MAKING DO AND DOING GOOD. AMEN.: AMERICAN CATHOLIC LAYWOMEN’S CHARITABLE EFFORTS IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION THROUGH CATHOLIC WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS

A Senior Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in American Studies

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Washington, D.C.
April 21, 2016
During the Great Depression, American Catholic laywomen navigated an increasingly tumultuous society caused by severe economic hardship. During this decade, gender roles continued to shift, unemployment threw titanic institutions into chaos, and the question of how best to care for the downtrodden was continually raised. Despite their contributions to society, these women are often left out of U.S. Catholic and women’s histories. Through their identities as Americans, Catholics, and mothers, laywomen worked tirelessly to create institutions that taught middle-class, Catholic values to children, even if those children were outside the home. This thesis explains how, during the Great Depression, the American Catholic laywomen of the National Council of Catholic Women used holistic charity to control youth’s increasing leisure and recreation time in an effort to foster social stability for families.

By unifying under organizations such as the National Council of Catholic Women and the Christ Child Society, these women participated in the larger American response to the Great Depression and involved themselves in the formation of adolescents. Due to the increasing amount of leisure time brought on by widespread unemployment, how people spent their free time became a growing concern. The NCCW and CCS responded with holistic charity, aiding society not only materially, but also physically, mentally, and spiritually. In particular, recreation
was used not only as a way to engage youth in healthy activity, but also as a way to teach morality and citizenship.

Through archival research of the collections of the National Council of Catholic Women and the Christ Child Society, this thesis uncovers the women’s stories and impact on society. By utilizing newsletters, photographs, convention booklets, pamphlets, prescriptive literature, personal correspondence, and newspaper clippings, the women are able to speak for themselves. It is impossible to know the full American story without these women, and in a country that is recovering from a recent economic recession and continuing to understand the role religion plays in local and national society, the lives of these seemingly unremarkable American Catholic laywomen are as relevant today as they were in the 1930s.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank:

Professor Erika Seamon and Teacher Assistant extraordinaire Colva Weissenstein for guiding our American Studies community with wit, curiosity, and care.

Professor McCartin, for challenging me and encouraging me.
It was truly an honor to work with you.

My amazing and inspiring classmates, who have accompanied me on this journey. Our comradery and conversations have made my Georgetown experience all the richer.

The Archives at the Catholic University of America, the Archives at the Lincoln Diocese of Lincoln, and the Lincoln Diocesan Council of Catholic Women.

History and American Studies professors who have continually pushed me to become a better writer, a better thinker, and a better person.

The wonderful role models I’ve had, who have shown me the incredible power of Catholic laywomen.

Lastly, and mostly, the women I have studied. Thank you for leaving a legacy for me to find and share with others. Through your lives I’ve learned about myself as a person and a scholar.
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INTRODUCTION

Unemployed men selling apples on the street in their best suits, Hoovervilles ringing the outskirts of cities, and hobos with all their worldly possessions neatly tied up in a sack and flung over their shoulders, hopping trains to find work out West. These are some the images that first come to mind when discussing the Great Depression. The United States in the 1930s experienced a time of turmoil and chaos. The Great Depression, as this decade would later be known, disrupted longstanding social institutions and caused a sharp decline in the widespread financial and lifestyle gains of only a decade before, during the “Roaring” 1920s. However, these male-dominated images beg a question, one that involves half of the population: what about women?

Typical understanding of the Great Depression focuses on the efforts of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal government, which provided relief, employment, and support during a time of economic freefall. But ending the story there ignores the charitable organizations that were already in place, mostly run by religious institutions. These religiously motivated organizations worked alongside massive governmental organizations to respond to the extreme need of the Great Depression. Organizations such as the National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW, founded in 1920) and the Christ Child Society (CCS, founded in 1887) existed before the New Deal, and would exist long after the worst was past. My thesis explores the role of American Catholic laywomen and how their organizations made a difference in the Great Depression. I aim to continue the conversation that was begun by Catholic women’s historians in recent years and to place these average, ‘forgettable’ women at the forefront of history, so that the reader may think of these, and other, everyday Americans as active agents who shaped the world in which they lived. Especially today, as America emerges out of the Great Recession of
the late 2000s to early 2010s, it is essential that we look to those who made do before us, both to honor their contributions, and to learn from them as we move forward. These groups merit attention and study as well as the large, governmental efforts because they were community-based, community-driven, and thus demonstrate that complex social problems can have both public and private, and as well as both local and national, solutions.

By looking at American Catholic laywomen through two Catholic women’s organizations, I put on display the conversations and tensions that were present in this typically overlooked group of women. As men’s roles in society were thrown into doubt during the 1930s, so too were women’s. With the decline in employment there were not enough jobs for breadwinning men, and no jobs for children and young adults. This vacuum expanded the then-emerging gap between childhood and adulthood, since young adults of working age had increasing difficulty securing employment to move out of the home and out of the parents’ care. The 1930s mark the beginning in the shift from adolescent to teenager, which the women of Catholic women’s organizations would recognize and swiftly react to, in an effort to shape what it meant to be (what we know today as) a ‘teenager’ from its infancy. Not only that, the lack of employment opportunities combined with the increase of media and forms of entertainment dramatically changed how youth engaged in home and in society. The women I researched were dealing with all of these disruptions while trying to hold on to some form of stability, which was grounded in their religious and moral convictions.

In this thesis I argue that during the Great Depression, the American Catholic laywomen of the National Council of Catholic Women used holistic charity to control youth’s increasing leisure and recreation time in an effort to foster social stability for families. These women acted
outside the home in an attempt to protect the treasures inside the home, their children. Catholic women in particular merit this depth of study due to their courageous action, working proudly as Catholics during the hegemony of Protestant America in the 1930s. Yet despite their effort and lasting successful programs, these women are largely left out of general histories.

As I was reading David Kennedy’s acclaimed history of the Great Depression, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (1999), the idea of Catholic charities dealing with the Great Depression caught my eye. Even as a lifelong Catholic who has been fascinated with the Great Depression since elementary school, I had never thought how religious groups had a unique, yet still profoundly American reaction to the challenges of the 1930s. As I continued to discover more about Catholics in the Great Depression, I noticed an absence of a key group: laywomen. Though women’s historians have been restless in their attempts to lessen the gap of scholarship regarding females, they had not yet consistently covered this large and impactful group of women who never joined religious orders, but were still active members of the Catholic Church.

I undertook this project because I wanted to see the stories of people like me, women I imagine I might have been had I been born 100 years earlier. It has been my mission as a scholar

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3 The actions of men are largely covered in history, generally speaking. Men and women religious are remembered by the internal histories of their orders, though non-members should do more to cover these histories. Parish priests, bishops, cardinals, and the pope are remembered in local parish histories and formal diocesan and Vatican archives.
to tell the stories of the overlooked, and I could not sit by while these women were being ignored by the world they helped shape. As a devout Catholic myself, I recognized my potential for bias from the day I declared my research question. To combat this, I have kept in mind someone who is neither an American Catholic, nor a woman, and I hope to show that person why he should care about this niche group of women. Over the course of my research, I have come to believe that all Americans can gain a greater understanding of America through these seemingly ordinary yet, in reality, extraordinary women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The work of other scholars, both women and U.S. Catholic historians, were essential to my understanding of the 1930s. The intersection of U.S. Catholicism and charity became clear in Dorothy Brown and Elizabeth McKeown’s book *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare* (1997), which analyzes how Catholic charities evolved from somewhat disorganized and untrained local groups into a professionally trained and highly coordinated force. Brown and McKeown also focused on Catholic charities’ commitment to staying Catholic amid the involvement of government and other religious groups. Their work was a guiding light for me as they based their findings on archival research, primarily at the archives of Georgetown University and the Catholic University of America. I aimed to continue their work by diving deeper into the National Council of Catholic Women, whereas they focused more broadly on the work of the National Council of Catholic Charities.

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Overwhelmingly, women’s histories such as Gwendolyn Mink’s *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (1995) and Susan Ware’s *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (1982) focus on women in general. Though they included the impact of race, class, and geography, they rarely if ever, touched on the role of religion, let alone dove into the distinctive ways different religions interacted with the world. In U.S. Catholic histories such as David O’Brien’s *American Catholics and Social Reform: The New Deal Years* (1968) and Jeffrey M. Burns’ *American Catholics and the Family Crisis: 1930-1962: An Ideological and Organizational Response* (1988), the National Council of Catholic Women was largely ignored. I was intrigued by the lack of mention of these women, who maintained a large network of local women’s organizations from the 1920s through today. As I continued my research, I found the NCCW mentioned in specific articles about American Catholic women, but in general histories, they didn’t make the cut of what was considered ‘essential’ knowledge. I was determined to form my own assessment of it that was true. I wanted to understand why they were left out; and, if their absence left a gap in knowledge, I wanted to help fill it.

**HISTORIOGRAPHY: Not Invisible, But Forgotten**

To thoroughly understand this group of women and where they stood in their own time, I took a ground-up historical approach and relied on primary sources tucked away in archives. I did not want to rely on the research of secondary sources, because if I had, I would not have

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found the voices of American Catholic laywomen. However, it is necessary to place these primary sources in the larger American narrative. To do so I analyzed the historical studies done on American Catholics in the 1930s, and women in the 1930s. Through my historiography, I was able to better understand where the gaps in research came from, and how I might best include these forgotten women in the larger history. I came to the conclusion that both historians of U.S. Catholicism and women’s historians have largely overlooked the Catholic laywomen of the National Council of Catholic Women, despite their national and local achievements. Though research on Catholic women has been steadily improving in recent years, I believe the stories of these women, who attempted to work within their expected places in society and within the Church hierarchy, are necessary to both women’s history and U.S. Catholic history.

U.S. Catholic History

U.S. Catholic historians have been making a slow but steady progress in understanding the history of the Catholic Church and its impact on culture and society, as well as on religion and morality. However, Catholic history in the United States is seen as marginal rather than as an important brick in the American foundation. As Leslie Woodcock Tentler noted in her insightful article “On the Margins: The State of American Catholic History” (1993), U.S. historians tend to assume either that the stereotypical understanding of American Catholic subculture is correct and not worth questioning, or that Catholics lived in a wholly separate sphere and did not have a substantial impact on America, and therefore are not worth further scholarship.\(^7\) To illustrate, at the 1990 Organization of American Historians convention, a scholar attending Tentler’s panel on

“New Directions in American Catholic History” proclaimed: “You folks do interesting work. But you’ll always be marginal to the profession.” Though her article was written in 1993, it rings true to this day and helps explain the scholarly gaps I noticed in my research. Tentler noted that it was mainly Catholics who were exploring Catholic history. She also deftly observed that Catholic historians too often undermined their own work, thinking that the study of Catholics in American history could only be interesting and important to Catholics, not to larger society. But as I came to discover throughout my research, it is important for all Americans to understand Catholics, the largest religious denomination since the mid-nineteenth century (who currently make up approximately 20% of the United States population), to fully understand America.

There also exists in the realm of United States history a tendency to simply assume that all Catholics were mindless “papists” who blindly followed the orders of the clergy and took no initiative of their own. This assumption takes away the agency of laypeople as historical actors in their own right. To ignore the power of the members is to ignore the driving force of any institution. Within the assumption of overwhelming dominance of the clergy is the easy assumption that women were particularly submissive and adhering; easy answers rarely paint full histories. Historian Leslie Woodcock Tentler wrote this:

Women played an equally important and nearly as ambiguous role at a later stage of


Catholic development, in the various Catholic Action movements of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. The feminine presence does much to explain the recent appeal of these movements for historians, as do the increasingly evident links between those movements and change in the church since Vatican II. Catholic Action, particularly in its more radical forms, was marked by an uncompromising laicism— not only by faith in the propriety of lay leadership, but also in a spirituality distinctive to the laity, through which church and world might be more nearly reconciled. Theologically venturesome and naively open to the world, Catholic Action was in mood and assumptions quite different from devotional Catholicism. It was nonetheless thoroughly Catholic in self-definition and orientation.\footnote{Tentler, “On the Margins,” 118.}

The relationships between women and the Church are never simple, as Paula Kane explores in her research on the intersections of gender and the Catholic Church. She has published numerous articles and books on U.S. Catholic history and comes at the work from a personal angle. Her mother, Annette Kane, was the president of the National Council of Catholic Women in the 1980s and 1990s.\footnote{Paula Kane, e-mail message to author, Nov 11, 2015.} Kane put women into larger conversation in the book, \textit{Gender Identities in American Catholicism} (2001), which she edited along with James Kenneally and Karen Kennelly.\footnote{Paula Kane, James Kenneally, and Karen Kennelly, eds., \textit{Gender Identities in American Catholicism} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).} Using primary documents, the book reveals the lives of Catholic women – both women religious and laywomen – from the 19\textsuperscript{th} century to the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

Catholic laypeople took their religion into the world; they did not leave their Catholicism in the church on Sunday, as Brown and McKeown point out in \textit{The Poor Belong to Us}.\footnote{Brown and McKeown, \textit{The Poor Belong to Us}.} This important work documented how American Catholics shaped the United States welfare system through Catholics’ long-standing commitment to charity and taking care of their own. However,
the authors frequently mentioned actors such as Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement, while the much larger National Council of Catholic Women was only mentioned as an under-organization within the larger National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC).  

