus had to search for new ways to minister in the world as well as for a new spiritual identity.”⁷² Through its emphasis on theological development, the Sister Formation Conference had prepared sisters to embrace this call from the Holy See to reimagine their connection to God and the Church. Lucy echoed the spirit of *Gaudium et*

⁷⁰ Quiñonez and Turner, 34-35.

⁷¹ Koehlinger, “Women Confounding Categories of Race and Gender,” 262.

⁷² Rogers (1998), 158.

Spies and *Lumen Gentium* in describing how sisters quickly found their new role in who—not what—the Church was:

Before Vatican II, you didn't talk about "people of God." We talked always about the Church and that gives the impression of some kind of monolithic structure of power from the top down. The Holy Father, the cardinals, the bishops, the cardinals, the priests and then the people. And notice, women religious are just part of that laity—the people. Well, after Vatican II we began to talk of the people of God, that's who the Church is, not what the Church is. And so other aspects of religious life and practice began to be changed very radically.⁷³

Sisters were now part of a Church that aimed to be accessible and attentive to human needs, and the Church called on them, along with all other laypeople, to reclaim, as *Lumen Gentium* had instructed, their "fullness of Christian life" in service of others. The Church now called for its members to demonstrate the redeeming love of God through social justice, not through holy submission. Mary Jo Weaver writes that American Catholics were particularly energized and action-oriented in their interpretation of Vatican II: "When Catholics learned from the documents of Vatican II that the Holy Spirit, continually at work in the Church, was also actively disclosing God's presence in their own lives, they embraced that dynamism in a particularly American fashion. Put another way, they conflated the conciliar definition of the Church as the "people of God," with the American national creed of "we the people."...The sense of empowerment felt by many lay people after Vatican II was almost palpable."⁷⁴

Women religious embraced this call to action and joined American social movements, including the peace movement and civil rights movement. Dubbed "new nuns" by the media, sisters now lived the gospel by boycotting, marching, and lending their voices to liberation. These social actions were unheard of in the pre-conciliar

⁷³Freibert Interview, 1976.

⁷⁴Weaver, 3.

Church. “Involvement in the social, cultural, and political arenas,” Lora Ann Quiñonez and Mary Daniel Turner write, “was simply unthinkable.”⁷⁵ Many sisters took up the causes of women’s rights, including working toward their own equality within the Church. Henold places them at the early forefront of the Catholic feminist movement, saying that “between 1963 and 1970, the ‘new nuns’ were on the cutting edge of Church renewal. More than any other group they seemed taken with the spirit of Vatican II and ultimately provided much of the leadership for the new Catholic feminist movement of the seventies.”⁷⁶

Amy Koehlinger examines this emergence of women religious after Vatican II in *The New Nuns*, looking particularly at what she identifies as the “racial apostolate” of sisters organizing for civil rights in the South.⁷⁷ Like Henold, Koehlinger considers the 1960s a turning point for sisters as they transitioned from traditional apostolic works within the Catholic community to broader social justice education and activism. Though not all nuns immediately turned to social action after Vatican II, those who did so were not, Koehlinger asserts, an isolated phenomenon: “The apostolic transition that occurred within American women’s religious orders in the 1960s was one component of a gradual, incremental, and widespread shift in the philosophy, ideals, and aesthetics of religious life among American sisters rather than the work of a small, unrepresentative cadre of sisters.”⁷⁸

As discussed in Chapter One, sisters lived, worked, and ministered within a hierarchical structure, albeit one generally administered by other women. Beginning with

⁷⁵ Quiñonez and Turner, 35.

⁷⁶ Henold, 21.

⁷⁷ Koehlinger, *The New Nuns*, 3.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 23.

the SFC and then accelerating after Vatican II, sisters acclimated to the modern world with more control over their practical lives in the latter half of the twentieth century, making more decisions about their daily schedules and their work and living situations. Though they still considered, consulted with, and served their communities, they retained much more ownership over their choices. Quiñonez and Turner emphasize the rapidity of this transition, saying “areas of personal choice, in the past viewed as the province of the superior, whose permission had to be sought, shifted virtually overnight to the discretion of the individual.”⁷⁹ Neither a nun’s identity nor her daily routine was any longer in service of the sanctity of the Church.

This shift in sisters’ quotidian lives was representative of a developing “moral maturity.”⁸⁰ Rather than simply following the Church’s hierarchical directives, sisters now determined their own secular and sacred lives. And in controlling their sacred lives, they found new power to effect spiritual change in the lives of those around them. Recall, too, that the Church was interested in eliminating structural barriers to efficacy even during the Sister Formation Conference, as Pope Pius XII called for communities to become more efficient. Beginning with the Sister Formation Conference and continuing with Vatican II, women religious “revitalized the apostolate, moving it from the margins to the very center of religious life.”⁸¹ Rather than preoccupying themselves with community hierarchies and routines, sisters now refashioned their worldly lives in service of their sacred, apostolic ministries.

On the surface, sisters’ reintegration in the modern world was strikingly apparent as they shed the habit. Most communities of women religious chose to stop wearing the

⁷⁹ Quiñonez and Turner, 114.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Koehlinger, *The New Nuns*, 60.

habit, or at least to considerably alter it, in the years following Vatican II, symbolizing their new identities as worldly women. Prior to Vatican II, a sister's body and agency were subsumed into her religious identity. The Church's spirituality downplayed her womanhood, as it was "irrelevant if not actually detrimental to holiness. Their female bodily features were discounted as immaterial in a celibate life, downright dangerous if not reined in by a vigilant spirit."⁸² The habit was a physical reminder and visible symbol of a sister's spiritual "otherness" in the Church, both to herself and to the public. Their habits hid their bodies and hair, neutralizing and homogenizing their physical appearance. Though the habits and bonnets varied from community to community, they all served to cover and homogenize the women as individuals, separating their religious identities from their corporeal identities.

Sisters' appearance shifted dramatically after Vatican II as most began to dress like other lay people. Many sisters still chose a modest wardrobe, but they were largely free to select their own clothes. In doing so, they reconnected to their female bodies. Quiñonez and Turner consider this connection between a woman's body and her spiritual mission, what they describe as the "feminization of American sisters" as critical for women religious in connecting Church teaching with a social justice consciousness. "It disclosed the awakening of sisters to this reality," they write, "that the vehicle of their human unfolding [was] a woman's existence."⁸³ As spiritual women and gendered, sexual bodies, sisters worked on behalf of—and alongside—other women through feminist activism, education, and community programs in civic and religious systems.

⁸² Quiñonez and Turner, 89.

⁸³ Ibid, 91.

Without the habit, nuns looked like other people of God and could reunite their spiritual existence with their female bodies.

Lucy's mother, a gifted seamstress, had made all of the family's clothes when Lucy was younger, and Lucy described her family as fashionable and well-tailored. When Lucy's parents and brothers travelled with her to interview with SCN, the sisters initially thought she was applying to Nazareth College because they were all dressed so well. Upon entering SCN, she went to a local convent to change from her worldly clothes into the bonnet and robes of a novitiate.⁸⁴ Though the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth stopped wearing the habit while Lucy was studying for her PhD at the University of Wisconsin during the late 1960s, she continued to wear hers for the sake of her education and her family. Lucy feared that her conservative advisor would have disapproved, as the habit was a visual reminder of Church, and even cultural, progress:

Because my mentor believed that the Church was the last bastion of good. And he thought—and his wife, both of them—thought that whenever the Church backed down on anything... They were not Catholic, but they just saw the Church as kind of the last barrier or the last safeguard of morality. And they thought that changing habits and things like that were just dragging the Church down to the secular level.⁸⁵

She “didn't dare” take off the habit, in part because she was focused on obtaining her degree, and in part because she saw no personal or political need to leave it behind. Lucy instead chose to wait until she could return home to her family after graduation. At 48 years old, she had now worn a habit for over 25 years and wanted to be with her mother when she transitioned back to modern clothes:

⁸⁴ Lucy Freibert interview by the author, September 6, 2013, Oral History Center, University Archives and Record Center, University of Louisville. (Hereafter cited as Freibert Interview, September 6, 2013.)

⁸⁵ Freibert Interview, 2001.

I went home and changed from a habit to contemporary clothes at my own home so my mother wouldn't be hurt. She loved our habit. She loved that white cap. And she would have, you know, it would have been very hard on her if I had suddenly come home in contemporary clothes. So I changed in her home. And it was just a little point of gratitude.⁸⁶

Like her mother, Lucy sewed beautifully and made many of her own clothes.⁸⁷ While she was far from ostentatious with her outfits, she did embrace style. Just four years after ceasing to wear the habit, Lucy met a new colleague at the University of Louisville, Ann Allen, and surprised her with her sartorial choices. Upon finding out that the petite woman wearing bright orange pants and a bright orange sweater was a nun, Allen said, "I was completely astonished. This was not my picture of a nun....I had not seen one all dressed in orange. So when I said 'oh, you're a nun!' I guess she realized...what had surprised me. She said, 'oh, yeah, I dress like this all the time.'"⁸⁸

Far beyond her wardrobe, Lucy was certainly representative of these "new nuns." By the mid-1960s she had completed her master's degree at St. Louis University, an endeavor she had undertaken at the request of her community. Both Lucy and the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth were interested in her pursuing a PhD in English, but rather than dictating which school she would attend—as they had done with her master's degree—her community asked her to apply to three schools of her choosing. Lucy points to this development as exemplifying the shift in religious communities after Vatican II: "Now, you see, this is a total shift in the attitude of the community from telling one what to do, to saying 'what do you think would be best for you to do in order to make the most of

⁸⁶ Freibert Interview, September 6, 2013.

⁸⁷ Lin Billingsley interview by the author, February 23, 2014, Oral History Center, University Archives and Record Center, University of Louisville. (Hereafter cited as Billingsley Interview.)

