

The Paradox of Service: the welfare of former nuns

**A Research and Discussion Paper prepared
by the Victorian Women's Trust**

Victorian

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making a difference

March 2009

The Paradox of Service: the welfare of former nuns was researched and written by Susan Powell and Mary Crooks for the Victorian Women's Trust and published by the Women's Trust in March 2009.

The Victorian Women's Trust is an independent body established in 1985 with a grant from the state government. For more than twenty years it has worked in a range of ways to improve conditions for women, advocating on issues affecting their health and welfare, and always with a focus on social justice.

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Executive Summary

Recently there has been some general discussion within the Catholic Church about extending the list of deadly sins to include the concept of 'social injustice that causes poverty'. Whether this extended list becomes more formalised or not, the notion of social injustice causing poverty highlights a policy and operational problem within the Church itself. When many Australian nuns left their orders over recent decades, their treatment at the time was often inadequate, poor and unjust, resulting in great hardship.

This Paper, *The Paradox of Service*, had its origins three years ago when a former nun approached the Victorian Women's Trust, seeking its independent support and assistance in exploring and highlighting welfare issues of former nuns. She herself had left her order decades earlier, after many years of service. On departure, the convent had given her virtually nothing, in financial terms or any other way, with which to help re-establish herself back in the world. As a result, her life has been hard, with limited economic security in the present and even less for the future. Through personal contact, she was aware of many others who found themselves in similar situations.

The Victorian Women's Trust's mission is to work to improve conditions for women – across all walks of life and with social justice as the focus. On hearing this particular story, and realising that there existed a body of evidence that could be tapped to attest to the effects of inadequate resourcing of nuns on departure, the Women's Trust decided to undertake its own research into the issue, since no other was available. The purpose has been to identify and document what has happened in the recent past concerning this matter and to suggest a way forward aimed at ensuring fair treatment for nuns who leave or have left.

The Women's Trust made contact with many people within the Catholic Church around Australia to learn of their views and experiences, including canon lawyers, senior religious (members of religious orders) and clergy, and women and men who had left their orders after substantial service. Relevant written material of various kinds was examined and practices in this and other countries canvassed to establish the approaches to departure that have been taken by various orders and Church hierarchies.

The more we read and reflected on the matter, the more unjust the process and outcomes seemed. Following Vatican II (1962-65), hundreds and maybe thousands of Australian nuns applied for dispensation (papal release from their vows) and left their orders. As far as can be deduced, and in the face of the Code of Canon Law (the collection of ecclesiastical laws binding the Catholic Church over the centuries), which instructs that legitimately departing members be treated with 'equity and evangelical charity', former nuns typically received highly inadequate amounts of money or other resources to help in re-making their lives in a very different world from the one with which they had once been familiar.

Given their lengthy and dedicated input as teachers, nurses and community carers, these ex-religious had made huge contributions to the work of the Catholic Church. Without such efforts, it is clear that the Church could not have initiated and sustained its wide-ranging educational and social services. Yet where these same women left their orders, they received on departure little to virtually nothing in the way of economic security or welfare support for their immediate or longer term futures.

The research shows that, for many, life after leaving was a saga of poverty. With nothing behind them financially, for some the difficulties persisted for a very long time; for others the situation improved if they obtained well-paid employment and/or married. But it shouldn't have happened at all. In addition to financial difficulties, post-departure was often accompanied by mental and physical ill health, social isolation, and a great deal of emotional pain.

This then is the paradox of service.

The enormity of the contribution of nuns' unpaid work to the Church is paralleled in the outside world, where economic accounting systems value market transactions and ignore the value of non-market work. The invisibility of women's unpaid work is institutionalised and taken for granted. Ironically, the amount of Australian women's unpaid work in the home is so great that, even when calculated at a low wage rate, the country could not afford the quantum involved. Government assistance to families and women, whilst it might run into some billions of dollars per annum, is still never close to the amount of unpaid work.

Just as conventional measures of the economy neglect the unpaid but crucial work of women in the broader community, and how this work is unevenly allocated between men and women, similarly the Church has institutionalised – and taken for granted – the unpaid work of nuns.

As with all social justice issues, there are things that can be done to rectify or remediate the situation for these women. Ultimately, however, responses come down to vision, values, political will, and resource allocation.

An important opportunity presents itself for the Catholic Church to be proactive on the question of the welfare of former nuns. There are at least two possibilities here, in sequence. The first is for the Church to make an ex-gratia payment to each former nun as an acknowledgement of services rendered to the Church. The second step would see the Church establish an over-arching Fund that can provide an appropriate level of financial support to meet the challenges of departure and the negotiation of a new life 'outside'.

