

**Maria Monk, “Bridget,” or Just Plain Invisible?:  
Catholic Lay and Religious Women in the Era of the American Civil War**  
William Kurtz, University of Virginia

It is always rewarding as a scholar to study a topic that has largely been neglected by scholars of American history in general, as well as by historians of American Catholics in particular. Such was the case when I went about researching and writing my dissertation on Catholics in the era of the American Civil War. True, non-Catholic historians have studied Catholics in the mid-nineteenth century in so far as they happened to belong to a particular ethnic group or political party the scholars in question were interested in. But, with the last comprehensive book on Catholics in the war having been written during the Second World War, how the conflict impacted the daily lives of Catholics and their future in America is still largely unknown. While researching my topic, I came across other neglected areas of American Catholic history as well. For example, the experience of German Catholics during this period can rightly be called, as historian Kathleen Conzen once did, “terra incognita.”<sup>1</sup>

But there was an even larger gap that became apparent as I researched, wrote, and revised, and that was that Catholic women were almost completely left out of the story of mid-nineteenth century America. They were seemingly invisible in the archives and historiography, and thus in the larger narrative of American history itself. With men occupying the leading positions in the institutional church, the editorship of all mid-19th century Catholic newspapers, and other positions of influence, it became clear that Catholic women had largely been left behind by historians of American Catholic history too. It’s true that there have been a number of studies on nuns during this period, but the experience of Catholic lay women, especially the non-elite, has been comparatively neglected. In place of an actual understanding of Catholic women

---

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Conzen, “Immigrant Religion and the Public Sphere: The German Catholic Milieu in America,” in *German-American Immigration and Ethnicity in Comparative Perspective*, Edited by Wolfgang Helbich and Walter D. Kamphoefner (Madison, WI: Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies, 2004), 114.

during this period, historians are left with little to combat the popular negative stereotypes of the time, ranging from the sinful nuns depicted in the notorious anti-Catholic novel, *Maria Monk* (1836), to that of Bridget, the diligent, if not also superstitious and dimwitted, Irish Catholic domestic servant found in so many middle-class Protestant households.

This paper has several goals. First, to outline how Catholic women are neglected in scholarship of the Civil War era. Second, to discuss what Catholic historians have written about them, and why the nuns predominate what little scholarship exists. Third, to share with you some of my hard fought findings about Catholic lay women who lived in the North and other states that remained within the Union in 1861. Finally, I will propose possible solutions to this problem so that Catholic women can be integrated more fully into histories of the Civil War in the future. I would be extremely grateful to my fellow panelists and the audience for their feedback and for any ideas they might have about where to find more sources about lay Catholic women in the nineteenth century.

Catholic women, religious or lay, have been almost completely neglected by both general and gender scholarship of the American Civil War. James McPherson's still influential synthesis of the war period, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988), does not mention even once Catholic lay women or the nuns who served as nurses. Major gender studies of the Civil War, such as Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber's *Divided Houses* (1992), Drew Gilpin Faust's *Mothers of Invention* (1996), Nina Silber's *Gender and the Sectional Conflict* (2008), and Judith Giesberg's *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* (2009) do not mention the nuns at all and similarly neglect to talk about Catholic lay women. Giesberg did address the

issue of women taking part in the New York draft riots of July 1863, but she focuses primarily on female rioters' class rather than their religion or ethnicity.<sup>2</sup>

Mary E. Massey's landmark study *Women in the Civil War* (1966) and Nina Silber's *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War* (2005) refers to nuns only in passing as a thorn in Protestant nurses' side. While Silber and Catherine Clinton's *Battle Scars* (2006) does include an essay on Catholic nuns along the Gulf Coast and also does briefly discuss the devout Marylander and Lincoln assassination suspect, Mary Surratt, gender historians of the northern United States have largely focused on Protestant women to the exclusion of Catholic laywomen and nuns alike. From personal discussions with leading historians like Dr. Giesberg, it became quickly apparent that Civil War scholars just do not know where to go to find the voices of Catholic women in this period. Yes, sources on Catholic women, as I found myself, are hard to come by. But the studies mentioned above could have included a few letters by Ellen Sherman as a representative of Catholic lay women. Apparently these scholars were not familiar with this easily available, microfilmed, and now digitized resource available at Notre Dame's Archives. Similarly they neglected the "low hanging fruit" of Catholic women's experiences by not visiting the archives of the many female religious communities who sent nurses to Union and Confederate hospitals.<sup>3</sup>