Women’s History

Historians have been bridging the gap in women’s history during the last half century, but have largely failed to include Catholics in the larger picture of American women’s history. Women’s history has tended towards revolutionary, dynamic figures to complement the work being done to further women’s equality in society. Recently there have been continued efforts through ground-up history to put women in the picture though there are fewer available primary sources. In her acclaimed work, *The Wages of Motherhood*, Gwendolyn Mink examined the role of women in establishing protections for threatened groups while ignoring the efforts of Catholic women in these same causes. She completely overlooked the role Catholics had in forming the welfare state. What remains forgotten is how impressive a feat it was that each different religious group had unique guiding principles yet somehow managed to unite under a single cause and accomplish significant works. Mink only mentioned the often-touted Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) as a place where working women got rooms, not an institution that helped shape their lives and opportunities. Other religious-based organizations are not mentioned at all. To ignore religion in the United States is akin to ignoring race, gender, socio-economic status, Brown and McKeown, *The Poor Belong to Us.*

Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood.*
and other pressing identities. Especially in the early 1900s, religious community formed neighborhoods, social organizations, unions, and was a foundation and framework for society.18

In her book, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform 1890-1935* (1991) Robyn Muncy analyzed the work of middle-class, white women in establishing charitable and political reforms through Hull House, the Children Bureau, the School of Social Service Administration, the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act, and the end of women’s control with the Federal Child Welfare Policy.19 Her research on women entering into professional social service roles highlighted the complications and nuances that exist in ground-up history. To legitimize themselves to male coworkers, Muncy argues, female professionals defined the mother-child role in comparison to the male breadwinner and perpetuated the idea of the mother as responsible for the rearing of children.20 The Catholic Church looked to its tradition to establish the role of the mother as caretaker, and Muncy’s acknowledgement of the external forces that impact this relationship was important for my research. Muncy made brief mentions of the National Council of Catholic Women, the National Council of Jewish Women, and the Young Women’s Christian Association, but only in relation to their support for the Shepard-Towner bill.21


20 Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform*, xv.

21 Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform*, 104-105.
In “Just a Housewife”: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America (1987), Glenna Matthews tracked the role of housewives from colonial America to the mid-1900s. Matthews argued that the housewife, as she was known in the 1930s, was grounded in the ideology of domesticity that came about during the antebellum years. During this time, Matthews explained, the role of housewife contributed to the defined identity of the middle class. Matthews’ research only included prominent writers and women’s magazines, and not the accounts of everyday women. With that gap, she concluded that few changes were made in the 1930s regarding ideas of domesticity in comparison to the “tumultuous developments” that had occurred in the 1920s. With that simple dismissal, Matthews essentially ignored the important changes 1930s housewives made as they continued living in their role while confronting the Great Depression. This failure to explore the 1930s in greater detail resulted in Matthews missing the nuanced impact that job loss during the Depression decade made on the home.

Susan Ware’s Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s did a splendid job of looking at a wide range of women’s issues during the Great Depression years, such as work, youth, education, politics, the arts, and popular culture. However, she failed to look at religion in any significant way. In the introduction, Ware wrote about how women turned to church and church organizations for a sense of stability amidst the uncertainty of the Depression. She mentioned both the YWCA and Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker movement in terms of other

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23 Matthews, “Just a Housewife,” xvi.

issues, all but separated from their religious foundations.\textsuperscript{25} Ware’s chapter on “Youth, Education, and Careers” was helpful as it discussed the creation of teenagers and youth education during the 1930s, explaining that women’s history was intimately linked to children’s history.\textsuperscript{26}

Dorothy Brown’s book on the role of women during the Depression years in \textit{Setting a Course: American Women in the 1920s} (1987), though out of my time period, provided an excellent example of what a women’s history should be.\textsuperscript{27} Brown effectively brought religion, including Catholicism, Judaism, and different denominations of Protestantism into the larger conversation of women’s history throughout her book, which touched on suffrage, employment, marriage and family, culture, and entertainment. Brown emphasized the changing presence of religion in everyday life in her chapter titled “Religion and the Challenges of the Revolution in Manners and Morals.”\textsuperscript{28} Specifically mentioning the National Council of Catholic Women multiple times throughout the book, along with other women’s organizations of multiple religions, Brown put these groups into conversation not only with each other, but also with American society at large. And her work is better for it.

\textbf{Catholic Women’s Organizations}

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\textsuperscript{25} Ware, \textit{Holding Their Own}, 102, 133.

\textsuperscript{26} Ware, \textit{Holding Their Own}, 55.

\textsuperscript{27} Dorothy M. Brown, \textit{Setting a Course: American Women in the 1920s} (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987); Both Ware and Brown’s books were part of the “American Women in the Twentieth Century” series, showing the in how women’s historians approach broader histories and how they decide what is important.

\textsuperscript{28} Brown, \textit{Setting a Course}, 167.
Of the ever-growing scholarship of U.S. Catholicism and women, there remains a great ignorance towards more traditional and conservative Catholic organizations. The only substantial work written about the National Council of Catholic Women was a dissertation written by Ruth Libbey O’Halloran, published in 1995 for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the organization. Ms. O’Halloran was asked to take on the project by Annette Kane, then the Executive Director of the NCCW and with the support of the Department of Church History at The Catholic University of America. The organization had to request its own history be studied because no one had taken up the mantle to do it independently, hinting at a lack of interest in (or awareness of) the group. The almost contractual relationship between O’Halloran and the NCCW made me wary of possible biases and instead used the source for only facts, not analysis.

With this new urgency regarding female involvement, Catholic women’s organizations immersed themselves in social movements that were instrumental in the larger American narrative. Jeanne Petit wrote an important article about the work of the NCCW in “Organized Catholic Womanhood: Suffrage, Citizenship and the National Council of Catholic Women” (2008). She, like Tentler, noted that “The marginalized position of Catholic laywomen in their Church and as women activists has also made it difficult for them to be taken seriously by historians.” She continued, stating that U.S. Catholic historians were quick to transfer stereotypes of a powerful hierarchical male clergy reduced Catholic laywomen into “decidedly


submissive and domestic roles,” instead of as their own agents.\textsuperscript{31} Lastly, Petit noted, “In general, the study of the relationship between Catholic women and the creation of gender ideologies has fallen through the cracks of both American gender history and religious history.”\textsuperscript{32} While these identities were overlooked, a traditional and conservative-leaning group like the National Council of Catholic Women was virtually ignored, creating a large hole in our understanding of both U.S. Catholic history and women’s history. As noted by historian James J. Kenneally, the NCCW “provided acceptable outlets for the talents of traditionalists.”\textsuperscript{33} Not only is the oversight of traditional groups such as the National Council of Catholic Women ignoring an important strain of Catholic Action, but it is failing to learn from its successes and failures.

As Jeanne Petit wrote in her analysis of the role of the NCCW in public and legislative actions during the 1920s, the women of the National Council of Catholic Women used the space for women’s involvement in politics created by the Nineteenth Amendment to advocate for themselves as both Catholic and women, they “took part in forging Catholic positions on women’s issues that stressed communalism over individualism and women’s responsibilities over women’s rights.” By doing so, Petit argued, “these women laid a foundation for distinctive Catholic response to twentieth century gender issues that affects American politics to this day.”\textsuperscript{34} Though they were never as far reaching and politically powerful as groups like the Young Women’s Christian Association, organizing allowed Catholic laywomen to demand a seat at the

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table of civic inclusion and to speak for their members. By mitigating their desire for
guidance in the world with the skills they were expected to have, the women of the NCCW
made a leap into progress while not blatantly disregarding tradition and spheres. They were
skilled navigators: they could be both women and Catholic, in the world and committed to their
faith; they did not see their identity as a double-edged sword of submissiveness.
Impact on the Family: Adolescents

Also necessary to involve in the story of Catholic laywomen is their positioning based on their commitment to Catholic Church teachings, particularly to familial values. Their emphasis on the family both mirrored and influenced societal action towards the newfound fear of youth’s leisure time. As Grace Palladino examined in her book, *Teenagers: An American History* (1996), traditional understandings of family structure were called into question during the 1930s when the stage of life of “teenager” began to develop due to the disappearance of an available employment pipeline from childhood to adulthood. Palladino did a commendable job surveying the changes in societal structures and morality that shaped young adults; and did so through the use of popular culture artifacts, such as teen magazines, marketing, and music. However, Palladino did her argument a disservice by failing to discuss how religion shaped this new group. Overall, her analysis of the societal shifts that prefaced the emergence of the teenager group was helpful in understanding how the NCCW approached the adolescents they aimed to help.

Joseph F. Kett’s *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (1977) documented the slow evolution of the adolescent to teenager period. By showing the process by which youth’s expectations and actions were established, Kett placed the transition from adolescent to teenager as part of a larger history. From that vantage point it becomes apparent that what the “teenager” would entail was far from inevitable; it was crafted and shaped by its time, the world around it, and the people who influenced it. By participating in the change,

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Catholic women’s organizations worked to keep citizenship and religion included in this new definition. Although he spent a sizable time discussing the impact of religion in terms of Protestantism, Kett ignored the efforts of Catholic women.\textsuperscript{37} By doing so he continued the Protestant-only narrative of American history.

Overall, it is lamentable that the specific actions of Catholic women’s organizations and the role of laywomen have been so largely ignored in both U.S. Catholicism and women’s histories. These women must be seen as an important component of shaping the ideals of the American woman and the American family because they represented the largest religious denomination in the United States and were shaped by their religious beliefs and their religious community. Through the omission of these women, their legacies are lessened. It is necessary that women be woven into the larger narrative for historians to gain a fuller understanding of the Catholic underpinnings of American society that are still present today.

**METHODOLOGY**

The evolution of my research question reflects my increased specificity as I dove deeper into my topic. What began as “How did the Great Depression and the New Deal change Catholic charities in the United States?” became “How did Depression-era Catholic laywomen live out the Catholic Action social movement and charitable ideology through their aid to youth, especially in areas of recreation?” The keywords “Great Depression, Catholic, laywomen, charity, recreation, and youth” reflect my interests as a scholar of history. I wanted to know an ‘average’ Catholic woman of this era; women who served their homes, communities, and nation, unnoticed. These women grappled with an ever-changing society, especially in the spheres of economics and

\textsuperscript{37} Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 70-71, 198-199.
gender. They were unique and real individuals; they were hardly straightforward, and that is what makes them so human, so relatable, and so relevant today.

My primary analysis began at the Archives of the Catholic University of America (ACUA) in early October 2015. I discovered the National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW) in ACUA’s finding aid as I searched for something having to do with women in the Great Depression. I decided to focus in on the *Monthly Message*, the monthly bulletin that was produced and distributed by the national board to their nationwide affiliates at the diocesan and parochial levels. I analyzed the 4-5 page newsletters from 1929-1939 to gain an understanding of the voice of the NCCW, the issues they felt were most pressing for their time, and their intended course of action. Realizing that the thoughts of these wealthier women likely differed from the lived-out action of the local level, I kept a healthy skepticism in mind as I read. However, as the national board, they seemed to know their responsibility in representing the wider organization.

When approaching the *Monthly Message*, I read through the entire newsletter for the first few years to gain a sense of the tone and style, as well as the typical content and subject headings. Then, I scanned the document for key words such as “youth,” “recreation,” “sports,” “athletics,” “theater,” and “Catholic Action.” Also contained in these newsletters were recommended articles and publications that informed Catholics should read and be knowledgeable about. I noted this ‘prescriptive literature’ as a way to understand and compare what was expected of a ‘good Catholic.’ After finishing the *Monthly Message*, I looked through the NCCW’s convention proceedings and lectures. Because of the references made in the newsletters, I was able to pinpoint particular years and speeches of note. Photographs of the
NCCW members at conventions allowed me to gain a visual understanding of the women and
gather some demographic knowledge.

I originally planned to compare the National Council of Catholic Women with one of its
thousands of affiliates. However, I knew this might be difficult as record keeping is expensive
and time-consuming and the actions of a single women’s group may not have been considered
worthy of the cost. Professor Paula Kane of the University of Pittsburgh, daughter of former
NCCW President Annette Kane, informed me that local records of the early years of the NCCW
were unlikely to exist. After that, I thought my local search had ended. I consulted with many
historians and women religious and one suggested the Christ Child Society, a charity that started
in Washington, D.C. in the 1880s and became a national organization by the 1930s. Both
organizations’ archives are housed at ACUA.

I had given up on a local lens to the NCCW until my aunt, Ann Jansky (the former
president of the Lincoln Diocesan Council of Catholic Women (LDCCW)), found a scrapbook of
clippings of the LDCCW from the 1930s. The scrapbook validated the importance the Nebraska
women felt by being a part of the National Council of Catholic Women; they believed that their
organization warranted an institutional memory, and they took the time to preserve it. The
scrapbook, filled with newspaper articles, logistical notes, and correspondence, showed that the
local affiliates listened to, respected, and largely followed the leadership of the NCCW, though
they still maintained their authority as a local organization.

Within the Christ Child Society, I focused on the work in the D.C. chapter. I analyzed this
collection with the same keywords I used for the *Monthly Message*. In the CCS’s correspondence
regarding the building of a recreation center I learned what they considered recreation and the
facilities necessary to support it. I also found records about the girls who went to the CCS’s yearly summer camp and the costs the camp incurred. In the CCS records, receipts and financial data proved extremely valuable, as well as the recommendation letters for girls to attend. Other sources included letters, photographs, contracts, and newspaper clippings. All combined to show me the inner workings and exterior perception of the CCS.

I had thought that the NCCW would be mentioned frequently in the records of the CCS, but I did not see much relating the two groups, except a collection of correspondence between Mary Virginia Merrick and NCCW President Mary Hawks. Though it would have been an important and direct way to connect my two primary sources, the collection is currently unavailable as Mary Virginia Merrick is being promoted for canonization by the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. This limited my ability to include the CCS in my written paper, but I want to acknowledge the formative information that the CCS collection made in my general understanding. Despite this setback, the CCS, combined with the NCCW, provide a lens into the leadership and operation of Catholic women’s groups. Thought they were distinct, both organizations shared a similar understanding of the world and reacted to the changes brought forth by the Great Depression informed by their Catholic faith.

Analysis of my secondary sources has been a process of reduction. I began my research with broad histories of the Great Depression, such as *Freedom from Fear,* to get a sense of the overall setting. Then, I started narrowing the field to specifically United States Catholic and women’s histories, as discussed in my historiography. In these sources I looked in the index for keywords including “National Council of Catholic Women,” “Christ Child Society,” “recreation,” “sports,” “charity,” and “Catholic Action.” In the U.S. Catholic sources, if the work
of the NCCW or the CCS was mentioned at all, it was typically included only as an example of an organization within the National Catholic Welfare Conference. In women’s histories, I searched for mention of any religious groups and still found very little if anything at all. The daily work of Catholic women was rarely mentioned by U.S. Catholic historians or women’s historians. The total historiography is far more extensive than what I could read for the scope of this project, but in the numerous sources I’ve looked into throughout my research, I never felt that the work of the NCCW or CCS were given their historical due.