We know that the Church as a whole has much to learn from and about women, who constitute more than half of its membership...we know that their contribution over the centuries and today has been (and is) enormous, even if not fully recognised and valued.

Cardinal Clancy, launch of research project on participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia, 1996

Introduction

This Research and Discussion Paper explores the issue of nuns' departure from their order, their life after leaving, and the challenges they face, with a focus on the financial. An important story unfolds, hitherto unacknowledged in official circles. It has many painful aspects. The persistent theme, affecting many of the nuns who were granted dispensation, is a lack of appropriate and just welfare support from the Catholic Church at this time and later.

The Paper outlines some important features of the lived experience of nuns over recent decades, commencing with the decision to enter and the introduction to a life of sustained hard work on behalf of the Church as teachers, nurses, and social/welfare and pastoral workers.

The focus then shifts to those who, often after decades of service, decided to leave and return to the external world. It looks at the process of transition, especially the challenges and the negative impacts. These impacts are most commonly associated with inadequate support from their order – financial and otherwise – at the time of departure. For some women the effects persist, continuing to take a toll on their personal and social well-being.

The Paper goes on to highlight a range of assumptions and defensive assertions that need to be challenged for a more appropriate and just response by the Church on the issue of the welfare support of ex-nuns.

The Paradox of Service concludes by suggesting a way forward through the creation of a new mechanism for just financial support for former religious.

The experience of religious life

In response to the experience of a calling to live as religious, the women typically entered their chosen order as postulants in the later teenage years or their early-to-mid twenties. Most came straight from secondary school or home; those who were a little older had generally been previously engaged in study or paid employment. Their intention was to remain in the particular institute for the rest of their lives, sharing in its communal spiritual and physical life in accordance with the traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

The postulants understood that the work they undertook as women in religious orders – whatever its nature, and whatever women in the world doing similar work might receive in remuneration – would be unpaid as such. Their material and other needs would be provided for by their communities, including access to further education and provision of health care.

Canon Law, wills and dowries

On entering the convent, these young women were required to sign a document confirming their awareness that should they later leave, under Canon Law they had no claim on the Church for any work they had carried out while living as a nun (see page 16).

At the time of entry, postulants were also required to dispose of any money or other assets they then possessed, and to make a will leaving any future inheritances to their families or other beneficiaries.

Prior to the early 1980s, some orders required of their postulants' families a dowry, usually an amount up to several hundred dollars (and also sometimes goods for their personal use as well). Over the years, the interest accrued by the dowry went to the convent, and when the nun died, the full sum as well. If the nun left to return to the world, the original sum (only) was to be returned to her.

It was the practice of a few orders to require postulants' families to make regular payments towards the upkeep of their daughters in the convent.

Many postulants were still legally minors when they entered and for some years afterwards. It wasn't until the 1970s that the Australian states variously introduced acts that reduced the age of majority from twenty-one to eighteen (e.g., both NSW and Victoria in 1977).

‘Maureen’ entered her order at seventeen and trained as a secondary teacher. She worked in this capacity for many years, taking on more and more responsibility as time went by, and excelling in high level positions in the education field and others. Thirty years later, in the early 1980s, she left due to the pressures of ill health. On departure, the order gave her \$10,000.

By now in middle age, ‘Maureen’ found it very difficult to find work and somewhere suitable to live. The money went nowhere in the circumstances, and after dozens of job applications failed to yield a suitable position she was forced to apply for unemployment benefits. It was several years before she was finally able to re-establish herself; lack of money and other resources on leaving played a large part in the huge stresses she experienced.

A life of work

That it took several years to become fully professed gave young nuns opportunity to assess whether a religious life was for them. Postulants who persevered, and there was, of course, natural attrition, progressed to the status of novice and then to taking final vows, which saw them admitted to the congregation.

Concurrent with their participation in the way of life and the busy daily round of the convent went the work women in religious orders undertook as a practical expression of their desire to serve their God. In cities, towns, and rural and outback regions across the country, they worked hard, long and highly productively at a main occupation related to their order, which could be in the fields of:

- education (primary and secondary);
- nursing;
- care of, or assistance to, people across the lifespan with needs of various kinds: infants/children/adolescents/adults/ families/the aged;
- other social/welfare/pastoral work;
- outreach and the missions;
- domestic or manual toil;
- prayer, for those in contemplative or enclosed orders.