So if Catholic women are neglected by gender and Civil War scholars, what about scholars who focus on American Catholic history? Clearly Catholic nuns are in history and

---

<sup>2</sup> James M. McPherson, *The Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Drew G. Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Nina Silber, *Gender and the Sectional Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Judith Giesberg, *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Mary E. Massey, *Women in the Civil War* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, reprint, 1994; original, 1966), 47, 54; Nina Silber, *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 212-213; Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 41-60, 110-116.

historiography the most visible Catholic women who took an active role in the Civil War. Catholic scholars, have universally celebrated nuns' apolitical devotion to soldiers' spiritual and bodily health as a remarkable example of Catholic Christian charity. Time does not permit me to go into their experiences here today, but suffice it to say that their work was appreciated at the highest levels of the federal government and the nuns were clearly convinced that their services had saved souls and improved the image of the church in America. In fact, the nuns' wartime experiences is much better understood than that of practically any other discrete subgroup of mid-nineteenth Catholic America. Sister Mary Denis Maher's *To Bind Up the Wounds* (1989) is more than forty years newer than the last general study of Catholics during the war, Reverend Benjamin Blied's *Catholics in the Civil War* (1945). Only the Irish Brigade outpaces the nuns when it comes to writing about aspects of the Catholic war experience.<sup>4</sup>

Thus while numerous studies have examined nuns during the war, the motivations of non-elite Catholic lay women, however, have been much harder to analyze. Like other working class immigrants, they left behind few personal letters or diaries. I was particularly disappointed to not be able to find letters in places where presumably Catholic women would have gone for relief first: their local dioceses or ethnic charitable organizations like the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick (New York). Apparently preserving correspondence from lay people, men or women, was not a high priority for dioceses in the nineteenth century. Let me briefly share with you what I did discover.

From those records that still exist, it is clear that poorer northern Catholic women, like their husbands, sons, and relatives, refused in many cases to subjugate the interests of their families to that of the nation. The wife of a non-commissioned Catholic officer in the 28th

---

<sup>4</sup> Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., "Daughters of Charity: Courageous and Compassionate Civil War Nurses," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 31 (Winter 2013): 51-52.

Massachusetts, for example, complained about him using patriotic stationary and in her correspondence with him she wished fervently for his return. While one Irish Catholic woman wrote to Rev. William Corby, chaplain of the 88th New York Regiment, thanking him for attending her husband during his death, another inquired after money that her husband had supposedly left with the priest. None of these women showed much interest in the Union cause and were much more preoccupied by how they would be able to take care of and provide for their families with their husbands off at war. Such an apparent lack of pro-Union sentiment on behalf of working class women led many northern observers to criticize their women's patriotism in contrast to that of southern women.<sup>5</sup>

Such indifference could not be said for all Catholic women, as some, especially from the middle-class, became fierce patriots. Mary Noyes, a Catholic laywoman from New York City, sent General William S. Rosecrans, "our Christian Patriot," a St. Joseph Medal to wear. "Dear Gen'l Rosecrans, it grows very dark all around, but tho' the darkness I feel there is coming, not only the temporal, but the spiritual salvation of our beloved People. Blessed are you who can so gloriously aid in both," she wrote. Another Catholic laywoman from Yonkers composed a poem in honor of Colonel Julius Garesché, who became widely seen as a Catholic martyr to the nation after dying at the battle of Stones River in 1862. At Saint Mary's College in South Bend, Indiana, northern girls, including General William T. Sherman's daughter, Minnie, insisted on wearing patriotic symbols even though the school forbade the practice. Goaded on by Sherman's