⁸⁸ Ann Allen interview by the author, November 8, 2013, Oral History Center, University Archives and Record Center, University of Louisville. (Hereafter cited as Allen Interview.)

your potential.”⁸⁹ She applied and was accepted to University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, and University of Wisconsin; ultimately she chose University of Wisconsin because they “offered [her] the best deal.”⁹⁰ Lucy connected her education to the Church’s post-conciliar call to social action and felt that, through education, she was better prepared to serve others, as Vatican II had called her to do:

And when the community began to shift, it began to shift in the direction of...not just personal development for the individual sisters or brothers, or whatever....But the fullest possible development for all of these people as members of the people of God. Now, as we develop individually, more fully, through the education that is provided for us by our communities, then we are able to give that much more for the people that we work for and work with...everybody we come in contact with. The more you develop yourself, the more you have to give to others.⁹¹

Beyond her formal classroom training, Lucy also gained a political education while at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and later pointed to this time as pivotal for her feminism, saying that while there, “I became radicalized and that changed my whole life and that sort of made me a feminist.”⁹² Many university campuses became hotbeds of political activity in response to the Vietnam War, but perhaps none more so than the University of Wisconsin in the second half of the 1960s. Faculty members organized teach-ins, students burned their draft cards, and Students for a Democratic Society brought national attention and energy to the campus. Students repeatedly protested campus recruiting visits from Dow Chemical, then producing Napalm, and the university’s Bascom Hill was often the site of some kind of political action. Anti-war activism turned violent in Madison, as police beat protestors and as activists set off firebombs in university buildings. Even when political actions were not violent, they

⁸⁹ Freibert Interview, 1976.

⁹⁰ Freibert Interview, September 6, 2013.

⁹¹ Freibert Interview, 1976.

⁹² Freibert Interview, 2001.

were far from passive; campus organizers would declare a tactic each day, including picket lines in front of classroom buildings.⁹³

Lucy credited her mother, grandmother, and various teachers with encouraging her independence as a woman and her concern with women's rights in general,⁹⁴ but it was not until she arrived in Madison that she politicized this concern:

People were saying, 'why do we always take just what is handed to us?' And I began to think well, there are so many things that I've always felt were wrong in the way women were conditioned by our society. I have always had a very strong feeling about this, but I never heard anybody else articulating this. And so when I got with people who were asking these questions of, 'why does this happen to women? Why have women been kept down? Why have women been given this second class citizenship all throughout the years?' Why are we the second sex as Simone de Beauvoir says. Then I was really turned on to the Movement.⁹⁵

Lucy recalled at least three strikes and one bombing while she was at the University of Wisconsin, and even walked through a picket line the day she defended her dissertation. Unwilling to miss her dissertation defense, she called that "the hardest day of my life. Just awful to walk by those people that I had stood with and have them see me going in to defend that dissertation."⁹⁶ Lucy now viewed herself as a political entity and was ready to apply this newly embraced power as an activist to her views on women's equality—and to her ministry as a nun.

The fact that Lucy developed her feminist consciousness and grew into her feminism on a college campus is significant for her as an educator. College campuses had reflected national political movements throughout the 1960s, first during the civil rights campaign with the growth of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and

⁹³ Glenn Sibler and Barry Alexander Brown, directors. *The War at Home*, 1979.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Freibert Interview, 1976.

⁹⁶ Freibert Interview, 2001.

other similar student organizations. Later the New Left and Students for a Democratic Society galvanized students around an agenda of broad social reform. Particularly for politically active women students and faculty like Lucy, organizing for women's studies and other political gains grew at least in part due to their marginalization in earlier political movements.⁹⁷ As was the case in the movements outside of campuses, the civil rights and New Left movements on campuses had often relegated women students to administrative or clerical tasks. Lucy saw this on the University of Wisconsin campus:

But that's where the feminist movement really got a big boost in the academic world. Because here were the women writing the speeches, making the coffee and cookies and the guys were out on Bascom Hill with the bullhorns during the demonstrations. And you didn't have to be brilliant to see what was going on.⁹⁸

In the women's movement, these women found an opportunity to lead their own political mobilization and, like Lucy, subsequently created academic scholarship that would complement their social movement.

Feminist theology also contributed significantly to Lucy's feminism in the late 1960s, particularly as it related to the Church. She repeatedly cited Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether, who had both begun publishing Catholic feminist theology in the 1960s, as influential on her spirituality as a woman. Other new nuns were also eager to embrace Daly and Ruether's perspectives; Koehlinger notes that "sisters read foundational books of Catholic feminism by Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether, and Sally Cunneen rather than works like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*."⁹⁹ Lucy named Ruether as "one of the foremost theologians in the country" and Daly as "an outstanding

⁹⁷ Mari Jo Buhle, introduction to *The politics of women's studies: testimony from thirty founding mothers*, ed. Florence Howe (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2000), xxi.

⁹⁸ Freibert Interview, 2001.

⁹⁹ Koehlinger, *The New Nuns*, 235.

theologian,” and discussed how “people of this caliber” could lead the Church in new directions with regards to women, including women’s ordination.¹⁰⁰ Daly resonated especially with Lucy:

Her books were so important to the whole movement. I think especially to Catholic women. Her book called *The Church and the Second Sex* followed on Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*, took that notion and said, ‘Yes, and this is what the Church has done.’ She was the one who unearthed all those great quotations that really make people stop and say, ‘How could a man of, you know, a man of God, how could a religious man ever say these horrible things about women?’ But they did.¹⁰¹

Like Lucy, both Daly and Ruether were university professors deeply committed to social action. By the mid-1960s Ruether was active in the southern civil rights movement, and Daly had just earned her third doctorate, having been forced to pursue her latest PhD in sacred theology at a university in Switzerland because American universities would not admit women to that program.¹⁰² Both Daly and Ruether envisioned a Church that allowed for the full participation of women, and wrote critiques of Church history and sexism that illuminated the Church’s failure to do so as of yet. Like other Catholic feminists, they viewed Vatican II as an opportunity to hold the Church accountable; if women were truly people of God, the Church needed to reform itself to embrace women’s full humanity.

By the beginning of the 1970s, however, these two theologians had embarked upon divergent spiritual paths. Ruether remained committed to the Church, though she called for radical theological and structural changes within the institution, but Daly, who had borrowed press passes to be allowed admission as an unofficial observer for the last session of conciliar proceedings, could not reconcile Catholicism and feminism. Henold

¹⁰⁰ Freibert Interview, 1976.

¹⁰¹ Freibert Interview, 2001.

¹⁰² Henold, 38-40.

explains this fundamental rift, saying that “she emerged as one of the first ‘revolutionary’ feminist theologians, that is, a theologian who rejected Christianity as irredeemably oppressive.”¹⁰³ While Lucy chose to maintain a relationship with the Church that aligned more closely with Ruether as a radical reformer, she identified strongly with Daly’s decision to make a revolutionary departure from the Church.

By the mid-1970s, less than a decade after Vatican II, Lucy had committed herself to justice through the feminist movement and called for other sisters to do the same. She argued that they were well educated and had developed leadership skills that would be useful in the movement. “Religious communities have been training women to take authority—to be principals, provincials, mothers general,” she explained in a 1976 newspaper feature. “When I think of the number of our sisters who have PhDs and master’s compared to other women, I am amazed.”¹⁰⁴ She emphasizes the experience that women religious already have in organizing and building a community of women committed to a larger purpose; as sisters, they lived together, worked together, trusted one another, and developed strong relationships as women. Because women religious “have had more experience at working with other women than any other group of women in history of the world,”¹⁰⁵ and because they do not compete for men or view one another as threats, they are able to unite women, as Lucy explained:

Now, it seems to me that women religious, who are people who work together....Our various goals should have a kind of knowledge that would help women to overcome this condition [of competition]. And therefore, I think women who are in religious communities can be just really exemplars, in a sense, and can really help women.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Ibid, 39

¹⁰⁴ “Lucy Freibert? A nun!”

¹⁰⁵ Freibert Interview, 1976.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

In 1974 Lucy wrote “Sisterhood is Powerful: Female Religious and Women’s Liberation,” an article for the *National Catholic Reporter*. The *Reporter* was, and remains, an influential paper with a large national distribution. In this article that reached tens of thousands of Catholic readers, Lucy described sisters’ authority and agency and galvanized women religious to become leaders in the women’s liberation movement. Not only did Lucy call for sisters to find their place as people of God in the movement, she also urged them to find feminist power in their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as reinterpreted for a post-Vatican II Church. For Lucy, these vows were liberating rather than restrictive. She wrote that, as a result of Vatican II, “many sisters are seeking a rationale for their commitment which is not based on patriarchal principles....The strongest support female religious can give to the woman’s [sic] movement comes from contemporary interpretations and applications of the vows themselves.”¹⁰⁷ Rather than constraining sisters, the vows afforded them more opportunities to take risks in their ministries.

In “Sisterhood is powerful” and in many subsequent interviews, Lucy continues to reiterate the feminist framework that these vows create and the freedom they provide for “the individual to serve people better.”¹⁰⁸ In the vow of poverty, women religious found economic power. Sisters held jobs in a variety of fields and pooled their resources, providing financial security for them individually and as a community. Lucy described the freedom that this vow provided her: “Because I don’t have to worry about who is going to support me the rest of my life, I don’t have to be money grubbing all the time.

¹⁰⁷ Lucy Freibert, “Sisterhood is Powerful,” *National Catholic Reporter*, September 6, 1974. (Hereafter cited as “Sisterhood is Powerful.”)

¹⁰⁸ Freibert Interview, 1976.

And so, by living a simple life, by keeping the vow and not having to worry about money I can be freer to do the things that I feel I want to do for society in general.”¹⁰⁹

In celibacy, sisters were better able to serve others by being more available to them. This argument was an extension of Lucy’s desire to join the sisterhood as a way to pursue a path outside of marriage and family. Because she did not have the responsibilities of a husband or children, Lucy was more available to others, including her students; she had “a lot of free time to be present to other people.”¹¹⁰ More importantly, celibacy conferred agency to women. “Through the singleness her vow implies, she acquires a vision of herself as a center comparable to that which a man develops as a result of the conditioning he receives continually from birth. She thinks of herself as the initiator of her own action, as a center to whom others come for strength.”¹¹¹

While female obedience to male authority seemed unequivocally patriarchal, Lucy argued that in the modern, post-Vatican II Church, obedience was the most compelling vow. In obedience, a sister commits to God, her Church, and her community, but she also commits to using her talents to follow a spiritual path. Lucy wrote of obedience: “Through it the religious is called upon to become self-actualizing, to follow the vision to which the Spirit seems to be calling her. The recognition of the direction to be taken often demands breaking new paths and risking failure. But the religious, knowing that her sisters are there to help her should failure occur, gain the courage needed to attempt the seemingly impossible.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ “Sisterhood is Powerful.”

¹¹² Ibid.