OVERVIEW

This thesis has four main chapters, a conclusion, and a substantial introduction with my literature review, methodology, and historiography. The introduction discusses the sources available about these women and why they are often left out despite their impact. I focus on both U.S. Catholic historians and women’s historians, as both groups fail to adequately place Catholic laywomen in their histories of the American interwar period. The objective of including a robust historiography is to show that historians overlook these women.

Chapter 1 focuses on women’s roles in 1930s society, how they changed in response to women’s suffrage in the 1920s and how occupations and activities drew family members outside the home. This chapter explains the expected domestic roles of Catholic women and how they cared for and stabilized the home. These expectations led to the tensions the women felt as they were called to work in public while still loyal to their private lives. This section displays the impact the Great Depression had in society and in the Catholic household. By showing the world in which these women operated and the constraints with which they worked, readers will gain an understanding of the external factors influencing the women.
Chapter 2 highlights the duty the women felt as both citizens and Catholics. My analysis of how these American Catholic women uniquely bridged their identities and how they viewed their actions in regards to their patriotism and to their faith will allow the reader to better understand the women, the world they operated in, and the balance they worked to maintain. This chapter shows how these laywomen felt beholden to their roles as wives and mothers while working outside of the home. The chapter also introduces the societal circumstances in the 1930s that began a shift in adolescence. By placing the identities of the laywomen with the changes caused by teenagers and the Great Depression, I connect the two groups and set the groundwork for why the women responded to youths as they did.

Chapter 3 shows why controlling leisure time was an important way for Catholic women to exert influence on their children and society. This chapter addresses the increase in leisure time and explains how leisure time could be used for either good or evil through providing a general history of the influence of radio, movies, and books on society and the Catholic Church’s response. Laywomen focused their efforts on preventing the potential dangers to which this increase in time could lead. This chapter explains why women pinpointed leisure as a worthwhile activity, yet one that needed to be controlled. The women believed they were providing a benefit, not only to themselves and their families, but to America and the Catholic Church at large.

Chapter 4 demonstrates why Catholic women focused on recreation-based charity that improved mental and spiritual health, instead of on the material or economic poverty that drove charitable efforts during the Great Depression. This chapter makes the connections between leisure time, recreation, and charity and shows why recreation was used as a way to improve a child’s health and social skills. This chapter shows that the world these women worked in had no
easy, clean-cut answers. This chapter also explains why recreation was seen as an important use of leisure time, considering the money and resources put into providing children these opportunities. I conclude my thesis with a summary of my analysis, suggest potential research, and tie the work of the women in the 1930s to today’s world.
Chapter 1- To Be American, Catholic, and Female during the Great Depression

The ‘Hard Times’ of the 1930s was a pressure cooker that brought both suffering and opportunity for change. Though many families struggled to get by, and trusted institutions such as banks lost all credibility as they lost all their money, the lack of stability made the security of the home, provided by women, all the more valuable. Women were continuing to explore the newfound power they gained in the 1920s when a shift in gender roles brought by the financial collapse threatened the status of male as breadwinner, which further elevated the women’s standing. In this chapter I argue that though women’s evolving roles in society and the family were even more disrupted during the 1930s, women continued to exert significant influence in the home as they navigated their increasing influence in society.

National Council of Catholic Women

The National Council of Catholic Women and its members continued in a long tradition of women being looked to as the moral safeguards of society. In the American Revolution, Republican Motherhood made women responsible for making their children into upright citizens. In the Cult of Domesticity, women were to make the home a respite for their husbands, to keep it pure and away from the evils and corruption of business and politics. During the mid-1800s abolitionist movement women began to use morally driven causes to justify leaving the home and enter public life. With the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, women were now legally a part of the public sphere. Clergy feared, without Catholic women representing themselves, society would lose its morality and the Church would lose some of its footing in society. This gave Catholic women an opportunity, which they seized wholeheartedly through the National Council of Catholic Women. Women’s organizations at large, including Catholic women’s organizations,
existed long before the NCCW, but by organizing under one voice, these women claimed their stance in civic matters and in the public eye and continued the tradition of women’s participation in society.\textsuperscript{38}

The National Council of Catholic Women was founded in 1920 by the National Catholic Welfare Council (later changed to National Catholic Welfare Conference) to control the work of laywomen. Women typically preferred to be members of female-only clubs so they would not be dominated by men and so they could develop leadership skills. They wanted a place out of the home that was their own space where their voices would not be stifled.\textsuperscript{39} The NCCW was meant to serve as an umbrella organization in which already established Catholic women’s groups could gather as a united voice at the onset of women’s suffrage.\textsuperscript{40} As stated by NCCW President Mary Hawks in February 1929, “That is the place and the value of the (NCCW): to bind together the exquisite patterns, big and little, or work organized by Catholic lay women into one glorious, brilliant perfect whole, of the Church, living, working.”\textsuperscript{41}

The organizational structure of the National Council of Catholic Women was implemented to coordinate the large number of existing Catholic women’s groups. There was a national board, elected at the annual conventions, which oversaw the organization, produced the

\textsuperscript{38}Petit, “Organized Catholic Womanhood,” 100.


\textsuperscript{40}Petit, “Organized Catholic Womanhood,” 89.

Monthly Message, and engaged with the clergy of the NCWC. The same process occurred at the diocesan-level councils, and other affiliated groups maintained their own management structures. The organization took care to maintain the affiliated groups’ sense of autonomy, since many of them existed before the national council. The NCCW saw themselves as a way to amplify Catholic women’s voices in the nation, not to take control of the minutia of local governance. The total size of the NCCW is difficult to gauge, especially in its early years. They did not report their total numbers in the Monthly Message and both Petit and O’Halloran commented on the difficulty of finding specific counts. By January of 1921, only one year after its founding, the NCCW reported 1,700 organizations affiliated and approximately 12,000 members. However, these individual numbers may be inflated as some women would join more than one affiliated group, creating a phantom increase in membership numbers.

A women’s organization founded by men, all within the complicated world of American Catholicism, did not come without its challenges. The NCCW worked in and through the conflict between religion and society, especially as it pertained to involvement in politics. These women navigated the world through their minority positions as Catholics in a majority Protestant nation


43 “Mrs. Mary E. Ohlheiser Heads Catholic Women,” Lincoln Star, October 31, 1934.


and women in a male-run church, and yet they embraced these identities to work within the democratic and domestic spheres. As NCCW President Hawks wrote in 1929, “It won’t be easy. We are, after all, women not angels.”

During its first decade as an organization, the National Council of Catholic Women acted as a unified voice for Catholic women, through legislative acts and mobilizing based on Catholic social teaching and tradition. Though women’s suffrage was a contested issue in the Catholic community (generally opposed by the male clergy and some women’s groups), by the 1920 ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, the clergy realized that if the woman’s vote was an inevitability, the Catholic Church needed to organize and politically engage its women.\(^{48}\) As Jeanne Petit wrote in her analysis of the role of the NCCW in public and legislative actions during the 1920s, the NCCW used the space for women’s involvement in politics caused by the Nineteenth Amendment to advocate for themselves as both Catholics and women, they “took part in forging Catholic positions on women’s issues that stressed communalism over individualism and women’s responsibilities over women’s rights.”\(^{49}\) By doing so, Petit argued that, “these women laid a foundation for distinctive Catholic response to twentieth century gender issues that affects American politics to this day.”\(^{50}\)

After achieving suffrage, the overall feminist movement split on the question of whether to fight for women’s legal equality through mechanisms like a proposed Equal Rights Amendment or to expand special protections for working women and mothers. Catholic women generally went with the latter group, joining reformers such as Florence Kelley in fighting for

\(^{48}\) Kenneally, *The History of American Catholic Women*, 86.

\(^{49}\) Petit, “Organized Catholic Womanhood,” 100.

\(^{50}\) Petit, “Organized Catholic Womanhood,” 100.
protective legislation because of the ideals of Catholic Social Teaching.\textsuperscript{51} The NCCW opposed the Equal Rights Amendment, saying, “Equal Rights’ must not be confused with identical rights. . . . the very laws which appear to discriminate against women are in reality intended to protect the home and to safeguard the children.”\textsuperscript{52} Their ideals were briefly explained in “Catholic Women and the N.R.A.,” an enclosure in the December 1933 \textit{Monthly Message} that read:

\begin{quote}
The National Council of Catholic Women has the viewpoint that only social justice makes for economic peace . . . We must secure to labor the right to work. We must dignify the work with a living wage. Work places need to be made safe, work hours made favorable to minors for safeguard of life and morals.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

The stance of the NCCW against the Equal Rights Amendment, and their positions for all legislative matters, were thoroughly studied and not blindly accepted. In the same article the NCCW defended their analysis, saying:

\begin{quote}
We base our social action on an informational background. We study many angles of all labor issues, work conditions, measures for the care of the aged, what circumstances of life are faced by working mothers and what to do for indigent or orphaned children. We scrutinize laws proposed. We keep in touch with social trends. We seek effective leadership and strive to know what local and national forces operate in the interest of general betterment.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Petit, “Organized Catholic Womanhood,” 91.
\item \textsuperscript{52} \textit{Monthly Message}, no. 88, February 1929.
\item \textsuperscript{54} \textit{Monthly Message}, no. 143, December 1933.
\end{itemize}
By divesting from the women’s equality movement and opposing the Equal Rights Amendment, Catholic laywomen assured conservative Catholic men, including the clergy, that they were not as extreme as other women’s groups, and could therefore be trusted with more independence. The National Council of Catholic Women is consistently referred to as a conservative group by historians. Its status as operating within the Church hierarchy led to constant tensions as NCCW members attempted to be both of the world and of the Church.


The Great Depression

With the ten-year anniversary of the National Council of Catholic Women came the Great Depression and a necessary addition of efforts to address the immediate concerns of the country. The Great Depression had an unprecedented impact on American society due to the crash of the stock market on October 29, 1929, known as Black Thursday. The implications of the crash extended far past those wealthy enough to invest in stocks; 5,000 banks failed between October 1932 and March 1933, taking with them about $7 billion of their clients’ money. On a national scale, gross national product in 1933 was half its amount only four years earlier. Businesses across the country either produced less, or went out of business altogether. By 1933, about 25 percent of the work force (thirteen million people) was unemployed. The unemployment rate throughout the 1930s averaged out at 17.1 percent.\(^{57}\)

The NCCW of the 1930s worked to navigate their role as women and Catholics in a dramatically changing American society; they continued the legislative involvement set by the 1920s, but also responded to the societal changes America faced during the Great Depression. As noted by Kenneally, Catholic women during the Great Depression shifted their sights and worked for the needy, and through those efforts they gained “leadership and organizational talents that exceeded by far the stereotypical characteristics of subservient, helpless women.”\(^{58}\) These concerns were noted in the *Monthly Message* as unemployment and charity gained some prominence in the publication. During the 1930s, the NCCW expanded its emphasis in protective legislation for women and children to the needs of the times; the organization mirrored the

\(^{57}\) Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 162-167.

United States in the initial resistance and then necessity-fueled acceptance of federally funded welfare. Organized women worked to balance their expected role of domesticity with their growing public engagement. Women also used their duties as caretakers to justify controlling how youths spent increasing amounts of leisure time.

Defining “American Catholic laywomen”

The American Catholic laywomen of the National Council of Catholic Women, whose experiences I will use as a lens through which to examine the larger issue of familial stability in the 1930s, must first be defined and understood. These women were typically middle to upper-middle class, as they had to have the financial freedom to engage in a voluntary side-occupation in addition to maintaining a household. They also needed some sort of disposable funds to support their charity work and traveling for the organization, particularly if they were members of the national board. Though in this paper I use the term laywomen in reference to these active women, it should be noted that not all laywomen in the Catholic Church were active in their faiths. Based on photographs from the various annual conventions held by the NCCW, the group was predominantly white, though a photo from the 1936 convention in Texas showed three women of color as part of the 200 members. The largely native-born women of the NCCW were a generation or two removed from the Catholic immigrant wave and considered themselves decidedly American. Though they were oftentimes dismissed due to their gender, Catholic


women used their position as moral guardians, mothers, and housewives to build for themselves a place of honor in the home, the Church, and society.
Women as Housewives

The women of the NCCW were regarded as stereotypical housewives and were expected to maintain those roles despite their desire to become involved in society. Therefore, in order to satisfy both roles, the women had to adjust the expectations of each and make their identities complementary, not contradictory. As scholar Genna Matthews has argued, women used the respect afforded the home and the esteem from their work as housewives to “justify their activism in the public sphere.”\textsuperscript{62} Gwendolyn Mink concurs, noting that female reformers, “accepted women’s gender assignment even while transforming it. They claimed political rights on the basis of woman’s domestic role and values, bringing political visibility to woman’s sphere, and they staked out a political role on the basis of women’s common identity as nurturers and common gift for caring.”\textsuperscript{63} This definition required the involvement of women like that of the NCCW, who likewise worked within their systems and while inside, pushed against the boundaries. By bringing motherly definitions of home out into the community, these women worked to justify that their place in the home was beyond the four walls that held the nuclear family; they played a necessary role in the upkeep of society at large.

The main change agent in housewives’ lives during the Great Depression was the diminished number of men capable of occupying the role of breadwinner. As men lost their jobs, they lost their status in the family, and subsequently a traditional gender role that was dependent on a man being the provider for his family was broken down. As men lost power, women took

\textsuperscript{62} Matthews, “Just a Housewife,” 92.

\textsuperscript{63} Mink, The Wages of Motherhood, 10.
control of the house and children lost faith in their fathers. As Cohen wrote, “these losses called into question the sustaining institutions of the 1920s, threatening the patterns of loyalty that working people had taken for granted, in their families, in their communities, and at work.”