---

<sup>5</sup> Peter to Margaret Welsh, February 8, 22, 1863 quoted in Peter Welsh, *Irish Green and Union Blue : the Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant, 28th Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteers*, ed. Lawrence F. Kohl (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 6, 69-70, 73-75; Jane McMahon to Father Corby, August 26, 1863, Corby Papers, Indiana Province of the Holy Cross Archives (IPAC); Rosana Moleny to Father Corby, August 23, 1862, Corby Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives; Nina Silber, *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1-2; For more on working-class women's dissatisfaction with the war, please see Judith Giesberg, *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 119-142.

wife, Ellen Ewing Sherman, the girls refused to back down and soon came to fisticuffs with their southern classmates.<sup>6</sup>

Ellen Sherman was just as patriotic as her brothers and her husband, all of whom but one were northern generals. Accusing Democrats of “skin deep” patriotism, Ellen angrily told her brother Charles that Benedict Arnold was a “saint” compared to the Confederates. Defeat at Bull Run in July 1861 only increased her patriotic fervor, instilling in her a new visceral “loathing and hatred of the men that are desolating our country without cause.” “For the first time in my life,” Ellen continued, “I wish that I had a man’s strength that I might use it against the traitors.” Ellen’s hatred of southern rebels stemmed in part from her hatred of slavery. “A catholic should be governed somewhat by the fact that the Church has always treated Slavery as an evil which should be abolished by wise & moderate means,” she wrote. She found it hard to understand how anyone “could sacrifice country & honor for the privilege of whipping negro wenches.” Despite her antebellum “dislike [for] the Abolitionists” she told her husband that “their folly sinks into insignificance when compared with the treason of the South.”<sup>7</sup>

Elite and middle class Catholic women helped support the war effort just like other women of their classes by organizing tables and displays at local sanitary fairs. In the last months of the war, Ellen Sherman, Mrs. Stephen A. Douglas, Mrs. James A. Mulligan, and other

---

<sup>6</sup> Mary Elizabeth Noyes to WSR, January 20, 1863, Box 8, William S. Rosecrans Papers, UCLA Archives; Louis Garesché, *Biography of Lieut. Col. Julius P. Garesché, Assistant Adjutant-General, U.S. Army* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1887), 442-443; James M. Schmidt, *Notre Dame and the Civil War: Marching Onward to Victory* (Charleston: The History Press, 2010), 87-88.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Sherman to Charles Ewing, July 24, 1861, Charles Ewing Papers, Library of Congress; Ellen Sherman to William T. Sherman, February 6, 1861, Sherman Family Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives; For more on the Ewing and Sherman families during the war, please see Kenneth J. Heineman, *Civil War Dynasty: The Ewing Family of Ohio* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Ellen Sherman, and other lay Catholic women have largely been ignored in gender studies of the war. Ellen, whose papers are readily available at the University of Notre Dame Archives, is only mentioned once in Mary E. Massey’s *Women and the Civil War* (1966; 1994). The story of Catholic lay women is a promising avenue for future research into the Catholic experience of the war. As chapter five will argue, Catholic female religious have been much more thoroughly studied although they too are often left out of the most important gender histories of the war (Mary E. Massey, *Women in the Civil War* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, reprint, 1994; original, 1966), 239-240).

prominent Catholic lay women organized a Catholic Department at the Chicago Fair on May 30, 1865, not just to help the soldiers, but to prove to the nation that Catholic women had and were doing their part for the national cause. By staffing their effort entirely with lay women, they implicitly likened their efforts on behalf of “Christian charity” and the nation to the Catholic men and officers in the army and the nuns in hospitals. Their appeal, for “[e]verything rare, useful or ornamental...all the stores of the farm and garden” was directed at other lay women across the Midwest. Participating in such relief activities, which saw them working side by side with their Protestant sisters, presented Catholic women with direct opportunities of aiding the war effort and becoming part of “a nationwide community of female supporters.”<sup>8</sup> The war allowed these elite women to take a more public role on behalf of their faith, local communities, and the nation itself in a way that may have been just as transformative as it was for middle-class and elite Protestant women. When taking into consideration their less patriotic and poorer sisters, however, it is clear that Catholic lay women, just like their men, were divided over the war. Some seized upon the conflict as a way to show their patriotism while others eagerly awaited the war’s end.