In these vows, women religious received practical support from one another and could live outside of the heteronormative structures that oppressed women and imposed traditional expectations of virtue, marriage, and motherhood. Henold writes that “of all American women, women religious were probably the least enslaved to standards of feminine beauty and domesticity. Sisters were living testaments that women did not need to define their identity through marriage and motherhood. They had long rejected both to live and work in communities of women.”¹¹³ In these communities, sisters like Lucy found opportunities for not only personal fulfillment, but also more powerful social action. It is important to recognize here that sisters were not simply bowing to Church demands, but rather making a decision that empowered them. Through poverty, chastity, and obedience, they declared ownership of their careers, bodies, and ministries.

Just as Lucy was calling for nuns to live this renewed interpretation of their vows and step up as leaders in the women’s movement, younger women were making choices about their careers and relationships that Lucy had made a generation earlier; by the early 1970s, many young feminists were rejecting domesticity entirely—a departure, at least for the white, middle-class women, from their mothers’ feminism. Ruth Rosen writes that “those who [became] leaders, activists, or writers in the women’s liberation movement early had observed the lives of their or of other adult women, and, even when they admired their political visions or commitments, knew they didn’t want an *exclusively* domestic life.”¹¹⁴ Lucy, by this time in her late 40s and just one year younger than Betty Friedan, had never opted in to the confining role of housewife that Friedan

¹¹³ Henold, 88.

¹¹⁴ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 45.

described in *The Feminine Mystique* and, as a result, did not have to develop a feminism that considered the responsibilities of a family.

During a 2001 interview Lucy referred to an article from a 1980 issue of *Main Street*, a small, local publication that she described as feminist. In the interview Lucy read two quotations from local women who emerged as strong leaders in the local feminist movement after marrying and having children: Suzy Post said that she “went to undergraduate school, got married and started having babies. Back then, that was what you organized your life around.” Similarly, Bea Johnson said, “I swallowed a lot when I was a girl, all that romance stuff in the movies about how getting a man will solve everything and make you completely happy.” Lucy hugely admired these women and their commitment, noting that they were typical of others in the movement and “were the kinds of women that were around in those days.”¹¹⁵

Lucy, of course, was not that kind of woman. Without a family to steward, and with the support of her community, she approached feminism, education, and activism from a unique position. In this way, Lucy and other nuns were a generation ahead of their contemporaries and could serve as models for younger feminists who now chose to forgo traditional families. While Lucy probably did not view her identity as a nun as a viable option for these young women, she embraced an apostolic transition that allowed her to bring feminism to young people in the classroom like never before. Similar to other new nuns, Lucy found renewed power as a person of God and was compelled to seek out the fulfillment of the Christian lives through social justice action. For many sisters, this was a feminist call to action. Lucy, who found the courage to accept risks in

¹¹⁵ Freibert Interview, 2001.

listening to God, would hear this call and commit herself to change in her community, on campus, and in the classroom.

CHAPTER THREE

“IT.IS.TIME.THAT.WE.ARISE”:.LOCAL ACTIVISM AND FEMINISM IN THE CLASSROOM

After Vatican II, many communities of women religious developed missions and ministries that emphasized the place of women among the newly defined people of the Church and often used their expanded vocation to commit to women’s empowerment, just as the women’s movement was gaining speed. For many of these nuns, a focus on women’s empowerment meant centering their ministries on serving poor women and children. Sister Marie Augusta Neal points to these years after Vatican II as marking a much more fundamental shift, though, as some sisters and congregations reinterpreted their ministries to the poor and disadvantaged. Rather than serving through acts of charity, nuns turned their service to “acts of social justice that [sought] to eliminate the causes of poverty.”¹¹⁶

While these “new nuns” may not all have labeled themselves as feminists—though some certainly did—they exemplified *aggiornamento* in their feminist activism, bringing the Church up to date by advocating for women. Just as nuns had done in the civil rights movement, sisters, including Lucy, took up the call to address systemic social problems that affected women by actively embracing transformative social justice ministries within the feminist movement. Their faith and service to the people of God

¹¹⁶ Marie Augusta Neal, *From Nuns to Sisters: An Expanding Vocation*. (Mystic, CT: Twenty2Third Publications, 1990), 2.

formed the foundation of their feminist consciousness and activism; for Lucy, confronting systemic issues began in the classroom.

These women religious joined other lay Catholic women activists in the 1960s and 1970s who grounded their feminism in their faith. In conducting her archival research on Catholic feminism, Mary Henold found a 1971 recruitment flier for the Saint Joan's International Alliance-United States Section (SJIA-US). The flier proclaimed "We are feminists BECAUSE we are Catholic."¹¹⁷ For Henold, the flier's assertion of a causal relationship between faith and feminism reveals an alternative narrative of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the feminist movement, one that moves beyond the incompatibility between feminism and a Church that is often a sexist and oppressive institution. Women like Mary Daly, who chose to depart from and ultimately denounce the Church, found the Church's patriarchy an insurmountable barrier to their participation, particularly as the women's liberation movement developed. Other Catholic women, like the members of the Saint Joan's International Alliance, however, interpreted the feminist movement as an extension of their Christian values. These activists worked toward women's equality both within and outside the church, believing that "feminism was a Christian virtue best pursued from within the Catholic worldview, which inspired them, and, where, despite its oppression, they felt they belonged. They focused on liberation of other Catholic women by initiating consciousness-raising, by seeking autonomy for communities of women religious, and by agitating for women's ordination."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Henold, 83.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 84.

The trajectories and agendas of national sisters' organizations complemented nuns' emerging feminist activism in the early part of the 1970s. These organizations, including National Coalition of American Nuns (NCAN) and National Association of Women Religious (NAWR), developed to support the expanding apostolate and sisters' emerging social justice ministries. Founded in 1969 and 1970 respectively, NCAN and NAWR both had many feminist members, though NCAN had a more overtly feminist mission. Led by Sister Margaret Traxler, a key figure in developing nuns' racial apostolate in the South, NCAN became an organization of radical Christian nuns; Traxler boldly labeled its members as "icebreakers which prepare the way for frailer crafts."¹¹⁹ NAWR, in contrast, focused initially on self-development and sisters' renewal of their ministries and was careful not to be associated directly with the women's movement or a radical agenda. By 1973, though, NAWR also identified as a feminist organization alongside NCAN.¹²⁰ The Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), the largest organization of American women religious from many orders, already functioned as a progressive association of nuns prior to the 1970s and, according to Ann Braude, "explicitly placed women's issues at the center of their agenda" in 1972.¹²¹

Nuns' increasing activism was part of a larger movement of this era as Americans of many faiths connected their religious beliefs to social action. Sara Evans' *Personal Politics*, for example, traces the development of women's liberation from the civil rights and New Left movements; in both of these movements, young women honed moral principles in Protestant campus youth organizations such as the Young Women's

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 91.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 101.

¹²¹ Braude, 563.

Christian Association (YWCA) that provided the foundation for collective action.¹²²

Braude identifies strains of feminism in many organized religions during the late 1960s and 1970s, including Protestantism, Judaism, evangelical congregations, and Mormon churches. She points to a 1966 photo of the founding members of NOW as representing the religious diversity of the women's movement, even in an ostensibly secular organization. Pictured are Sister Joel Reed, whose leadership Betty Friedan remembered in early NOW; Anna Hedgeman, a Methodist leader and coordinator of the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches; and Friedan, who was not a practicing Jew but did refer to her Jewish upbringing and education.¹²³ Not pictured, but present for the photo, was Pauli Murray, who later left her career as an attorney and law professor at Brandeis University to become the first African American woman ordained as an Episcopal priest in 1977.¹²⁴

Lucy knew of these leaders and likely would have seen individual faith in action in the New Left activism at the University of Wisconsin. She certainly witnessed the power of Southern Protestant churches as a lifelong Kentuckian. As a border state, Kentucky was both a crucible and a conduit for southern racial justice organizing. Churches, women's clubs, and faith communities had long been sources of strength and sites of progress for African-American women, and many white women in the civil rights movement—among them, fellow Louisville resident Anne Braden¹²⁵—grounded their left-wing, progressive views about race and gender in largely conservative Protestant churches.

¹²² Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

¹²³ Braude, 559.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 565.

¹²⁵ Evans, 29.

It was amidst this growing feminist tendency among sisters, and other women of faith, that Lucy developed as an activist and educator. Lucy returned to Louisville after receiving her PhD from the University of Wisconsin in 1970 and had begun teaching in the English department at Spalding College, then still owned by Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, as did other SCNs who received advanced degrees. As a result of her experiences in Madison, by 1970 Lucy was bringing new ideas into Spalding classrooms and participating in local social actions, including a rent strike.¹²⁶ She clashed with administrators at Spalding; years later she wrote that, while students loved her teaching, “its political implications had raised administrative hackles.”¹²⁷ Lucy’s had a similarly visceral response to the president’s preference for male administrators: “The sister that was the president at that time, she was always putting men in charge and making men the heads of departments. And this was a woman’s college, and that got on to me. And I just really resented that, and...I guess I complained. More than complained.”¹²⁸ College administrators labeled her as too radical and what she called a “bad example” for students.¹²⁹ Administrators subsequently denied her request for a sabbatical and would not grant her tenure.¹³⁰ When Lucy informed the school that she planned to look somewhere else for a job, the president said “well, *good luck*”—in a tone that Lucy says she will never forget.¹³¹

Lucy was ready to make a bold move and called Dr. Ernest Hassold in the UofL Humanities Division, who she had met by chance while traveling to a conference.

¹²⁶ Freibert Interview, 2001.

¹²⁷ Lucy Freibert, “Teacher as Catalyst: Updating the University Infrastructure,” no date, Lucy Freibert reference file, folder 1, University Archives and Record Center, University of Louisville. (Hereafter cited as “Teacher as Catalyst.”)

¹²⁸ Freibert Interview, September 6, 2013.

¹²⁹ Freibert Interview, 2001.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Freibert Interview, September 6, 2013.

Hassold connected her with English Department Chair Bill Axton, saying that if Axton did not hire her, he would.¹³² Axton found a temporary position for her, and Lucy left the school owned by her community to begin teaching at a public, secular, and much larger university in 1971. Though some women religious had initiated ministries outside of Catholic schools and hospitals after Vatican II¹³³, the vast majority of sisters serving as professors did so at Catholic universities. Lucy's decision to leave Spalding, then, marked her as unique, even among liberal sisters from across the country. While this transition may have been rooted in disagreements among a few faculty members at the college, it made waves throughout her congregation and caused friction between Lucy and some members of her community that would linger for many years.¹³⁴

Lucy welcomed both the opportunity and challenge associated with her new position at UofL. At Spalding she had taught with other women and had several years of experience on the English faculty. Arriving at UofL at age 49, she was now the most junior faculty member and one of only two women in the department.¹³⁵ Although she was teaching mostly survey courses, she was able to add a few texts that at the time seemed to her “subversive”—including Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.¹³⁶ The move to UofL opened Lucy personally, professionally, and politically: “When I got to UofL, I realized that this was a whole different world. I could teach and be political and nobody cared.”¹³⁷

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ McGuinness, 169-70.