Women working was an issue for society, especially the Catholic Church, to grapple with as it redefined women’s status in the home. It was accepted that men and women were naturally distinct; however, there were differences in views of which gender was superior. In a March 1938 bulletin, NCCW women defended their sex while countering Equal Rights Amendment legislation by writing, “these differences are innate, natural, the result of the factors over which neither sex has any control. To say that they make woman the inferior of man is foolish: to contend that they make woman different from man is to talk both common sense and science.”

As historian James J. Kenneally notes, women had long been economic contributors to the family income, but with the upheaval in employment caused by the Great Depression, women went from contributing with handicraft goods to sometimes actually sustaining the household. Though women’s wages were necessary, Kenneally stated, “the reservations of many Catholics, lay and clerical, remained and, like those of non-Catholics, intensified with the Great Depression.” Working women became a scapegoat for men’s problems; they were blamed for taking men’s jobs and the education of girls was accused of promoting an “unnatural desire to


seek equality at a time when young women should be taught there was no higher calling than that of wife and mother – unless it was religious life.”

Though both men and women were maintaining the function of and contributing financially to the operation of the home, women were thought to be destroying the institution.

Women were keenly aware of their duty to their family and also of the threats that unemployment brought outside their front door. As the lines between religious communities began to blur more and more as urbanization increased, they worried about the decrease of Christian ideals in society. The National Council of Catholic Women vowed “‘actions not words’… in waging this holy warfare for the protection and preservation of the Christian ideal in the family.”

The threat to families caused by external factors was keenly felt by the NCCW. The women felt they were responsible for maintaining the home and noted, “our social structure was disturbed when women entered the field of industry. It is now being urged as desirable that the family ties be strengthened, and that the home be re-established as the center of existence, worth all the interest and attention which women can give it.”

**Bridging the Private and Public Spheres**

The tension created by American Catholic laywomen navigating their responsibilities to both home and society in the years following the Nineteenth Amendment continued into the

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1930s. The language used by the *Monthly Message* was sometimes confusing and contradictory. The NCCW national board called for a reengagement with the home using religious language of the family as a foundation of society while also calling the women toward their civic, patriotic duties to be informed citizens and to act with their recent voting rights. Their commitment to both was impressive, but unrealistic; the women would be spread very thin.

This commitment to home and civic life was evident in November 1929 when President Hawks stated that the women were “showing the world what the Church teaches by what we do as home makers and citizens.”\(^{71}\) The NCCW emphasized to their members the importance of educating themselves to have meaningful discussions with others, to inform people of the issues and explain the Catholic perspective, and to vote accordingly, for:

> To vote is not only an obligation, but even in a larger way, it is necessary to prepare to vote. The time has passed when mothers, sisters, and wives can keep the home life clean, sane and happy, by working only in the home. Civilization has become so complex that dangers beset the path of the family on every hand. Catholic women must enter into the larger life of the community and prepare by study clubs to participate in its affair intelligently and effectively.\(^{72}\)

With such a mandate, the women were especially engaged with their federal, state, and local governments. On the second page of each *Monthly Message*, the entire page was devoted to updating members about important legislation. The national council’s issues ranged from equal rights of women to birth control, deportation, and industrial safety standards. As stated in August


1931, “every educated Catholic woman should prepare herself for intelligent discussion … whether on the public platform, or merely in private conversation.”

This involvement in the public square put to question the traditional, submissive role of women. The *Monthly Message* quoted Sister Miriam Therese in a 1932 edition:

I HAVE TREMENDOUS FAITH IN MY SEX. They have intelligence equal to men’s and greater emotional capacity. If only we can develop among women an intelligent appreciation of the problems of the social world and the principles that our great Church has laid down on their solution, their enthusiasm, I believe, would see the way to make changes about which more impassive men are saying, ‘How can we do it?’

But mentioned only three years later was the issue that women working disturbed the social structure, and because of that, “it is now being urged as desirable that the family ties be strengthened, and that the home be re-established as the center of existence.” As the Great Depression was increasingly felt by the mid-1930s, this retraction could have been a result of a desire for a simpler, more familiar time. The apparent contradiction emphasizes the difficulty in bridging two seemingly impenetrable spheres.

**Catholic Action**

Catholic Action was a popular topic and guiding force for the women of the National Council of Catholic Women. As defined by the *Revised Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church,* Catholic Action is an “organized religious activity, especially of a social, educational, or

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75 *Monthly Message,* vol. XV, no. 9, September 1935.
quasi-political kind, on the part of the Roman Catholic laity, particularly when conceived as an extension of the apostolate of the hierarchy." The concept of Catholic Action was developed in Pope Pius XI’s 1922 encyclical, *Ubi arcano*, which defined Catholic Action as “the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy.” Catholic Action as an involvement in greater society for the good of the Church grew popular among the laity during the 1930s as it was further emphasized in Pope Pius XI’s 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*. The women immersed themselves in education, culture, religion, and economics with the driving purpose of benefitting society through Catholic teaching. In 1930 the NCWC Social Action Department defined Catholic Action, writing:

> Catholic Action means leading a Catholic life; for life is action and action is life. Catholic Action is not a new thing. But so many Catholics have been content to live only a part-way Catholic life, that it sounds new. They have sliced their life into parts and put the stamp of their faith and their morals on a few slices and not on all. They have divided their life into compartments and have left religion only for what are called Church duties, family life and the more personal relationships. They have been fractional Catholics. And when they have done this, they have added to the host of evil that afflicts public life, working life, and social and private life, too.

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This quote explicitly told the women that Catholic Action was necessarily immersed in the work of their daily lives and in all of society. They could not be “cafeteria Catholics,” as they are now condescendingly called, but had to work for the Church in all ways and in all teachings.

For the women of the NCCW, Catholic Action was to be lived out in their roles in the home and as mothers. As Mary Hawks wrote in November 1929, “Catholic Action is then living our Faith – showing the world what the Church teaches by what we do as home makers and citizens.”\(^80\) But this faith was not relative; Catholic Action had to be firmly cemented in Church teaching, for, “if we are to make our Action Catholic, we must study the mind of the Church… Catholic Action must be action in accord with the mind of the Church.”\(^81\)

\(^80\) *Monthly Message*, no. 97, November 1929.

\(^81\) *Monthly Message*, no. 97, November 1929.
Working Within Church Hierarchy

The predominant way the women of the NCCW did not threaten their preordained roles in the Church was through their acceptance and even gratitude in being placed under the supervision and control of a member of the male Catholic clergy. Catholic women’s organizations were limited in their power by male authority through the bishops, clergy, politicians, legal system, and by operating in a society with male-dominated norms. By working in this role, the NCCW “became agents of Americanization, definers of social class, and extensions of ecclesiastical control over women.” More than being forced into this position, the women appeared to welcome it, as they noted throughout the *Monthly Message*. The NCCW seemed to see the hierarchy as a unifier of all Catholics, with whom they could best coordinate their actions for maximum effect. In September 1930, the national board wrote, “to secure Catholic united action all organized activity of the Catholic laymen and women of the country must be united with and under the Bishops. Without that official, recognized and authoritative bond, Catholic common action cannot exist…”

The balance of power between the women and the clergy was an issue that persisted beyond the national council. As the National Council of Catholic Women had to work under the bishops heading the NCWC, local affiliates and diocesan councils had to place themselves within, meaning at the bottom, of the hierarchy. The women had to perform their typical tasks


without the assistance of the bishop or priest, but also required his assistance in making connections and networking. They did all this while being thought as and appearing to agree to, working below him. The correspondence between the bishop, the diocesan council, and the national board reveal hints of that tension. As Nebraska’s Lincoln Diocesan Council of Catholic Women was formed in 1932, a great deal of coordination was required between the three aforementioned groups. The hierarchy was laid out in a July 13, 1927 letter from NCCW President Mary Mullen to Bishop Francis J. Beckman of Lincoln, Nebraska, “while the work of the National Council is under the direction of the bishops of the Administrative Committee of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the plan of organization in any one diocese must be in accordance with the wishes of the Ordinary and no step may be taken without his approval.”

Louis B. Kucera, Bishop of Lincoln during most of the 1930s, encouraged the work of the Lincoln Diocesan Council of Catholic Women. In a 1932 speech, Kucera spoke proudly of the LDCCW: “by affiliating with the National Council of Catholic Women, the various parish societies of our Catholic mothers and their daughters throughout the diocese have become members of an organization that is peculiarly their own.” Still, however much “their own” the NCCW was, there always existed an underlying knowledge among its leaders that they were not autonomous. In a 1934 letter from NCCW President Sarah Hooley to LDCCW President Mrs. W.E. Straub, Hooley described the opportunity the economic depression provides for the women and their religious and patriotic duties to act on it; she wrote confidently in what to do and

85 Mary Mullen to Bishop Beckman, July 13, 1927, box 1 DCCW, 1927-1958, Archives of the Diocese of Lincoln, Lincoln, NE.

86 Speech by Bishop Louis B. Kucera, April 30, 1932, box 1 DCCW, 1927-1958, Archives of the Diocese of Lincoln, Lincoln, NE.
inspires the reader, but finishes her call to action with the clause, “this must be done, however, according to the wish and the convenience of your Bishop.” The women mostly acted independently, but had to ensure checks on themselves to not threaten the hierarchy.

The local affiliates of the National Council of Catholic Women relied on the cooperation of their bishops to serve as intermediaries with other priests and as megaphones with which to share their work and drum up support. Kucera and the other bishops with which he corresponded, wrote of their appreciation and admiration for the work of the women’s organizations while simultaneously belittling their power. In 1935, Kucera wrote to the LDCCW president, “may I again at this time renew my pledge of support for whatever project you may choose to assign to the Catholic women who look to you for leadership and direction.” This language is worthy of note; Bishop Kucera pledged his support and gave decision-making authority to the women in a time when the Church hierarchy was still very rigid. The bishop also said that the women should look to their local female leaders, not to him. In a Christmas Eve letter, Bishop Kucera again wrote how he was pleased with LDCCW’s work:

How to thank you aside from merely giving expression to my appreciation is a problem I know that you will agree that it is not always easy to tell others just how we feel. In this instance, please be assured that I do not at all consider you indebted in any way to use for whatever effort we have made to aid you in the splendid work you are doing in the N.C.C.W. On the other hand, I sometimes feel that we are debtors not only to you, but to your co-workers in a measure that we can never hope to repay.89

87 Sarah Hooley to Ms. W.E. Straub, July 31, 19234, box 1 DCCW, 1927-1958, Archives of the Diocese of Lincoln, Lincoln, NE.

88 Louis B. Kucera to Mary Ohlheiser, June 7, 1935, box 1 DCCW, 1927-1958, Archives of the Diocese of Lincoln, Lincoln, NE.

89 Louis B. Kucera to Mary Ohlheiser, June 7, 1935, Lincoln, NE.
The high praise reflected a sentiment of partnership between Bishop Kucera and the women of the NCCW. He did not see the group as a burdensome waste of time or threat to his authority, but rather as a valued Catholic organization in the community. This respect of the clergy toward the work of the women, even outside the Lincoln diocese, was confirmed in a 1929 letter from J. Cardinal Gasparri to Bishop Joseph Schrembs D.D. of Cleveland. Gasparri wrote about the resolutions adopted by the NCCW at their D.C. convention saying, “One cannot but admire their excellent Catholic tone, and feel confident that much moral and material good will accrue by fidelity to the principles expressed in them. . .It affords me great pleasure to express my admiration for the good work of the Catholic Women Council and wish it every success.” Because this was a letter between two bishops, the respect given to the NCCW was even more apparent, as they were not writing to placate the women, but were speaking privately and with an equal, as brother priests.

Based on the bishop’s correspondence regarding the LDCCW, local councils relied on the bishop to invite speakers to the annual convention, which mirrored that of the national council. In a 1938 letter, Bishop Kucera wrote to a Jesuit priest at Creighton Law School about the LDCCW’s annual convention, inviting him to give a speech. The women had condensed their annual convention from two to one days, altering the proposed plan that Kucera had sent early. Instead of complimenting their thriftiness in economically strained times, Kucera

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90 I was surprised at how involved a bishop was in the work of the NCCW; the correspondence was significant enough to merit two large folders at the Sister Loretta Gosen Memorial Archives- Museum of the Diocese of Lincoln.

condescendingly closes his statement, “Fickle women.” This flippant phrase contradicted the tone of his previous correspondence with the women, suggesting an ulterior language when talking to his fellow male-clergy that contrasted the exchange between Gasparri and Schrembs. In other letters, Bishop Kucera appears genuinely impressed and pleased with the work of the laywomen, but it is equally clear that he is in charge, overall.

During the Great Depression, the NCCW attempted to maintain their tradition as a decade-old organization while adjusting to the world they operated in. In this way, they were what the Catholic Church needed at the time. Isolating themselves and following the traditional ways things were done would not address the economic crisis at hand. To preserve the morality of society amid the uncertainty of the Great Depression, Catholic women needed to engage in society, and quickly. Overall, in the 1930s, women’s roles continued to evolve, and the family unit was even more disrupted by the economic uncertainty caused by the Great Depression. In response, women maintained and even increased their influence as moral guardians and caretakers of the home.

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92 Louis B. Kucera to Fr. Joseph P. Zuercher, May 7, 1938, box 1 DCCW, 1927-1958, Archives of the Diocese of Lincoln, Lincoln, NE.
Chapter 2- Double Identities, Extra Duties: 
Mothering Catholic Americans in an Age of Upheaval

American Catholic laywomen in the National Council of Catholic Women were forced to negotiate tensions among their identities during the Great Depression, as they attempted to be loyal to America, the Catholic Church, and their families. These women not only accepted the expectations placed on them as mothers, homemakers, and spiritual shepherds of their children, they embraced them. Therefore, when the United States experienced the turmoil of the Great Depression, the women responded by embracing their traditional roles and expanding the scope of those roles. The women and mothers focused on the impact the Great Depression would have on their families and especially their children. Their gaze turned especially towards their older children who spent an increasing amount of time outside the home.