However, is focusing on women like Sherman and the wives of prominent Catholic generals the best way to understand all lay Catholic women during this period? Would such a study simply be replacing one kind of gender scholarship focused on middle-class, patriotic Protestant women with a Catholic version of the same? What about those hard to find women, especially the non-Irish, the non-elite, or those who opposed the war? How are we to tell their stories? Should they be consigned to be dismissed as Bridgets all or beyond the pale as the notorious, violent women of the Draft Riots?

---

<sup>8</sup>U.S. Sanitary Commission Fair Flier [1865], Mulligan Papers, Box 3, Folder 5, Chicago Historical Society; Silber, *Daughters of the Union*, 173-174, 188.

I believe that this project of recovering the larger lay women's story is so large, difficult, and important, that it is beyond the means of just one scholar to handle on his or her own. Therefore, in the spirit of this panel, I would like to propose a collaborative effort to make Catholic women more visible and more accessible for Catholic and more general historians alike. My first suggestion is to use this panel as a starting point for a collected volume of essays on Catholic women during the nineteenth-century. Such a volume would not necessarily need to be limited to the Civil War era, but could easily encompass the antebellum and post-war periods too. It could present a variety of essays focusing on nuns, lay women, elites, and immigrants during this period from the North, South, and West. The volume would address important questions about the uniqueness of Catholic women's experiences compared to women of the WASP majority. It could also examine their place within the growing Catholic community, and how issues of gender, class, and ethnicity influenced both their religious and secular lives.

My second proposal is a bit less traditional, and is influenced by my own career which has taken me increasingly into the world of digital humanities. I have been fortunate to be involved into two large-scale digital projects that I think might serve as a starting point for ways to make Catholic women's stories more accessible to historians and the general public alike. Currently I work as an assistant editor on a project called [Founders Online](#), which is a free online resource providing access to all of the letters of the first four U.S. presidents, plus Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton. If we want to promote our own scholarship on women's lives while encouraging non-Catholic historians to do the same, surely providing easier and free access to primary sources is a good idea. Perhaps a similar website, one including selected letters and writings from figures such as Ellen Sherman, Eliza Allen Starr, Mary Sadlier, Mother

Angela Gillespie, and others from the mid-19th century could be organized and hosted by a leading Catholic research institution.

My second idea, perhaps in conjunction with the first, would be to create a database of Catholic women during the period, exploring the connections between prominent women while trying to shed light on unknown, non-elite women who left few written letters behind save baptismal certificates and census records. There have been a number of successful collective biographical projects of this type, notably [People of the Founding Era](#), a database that I have worked on of over 20,000 women and men from the time of the Founding Fathers. In addition to recording basic biographical information and drawing out connections between Catholic women across the United States, such a database and accompanying visualizations would be useful to digital humanists and traditional scholars alike. Like historian Edward Ayers's famous *Valley of the Shadow* digital archive, which has generated prize-winning books, notable articles, and many undergraduate research projects, creating a Catholic Women's digital project could be the basis for future scholarship for historians of the United States and American Catholic history too.

In conclusion, I believe that, like so much of the entire Catholic community's Civil War experience, we have only begun to scratch the surface of Catholic women's role in the conflict, its coming, and aftermath. It will take a concentrated effort to try to integrate Catholic women into a scholarship that has been for so long dominated by elite, middle-class, white, Protestant women. Bringing lay and religious women into the larger story will enrich gender history, Civil War scholarship, and Catholic studies alike. Thank you all very much for your time, and I look forward to your comments and suggestions.