¹³⁴ Billingsley Interview.

¹³⁵ Teacher as Catalyst.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Freibert Interview, 2001.

Students enjoyed her teaching, and after two one-year terms as a visiting professor, Lucy asked for a tenure-track position. When she was told no such position was available, she prepared to take another risk and applied to other universities. Bill Axton found out she had an interview with the State University of New York, and “the next day they found a tenure track position. I mean, it was just like a miracle. So, by that time, you see, I was becoming really interested in taking risks and willing to do that kind of thing.”¹³⁸ This willingness to take risks emanated, in part, from her feminist reinterpretation of her vows as a sister. While, on one hand, Lucy’s departure from Spalding distanced her from her community, her commitment to SCN and belief that her sisters would continue to support her remained steadfast.

Despite this mutual commitment, however, this transition did create some distance between Lucy and SCN. Her departure from Spalding had already signaled her willingness to follow what she heard as her personal call to advocate for justice. She had begun a new journey and had faith—but no guarantee—that her sisters would catch up to her. Lucy also established some physical distance between herself and her sisters when she moved into her own apartment after beginning to teach at UofL. Though she had lived in the convent setting for over 25 years, she had recently been sharing an apartment with two other sisters. She found the environment too distracting and felt she could not contribute to the household with all of the demands of university life, so she asked her mother superior for permission to live alone.¹³⁹ Lucy had always enjoyed living as part of a community, and this was not an easy decision for her. “I have no problem with living in the convent setting. I really enjoy it, and found it a very important part of

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Billingsley Interview.

religious life....But you should be able to spend a good deal of time with your sisters,” Lucy said. She could not have both her work at the university and the relationship with her sisters that she desired, and, at least while she was at UofL, she felt she had to compromise:

[Faculty] responsibilities and other kinds of distractions that are attendant on University life—these things kept me from living a full community life, and so I felt that it was fairer to the community and to myself to live alone. I’ll have no problem when I retire from the university in going back into community life. I’ll enjoy it....Because I really don’t want to cut myself off from the sisters.¹⁴⁰

Feminists like Lucy on the UofL campus were active in the local women’s movement, which was already gaining momentum by the early 1970s and grew from earlier local organizing, particularly around issues of racial justice. Few historians have written about the women’s movement in Louisville; Fran Ellers’ *Standing up for reproductive rights: the struggle for legal abortion in Kentucky*¹⁴¹ is a notable exception, but the movement was actually far wider than reproductive rights. While a full history of the the many feminists creating change during the 1970s is beyond the scope of this research, suffice it to say that the grassroots feminist movement was widespread, active, and effective in Louisville.

Beginning in 1969, the Kentucky Civil Liberties Union took the lead in advocating for women’s rights, particularly reproductive freedom.¹⁴² Kentucky hosted its first women’s rights conference in March 1971, with hundreds of women attending the event.¹⁴³ By 1972 the Kentucky Women’s Political Caucus was lobbying for legislation,

¹⁴⁰ Freibert Interview, 1976.

¹⁴¹ Fran Ellers, *Standing up for reproductive rights: the struggle for legal abortion in Kentucky*. (Louisville, KY: Chicago Spectrum Press, 2008)

¹⁴² Ibid, 28.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

and that same year Kentucky extended civil rights laws to women and ratified¹⁴⁴ the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA.)¹⁴⁵

As feminists active in the women's movement, students and faculty alike at the University of Louisville brought the movement's demands for equality to campus. Professors Liliayce Akers, a sociologist, and Mary K. Tachau, a historian, among others, were members of the Kentucky Women's Political Caucus advocating for state-level change. The Kentucky Civil Liberties Union sponsored "Growing up Female: A Workshop for Women" on campus in 1972, including workshops on education, homosexuality, third world women, and consciousness-raising groups.¹⁴⁶ In the two years since Lucy had returned from Madison, and in even the one year she had been teaching at UofL, the local movement had grown significantly. More importantly, Lucy had matured in her own feminism and was ready to create systemic change, beginning on the university campus.

As at other universities, faculty leaders, including Tachau, Akers, Anne Noland, Ray Bixler, and Lucy were examining their institution for sexist policies and practices, researching the status of women at the university, and developing programs to advance opportunities for women instructors and students.¹⁴⁷ Tachau had recently chaired a 1970-71 Committee on the Status of Women at the university, identifying numerous instances

¹⁴⁴ The struggle for the ERA continued after 1972, though, as state legislators attempted to rescind the ratification amid a growing stop-ERA counter-movement. In 1978 the state legislature did vote to rescind the ratification, but Lieutenant Governor Thelma Stovall, acting as governor while the governor was out of the state, vetoed the rescission. (Ellers, 43).

¹⁴⁵ Mary K. Tachau interview by Ethel White, November 16, 1988, Oral History Center, University Archives and Record Center, University of Louisville. (Hereafter cited as Tachau Interview.)

¹⁴⁶ "Growing up Female: A Workshop for Women," 1972, box 24, Mary K. Tachau Papers, University Archives and Record Center, University of Louisville.

¹⁴⁷ Sydney Schultze, "Enriching the Curriculum: Formation of the Women's Studies Program," circa 1995, Women's Studies reference file, University Archives and Record Center, University of Louisville. (Hereafter cited as "Enriching the Curriculum.")

of discrimination against women, and had been subsequently appointed as the university's first female ombudsperson.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, students had already proven their willingness to take action and organize for their academic interests, and the university had proved willing to respond to this action. In 1969 a group of black students had taken over the building housing the College of Arts and Sciences, demanding the creation of a black studies department. The students—including Blaine Hudson, who would later return to UofL and become dean of the College—faced disciplinary action, but the university created an Office of Black Affairs and formally established the Department of Pan-African Studies in 1973.¹⁴⁹ By the time Lucy decided to develop a course focused on women in literature that same year, UofL was ready to support it.

Lucy had recently attended a workshop led by feminist scholar Josephine Donovan, then an untenured English professor at the University of Kentucky, who discussed the teaching of women writers in her classes. Inspired by Donovan, Lucy designed “Women in Literature,” an undergraduate course about “images of women”¹⁵⁰ in works written by both women and men. During her first two years at UofL, Lucy primarily taught classes using syllabi developed by other professors, where she “confined [her] critique of patriarchy to analyses of the texts used.”¹⁵¹ In her new course, Lucy now prepared to confront patriarchy with and through the texts she chose. Using Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* as the foundational text that would provide a framework for class discussions, she added a broad selection of texts to the reading list, from Ibsen’s *A*

¹⁴⁸ Tachau Interview.

¹⁴⁹ Mervin Aubespain, Kenneth Clay and J. Blaine Hudson, *Two Centuries of Black Louisville: A Photographic History*. (Louisville, KY: Butler Books, 2011), 202.

¹⁵⁰ Teacher as Catalyst.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Doll House, written in 1879, to Plath's 1963 *The Bell Jar*.¹⁵² The English department published the course description for the 1973 fall semester, and students were eager to join her elective class, even if it did not meet degree requirements. Within 20 minutes of registration opening, the first women's studies course at UofL was full.¹⁵³

Lucy strove to connect literature with politics, encouraging students to see "that they're not two different things."¹⁵⁴ Across campus, other professors soon introduced women's studies courses within their own disciplines, bringing feminism more centrally into the classroom. In 1975, women's studies became its own program; though it lacked institutional funding, the formal recognition of the program legitimized women's studies and fostered feminism on campus. The program's first coordinator, Sydney Schultze credited the eagerness of students in creating the academic environment for women's studies as its own program; they too wanted scholastic material that related to their lived experiences and made their own connections to the feminist movement. Outside the classroom, Lucy and other faculty members affiliated with women's studies served as advisors for a feminist student organization, Feminists on Campus at U of L (FOCUL), which brought feminist icon Betty Freidan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, to speak in 1975.¹⁵⁵ On such an urban campus, many students were nontraditional or commuting, rather than young people who transitioned from high school to living on campus, and they were consequently more likely to be adults and to have had life experiences that predisposed them to such a program. But in chronicling the program's origins, Schultze

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ "Enriching the Curriculum."

¹⁵⁴ Freibert Interview, 2001.

¹⁵⁵ "Resounding Voices," *U of L Alumni Magazine*, Fall 1996, Women's Studies reference file (University Archives and Record Center, University of Louisville).

also pointed to Lucy's leadership as critical in its development, saying that she "more than anyone else deserves the designation of founding mother of our program."¹⁵⁶

As a woman professor, particularly as one who led with a dialogue of equality, Lucy continued to raise some hackles, just as she had done at Spalding. She insisted on gender-neutral language in departmental—and later all university—documents and did not tolerate racism or sexism among her colleagues in faculty meetings:

Those meetings resembled an old boys smoking club. My first act of defiance was to refuse to laugh at sexist and racist jokes and remarks. Quickly the men recognized the problem. Being basically intelligent people, they gradually mended their ways during meetings. I could not help but notice, however, that raucous gatherings in the hallways and lounge often broke up or grew silent when I passed by.¹⁵⁷

Lucy was bold in her opinions and in her commitment to equality. Ann Allen, who came to UofL a year after Lucy, described her not as a "firebrand" but as someone who "was unfailingly supportive of women or anything that was being done for women, willing to put herself out, willing to take time about it."¹⁵⁸ Lucy's goal was transformation—of students, faculty, and the university—and frequent nudges from her and other feminists on campus did begin to shift the culture. For Lucy, it was an "exciting" transition, even if she was once again criticized for her radical efforts: "Both men and women were becoming more aware of what was going on in the world and more conscious of human rights.... They thought I was too radical, becoming a rabble-rouser and a trouble-causer.

¹⁵⁶ "Enriching the Curriculum"

¹⁵⁷ Teacher as Catalyst

¹⁵⁸ Allen Interview.