In the 1930s, there was an increased worry about young adults, how they were reacting to the disillusionment caused by the Great Depression and the disruption of societal structures such as employment and the pipeline from childhood to adulthood. Amid these changes, Catholic women, like women of other faiths, had to wrestle with a new phenomenon: the emergence of a new generational group, that of ‘teenager.’ The near disappearance of jobs for those between 14-18 years of age, the increased number of students who stayed in high school, and the rise of the average age at which men and women married combined to create new challenges both for young people and their parents. In this chapter I show that Catholic women believed they had a duty to both their nation and their faith, and they used that belief to be involved in preserving the moral well-being of the United States by guiding their children successfully through the tumultuous adolescent years into life as faith-filled adult citizens.
Duty to Nation

American Catholic laywomen felt a strong loyalty to their nation and used their sense of duty to involve themselves in the public sphere as an extension of their responsibility as safeguards of societal morality. This involvement was no different from previous reform movements headed by women that had existed since the mid-1800s. Their patriotism was evident throughout the Monthly Message’s. In 1937 they devoted half of a page to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Constitution. The women of the NCCW stated their patriotism and their role in helping America succeed, while criticizing the failure of business and the Great Depression, “patriotism is more than vague love of country -- the desire to see America prosper. Christian love of country means love of fellow citizens, the men and women and children who make America great by living those ideals of spiritual equality and material opportunity which gave her being and are essential to her life and character as a nation…Business has wandered far from this ideal…” The NCCW of the 1930s responded to the Great Depression by transitioning their mission. Instead of focusing on defending the Catholic faith, they now worked for the relief of all the nation’s poor. The women, as mothers, particularly countered the impact of unemployment on families.


The patriotic commitment of Catholic women’s organizations was further communicated through the annual national conventions. In drumming up support for the 1929 NCCW convention, the women noted its importance saying, “The Catholic position is put before the public. The fact that representatives of Catholic women of fine intelligence and imbued with religious fervor and patriotic zeal come together to discuss problems common to the Church and to the country cannot fail to inspire respect and regard for the Catholic body as a whole.” The NCCW board lauded Franklin Roosevelt’s National Recovery Act, signed into law in June 1933, as a confluence of Catholic and American ideals. They called their affiliates to support the act as “The National Recovery Act embodies the principles of social justice set forth in the Encyclical of Leo XIII issued in 1891 and that of Pius XI in 1931.” Far from divided, the NCCW saw the combination of their “religious fervor and patriotic zeal” as a benefit to the nation, and used rhetoric from both identities to support their efforts.

Duty to Faith

The Catholic laywomen of the United States felt a similar loyalty to their religion as they did to their country. The idea of a religion functioning as a community identity was established from the landing of the Mayflower in Plymouth at the onset of what would become the United States of America. Catholic immigrant groups created their own pockets of ethnic and religious

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based communities when they began immigrating in mass. However, the quota enacted in the Immigration Act of 1924 greatly limited these communities from gaining new members, and Catholics began to become more American than a ‘hyphenated-American.’ Despite the change in demographic format, religion provided a stalwart community and the laywomen of the 1930s held on to their Catholicism as a bonding agent in a time of disintegration.

Catholics’ first attempt to deal with the crisis was based on what they had done in the 1920s, even though the foundations of society were no longer secure. Members of communities sought aid from the neighborhood church and ethnic-based organizations they had all pitched in to support, but that fund was meant for when an individual family fell on hard times, not the entire community. There was still very much a ‘take care of their own’ mindset, and a desire for charity to be community-based and private; however, with the massive number of people in need at the same time, it was not surprising that these local organizations quickly ran out of resources to care for those who needed them.

**Threat of Non-Catholic Organizations**

Also during the 1930s, there still remained a distrust between Catholics and followers of other religions. American Protestants were long wary of the “dreaded papists” as Catholics were thought to be brainwashed into mindlessly following the pope. Catholics, reliant on the religious community, feared non-Catholics as threats that would seduce their children away from the faith.

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100 Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 218.
Prior to Vatican II in the mid-1900s, there was not much support of anything interfaith. Religions were still separated into tight, homogenous community pockets and were not supposed to contaminate the other.\textsuperscript{101} This fear was noted in the \textit{America} article “Catholic Children in Public Schools” by Joseph J. Mereto on May 23, 1931. Mereto said that there were two million Catholic children in public schools, but the Church was fearful that by mixing with non-Catholic education, they may lose their Catholic identity and be led astray.\textsuperscript{102}

The efforts of the Catholic women were not motivated solely by their own good will, it was partly accelerated by the work of other religious groups whose influence was seen as threatening to the Catholic way of life. For example, organizations such as the Young Men’s Christian Association, and Young Women’s Christian Association, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts were already very present and popular in the 1930s and included Catholics in their ranks. As succinctly stated by the NCCW in a 1934 enclosure titled “The Catholic Woman and Civil Life,” areas including Catholic schools, libraries, recreational facilities, community centers, social welfare (including Catholics in non-Catholic institutions), economic conditions, and civic cooperation should be of the utmost concern to Catholic women and, “Unless Catholics manifest interest in these matters, they have little right to criticize those in power or the program they

\textsuperscript{101} For a more in depth explanation of the distinctions between Catholics and other religions, and the ethnic and racial divisions within Catholicism itself, see Chapter 1 of John T. McGreevy’s \textit{Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

formulate. In many cases the fault lies within ourselves if we are excluded from participation in the work of the above groups.”

Children Leaving the Nest and Going to High School

During the Great Depression, expectations of employment fell away for all Americans, but particularly for children and young people. In the years before the 1930s, the majority of teenagers either worked on farms, in factories, or at home, based on the occupation and needs of their families. This group, however, was not considered to be teenagers or adolescents, since those terms were only given to students in high school. These youths were still treated as young children within the family circle. But when the Great Depression took away employment options for young people, it created a vacuum of employment—few young people were able to find jobs and provide for themselves. This massive unemployment forced teenagers out of the workplace and into schools, “high school had to bridge the gap.”

Previously, both high school and the age group between childhood and adulthood was a privilege enjoyed by the wealthy, since the classes offered were aimed for college preparation, not the workforce. However, the lack of jobs caused by the Great Depression put troubled youth


105 However, high school was used as a way to fill time, more than to secure a job. The guarantee of a high school diploma granting a middle-class boy a white-collar job had all but disappeared as professional income plummeted 40 percent between 1929 and 1933, and there were far more workers than there were white-collar jobs (Palladino, *Teenagers*, 35). According to a 1933 article, only one in 10 to 15 high school graduates could expect to find work in 1933.

into the public eye and persuaded Americans to put the federal government and federal money, into solving the problem.\textsuperscript{107} In 1930, high school was attended by about half of youths ages fourteen and eighteen.\textsuperscript{108} By 1936, more teenaged youth were in school than had ever been before, at 65 percent.\textsuperscript{109} And by 1940, the number was three-quarters of youths.\textsuperscript{110} This massive shift lessened the class division between those who could afford to be high school students and those who could not, and effectively brought “middle-class values into lower-class lives.”\textsuperscript{111} Since adolescents were now an age group, instead of a subset of the wealthy class, “a separate, teenage generation” began to emerge; high school became a shared experience between a larger number of similarly-aged people, of a more diverse range of socio-economic and class status, and created the breeding ground for what would emerge as an established youth culture and developmental phase.\textsuperscript{112}

\textbf{The Emergence of Adolescents}

High school was an important factor in shaping the adolescent generation because it provided a middle ground where young adults were out of the eyes of their parents, surrounded by their peers, but also were provided some form of structure and encouragement to learn how to

\textsuperscript{107} Palladino, \textit{Teenagers}, 33.

\textsuperscript{108} Susan Ware, \textit{Holding Their Own}, 56.

\textsuperscript{109} Palladino, \textit{Teenagers}, 5.

\textsuperscript{110} Ware, \textit{Holding Their Own}, 56.

\textsuperscript{111} Palladino, \textit{Teenagers}, 33.

\textsuperscript{112} Palladino, \textit{Teenagers}, 5.
become responsible adults. Parents and the church now had to compete with peers for a young person’s attention. Another notable middle ground were places of recreation – such as summer camps and community centers. With the idea of young adults occupying a middle space between child and adulthood, greater “personal freedom and generational independence” were demanded of parents by teens. External forces such as “scientific education,” scandalous movies, and “pleasure-seeking” in high school students were a direct assault on the role fulfilled by mothers. High school’s weakened adolescents’ view of the authority of home, and by the 1930s, active high school students “did little more than eat and sleep at home.” They found their education and structure, or lack thereof, elsewhere.

One of the most pressing issues the women faced as mothers and homemakers was the question of what to do with the children as it combined their responsibilities towards the United States in forming citizens, their duty to the Catholic Church to form good Catholics, and their roles as mothers to raise their children. The women could justify feeling beholden to their roles as wives and mothers while working outside of the home if they worked for the well-being of children who increasingly drew away from the home. The idea of a ‘teenager’ as we now know it emerged in World War II, but just like the unpredictable teens it impacted, the idea continued to be shaped in the tumultuous years of the Great Depression, then known as ‘adolescents.’

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113 Ware, *Holding Their Own*, 56.


The term adolescents goes back to the nineteenth century and was used to describe the hormone-fueled years of awkwardness, vulnerability, and inexperience experienced by those in between childhood and adulthood. Prior to the category of ‘teenager’ being formed, this group was still considered children and made the leap to adulthood with a job and marriage. Because they were so susceptible, adolescents were thought to need the structure of “a disciplined, wholesome, adult-guided environment” in which they could learn skills and how to be productive members of society. Keeping adolescents in school was a way to combat high unemployment rates, but this shift in attendance also shifted high school coursework to include vocational training, allowing for students to train for careers rather than academia. This increase in education added numbers and normalcy to the presence of a gap between childhood and employed adulthood, which sparked the widespread transition from the adolescent who stayed at home, to the teenager who spent her free time away.

Because of their standing as middle-class women, the NCCW recognized that their membership was not representative of the Catholic Church in America. As noted in the “Report of The Industrial Committee of the National Council of Catholic Women” in 1929, “our Church in the United States is distinctly a Church of the industrial working people. When we help to bring justice, equity and peace into trade and industry, we help the vast majority of the members of our own Church at the same time that we help millions of others who hold with us the

117 Kett, Rites of Passage, 217.

118 Palladino, Teenagers, xv.

119 Palladino, Teenagers.
common bond of American life. That most of us will, furthermore, be helping our own family
life and our own individual status.”

To truly reach the margins, the women of the NCCW had to work for those in another
class, the working-class. Because of their middle-class standing, the children of members of
Catholic women’s organizations would have predominantly been in high school before the shift.
But by reacting to meet the needs of the new high school students that came from poorer
families, the women had to work outside of their economic class; however, this breaking of
boundaries led to the “middle-class values” of the women influencing “lower-class lives”
through their efforts and programs. This phenomenon was demonstrated in Muncy’s work
about female reformers in government agencies, that “Sheppard-Towner nurses invaded
working-class homes to order them according to middle-class preferences.” Catholic women
were part of a larger movement, that of the benevolent elite attempting to uplift the poor
according to their standards and expectations.

The combination of children leaving the home and dismissing parental control, and their
general apathy and disillusionment caused by the Great Depression, worried mothers profusely.
Due to the gap between home and teens, mothers had to extend the reach of the home outside of
the four-walled structure. The guiding influence, teachings, and morality of home had to be

120 The National Council of Catholic Women and National Catholic Welfare Conference, “Report of The
Industrial Committee of The National Council of Catholic Women,” (Baltimore, MD: Belvedere Press, September
28, 1929), as found in: National Council of Catholic Women, Monthly Message, January 1930, Series 8:
Publications, Form Letters and Information Kits (1919-2000), no. 99, box 157, folder 8, National Council of
Catholic Women Collection, Archives of The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.

121 Matthews, “Just a Housewife.”

122 Muncy, Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 163.
found in wider pockets of America if they were to save the children. Mothers worried what this next generation would look like, and how they would contribute to America if as citizens, they had “no faith in the American dream of self-help and self-improvement.” Catholic women knew they needed to act to save America through the morality and structure found in Catholicism; they refused to allow non-Catholics to lead their children away from the faith. By involving themselves in the issues of their day, American Catholic laywomen aimed to save their youths, and make them better Catholics, and better Americans.

Who’s in Charge of Charity?

The tensions faced by the women of the National Council of Catholic women were most obvious in the change from charity as the responsibility of local and private sources, to federal government-controlled charity, and in the women’s efforts to remain in their domestic sphere while being called to civic engagement. The national question of who was responsible for charity underwent a great deal of change from 1929-1939. Because the Great Depression was the worst and longest economic downturn in the history of the United States, ideas of charity shifted and expanded in response. In the December 1929 *Monthly Message* it was noted that President Herbert Hoover called for a social welfare program that would be “confined to the research and the dissemination of information and experience.” This intellectual approach was appropriate for Herbert Hoover, who relied on social scientists and data to make policy. Also, it was only

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about two months into the Great Depression and although dramatic, was not thought to be anything more than a basic recession and part of the economic cycle.\textsuperscript{126}

Herbert Hoover’s approach to charity was similar to that of the NCCW. Historian David M. Kennedy described Hoover as “. . . dream[ing] the progressive generation’s dream of actively managing social change through informed, though scrupulously limited, government action.”\textsuperscript{127} Continuing in this vein, Hoover reached out to the NCCW in 1931, asking them to aid the Red Cross in their relief efforts. Hoover desired for charity to be private, though aided and publicized by national efforts; he said, “The American way of meeting such a relief problem has been through voluntary effort.”\textsuperscript{128} To Hoover, and the women of the NCCW who accepted his call to action, voluntary aid was an American tradition and value.\textsuperscript{129} Though their sentiments aligned in this instance, by the end of Hoover’s time in the White House, the women no longer thought the government’s programs were enough. In December 1932 they wrote that “…private agencies have a heavy burden. Public funds are inadequate, restricted if not nearly exhausted…” and challenged their members to sacrifice their luxuries for the common good.\textsuperscript{130}

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\textsuperscript{126} Kennedy, \textit{Freedom from Fear}, 58.

\textsuperscript{127} Kennedy, \textit{Freedom from Fear}, 11.

\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Monthly Message}, no. 111, January 1931.