In addition, nuns routinely carried out other activities and roles in support of the convent or associated with the work of the Church. Commonly, it was the nuns who were entrusted to found and oversee the construction and operation of schools, hospitals, orphanages and other groundbreaking missionary endeavour. Many raised the funds, dealt with tradespeople, enlisted lay support, hired and managed staff. And whatever else they were doing, at any time nuns could also be studying for degrees or other qualifications.

Tertiary or higher studies or training led to significant numbers going on to occupy positions of great responsibility, challenge and influence in Australia and elsewhere. Over the course of their professional lives, nuns could find themselves sent by their orders to various destinations and situations within their state, interstate and overseas. In these settings they studied or worked, acquired or honed skills, expanded knowledge and experience, undertook research, initiated projects and programs or assisted others involved in such work.

Whatever the direction their working lives took, women in religious orders have positively affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, young and old.

Nuns' own accounts attest to the fact that there was never an idle minute, and very little respite from their employment or its environment. This situation was to change a great deal over the years along with so much else. But in the earlier decades, although their work may have involved interaction with laypeople or general members of the public, nuns were otherwise permitted only to mix with their fellows, and then in circumscribed ways. They enjoyed no comparable access to the recreational/leisure outlets and social opportunities available to male religious that helped counter-balance lives of worship and work.

As individuals, the nuns were all different from one another, as people are. However, to achieve what they did, they clearly shared not only a dedication to serving others and to living in the spirit of the order but also highly developed personal qualities: adaptability, flexibility and focus, and a capacity for obedience, commitment and cooperation.

A pivotal contribution

The multi-directional work undertaken by nuns was intrinsic to the operations of the Catholic Church. In fact, it was the kind and degree of their contributions that enabled the Church to become effective and influential in so many areas of Australian life.

The unremitting labour of women religious was a crucial enabling factor in the expansion and presence of the organisation throughout Australia over the twentieth century, and in the building up of its huge assets, tangible and intangible. Members of this specialist workforce probably toiled harder, and for more hours each day, than the majority of their contemporaries 'on the outside'. In many instances nuns only ceased this level of input when they reached their seventies and sometimes beyond.

The enormity of the contribution of nuns' unpaid work to the Church is paralleled in the outside world where economic accounting systems value market transactions and ignore the value of non-market work. The invisibility of women's unpaid work is institutionalised and taken for granted. Ironically, the amount of Australian women's unpaid work in the home is so great that even when calculated at a low wage rate, the country could not afford the quantum involved. Government assistance to families and women, whilst it might run into some billions of dollars per annum, is still never close to the amount of unpaid work.

Just as conventional measures of the economy neglect the unpaid but crucial work of women in the broader community, and how this work is unevenly allocated between men and women, similarly the Church has institutionalised – and taken for granted – the unpaid work of nuns.

For this sustained input of effort, experience and expertise, women in the world in comparable fields of paid work would have earned hundreds of thousands of dollars in the course of their working lives, and had the opportunity to accrue substantial savings and/or superannuation for their later years.

Leaving the religious life

Prior to about forty-five years ago, once nuns and priests had taken their final vows, the pattern of life was set to the end of their days. It was relatively rare at that time for professed men or women to reconsider their vocation, seek papal dispensation, and leave.

The mid-1960s and the following decades saw considerable alteration to this stable situation. At what was also a time of upheaval and dissent in the outside world, the most momentous changes within the Catholic Church for many centuries took place in the wake of Vatican II. This council of bishops was held in the first half of the 1960s, and as one of its many far-reaching outcomes, Pope Paul VI called on nuns and priests worldwide to engage in a process of renewal within the Church. Members of orders and congregations were obliged to do what they hadn't been permitted before: to question, discuss, and re-evaluate what their role and purpose was and to bring this into line with the needs of the twentieth century and beyond. Great was the ensuing debate and dissent, the decisions that were subsequently made redefining the religious life for institutes and the individuals within them.

For a number of reasons, the years following Vatican II saw significant numbers of religious in Australia and other countries applying to Rome for release from their vows and return to life in the world. This phenomenon continued into the 1970s and 1980s and, to a reduced degree, into the 1990s. Actual figures are not available but it could be estimated that perhaps several thousand nuns and priests in this country relinquished their vocations over the past forty-plus years, often at a mature age. People still occasionally leave today but the landscape when they do so is generally much changed from past practices. (As numbers of new religious of both sexes have dwindled over the past twenty years or so, the situation for the future will thus be different again.)