And they just weren't quite up with the times, but then, gradually, they came around and got the whole world turning alike."¹⁵⁹

Lucy continued to take risks, even when they caused significant friction with the university. The "Gibson Girls" scandal in 1975 brought negative attention to the university within Louisville, but Lucy did not hesitate to take up the cause. Head football coach Vince Gibson circulated a letter to women in the dorms, inviting them to serve as hostesses to prospective football players visiting campus. They would provide tours, join the players on dates, and ensure a positive experience for recruits. Lucy and Mary K. Tachau requested a meeting with university administration to discuss how these "Gibson Girls" were problematic for women students; when they entered the room, Lucy and Tachau faced not only administrators, but also Coach Gibson himself, along with nearly 40 football players, parents, and "Gibson Girls." They appealed to administrators and explained how using women in this way was inappropriate. Lucy later said, "I did Lecture 101 from the beginning."¹⁶⁰ The scandal was not only widely covered in the campus newspaper, but also reached the rest of the city in the *Courier-Journal* newspaper. The pressure that the community then placed on the University disbanded the "Gibson Girls" and likely was the final straw in securing the formal women's studies program on campus.

Lucy's protestations were particularly risky because she was up for tenure just as the "Gibson Girls" stirred up trouble at the university. For Lucy, justice outweighed career aspirations in this incident and others like it. As with her move from Spalding to UofL, she had the support of her community in enacting her reinterpretation of sisters'

¹⁵⁹ Lucy Freibert interview by the author, February 22, 2014. Personal interview. (Hereafter cited as Freibert Interview, February 22, 2014.)

¹⁶⁰ "Enriching the Curriculum"

vow and could therefore take risks that other faculty members could not. Because other sisters in her community had made vows of poverty and obedience, she did not have to worry about her personal economic security. Ann Allen says that even though Lucy had to meet the same career milestones as all other professors, and had her own personal stress in doing so, her goals were different. She “was not making a career for herself, getting herself ahead. That was not her main orientation because she was a different kind of professional. Her loyalty lay with her order and with her vocation, and therefore, she was, as I said, not afraid to raise a fuss and did on this occasion.”¹⁶¹

Though Lucy was certainly a leading campus feminist, her locus of activism was the classroom:

Now, I may not be the flaming radical that goes out and demonstrates. I mean, that is not my style. But rather, I try to approach the question from the academic point of view, trying to help the many young women that I come in contact with to see that they have a right to fulfill their potential and they should not think of themselves as somebody only to follow what somebody else tells them to do.¹⁶²

In the classroom, Lucy lived her ministry as a woman of God in service to the people of God. She did not use the space to preach, however, but rather to foster students’ critical thinking about their own experiences and the experiences of others. She also equipped students to live in service to themselves and to other people. Her purpose was to “excite learning, to make kids want to learn. I think that’s [the goal]...whether it’s in the classroom or out of the classroom, wherever you are, to make people want to think about whatever is going on.”¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Allen Interview.

¹⁶² Freibert Interview, 1976.

¹⁶³ Freibert Interview, February 22, 2014.

Her belief in the power of the classroom and of her students to bring systemic change grew from her own faith and her experience as a new nun in the post-Vatican II Church. Just as other sisters were helping the poor by addressing social justice issues that lay at the root of poverty, she sought to end oppression not through acts of charity, but by educating and exciting students into creating a new future. As she wrote later, “coupled with visionary activism, [teaching] can effect systemic change that threatens the patriarchal structure.”¹⁶⁴ In this way, her faith not only contributed to her own feminist consciousness and activism, but also to her pedagogy.

Lucy did not promote her classroom as a bastion of feminism or social justice, however; instead, she wanted an open climate for students to learn from one another, even if that meant muddling through conflicting political opinions and textual analyses. This kind of environment often created opportunities for Lucy to learn and to push or reexamine her interpretations and opinions:

I didn't teach anything that I didn't really believe. I never taught anything just to be radical or just to be different. I didn't try to make myself a popular teacher. I tried to teach what I really believed and what I really thought was worthwhile passing on. If they didn't like it, they could come and talk to me about it, and I would be glad to discuss it with them. But there was no way I was going to try and make my opinion the end-all and be-all. You have to leave things open because someday, somebody, even a student may make you think twice about something you've been teaching all along....Have you been teaching this wrong? Have you been missing the point?¹⁶⁵

Conversations that moved outside of the classroom were evidence of the change that Lucy hoped to see in her students. If the dialogue “carried over into dormitory gabfests

¹⁶⁴ Teacher as Catalyst.

¹⁶⁵ Freibert Interview, September 27, 2013.

and weekend parties off campus,”¹⁶⁶ she knew that she was having an impact on students. “If they’re talking about it in the evening and arguing about what went on in class, they are learning. I think that’s the most important thing. When students used to say, ‘Well last night we were discussing this...’ I’d say ‘thanks be to God.’...When they care enough about that class to talk about it in their free time, then you are teaching.”¹⁶⁷

While Lucy may not have tried to be a popular teacher, she certainly was one, and her classes were always at capacity. Most of her students supported her—even voting for her to receive an “outstanding faculty member” award¹⁶⁸—and department chairs like Bob Miller and other administrators were also supportive when other students complained about her being too radical.¹⁶⁹ One of Lucy’s most exciting moments as a teacher came when one student dropped her class because he disagreed with her, then returned a year later, eager to take her class with a new outlook:

He said, ‘this time I’m ready to hear what you have to say.’ I’ll never forget that as long as I live because that really made me think it is worthwhile to talk about things you really believe in the classroom. You need to make students—convince students—that what you are saying has some truth. They may not be ready for it the first time, but if they ever come back and say, ‘I wasn’t ready for this last year, but I’m ready for it now. That’s why I’m back.’ That makes your day. That makes your life.¹⁷⁰

Lucy may have seen her feminist activism as most effective in the classroom, but she was also publicly political outside of the university. She was an active member of the Kentucky Civil Liberties Union, the local chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW), and even served as one of Kentucky’s delegates to the 1977 National

¹⁶⁶ Teacher as Catalyst.

¹⁶⁷ Freibert Interview, February 22, 2014.

¹⁶⁸ “Lucy Freibert? A nun!?”

¹⁶⁹ Freibert Interview, February 22, 2014.

¹⁷⁰ Freibert Interview, September 27, 2013.

Women's Conference in Houston. Not surprisingly, as a feminist nun she was most visible as an advocate for reproductive rights. While many in Louisville supported her on this issue, as they did other local feminists, Lucy received particular attention and criticism in this regard from within the Catholic community.

Consistent with her assertion that she was not a “flaming radical” demonstrating in the streets, Lucy was direct but not interested in turning her beliefs into a public spectacle. In 1975 she wrote a letter to the editor of the local Catholic newspaper, *The Record* in response to an article they published about Leo Maher, a San Diego bishop who was refusing to give the sacrament to any “pro-abortionists.” Maher labelled NOW members “shameless” agitators for abortion. In her letter, Lucy attempted to clarify NOW's position by citing the NOW statement of purpose from its bylaws. The statement called for members to work toward women's rights and the full participation of women, mentioning nothing about abortion or even reproduction. Writing as a member of NOW, Lucy wanted to inform readers that NOW did not impose any policies upon members and respected religious freedom. She also noted “a distinction which must have been overlooked by the Bishop of San Diego and his advisors—that between a ‘pro-abortionist’ and a person who espouses abortion rights. The term ‘pro-abortionist’ seems to connote that the person so designated encourages women to have abortions. Relatively few people would, I think, come under this heading. The number of Americans, on the other hand, who would defend a person's right to have an abortion and who would support the principle of abortion rights is, I suspect, rather large.”¹⁷¹

Ever the teacher, Lucy's intent in this letter was to inform and explain, equipping readers with the facts. Her tone was even and did not invite debate, though she certainly

¹⁷¹ “NOW member responds,” letter, *The Record*, April 24, 1975.

knew that most readers would disagree with her. Some of those readers responded with their own letters to the editor, expressing their disagreement with Lucy and with the paper for publishing her views. “You should inform the Sister and the readers of *The Record* that the prime tenet of NOW is a woman’s right to choose to kill her unborn son or daughter,” one reader wrote. “Please stop sending *The Record* to our home until you decide to start listening to the Pope in all things.” Another reader responded by asking why anyone would be shocked by Lucy’s opinion. The reader was “deeply disturbed by the worldliness” of Lucy in “full regalia—jewelry, pantsuits, sophisticated hairdos” and expected this “terribly artificial” stance.¹⁷²

Lucy’s views on reproductive rights also appeared in print in the same 1976 *Louisville Times* profile in which she discussed her desire not to tell students up front that she was a nun. Writer Dianne Aprile noted that Lucy was a member of the Kentucky [Religious] Coalition for Abortion Rights and that she hoped to see the development of a Catholic abortion rights group.¹⁷³ Some readers of the *Times* responded just as those of the *Record* had done, writing that Lucy was selfish and had used SCN in order to pursue her own interests. She had “divorced herself from the Catholic Church” because of her views. “Her purposes were to get her education free, to have the support of the order she belongs to and to be able to hide behind the cloak of her nunhood to pursue her chosen lifestyle. She could have had the decency to at least have kept her anti-Catholic views on abortion secret, as she sometimes keeps her nunhood secret, instead of flaunting them to the world.”¹⁷⁴ Two days after *Times* published the article, Lucy submitted a statement that her ideas “are entirely my own and in no way reflect the opinion or approval of the

¹⁷² “Labels NOW Anti-Life”; “Disputes NOW’s Position,” letters, *The Record*, April, 1975.

¹⁷³ “Lucy Freibert? A nun!?”

¹⁷⁴ Letters to the Times, February, 1976.

Sisters of Charity of Nazareth.” Other women wrote in support of Lucy, however, asserting that she represented the future of the Church and the love of God . “I think that Miss Freibert is a product of the many changes taking place in religious communities everywhere. The changing of their habits was the beginning, but not the end,” wrote one contributor.¹⁷⁵ Lucy’s uniqueness as a nun, then, made her a target of criticism for some and a symbol of progress and strength for others.

In 1977 Lucy traveled to Hardin County—a more conservative rural county outside of Louisville—to present a lecture about the abortion debate to the Hardin County chapter of NOW. In their weekly column for the local paper, NOW members Frankie Ray and Kathy George outlined Lucy’s position on abortion, one that appealed to the autonomy of an individual’s moral choice and advocated for legislation that ensured the safety of women.¹⁷⁶ Lucy’s five points of consideration in reproductive rights—including the unborn child, mother, father, medical profession, and state—outlined a thorough argument that insisted on the quality of life after birth. In particular, the state—which she defined as “we, the community, the general populous”—must interpret “right to life” to mean the right to a quality life after birth and that until such a condition can be guaranteed, the state should not intervene. Lucy also emphasized this position in an interview:

How do we have the right to demand that every fetus be brought to fruition, that every conception be completed and a child produced when we do not provide a world in which those children that are so brought into the world have a good life?...People who are always claiming to have such a high regard for life, have very little knowledge of the low quality of life

¹⁷⁵ Letters to the Times, February, 1976.