\textsuperscript{129} For a thorough understanding of the government’s response to the Great Depression, see David M. Kennedy’s \textit{Freedom from Fear}.

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There was a transition between private and government-funded aid between 1932 and 1933, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt came into the U.S. Presidency with his New Deal. FDR and his administration greatly increased the amount of government intervention and aid in unemployment relief during the Great Depression. His unprecedented legislative successes during the first hundred days after he assumed the presidency included the Civilian Conservation Corps, which employed more than three million “idle youngsters.” Though the NCCW was supportive, it did not blindly adopt his relief programs. In June 1933 they lauded the efforts of the Civilian Conservation Corps but were dissatisfied with the lack of “religious, social and recreational needs” being provided to the young men. However, their language suggested their satisfaction with FDR’s programs compared to Hoover’s. As they mentioned in their January 1934 newsletter, the efforts showed “an entirely new attitude towards government and governmental control,” and that the president had more power than ever before. But instead of being fearful or wary, the NCCW said that “the Administration has used that power for the best interests of the people as far as human knowledge and human foresight would seem to go.”

The women of NCCW continued their moderate criticisms of the federal relief programs into 1936; as they said, “too many of the present-day plans have only social, economic and material objectives; here, as in all phases of the readjustment of the social order, the fundamental

131 Monthly Message, no. 131, December 1932.

132 Kennedy, Freedom from Fear, 144.


134 Monthly Message, no. 144, January 1934.
importance of the spiritual, religious and moral questions involved, personal and group, civil and religious rights and responsibilities, are either overlooked or ignored.”

Showing some change in thought, in October of 1936 they expressed worry that due to the emergence of widespread government relief programs, there was now “the danger that . . . the work of Christian charity would become a government responsibility rather than remain, as it should be, the responsibility of individuals and of organized groups.”

Overall, there appeared to be consistency in their efforts to help the poor, and also in their uncertainty about how best to do so. The women of the NCCW recognized the need of government aid to supplement private efforts, but did not want religion to be pushed out of charity.

It was in this context, a cash-strapped America still relying on community charity, that the NCCW immersed itself in the the faith and morality of the United States. The motto of the NCCW was proclaimed to be “For God and Country” by the October 1931 Monthly Message and aimed “to give to Religion the best service of our citizenship: to give to our Country the best service of our Religion.”

The women of the NCCW felt it was necessary to leave the domestic sphere and go into the public to work for the interest of both their God and their country.

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Chapter 3- “Those who engage in idle pursuits lack sense”\textsuperscript{138}: In Search of Catholic Leisure

The economic crash of October 1929 and the ensuing Depression shook the United States to its core. An important though understandably overlooked consequence of the financial collapse was the vacuum of time unemployment created. With about a third of American workers without a job in the height of the Depression, a larger number of people had an increase in leisure time, however little desired. Leisure time, or free time away from work, increased alongside unemployment for both men, women, and children in the Great Depression. With the increase in entertainment from the 1920s, the options of how to do nothing were plentiful; people could spend their time at sporting events, the theater, the movies as well as simple games in any available free space, from parks to the streets.

The Catholic Church, America, and women each had unique reasons to feel that the resultant empty time was threatening to their ways of life. The Church feared America’s failings were due to sin and immorality, and unstructured free time would only increase that evil. America feared unproductivity and creating a generation of lazy vagabonds. Women used to control leisure time as mothers, but as children left the home at earlier ages, they had to look outwards into society to rear their children. In this chapter I explore how American Catholic laywomen felt all three of these motivations in their response to productively fill this newly increased leisure time. I argue that by preventing youths from immoral or wasteful activities, the women believed they were protecting the children, the nation, and their souls.

Catholic laywomen found in the unemployment crisis a duty to help children as if they were their own. The combination of children leaving the home and dismissing parental control, and their general apathy and disillusionment caused by the Great Depression, worried mothers profusely. Due to the gap between home and teens, mothers had to extend the guiding influence, teachings, and morality of home outside of the four-walled structure if they were to save the children. Mothers worried what this next generation would look like, and how they would contribute to America if as citizens, they had “no faith in the American dream of self-help and self-improvement.”

A 1938 *Monthly Message* reflected on the early years of the Great Depression, “During the years 1928-1932, when millions of young people who were out of school were also out of work, our national loss was terrific human loss. Boys and girls were damaged spiritually, physically and materially.” Catholic women knew they needed to act to save America through the morality and structure found in Catholicism. By involving themselves in the issues of their day, American Catholic laywomen aimed to save their youths, and make them better Catholics, and better Americans.

The Problem with Youth: A National Concern

This worry for youth was felt throughout the country, in religious and non-religious groups alike. The founding of the National Youth Administration on June 26, 1935 and its budget of $50,000,000 of relief funds showed the severity of the problem; an entire governmental

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agency was created to combat the issue. In opening the organization, FDR asked for other
groups to rise up and help the nation’s fledgling young people, “It is my sincere hope that all
public and private agencies, groups, and organizations, as well as educators, recreational leaders,
employers, and labor leaders, will cooperate wholeheartedly . . .” This national attention gave
urgency and legitimacy to the recreation and youth-based work that was already being done by
the NCCW, who increased their efforts towards youths by making the theme of their annual
convention “Youth” in 1934, 1935, and 1936, and hosting a special Youth Institute, at which
twenty-five representatives of Catholic groups convened in Washington, D.C.

The same sentiment was felt on a national scale, as a 1938 special issue of Life magazine
dedicated to “The Youth Problem” said, “U.S. youths today are a sober lot.” Children who had
known little else than the financial prosperity of the Roaring 20s were now facing widespread
destitution. Being out of both school and work was seen as dangerous, as there was no structure
or purpose in the lives of the young ones. During this formative time, a black hole existed, which
society at large feared would be filled with unproductive, immoral, or illegal activities.

Ways to Fill Leisure Time

\[\text{\footnotesize 141 Betty Grimes Lindley and Ernest K. Lindley, } \textit{A New Deal for Youth: The Story of the National Youth Administration} \text{ (New York: De Capo Press, 1972), 3.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 142 Lindley, } \textit{A New Deal for Youth}, 4.\]


\[\text{\footnotesize 144 Ware, } \textit{Holding Their Own}, 55.\]
The three main occupiers of children’s time were reading, the radio, and the movies, as mentioned in the February 1938 edition of the *Monthly Message*, “According to a study of 10,000 boys and girls between the ages of 11 and 15 years, living in the tenement districts of New York City, leisure out-of-school time is spent on the radio, on the movies; a poor third is given to books.”¹⁴⁵ These popular passers of time continue to shape the lives of youths, but they had a particular influence in the 1930s, when the radio and film were still young inventions. How they would impact the lives of Americans was still to be determined, and the new and unknown was greeted with wary skepticism. Books, the radio, and movies shaped culture profoundly as ways to share stories and knowledge outside of school and the home. Though reading was not a new technology, library usage increased by 60% over 3 years from 1930-1933.¹⁴⁶ Also, the women of the NCCW constantly asked their affiliated organizations to provide Catholic literature in libraries because they knew the reach libraries had.¹⁴⁷ However, though print remained important, it was not the newest and most exciting way to get information in the 1930s.

Radio was a particularly popular technology and pastime in the 1930s. By the beginning of the 1930s, 12 million American households had a radio and by 1939 more than 28 million


homes were tuning in. Radio’s content was varied; and as proven by the popularity of radio priest, Reverend Charles Coughlin, Catholics were tuning in. The National Catholic Welfare Conference saw it as a powerful way to spread the faith. In 1937, the NCCW announced that their brother organization, the National Council of Catholic Men needed support in spreading the word about the “Catholic Radio Hour” which would comprise of sixteen radio broadcasts on the subject of “Youth” beginning March 6, 1937 each Saturday.

The NCCW followed up with their own programming, a radio series entitled “Call to Youth” which was broadcast by NBC from 1937 to 1940. The intended audience was radio-listening youth, as Catholic laypeople saw radio as a powerful and effective means of evangelization. The NCCW also expressed outrage at the programming on the radios when it wasn’t deemed wholesome enough. In the January 1938 Monthly Message, an insert titled “Objectionable Radio Broadcast” was included in the bulletin. The authors were angry about the broadcast of Mae West, a popular starlet and sex symbol. The women even threatened to put their money where their mouth was, “We women need not permit such a thing to continue. Women


149 Kennedy, Freedom from Fear, 216.


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make about 90% of all purchases, and especially of food. Advertising can live only in proportion to results it gets from the buying and consuming public.”152

Movies became a particular cause of the NCCW as film made sin glamourous, lifelike, and 20-feet tall. Catholic opposition to corruption in movies had long existed and was led by members of the clergy who used their pulpits to dissuade their parishioners from subjecting themselves to evil.153 The NCCW noted that movies were especially dangerous for their potential capability in corrupting youth. During the 1920s, the impact of film on American lives continued to grow, and the racy content on screens did likewise. By 1930, the Motion Picture Production Code, a set of industry moral guidelines for major studios, was put in place to censor what could be shown on screen.154 The Code was a reactionary effort, self-imposed and self-regulated by the producers of American motion pictures, to improve the image of Hollywood after the combination of immoral films and the misbehavior of stars led to a societal concern about the movies.155 Written by Father Daniel Lord, a Jesuit priest, and Martin Quigley, a prominent Roman Catholic layman involved in the motion pictures industry, the impact of Catholicism on


censorship of film was strongly felt.\textsuperscript{156} The Code did not solve the problem of content in film as there were no actual legal repercussions for failure to adhere.

The National Council of Catholic Women joined the national concern and led it in their own way in their distributed materials to the affiliated organizations. The Catholic Church founded the National Legion of Decency in 1933 with the aim of cleaning up “the pest hold that infects the entire country with its obscene and lascivious moving pictures.”\textsuperscript{157} The Church’s effective national organization and strong vocal outcry reached the NCCW, as the crusade against immoral films was mentioned frequently in the \textit{Monthly Message}’s of the 1930s.\textsuperscript{158} In the February 1937 edition, a pamphlet called “How to Judge the Morality of Motion Pictures: A Popular Guide to Right Standards in Motion Picture Entertainment, Authorized by the Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures for the Legion of Decency,” was enclosed in the bulletin. There was longevity and commitment to the movement, the continuation of such articles also showed the NCCW didn’t think the Code was doing enough.

The NCWC saw a clear dichotomy in filling leisure time—it was either good or bad, moral or immoral, productive or not. In the “How to Judge the Morality of Motion Pictures” pamphlet, the distinction between entertainment was made clear:


\textsuperscript{157} Doherty, \textit{Pre-Code Hollywood}, 320.

It is generally recognized that entertainment is either helpful or harmful. A clear distinction must, therefore, be made between (a) entertainment which tends to elevate or to relax men and women physically or mentally tired with the duties and occupations of every day life, and (b) entertainment which tends to lower their ideals and moral standards of life.\textsuperscript{159}

The NCWC noted that entertainment was a valid and necessary tool for a bit of relaxation and escapism from life, but only if used properly and morally. The pamphlet continues, “Motion pictures must be judged not only as entertainment but also as an influence on morals. A screen drama influences morals because it presents ideals of human conduct.”\textsuperscript{160} It was the lifelike nature of the movies that endangered society because it made viewers think poor behavior was normal and expected. If the morals on screen were lacking, there was worry that viewers, especially susceptible children, would adopt the sins of their favorite on-screen star or starlet. The pamphlet concluded, “In brief, because the motion pictures reach greater numbers and speak with extraordinary persuasiveness to impressionable people, their producers have special moral obligations to the public. They should avoid confusing morals. They should present only correct standards of life.”\textsuperscript{161} The Catholic Church and Catholic women’s organization took it upon themselves to define those “correct standards of life.”

\textbf{The Catholic Church in the 1930s}


\textsuperscript{160} National Catholic Welfare Conference, “How to Judge the Morality of Motion Pictures,” \textit{Monthly Message}, February 1937.

\textsuperscript{161} National Catholic Welfare Conference, “How to Judge the Morality of Motion Pictures,” \textit{Monthly Message}, February 1937.
The Catholic Church, the United States government, and women each felt a responsibility to care for the morality and productivity of their citizens, their children. The Archbishop of San Francisco, Father Edward Hanna, explained the Church’s responsibility to not only Catholics, but all unemployed Americans in 1930:

Again, the United States is suffering the tragedy of millions of men and women who need work, who want work and who can find no work to do…The workless must indeed be cared for…More than temporary alms is necessary. Justice should be done. This unemployment returning again to plague us after so many repetitions during the century past is a sign of deep failure in our country. Unemployment is the great peace-time physical tragedy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and both in its cause and in the imprint it leaves upon those who inflict it, those who permit it and those who are its victims, it is one of the great moral tragedies of our time. The failure is not due to lack of intelligence nor any more to ignorance. It is due to lack of good will. It is due to neglect of Christ.  

Catholic clergy especially mobilized during the Great Depression because of the reasons Archbishop Edward Hanna described. Hanna also noted that an economic bandage would not fix the underlying problem. Over seven years later, the women of the NCCW agreed with Archbishop Hanna in a 1937 *Monthly Message*, “Unless principles of organization and legislation accompanied by a new spirit of social charity, of brotherhood under God, are realized, alternatives are: Communism, Fascism, Slow Decay… Catastrophes due to present system and rejection of Christ.” These Catholics believed that the Great Depression was God punishing

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society for the immorality and failures of its citizens.\textsuperscript{164} Though accusatory, the message was also empowering, since Americans got themselves in this mess, they could get themselves out. The Great Depression was not irreversible.

In May 1931, Pope Pius XI released a papal encyclical, \textit{Quadragesimo anno}, or, \textit{On Reconstruction of the Social Order}. He began the work by noting the fortieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII’s “peerless” encyclical, \textit{Rerun novarum}, or, \textit{On the Condition of Workers}.\textsuperscript{165} Like Archbishop Hanna, Pius XI stated that distance from God through sin was to blame for current social problems, “the root and font of this defection in economic and social life from the Christian law, and of the consequent apostasy of great number of workers form the Catholic faith, are the disordered passions of the soul, the sad result of original sin which has so destroyed the wonderful harmony of man’s faculties,”\textsuperscript{166} Pope Pius XI justified the Church’s involvement with economics and society by noting that human dignity and the treatment of Church members are the business of the Church, and so to fulfill its mission, the Catholic Church must engage with industry and society.\textsuperscript{167} Pius XI quoted Leo III’s \textit{On the Condition of Workers}, #41: “If human society is to be healed, only a return to Christian life and institutions will heal it.”\textsuperscript{168} The

\textsuperscript{164} Monthly Message, no. 110, Dec 1930.

\textsuperscript{165} Quadragesimo anno.

\textsuperscript{166} Quadragesimo anno, 132.

\textsuperscript{167} Quadragesimo anno, 136.

\textsuperscript{168} Quadragesimo anno, 129.
encyclical inspired American Catholic organizations to continue their work combatting the
effects of the Depression, not just economically, but spiritually.

Leisure Time’s Impact on Women

As a Catholic woman’s role was thought to be that of domestic caretaker in 1930s society,
Catholic women’s organizations saw the increase of leisure time as dangerous to the family and,
most importantly, the children. Since women were historically responsible for the upbringing of
children, they were able to bridge their roles between home and society when children started to
leave the home before they were fully formed and upright citizens. By engaging in society in
small, digestible ways, women were still seen as protecting the home, though they were no
longer strictly inside. The full effects of the Great Depression weren’t keenly felt in its first
years, but by 1933, citizens realized that this economic downturn was more than cyclical. In that
year, the NCCW wrote, “The most optimistic viewpoint on recovery must take into account the
effects on family life and child life of these years when normal life has been impossible for
millions.”169 Though husbands were still thought of as breadwinners, the women of the NCCW
recognized that true and effective relief must be given to the entire family.

Women recognized the necessity of teaching children the ways of the world at an early
age. At the NCCW’s 1936 annual convention, which focused on the theme of “Youth”, Mrs. Neal
Ahern presented a talk entitled “Parents and Youth.”170 She stated, “Our children must live part

169 Monthly Message, no. 137, June 1933.

170 “Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Convention of the National Council of Catholic Women,”
October 1936, Series 3: Convention/Assembly Proceedings and Related Materials (1920-1996), Sub-series 3.1:
Women Collection, Archives of The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.
of their lives at school and in contact with the outside world, as well as the part of it they live with us at home.” The home was no longer the only instiller of values and could no longer fully protect children. The women of the NCCW accepted that their children lived in multiple spheres, as they now did, and that to keep the children safe, they had to make the spheres complimentary instead of distinct.

“Women’s Work”: Eased but Not Lessened

Women felt the effects of leisure time not only through their children, but also through an increase in time saving technology. Though these advancements eased housework, they also changed how housework was viewed in society. Technology did not lessen the responsibility women had for the home. By the 1930s, though women were still expected to spend their days caring for their house and family, the seemingly easier ability to clean and cook lessened the importance and respect given to housewives. The economic significance afforded to homemakers was eliminated when machines were seen as doing their work for them, and the purchase instead of production household goods reduced their perceived skills and contributions. In More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave (1983), Ruth Schwartz Cowan proved that though technology was

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thought to lessen housework, “modern labor-saving devices eliminated drudgery, not labor.

Households are the locales in which our society produces healthy people, and housewives are the workers who are responsible for almost all of the stages in that production process.”

Women gained back some time as household appliances were invented and improved, but they were expected to put that extra time back into the home in other ways, such as child-rearing and bettering society for their children. Technology such as the vacuum cleaner, the refrigerator, and the washing machine allowed women to spend less time maintaining the home and gave women more freedom of time, though it could not quite be called leisure time. With more time came the same, never-ending, responsibility. In her speech at the 1936 NCCW Youth Convention, titled, “The Woman as a Homemaker,” Mrs. Robert A. Angelo stated that the greatest impact a woman could have was in the home, and Catholic women must still use all their time to care for the family. However, she made the distinction in how women could care for their families:

With the invention of labor-saving devices, women have more leisure time on their hands. Are we using this time to the betterment of our families? Some will answer, yes, they never neglect their families. That is why they cannot be active in Church groups or Catholic Women’s organizations. I am always sorry for those poor families that are used as excuses for the things we do not want to do. We seem to have time for everything


175 Strasser, *Never Done*, 186.


except to obey the command of our Holy Father. When he asks us to be active in Catholic groups he means that some parts of this leisure time should be devoted to the perfecting of our spiritual lives. He wants us to wake up to the present state of things. To use our time, our voice, our power, to bring about a new spiritual life. Can we sit back in smug complacency and let the future take care of itself?\textsuperscript{178}

Angelo noted that involvement in Catholic women’s organizations was a way of taking care of their families; not only that, but that it was their responsibility to the Church and to the pope to be involved outside of the home, for the good of the family. A woman was never relieved from her housework, no matter the technology at her disposal.

\textbf{The Child Thrown into the Adult World}

The women of the National Council of Catholic Women demonstrated a knowledge of the goings-on in society outside of the home, and saw it as their responsibility to protect their children even when they were not under the family roof. The women noted the extreme changes brought about by the Great Depression in a 1938 bulletin, “Young people living in this period of changing systems – these uncertain, confusing, yet stimulating years – are more familiar with such terms as strikes, unions, capital, labor, divorce, crime and war than were their parents at the same age.”\textsuperscript{179} The NCCW recognized that children were learning outside the home and outside the classroom as “Radio, newspapers and movie-news give the child various and isolated bits of information concerning these factors that are occupying the attention of the grown-up world.”\textsuperscript{180}

Their children were being thrown into the world and “Too often the boy or girl sees the

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\textsuperscript{178} Angelo, “The Woman as a Homemaker.”


\textsuperscript{180} “Youth Needs Interpreters,” \textit{Monthly Message}, September 1938.
\end{flushright}
conflicting forces of capital and labor, of crime and law, or the destructive forces within home – without any real understanding of the principles (or lack of them) underlying these issues.”

An NCCW article, “Youth Needs Interpreters,” noted, “This generation is being forced into the role of realist very early in life.” The writer also noted the generational differences between children and parents; “Too many young people of the last generation felt that life was meant to be a bed of roses, with ready-made happiness just waiting to be claimed. Too often that vision of happiness was built on material well being, overlooking the real spiritual basis of a happy life.” Today’s children needed to be intentionally taught of “the beauties and wonders of our world as God made it. We must admit to young people the weakness and failures of human beings, not to discourage and disillusion them, but to warn them that living in this world requires faith and courage and self-sacrifice.”

American Catholics believed they could provide proper guidance and effectively control children’s leisure time. As printed in a 1938 *Monthly Message*, “The children are the nation’s most treasured asset. They are the hope of the future, and we who are charged with the responsibility of guiding and encouraging them to the fulfillment of their heritage – noble

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Christian manhood and womanhood – must keep faith with that responsibility.” Taking up this mantle would require a commitment of both time and money, creativity, and a lot of faith.

Archbishop Rummel said during his opening remarks at the Sixteenth NCCW Convention:

I, for one, believe firmly that the mass of our American boys and girls are neither criminally inclined nor hopelessly frivolous; but they have their share of the effects of original sin and require guidance, correction and encouragement to do the better things.\footnote{186}

The children were not a lost cause, but Catholic Action would have to act, and act fast.


Chapter 4- Holistic Charity:
Catholic Women’s Organizations Respond

With the increase in unstructured leisure time caused by the Great Depression, American Catholic laywomen had a decision to make: they were responsible for productively filling this time for their children and themselves. But how would they do so? Groups like the National Council of Catholic Women and the Christ Child Society were not satisfied with the immediate reaction of limiting care to only material poverty. In this chapter I explore how they turned their gaze towards holistic charity that not only addressed economic poverty, but also used recreation such as art, entertainment, and sport to improve mental and spiritual health and encourage health, citizenship, and social skills in children. Though 1930s Catholic women did not invent the concept of holistic charity, they continued the tradition and applied it to their circumstances to not only help young people out of a dire situation, but to lift the children up to become productive members of society.

The National Council of Catholic Women, along with other women’s organizations, used an expanded definition of charity to include more than simply providing for a person’s material well-being. My use of the term, “holistic charity” refers to aid that does not end when a person was simply washed and fed; it includes the person’s ability to find employment, education, training, as well as the person’s ability to find God; it cares for the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical self. Holistic charity, as exhibited by American Catholic laywomen in the Great Depression, took much more time and many more resources, but, the laywomen hoped it also might lead to a more committed citizen and Christian.

Holistic Charity: Filling the Gap and Shaping the Youth

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The members of the National Council of Catholic Women saw a gap between the relief and aid that was being given and the requirements of shaping a Catholic young person. The stakes were high, as NCCW President Hawks wrote in 1936, “A Real challenge and a great opportunity are open to our Catholic youth. Anyone who views the spiritual and moral future of our country must realize that it depends on our Catholic youth for leadership and support of the fundamentals of all true life.” Hawks continued by saying that because of the economic turmoil caused by the Great Depression, the government was providing help and looking for solutions. Hawks united the mission of the organization with the work of the government, noting, “We too…must participate in this work by supporting the teachings of our Church.”

It was also likely that the women of Catholic women’s organizations felt the potential threat of losing their domain if the government started to control charity. Charity had often been under the control of religious and ethnic communities, but since the growth of social movements, providing aid was an important area in which women could bridge the home and society. Catholics were threatened by government secularizing a religious institution, especially when it came to children. It should be clarified, however, that the ability to involve oneself in charity was a privilege of the sufficiently wealthy. Like involvement in a religious organization, one must have the time and income to support voluntary work. Still, if especially wealthy and

187 Monthly Message, vol. XVI, no. 7, July 1936,

188 Monthly Message, vol. XVI, no. 7, July 1936,

189 Brown and McKeown, The Poor Belong to Us, 152.
therefore inherently more powerful women were promoting morality and care towards citizens, they were seen as not threatening to the social order and providing a valuable service to society.

The sense of ownership religious people had over charity was displayed by Miss Lynch of the National Catholic School of Social Service, “the government in entering the field of social service is doing what for hundreds of years was accomplished by the Church.”¹⁹⁰ In the early years of the depression, Church members believed they could continue to support their communities without government help. The women feared that federal aid being poured into privately run charity would discourage community members from contributing. The December 1937 *Monthly Message* lamented, “Too often, the fact that federal aid has been made available for material relief has influenced the reduction or discontinuance of contributions into the (community) chest. This is a most deplorable situation. Material relief meets but one phase of human need.”¹⁹¹ The author noted that government aid would not be able to tailor its help to the specific communities, hinting that it may not be as effective as religiously-controlled charity.

**Religious Recreation**

The American Catholic Church’s emphasis on recreation in the 1930s may appear strange from a modern vantage point, but in its time and space, the Church was continuing a trend inspired by World War I. As noted in Roger Willis Erving’s dissertation, *Views of Some American

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Catholic Leaders in Regard to Sports and Physical Recreation (1956), physical education gained momentum in the years following the Great War because so many Americans were declared unfit to serve in the military. As a response to the large number of men who failed the draft’s fitness exams, a physical recreation movement was galvanized. Grace Turner penned a 1927 article for Catholic World magazine titled “Health as a Handmaid of Holiness” writing, “Recognition of our physical unfitness, as a people, came with the drafting of men from the Great War and the tragic record of rejections . . . The cold figures submitted by the draft boards proved conclusively that we were not accomplishing our purpose in the physical development of young people… it is necessary to strive for what is, after all, a very grand old Catholic principle, mens sana in corpore sano, a sound mind in a sound body.” It was important for both America and Christianity to get its members back into shape.

Recreation encompassed not only physical activity and sport, but also crafts, watching movies, attending and putting on plays, indoor and outdoor games, reading, dancing, and more. With this wide range of activity, it was difficult to define recreation; it simply was understood as being enjoyable ways to fill leisure time. The diversity of activities within the

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192 Roger Willis Erving, “Views of Some American Catholic Leaders in Regard to Sports and Physical Recreation” (master’s thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1956); though Erving’s dissertation was submitted later, the majority of his research was from the 1930s and his conclusions reflect a summary of the 1930s, making this a helpful source from which to draw.

193 Grace Turner, “Health as a Handmaid of Holiness,” Catholic World, April 1927, 30-38; this ‘sound mind sound body’ idea rings similar to the 19th century ideas of Muscular Christianity, primarily in the Protestant tradition. Catholic women justified this concept in their own tradition, but seemed to primarily continue the American Protestant implementation of health into religion. Though, St. Ignatius of Loyola included physical health in his requirements of being a capable Jesuit in the 16th century.

scope of recreation shows that it was meant to be applicable and enjoyable for all. Unemployed youth could attend “club programs consisting of athletics, dramatics, study clubs, 4-H clubs, poster clubs, and art classes,” there was meant to be something for everyone.¹⁹⁵

The women lacked both a consistent definition of recreation and a consistent way to promote recreation, since their support brought them and their children outside of the home. As noted in the February 1932 *Monthly Message*, “Recreation, as well as work, has in great part left the family circle. Lack of play space has tended to push recreation out of the home while commercialized amusement has helped to lure both young and old away from the family hearth.”¹⁹⁶ Here, Catholic laywomen faced a double-edged sword, their work meeting the child where they were encouraged more children to go outside the home for recreational experiences.

The difficulty of reconciling these ideals was displayed in the selection of girls for the Christ Child Society’s Camp Kateri summer camp. Most girls who attended the camp were on scholarship, and recommended by a charitable organization in Washington, D.C.¹⁹⁷ These recommendation letters were pleas for these girls to have the opportunity to escape their desolate environment and have the chance to be a kid. One girl, Marilyn Divinney, was recommended by Catholics Charities to attend the camp because she had to take care of her younger siblings and


her home was a “cheerless atmosphere.”¹⁹⁸ Camp Kateri was recommended as a way for the girl to get rest, recreation, and proper nutrition.¹⁹⁹ Oftentimes in poor families, older children, especially girls, became ‘little mothers’ and acted as the caretakers of their younger siblings and the confidants of their parents, robbed too early of their youth, and shouldered with heavy responsibility. This removal ties to the tension between glorified idealism and lived reality. The NCCW desired and worked to keep families together, but to protect the child, the CCS had to remove the girl from her home, though it was the home and family they were desirous to defend.