¹⁷⁶ “NOW hears abortion speaker,” *Elizabethtown News-Enterprise*, April 15, 1977.

that many of these children—that they’re insisting be born—are going to have to live in.¹⁷⁷

Here Lucy exemplified the new nun, albeit a radical and controversial one. Her insistence upon a life free from poverty and able to realize its full potential, even at the cost of some fetal lives, expressed values that she saw as consistent with her faith and her church. For Lucy, the decision to support a woman’s right to choose was the result of a broad examination that incorporated her personal ethics, societal concerns, and scholarly research. She cited two sources that influenced her decision: Alison Jaggar’s “Abortion and a Woman’s Right to Decide”¹⁷⁸ and John Noonan’s *Contraception: A history of its treatment by the Catholic theologians and canonists*.¹⁷⁹ Both Jaggar and Noonan emphasized the contextualization of abortion as a moral issue and the circumstances that affect public dialogue about it. Jaggar, a contemporary feminist philosopher and academic acquaintance of Lucy, argued that there is a moral justification for a woman’s right to choose if the moral issue in question is that of the right to a full human life, one that takes into account the circumstances after birth of an unwanted child. Noonan contextualized the Church’s position—and public acceptance of it—within historical and social conditions. For Noonan, the Church’s directives on contraception evolved over time and were influenced by many factors outside the Church; as a result, he argued, the Church’s teachings cannot be separated from the environment, and its doctrine is a “human process.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Freibert Interview, 1976.

¹⁷⁸ Alison Jaggar, “Abortion and a Woman’s Right to Decide” in *Women and philosophy: toward a theory of liberation*, edited by Carol C. Gould and Marx W. Wartofsky, (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976), 347-60.

¹⁷⁹ John T. Noonan, *Contraception: A history of its treatment by the Catholic theologians and canonists*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 5.

Lucy synthesized Noonan's emphasis on this process with Jaggar's insistence on a broader definition of human life. Rather than following the church as a static hierarchy that dictated an individual's moral framework—a pre-conciliar interpretation of the church—Lucy chose to incorporate Jaggar and Noonan into her beliefs about the post-Vatican II church. She advocated for a woman's right to choose within a set of societal conditions and protected women and children as the people of God in doing so.

Lucy was breaking the ice, to borrow Sister Margaret Traxler's phrase, for a new dialogue in Louisville about abortion and Catholicism. Again, her faith informed and strengthened her feminism. Lucy did not come to her pro-choice position easily, and in the 1970s she still struggled to reconcile and articulate her beliefs, particularly as they deviated from the church's teaching and the Catholic faith whose traditions she valued. Decades later, Lucy spoke about this difficult time, saying that her public commitment to support a woman's right to choose "alienated" some family, friends, and colleagues. Lucy continues to insist that the SCN community supported her, but as with her decision to leave Spalding, this issue created tension with some sisters that took years to ease.¹⁸¹

The 1970s were a powerful decade for Lucy as both an educator and an activist. In a 1979 article for the local Senate of Religious newsletter, Lucy equated liberation to rising and awakening. Although she never used the term, her imagery evokes a resurrection, and the article was published in May, just after Easter and the celebration of Christ's resurrection. She called for women to define themselves and "find companions among those who travel similar paths." While this was an exciting time for her as a feminist religious, it was also marked by fear and pain:

¹⁸¹ Billingsley Interview.

We have been underground for a long time and have died to ourselves repeatedly. It is time that we arise and take the air and light that will foster our growth. And we should not be surprised or dismayed if we come out bearing scars, for it is not easy to emerge unscathed from centuries of dead leaves and shattered bark.¹⁸²

Remarking on this time in Lucy's life, her friend Lin Billingsley said that, "She was always willing to stand up and speak out, and you know, it wasn't easy, and it wasn't popular."¹⁸³ Still, Billingsley added, Lucy was undeterred:

She had a vision of equality, and she carried that with her everywhere she went. And so...she was willing to share that and call other people to that vision. And certainly everybody I know who knows Lucy feels called to that vision. She will explain to you in chapter and verse if you don't think it's important....Lucy was a stickler and felt it was her job to...get this done.¹⁸⁴

Having taken the risk to leave the shelter of Spalding and become a more political sister, Lucy had found her light and her air and was insistent that all people have the opportunity to do the same. She endured some pain in achieving her own liberation and was ready to lead students and women as they shaped their own resurrection. As with Christ's resurrection, what had emerged from Lucy's pain was a devotion to humanity and a call to love and justice. Rather than focusing on the pain, Lucy used it as a force for change in the coming decades.

¹⁸² Lucy Freibert, "Dying and Rising," article for Senate newsletter, Senate of Religious, Archdiocese of Louisville, May/June 1979, box 2, Sister Lucy Freibert Papers (Archives, Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Nazareth, Kentucky).

¹⁸³ Billingsley Interview.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

“YOU.CAN’T.AFFORD.TO.WOBBLE”: IMPACT AND LATER YEARS

The narrative I have presented thus far is limited in its scope; for the purposes of this thesis I chose to draw my analysis to a close at the end of the 1970s because that decade was so indicative of the impact of Vatican II on Lucy’s faith and feminism. Lucy’s academic scholarship, campus leadership, and community activism carried on for subsequent decades, however, and I would like to offer a brief survey of how she continued to use her feminism and faith to advocate for social change. Her impact extended far beyond the borders of the University of Louisville campus, or even the local community. In reflecting later upon shifts in women’s scholarship, she acknowledged that she was part of a national movement, saying “Can you believe that? That it’s really what happened. And it was happening everywhere. It wasn’t just in Louisville.”¹⁸⁵

Lucy maintained a commitment to academic reforms that supported women’s studies, designing many additional courses that addressed gender in literature, including survey and research methods courses.¹⁸⁶ By the mid-1980s Lucy still grappled with the lack of any comprehensive texts in selecting material for these courses, and so, along with Barbara White of the University of New Hampshire, began “a project to recover fiction by twenty eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers whose works had in

¹⁸⁵ Freibert Interview, December 23, 2013.

¹⁸⁶ Teacher as Catalyst.

their day been best sellers.”¹⁸⁷ Published in 1985, *Hidden Hands: An Anthology of American Women Writers* was one of the first collections of women’s literature, and Rutgers University Press marketed it “for use by professors like ourselves who had never actually studied these writers in graduate schools because our teachers had never read them, and because the texts were not readily available.”¹⁸⁸ *Hidden Hands* was popular among students and professors, so much so that Rutgers and The Feminist Press began to republish paperback editions of the novels that Lucy and White excerpted in the anthology.¹⁸⁹ Lucy also continued to build the field of women’s studies with a national presence, publishing articles and presenting papers about the importance of feminist advancement in the academy; in 1980-81 she was a member of the National Women’s Studies Association Coordinating Council and co-chaired the national membership drive.¹⁹⁰

Beyond her commitment to uncovering women’s voices, Lucy always incorporated race and gender analysis in the classroom.¹⁹¹ In 1982 she designed a first-year composition course that listed only black writers for related reading and African-American topics for the final paper. Reflecting later on that first class session, she recalled:

Arriving at the classroom on the first day and peering inside, I saw nineteen African-American students and one white male student. My delight quickly dissipated, however, when I stepped through the door and saw nineteen dismayed faces. Their sense of betrayal was so evident that I was emotionally shaken. Taking a deep breath, I said, “I’m sorry I’m not Black.” Normally hard nosed and unemotional, I could not restrain the

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Lucy Freibert, Curriculum Vitae, 2006, personal collection. (Hereafter cited as “Curriculum Vitae, 2006”).

¹⁹¹ Billingsley Interview

tears that filled my eyes and ran down my face. Within minutes, many glistening eyes matched mine. I'm sure those students had never seen a professor cry.¹⁹²

During the semester, Lucy invited the first African-American student she had taught, Estella Conwill Majozo, by then a professor of American Studies to perform poetry for the class. Majozo “imparted to them a vision and a sense of self that no white teacher could ever give them,” and students described her visit as extremely impactful.¹⁹³

Though she never taught the course again, she called it a “strong change agent,” as she would tell colleagues and administrators about its success and about the impact of Majozo’s visit, convincing them of their “obligation to provide percentages of African-American and other ethnic faculty to correspond to local demographics.”¹⁹⁴ The University of Louisville later hired Majozo to join the English faculty. During that composition class, Lucy told the students that she had an interest in African-American history, narratives, and literature and had a “desire to share that knowledge, which the school system had denied most of them, their parents, and their grandparents.”¹⁹⁵ Recall that Lucy had originally wanted to join Katherine Drexel’s Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament when choosing a religious community because these sisters were working with African-American communities throughout the South. Much like the new nuns who had traveled the South during the civil rights movement, Lucy’s commitment to African-American people and, by extension, literature and education, was part of a broader vision of justice based in her faith and in the Church’s call to minister through social justice acts.

¹⁹² Teacher as Catalyst.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

At the time, Lucy did not realize the impact of her efforts to reform the pedagogy of gender, race, and class. She was not afraid to explore new topics, or even new teaching methods. Though it is now common in classrooms, Lucy incorporated multimedia projects before they were mainstream class assignments. In a recent interview she was struck by the impact of this seemingly minimal undertaking, saying, “Boy, that was wild. I think giving them that option would be something that you didn’t ordinarily do. But I had a lot of guts, didn’t I? I had a lot of nerve. They probably thought I was weird at the time.”¹⁹⁶ Well after she was an established faculty member—she was promoted to professor in 1984¹⁹⁷—she still struggled for the legitimacy of women’s scholarship and, by extension, her own authority; it was this struggle that prevented her from fully understanding how groundbreaking her work was as it was unfolding. Reflecting upon *Hidden Hands*, she said, “I figured it was important, but now, looking back, I can see the effect that it had. Then, usually, I was too busy defending myself to really be able to enjoy it. Now, it’s behind me, and so what’s the big deal? That’s the way I feel now. But then, I couldn’t feel that sure because I was still going through the process.”¹⁹⁸

Lucy did not doubt her impact, however, noting that “my greatest contributions to systemic change in the university were always those made by working with students and other faculty.”¹⁹⁹ One such change was the creation of the University of Louisville Women’s Center in 1991; together with professor Mary Hawkesworth and Board of Trustee member Cissy Musselman, Lucy pressured university president Donald Swain to

¹⁹⁶ Freibert Interview, December 23, 2013.