**Structured Recreation**

Another fear of both the National Council of Catholic Women, and the clergy, was that recreation would only be thought of as only physical, and that competition would take precedent over faith. A balance had to be struck between promoting health and being “purely recreational.”²⁰⁰ The clergy stepped in and offered their recommendations. In his talk, “The Whole Youth,” Reverend Joseph F. Rummel, Archbishop of New Orleans, emphasized that recreation was more than just physically beneficial, but also in its fun it could teach children important skills. Most beneficially, “in a sense [recreation] is also the one feature that sometimes


draws the boy who is most in need of the spiritual attention...the bait after which he snatches eagerly, little knowing the greater blessings that await his more intimate association with the larger movement.” In this light, recreation was seen as a tool for the Catholic Church to increase physical health, fill leisure time, and bring children closer to God, even if it meant tricking the kids into holiness.

The Christ Child Society so valued recreation as a cure of the nation’s ills that in 1933, when the effects of the Depression were tenderly known and people started to realize that the economic downturn was more serious than they had previously thought, they decided to build a gym. Even though it was a big investment to make during the Great Depression, the idea and support for a gymnasium show the desperation of society to fill the ever growing amount of leisure time for its citizens. The financing of the gymnasium proved the strong belief in the benefits of recreation. In a 1933 letter from Mary Virginia Merrick to Archbishop Michael Joseph Curley of Baltimore, Merrick laid out the plans for the unfinished gymnasium and mentioned that however much the cost, “the building of a gymnasium has now become urgent, the condition of the times is increasing the number of boys frequenting the Settlement. To-day (sic) we register nearly 600 boys.” The Merrick Boys’ Club was a popular subset of the CCS, which encouraged recreation and athletic competition. The CCS also had sports for girls, but the general support revolved around males, as in May 1932 the boys’ sports page filled an entire

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page of *The Mirror* (the monthly newsletter of the CCS), whereas girls’ sports received a paragraph in the bottom corner. Overall, the CCS showed that Catholic women’s organizations not only recognized the need for recreational opportunities for youth, but were willing to support these efforts with substantial financial commitments.

“**Athletics for Girls**”

Present in American Catholic laywomen’s recreation-based charity was the different treatment of boys and girls. Though not considered a point of tension, there were many conditions female recreation had to meet. Due to societal expectations of gender roles, boys and girls were not to gain the same benefits and skills from participation in recreation, particularly sport. As Sister Mary Antonine wrote in November 1933, “Nothing can express a greater truism than to say that the work of men and women in life is essentially different. It follows, therefore, that if educations is preparation for life, it should be equally differentiated.” Girls were to focus on teamwork and health, whereas boys were encouraged to display physical strength and to win. One might assume that the Catholic laywomen would focus on girls’ recreation, and leave boys’ recreation to the National Council of Catholic Men, but, due to their roles as mothers, women felt the necessity and authority to work for all children. It was not a far stretch for middle-aged women to provide home-like care and activities outside the home and outside their own family because who they were serving still filled those expectations.

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The distinctions necessary for girls’ recreation compared to boys’ were of frequent conversation within the NCCW’s guidelines. “Athletics for Girls” by Isabel Stephens was noted in October 1929’s *Monthly Message* and recurred frequently in the publication over the 1930s. Stephens’ article set the platform for the NCCW and told the women what type of athletics and what clothing girls could wear. The article was approved by the Holy See and as such was a leading guide to girls’ sport. The *Monthly Message* even offered its readers an opportunity to purchase copies of the article, “It should be distributed among our Catholic colleges and Catholic girls’ clubs. (5c a copy)” Its widespread nature would encourage consistency and standardization between schools and clubs, an important characteristic of sport.

The topic of the strenuous nature of athletics and the ill effect of exertion on females was of frequent discussion among promoters of youth recreation. In a pamphlet entitled “Policies and Standards of Girls’ Athletics,” the expected playing style for girls was determined by treating their bodies “as temples of the Holy Spirit and tabernacles of the race.” Also discouraged was public competition and competing too strenuously; again mentioned were the necessity of

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“suitable costumes.” In “A Sound Mind in a Sound Body,” Archbishop Rummel wrote that “Games suitable for boys are not always commendable for girls; rules require adaptation to the sex and ages of participants in the more strenuous games.” Later in the article, Rummel repeated the warning against competition as it lead to rivalries and unpleasant feelings.

Not only motivated by the physical differences between boys and girls, recreation advocates attempted to prevent girls’ sports from acquiring the least desirable effects of boys’ sports. In a speech titled “Recreation for Women and Girls,” Mary J. Breen of the National Recreation Association said:

Leaders throughout the country have become increasingly concerned that the mistakes and dangers, which developed in athletics for boys and men, should not be repeated for girls and women, and that emphasis should be placed on the joy of playing rather than on the winning of championships. . . . This one illustration alone shows how important it is that girls have a program based on their own needs--which takes into account their physical structure, interest and experiences, not only a girl’s personal experience, but the racial experience of women as homemakers and mothers, which helps, define the activities in which a girl can participate without danger today.

Breen continued in her speech, “The problem of increased leisure is one of the most important of the present day--for girls and women as well as boys and men. It is fairly well agreed that even when the period of unemployment passes, the amount of leisure will not decrease greatly.” This expected longevity further legitimized the focus on recreation; it was not just a quick fix to the immediate problem, but would have positive impact long after the depression had ended.

Presented in her speech.


The sports themselves were ranked in usefulness and the reasoning was less gendered than one might expect. The value of sports was dependent on its “carry over value” into society. Sports at the recreational level were simply meant to improve the health of the participant and her valuable life skills. The value placed on a sport depended on whether it was an individual sport or a team sport, and how many participants were included. Baseball, basketball, and softball were said to have little carry over value by the NCCW because of the low individual contribution caused by the large team. Elite sports like tennis and golf were lauded for women as they were individually-focused, graceful, and required less exertion.

The women of the NCCW did not accept defeat when they lost some of their control over charity; instead, they turned their attention to the areas that were necessarily given less priority by the government: non-physical poverty. By doing so, Catholic laywomen maintained a strong foothold in charity while being realistic about the magnitude of the economic turmoil. The NCCW made the care of the youth more explicitly their mission. The August 1935 *Monthly Message* dedicated an entire page to the subject of “Youth”; the authors write that “a YOUTH PROGRAM is one of the great responsibilities of the National Council of Catholic Women.” But, this youth program would be all encompassing, as, “Such a program should include every phase of girl work and care, and all age levels. It must include the development of her

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212 National Council of Catholic Women, “Youth: Youth Series III.”

appreciation of: The Spiritual, The Ethical, The Educational, The Cultural, The Economic, The Vocational, The Recreational.” With this support, the authors believed that the women would be given choices for their futures, and a wide range of skills. The emphasis of the Catholic Church on a youth movement that encompassed spiritual care and training was not totally unselfish; by ensuring that the future generation of Catholic leaders were well trained, the Church was ensuring its own future.

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214 *Monthly Message*, vol. XV, no. 8, August 1935.

215 *Monthly Message*, vol. XV, no. 8, August 1935. “It treats in a sympathetic vein, her ambitions and her rights: for a present congenial environment, for future home making, for increased educational advantages- either vocational or cultural, as she prefers, a choice of sane and attractive recreation projects, good reading matter, an opportunity to meet socially persons whose companionship will contribute to a richer and fuller life.”

CONCLUSION

In many ways, the American Catholic laywomen in the National Council of Catholic Women were unremarkable. They resembled many other anonymous, mostly middle-class women who were involved in civic volunteer efforts. It is easy to overlook them. But we have much to learn from studying their activity during the Great Depression. They responded to the issues of their time with what they knew: a strong faith in their country, a faith that was shaped by their Catholicism, and an identity firmly grounded in motherhood. They lived through a tumultuous time of change, one that placed stress on their families, changed the trajectories of their children’s lives, and introduced new levels of economic insecurity. Despite the disruption in women’s gender roles in society and the family during these years, women in general continued to hold significant influence in the home and used this time to further explore how they might bring the morality that guided them in the home and church into society.

That morality included duties to both the United States and the Catholic Church, and continued the efforts of the native-born, middle-class women to show that Catholicism and Americanism were not mutually exclusive. These Catholic women used Catholic teaching to shape the morality of the United States and ensure the upright formation of their children as both Catholics and Americans. The women were guided by Catholicism in reacting to the increasing amount of youths in the transitory, and not yet fully formed, subgroup of teenagers. These youths were no longer children, but not yet moved out of the house, and they lacked the supportive structure of a job to shape their working lives. As time in school increased, options for what to do outside of the classroom also increased. American Catholic laywomen, through the NCCW, held it as their duty that they must protect the children both inside and increasingly outside the home.
To effectively protect youths from themselves and outer temptations, the women had to determine what was considered a productive use of free time, and then put in place programs and fund resources to encourage their work. With the increase in media and entertainment options that continued to grow during the 1930s, youths had more options than ever drawing them away from the home. Many movies were decried as racy, inappropriate, and potentially dangerous for children to watch. Because they were not at home, youths were not gaining important lessons in how to be productive citizens and good Catholics; the women of the National Council of Catholic Women and the Christ Child Society recognized this as a threat to their home-educational model.

To counter the risk of wasting their leisure time, American Catholic laywomen worked for a holistic charity that addressed all aspects of an individual: physical, mental, and spiritual. They specifically used recreation as a means to improve health, citizenship, and social skills. By strongly advocating for the funding of recreational activities, gymnasiums, and summer camps, during a time when funds were scarce, the women of the NCCW and the CCS indicated the importance women’s organizations placed on health and learning through play.

Despite all of this impressive work, these women have been overwhelmingly left out of the histories of both U.S. Catholics and women. Because their work was mainly carried out on the local and diocesan level, contained varying groups of different size and purpose, and because the women attempted to accomplish their work without completely disrupting their expected roles in society and the Church hierarchy, I believe they are largely forgotten. It is understandable how this ignorance came to be when thinking about the scope of both U.S. Catholic and women’s history; however, these women represent an important intersection of
three identities: Americans, Catholics, and women. In learning about them, we learn a great deal about all three of these groups. In all, during the Great Depression, the American Catholic laywomen of the NCCW and CCS attempted to shape the newly formed concept of teenagers through control of youth’s leisure time and recreation in an effort to foster social stability for families, promoting a holistic approach to charity.

In a decade where the Catholic Church has become synonymous with corruption, abuse, and immovable doctrine, I aimed to present the other side of the same coin, that of a long-standing institution that requires of its members a commitment to serving their fellow men and women. A faith that compels the believer to action. A religion that does not idly sit by when others are in pain. That is as much the Catholic Church as its very real, very painful failings. As informed citizens, it is important that we grapple with the complications of human history. As much as the Catholic Church has failed over it’s two-thousand-year history, it has also produced remarkable good in the communities its members call home.

Because these identities of American, Catholic, and female still very much exist today, this research is part of a larger history, and its implications and influences continue into today’s world. In understanding the women of the 1930s, we can more deeply understand the women of today, especially as America continues its rise out of the Recession of 2008. It is important to recognize and understand what people turn to when their options are severely limited. In a time when the American Catholic Church is still recovering from the clerical sexual abuse crisis that came to light in the early 2000s, it is necessary to learn as much as one can about the structure of the institution with a critical eye. Lastly, with the call of Pope Francis to go out to the margins, it is both interesting and essential to understand what Catholics were doing before our time, and
how they shaped the society they lived in. Most Catholics believe that only nuns did substantial charitable work and that the Catholic Church is an insular body that has no significant impact on the United States. All Americans should recognize that there is a much more dynamic, richer picture and that these overlooked women were shaping society in ways no one realized.

Continued research on the charitable involvement of religious organizations should be considered by future scholars. I only tackled one subset of one religion in one country. To paint the fullest picture of religion’s impact on American history and society, I would look at other Catholic charitable organizations as well as the organizations of other religions. The efforts of not only Protestants, but also Jews, Muslims, Mormons, Hindus, Buddhists, and others deserve to be brought into the nation’s narrative in a more holistic way. I believe particular study into the history of Islam, which has existed in the United States since the colonial period, would be of pressing use as the United States currently grapples with widespread Islamophobia. A look into the past shows tendencies to find a scapegoat, but religions deserve to be seen for the benefits they have added to society, instead of only for the restrictions that non-believers target. This is important as the citizens of the United States continue to learn about the ways in which religious freedom creates a better country. It is necessary for all Americans to learn about the diverse groups that have shaped the United States from the beginning, and to ignore the impact of these overlooked groups is to not fully know the America of the past or the present.

I found a trove of information about Catholic views on recreation and the varied ways these philosophies were acted upon. I attempted to give it fair mention in my paper, but was limited by scope to do it justice. Going forward, there is a great deal of opportunity to expand on the documents I had to leave untouched in the collection. I am particularly interested in the
intersections of Catholic charities and governmental organizations such as the National Youth Administration. There is also potential for study in the relationship between ideas of recreation for solely moral and social uplift compared to the growth of professional sport.

Lastly, as I mentioned in the introduction, due to the timing of Mary Virginia Merrick’s candidacy for canonization, I was unable to access her personal documents, particularly the personal correspondence between her and NCCW President Mary Hawks. For a future project, or an expansion of this thesis, I would love to look at the relationship between these two women, as heads of Catholic women’s organizations and to look at the Catholic society in 1930s Washington, D.C.

Overall, I encourage any scholar of history or culture and society to take the plunge and conduct first-hand research in an archive. It was an engaging and deeply formative experience that will benefit me for the rest of my life. I hope that others will conduct their own investigations and possibly challenge my conclusions based on their personal findings. Through these sources, history becomes a continuous discussion and interpretations reveal as much about the scholar as they do about the past. I desire this dialogue to be never-ending, and I look forward to the others who will join me in the conversation.
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