¹⁹⁷ Curriculum Vitae, 2006.

¹⁹⁸ Freibert Interview, December 23, 2013

¹⁹⁹ Teacher as Catalyst.

provide funding for a Women's Center, an institution that was then a developing trend on college campuses.²⁰⁰ The Women's Center was meant to be a site of praxis for the university, where academic scholarship on women and gender could connect with both community activism and issues of gender equality on campus. A 1992 article for the *U of L Alumni Magazine* noted that, "Depending on whom you ask, the Women's Center will be a center for the exchange of academic ideas and research involving women's issues, a lightning rod for political activism, or a place where women can meet, mingle, and 'network' on campus."²⁰¹ In that same article Mary Hawkesworth described the Center's development as a group effort: "As a model for implementation of an idea, this one belongs in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. There was just wonderful cooperation from all units; the idea got wonderful support."²⁰²

The Center's first director, Judi Jennings, did not recall such a celebration of collaboration, however, and pointed to competing resources and departmental overlap as creating confusion and even conflict. The Women's Center, Women's Studies Department, and university Commission on Women often vied for funding or prioritized campus efforts differently. Lucy was able to mediate those conflicts, however; Jennings praised her as "the glue" of those early years, saying, "Lucy was always the one everybody respected, and Lucy was always the one who could go through the different camps and make peace....She did it by being universally positive and never speaking ill of anyone and never giving up that we could all work together....She was the key,

²⁰⁰ Judi Jennings interview by the author, February 26, 2014, Oral History Center, University Archives and Record Center, University of Louisville. (Hereafter cited as Jennings Interview.)

²⁰¹ Randi Hansen, "Centering on the Needs of Women," *U of L Alumni Magazine*, Summer 1992.

²⁰² Ibid.

because we would have self-destructed.”²⁰³ The efforts of all those who supported the Center certainly paid off as its budget, space, and programming grew. The Women’s Center served as a hub for campus information and organizing around gender equality, including equal pay, sexual harassment, and Title IX athletic department support.²⁰⁴ In a report celebrating its first five years, the Center boasted that it had reached more than 15,000 women and men and had “sponsored or co-sponsored 277 activities on and off campus, featuring everything from light-hearted women-centered entertainment to difficult and controversial discussions.”²⁰⁵ Calling the establishment of the Women’s Center “my last major venture before I retired,” Lucy continued to edit the Center’s newsletter until 1995.²⁰⁶

Though Lucy continued to serve as a university ombudsperson until 2000, she retired from teaching officially on June 30, 1993.²⁰⁷ University students and faculty, along with community leaders, honored her with numerous awards for her service, including: Outstanding Faculty Member Award (1973), Distinguished Teaching Award (1987), Trustees Award (1991), Lifetime Service Award in Recognition of More Than 50 Years of Community Service (2001), and the Mary K. Bonsteel Tachau Gender Equity Award (2004). The English department sponsored colloquia in her honor, and in 2010 she was inducted into the College of Arts and Sciences Hall of Honors and became one of nine university affiliates whose faces adorned a large wooden pergola erected to commemorate their contributions to civil rights at the university. In 1993 an anonymous

²⁰³ Jennings Interview.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ “University of Louisville Women’s Center: Beginnings, 1991-1996,” 1997, Women’s Studies reference file, University Archives and Record Center, University of Louisville.

²⁰⁶ Teacher as Catalyst.

²⁰⁷ Curriculum Vitae, 2006.

donor contributed \$10,000 to establish the Lucy M. Freibert Women’s Studies Collection at the University of Louisville Library.²⁰⁸ As a nearly ironic nod to Lucy’s call for the university to incorporate gender-neutral language, the plaque she received for her Trustee’s Award, the university’s highest honor, recognized “His” contribution. Lucy explained:

Previously received by males only, the beautifully crafted plaque read: ‘Presented to Lucy Marie Freibert / In Recognition of His Extraordinary Contribution to Undergraduate Life.’ Although a new plaque was immediately forthcoming, I have retained the original plate to show to young women who do not see or understand the depth of gender bias in society.²⁰⁹

Above all, Lucy served and championed students. Even her largest material contribution to the university, a 1,059-volume personal library including signed first editions from influential authors,²¹⁰ was gifted as an opportunity to teach students. Now available in the library’s rare books archives, this collection is just like those she used to incorporate into her research methods class, as she would instruct students how to use women’s manuscript and book collections to uncover new narratives.²¹¹ When Lucy moved back to the SCN motherhouse in 2003, her friend Lin Billingsley helped her clean out her apartment. In addition to the more than 1,000 books they sorted, Lin found multiple plastic totes full of recommendation letters for students.²¹² Lucy’s commitment to and affection for her students is evident in her ongoing relationship with Leann Bearden, now in prison for murder. Bearden was a student of Lucy’s in 2002 when she

²⁰⁸ All awards: Curriculum Vitae, 2006 and “Legend in the Classroom.”

²⁰⁹ Teacher as Catalyst.

²¹⁰ “Legend in the Classroom.”

²¹¹ Teacher as Catalyst.

²¹² Billingsley Interview.

was arrested and convicted of a 1998 drug-related murder.²¹³ Lucy visited Bearden often when she was imprisoned locally and now exchanges correspondence once a week.

Bearden admitted her guilt in court, but Lucy blindly maintains her innocence.²¹⁴

“Whatever one thinks about her case,” Billingsley has said, “Lucy has taken that ministry to the prisoner, and taken it seriously and walked the walk.”²¹⁵

Judi Jennings summed up Lucy’s impact at the University of Louisville, describing her as “the consciousness, the voice of conscience of UofL. Always a voice for truth....She could speak her truth and her justice without alienating people, and they actually loved her more.”²¹⁶ Most evident after Vatican II, this truth and justice grew from Lucy’s faith, and she lived her ministry through education. Billingsley affirms Lucy’s thorough embodiment of her ministry: “Lucy is, from her head to her toes, a teacher. And she is never backward about teaching in the moment.”²¹⁷

Lucy’s faith, feminism, and ministry continued to evolve off campus after the 1970s as well, and she was similarly forward-thinking in these pursuits. Some of these endeavors seemed to be natural extensions of her role as a teacher, including her board membership with the Pleiades Theatre Company, a local women’s theater troupe, and her leadership role in Project Women—now Family Scholar House—an organization serving single mothers who are working toward their bachelor’s degrees.²¹⁸ Other activities were more controversial and stirred up concerns among her religious community, including her involvement with the local Women-Church. Women-Church

²¹³ Gregory Hall, “Jury Urges Life Terms in Death of Drug Dealer,” *Courier-Journal*, December 14, 2002, B1.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Billingsley Interview.

²¹⁶ Jennings Interview.

²¹⁷ Billingsley Interview.

²¹⁸ Curriculum Vitae, 2006.

was a movement in which women worshiped together and created a feminist space for faith outside of the religious hierarchy. Louisville's Women-Church was a thriving community during the late 1980s and 1990s. Lucy served as a board member and largely gave up attending traditional Catholic Church services.²¹⁹ Her support of Women-Church, by itself, would not have been cause for concern with SCN, but her failure to attend masses at another church caused SCN superiors to ask her to resume local church membership. She did join a local church, though Billingsley, also active in Women-Church with Lucy, suspected that she would “drop in and tune out.”²²⁰

Lucy did have some concerns about how her feminism, and the activities associated with it, might affect her relationship with the SCN community; despite her belief that the community would support unflinchingly, she cared deeply about her relationships with other sisters. Billingsley described Lucy's trepidation about returning to the SCN motherhouse in 2003, saying that Lucy feared that other sisters had the impression that she was a “scholarly and snobbish woman” and that she might not be welcome in the community.²²¹ “She was very concerned,” Billingsley said, “about the reception she might receive from some of her peers and nuns that were younger, that they had pretty much had arguments....I'm not sure Lucy is past the argument, but most other people are. And people were very welcoming, but she actually did have some anxiety about that.”²²² In the end, Lucy's fears were largely unfounded, and she has found joy and contentment living back in community with her sisters.

²¹⁹ Billingsley Interview.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

In 1976 Lucy had told the *Louisville Times* that she had never been asked to give up any of her teaching or feminist activities. “If that ever happened,” she said, “I’d have to make a judgment. I’d have to decide what’s more important to me.”²²³ In choosing her vocation she committed to God’s service and developed her own ethos as a result of this commitment. Lucy was confident and resolute in this moral imperative, both spiritually and as a feminist. In a recent interview, she encouraged others to strengthen their own resolve:

I’m not a nervous type. If I believe in something, I do it, and then if somebody clobbers me, I defend myself. That’s my whole approach to life. Anytime I think it’s much better to stand on your own two feet and know the reasons why you chose to do things. And then if somebody questions you, you know why you did it. You have to have your own conviction, and you have to be willing to stand up for it, no matter what. And if you have a good reason, you don’t hesitate to stand up for it. If you’re wishy-washy, then you’re going to wobble on your feet, and you can’t afford to wobble.²²⁴

²²³ “Lucy Freibert? A Nun!?”

²²⁴ Freibert Interview, December 23, 2013.

CONCLUSION

Lucy seems ultimately to have felt little substantive conflict between her identity as a sister and her personal ethos, and while her vision of justice at times may have differed from that of the Church and even her community, it reflected her own relationship with God and what she heard as her spiritual call to serve humanity. A decision between her religious community and her personal faith and ethos would have been deeply painful, and though Lucy was never in that difficult position, other women religious were.

In 1984, Catholics for a Free Choice published a full-page ad in *The New York Times* to promote discussion of reproductive rights and the recognition of a diversity of opinions among Catholics. The ad, “A Catholic Statement on Pluralism and Abortion,” was meant to support vice-presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro, a pro-choice Catholic who had been publicly criticized during the election. Ninety-seven prominent Catholics signed the statement, including 24 nuns. The Vatican asked the sisters to recant their statements or face discipline from their orders. Twenty-two of the women “clarified” their statement to their superiors or in a meeting with Church officials. Two women, Patricia Hussey and Barbara Ferraro, refused to do so, and their actions sparked a public debate that lasted four years. Though their order, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur would not expel them, the superior did release a statement distancing the order from the Hussey and Ferraro. Hussey and Ferraro eventually decided to leave their

congregation in 1988, in part because they felt they could not continue their work with poor women and be “in a relationship of equality” with them as members of a religious community.²²⁵

Like Lucy, Hussey and Ferraro developed their ethos within a religious community, but they grounded this ethos within themselves as individual moral agents. When compelled to choose, they trusted their belief in themselves and in their broad vision of equality and justice. Rather than emphasize their eventual decision to leave the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, I point to the decades in which Hussey and Ferraro developed their ethos within the crucible of their religious community. For Lucy, Hussey, and Ferraro, their years in community provided opportunities for growth and service that most women did not have. They all chose their subsequent paths, whether to stay with their community or to amicably part ways, in service of God and the people of God.

As the number of women religious continues to decline, this discussion of the power of Catholic sisters in the feminist movement seems to be becoming less relevant. I point to these women as radical models of resistance, however, and feel I cannot overemphasize how radical Lucy—and other sisters like her—were in their commitment to justice. Lucy’s life of service did not remove her from worldly concerns or confine her within the church; instead, in choosing her vocation she freed herself to become more connected to the struggles of others. Nuns like Lucy did not step away from the world; they positioned themselves to step into it more fully.

As I mentioned previously, Carol Garibaldi Rogers emphasizes sisters’ responsiveness and ability to transform, as women religious faced so many shifts in their

²²⁵ McGuinness, 176-78

daily lives and ministries throughout the 20th century and beyond. Communities of women religious and individual sisters, both by choice and by necessity, accepted change. While their willingness to do so may have varied, nuns like Lucy embraced transformation and flexibility. She appreciated it when students challenged her views and saw those moments as both opportunities to refine her beliefs and opportunities to encourage students to do the same. Lucy was ideological in her commitment to feminism and firmly believed that patriarchal oppression was the greatest threat to the human community she committed to serving. She was not meek, but unlike many radical feminists, she was not confrontational in this ideology. Lucy saw the need to maintain productive dialogue and to nurture relationships, in part because her experience as a sister prepared her with considerable capacity for responsiveness and flexibility.

Exploring the relationship of Catholic sisters to the women's movement is also significant because religious communities were models of women's separatism. Like lesbian feminist collectives, religious communities were one of the few social spaces where women were not expected to have relationships with men and where women held all of the leadership roles. Sisters, like cultural feminists, embraced their womanhood and created their own systems and missions based on their femininity. They did not find submission in this femininity, however, and instead found opportunities to use their identities as sisters to advance the lives of other women.

Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp have defended cultural feminism against the critics who claim that its focus on identity weakened its political power. Taylor and Rupp identify cultural feminism's three greatest "sins" as essentialism, separatism, and an

emphasis on building alternative cultures.²²⁶ They examine the effectiveness, not the ideology, of cultural feminism as it relates to lesbian feminist communities. I argue that the strengths they identified of these communities also apply to congregations of women religious. First, like lesbians, sisters value themselves as women and feel that their womanhood—if not biologically, at least as how they experience the world—makes them unique. Their identity in the Church is specific to their gender, and sisters have used this to their advantage. Second, both lesbian separatism and religious life attempt to promote women’s growth, leadership, and political power in the absence of men. Third, both women religious and lesbian feminists’ primary personal and political relationships are with women. Finally, separatism both relies on and produces feminist rituals and cultural acts. Nuns have had their own rituals and culture for centuries and some, like Lucy, have connected these to feminism.

Consequently, sisters were uniquely situated with regard to their connection to the feminist movement. But they were and are important models for feminists of all faith who must negotiate the connection between faith and feminism. Despite Ann Braude’s assertion that “women’s history *is* American religious history,”²²⁷ feminism, generally speaking, continues to distance itself from religion. As such, although Lucy’s narrative seems to be simply adding to white feminist historiography, dominant discourses in the field continue to dismiss the importance of feminisms like hers. In this way, religious feminists are a minority, and sisters like Lucy broaden our understanding of how differences among feminists as well as how feminists can live their faiths.

²²⁶ Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, “Women’s Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism,” *Signs* 19 no. 1(1993): 33.

²²⁷ Ann Braude, “Women’s History is Religious History,” in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, edited by Thomas Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 87-107.

On the back cover of the Winter/Spring 2014 issue of *Ms. Magazine*, the Freedom From Religion Foundation secured a full-page advertisement, encouraging readers to phone for a free copy of their newspaper and the “Why Women Need Freedom From Religion” brochure.²²⁸ The Foundation describes itself as “the nation’s largest association of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics) working since 1978 to keep religious dogma out of our laws.” The ad includes photos of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Zora Neale Hurston, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Margaret Sanger, Robin Morgan, Susan B. Anthony, Emma Goldman, and Taslima Nasrin. Asking “What do these feminists have in common?” the ad declares that “They challenged patriarchal religious dogma. They have worked to improve this world.” Complete with a membership form and the option to purchase two additional publications—“Woe to the Women: The Bible Tells Me So” and “Women Without Superstition”—the ad calls readers to education and action.

The ad’s placement on the back cover of *Ms.*, historically the nation’s leading feminist publication, is a cultural signal; with this large ad purchase, feminism and an anti-religious organization have a mutually beneficial commercial relationship. This connection is, of course, a logical one. Organized religions are far more restrictive than liberating, and for centuries oppressors have used religion to justify white supremacy, colonization, and sexist subjugation. We are still reeling from the culture wars, and for centuries patriarchal legislators have bolstered their legal arguments with religious subtexts. On the whole, organized religions have done very little to advance non-white, non-hetero, and non-male interests, preferring to maintain a repressive status quo. Gender equality and religion, therefore, have a necessarily tenuous relationship, and

²²⁸ *Ms. Magazine*, Winter/Spring 2014.

feminists have cause to question if there is—or should be—any room for faith in feminist activism or beliefs.

To broadly dismiss religion as “dogma” or “superstition,” however, obscures any possible positive relationship between faith and feminism. The Freedom From Religion Foundation’s ad implies that to “improve this world” one must reject religion entirely. My work, however, calls for a more nuanced interpretation of how religion and social action can work together to benefit one another. Many feminists consider themselves to be people of faith and may associate themselves with organized religions. Others have family and cultural traditions that connect to a religious heritage and wish to ground their feminism in that heritage. Just as race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other axes of identity intersect with gender, we must create space for spiritual and religious identities. Lucy’s activist life suggest the value of continuing to incorporate feminist actions and interpretations into religious institutions, theologies, and discussions of faith.

Faith and feminisms can inform and power one another. Lucy, like many other Catholic sisters, serves as a model for how feminists can use their faith to activate social movements. Rather than focus on the incompatibilities, she chose a feminist theological standpoint and incorporated her lived experience, including her teaching, into her faith traditions. Vatican II fueled this shift, as it called for individuals to define and live their own faiths in service of others, but Lucy personalized the church’s call to service. She formed and nurtured, both in herself and in others, an unwavering commitment to advancing gender equality. In Lucy’s narrative we find a woman who, like other women of faith, has redefined feminist social action. If “the personal is historical,” we can look to her as a model for reframing how faith connects to feminism.

Though Lucy has not yet written her autobiography, she tells me that “you’re listening for that voice from on high” and has already written the book’s epigraph accordingly:

We can never foretell what the gift of God may be today, so we must pay attention.²²⁹

²²⁹ Freibert Interview, February 22, 2014.

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Education

University of Louisville—Louisville, Kentucky

Master of Arts in Women's and Gender Studies, May 2014

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Thesis: "Catholic Sisters in the Second Wave: Sister Lucy Freibert and Women Religious at the Intersection of Faith and Feminism"

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Bachelor of Arts, *summa cum laude* in Spanish and Gender Studies, May 2004

Research and Other Academic Experience

Research interests:

Feminist and queer history, women religious, 20th century social movements, Catholicism and feminism, oral history, local histories of social change movements

Study abroad and oral history research

South Africa, May 2013

- Conducted interviews with anti-Apartheid activists in Cape Town, South Africa as part of comparative history course, "Race, Gender, and Social Movements in the U.S. and South Africa." Created blog and online exhibit chronicling experiences and interviews while in Cape Town.

Healing History Academy participant

August 2011-August 2012

- The Healing History Academy was a community education cohort facilitated by University of Louisville's Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research and funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Incorporating local history, community experiences, and anti-racism facilitation, the Academy accepted 25 participants to build a movement for racial healing in Louisville. Topics included constructs of

race, Kentucky as a border state, oral history in the Civil Rights movement, health equity, and fair housing.

Conference Presentations and Publications

“Radical Catholic Sisters in the Second Wave: Sister Lucy Freibert Navigates the Intersection of Faith and Feminism,” individual paper
Southeast Women’s Studies Association Annual Conference, “The Ebb and Flow of Feminism,” to be presented March 2014, Wilmington, North Carolina

“Community Engagement for Racial Healing through History,” panel presenter
Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities Annual Conference, “Transforming and Sustaining Communities through Partnerships,” October 2013, Louisville, Kentucky

“AIDS in Women: A Growing Educational Concern” essay published in Stuart Greene and April Lidinsky, *From Inquiry to Academic Writing: A Text and Reader* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2008)

Awards

Carolyn Krause Maddox Prize—University of Louisville Women’s and Gender Studies Department, 2014

Best graduate essay on a women’s or gender studies topic, “The Furies and Feminist Nuns: Separatism as Sexual Resistance in the Women’s Liberation Movement”

Cushwa Center Research Travel Grant—Cushwa Center for American Catholic Studies at the University of Notre Dame, 2014

Awarded to support travel to utilize the University of Notre Dame’s Catholic archive collections

M. Celeste Nichols Award—University of Louisville Women’s Center, 2013

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Merit scholarship for M.A. students in the University of Louisville Women’s and Gender Studies Department

Recent Professional Experience

Organizer and Communication Specialist,
Network Center for Community Change (NC3)
May 2011-Present, Louisville, Kentucky

Serve as grassroots community organizer with a Network of over 5,000 members, a community movement operating in six underserved Louisville neighborhoods to build civic leadership, educational opportunities, and strong neighborhoods. Facilitate trainings on leadership and personal resiliency. Develop NC3 communication materials and social media content. Coordinate neighborhood-based events, often with more than 150 attendees. Co-lead team for annual fundraising event.

Community Service

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Kentuckiana

Serve as proud mentor to my Little Sister, October 2011-present

The Louisville TimeBank

Member of coordinating team, January 2012-present