‘Theresa’, now sixty-six, entered her order at seventeen and left at the age of thirty-two. She had been a nursing nun and was studying for a further qualification at the time she sought dispensation. After fourteen years service to the order, she was given \$600, and the following year, on application, a further \$600. The amounts were so low she was forced to return to her aging parents’ home, where she felt uncomfortable and out of place.

She says, ‘Receiving a decent pay-out when I left the convent would have helped my self-esteem a lot. I felt completely ignored and forgotten. And I felt confused and frightened that I had no income at all and still had three years study to go. Fortunately Gough Whitlam got in that year and abolished the fees. As I had no transport to uni, I applied to the convent for a loan to buy a car but was turned down.

‘I subsequently married a former Catholic priest who received no money from his diocese on leaving. The combined gap in our incomes due to unpaid labour became a great hardship as we struggled to bring up our children and buy a house. Three years ago, still in real financial distress, I applied to my previous order for assistance and received an ex-gratia payment of \$2000! With it came a covering letter stating that there is nothing in the order’s constitution which says it must assist former members.’

Deciding to leave

Nuns have sought dispensation over past decades for individual reasons. The decision to leave their institute could have had a single impetus or been based in a number of considerations. These may have related to the spiritual, the personal, the work, the way of life, mental or physical health, or matters connected to the structure, hierarchy and directions, present and future, of the Church, or to individuals associated with the structure or hierarchy. Allied to these attitudes, or in addition to them, some nuns felt called to live a different life back in the world, or even a somewhat similar life in the world; or, depending on age, they may have wished to marry and have children. Overwhelmingly, their faith remained a key element in their lives but it was to have a new manifestation.

Examining their deepest feelings, identifying what it was they now wanted to do, reaching a decision to leave, informing superiors and taking the unanticipated steps leading to release from their vows required of the women both courage and determination.

A painful process

Such qualities were further called for in the process of letting go – spiritually, emotionally, mentally and physically – of the convent. Former nuns typically reveal that, although they were relieved at their decision, relinquishing the life they had pursued for often very protracted periods (up to thirty or forty years in some cases) brought with it mixed feelings. Reactions of sadness, guilt, nostalgia, uncertainty, apprehension and loss at farewelling their familiar life and their companions were prominent among them.

Many speak of taking leave of their community in terms of leaving their family. And some recall concern about the reception their family of origin would accord them, especially if great pride had been taken in a daughter's or a sibling's vocation. What would be their place within whatever family makeup now prevailed? In earlier times, if a nun sought dispensation from her vows it would have been expected that as an unmarried woman – a teenager when she left, now perhaps in her middle years – she would return to the shelter of the family household. But that way of life and those assumptions were out of date by the second half of the twentieth century.

The challenges of transition

At the time of departure, the immediate and longer term futures of these former nuns were unknown and unpredictable. From a protected, highly regulated, overseen life they were now to make all their own decisions, with no one looking out for their welfare. Strong and capable as they were, they would initially be ignorant of the ways of the world, vulnerable and naïve for a period, and perhaps easily exploitable. Apart from the typically small offering the convent might have accorded them to help in establishing this next stage of their lives, they would have no money until they started earning.

Those who had been living as religious for a long time obviously faced not the resumption of a previous life but the creation of a new one. This task had many dimensions, some of which needed to be addressed straight away, while other challenges would take much longer to resolve.

Against a backdrop of re-entering the world at a different stage of life from when they had left it, and a world in which profound changes had taken place, the women needed in the short term to:

- find somewhere suitable and affordable to live;
- locate employment (in their previous field or a different one, if similar work was not possible or desired) or other means of support;
- rediscover the value of money;
- purchase appropriate clothes, and household and other goods;
- acquire financial management, consumer and independent living skills.

Over the following months and years, they also needed to:

- re-negotiate their place within their family of origin;
- integrate the change in their self-image, and the way the world used to view them as nuns;
- re-orient their values and beliefs;
- maintain their physical and mental health and well-being;
- learn/re-learn how to care for their appearance;
- discover/rediscover aspects of themselves such as intimacy and sexuality;
- work out whom they could trust;
- live to their own timetable;
- find a place as an 'ordinary citizen' in secular, contemporary Australia;
- forge new friendships and other relationships with both men and women;
- ultimately, gain a fresh sense of identity.

‘Maria’s’ story: ‘I entered my teaching order in 1957. While I was a postulant, novice and professed nun, my parents were asked to contribute every month to my expenses, without my knowledge. This was because I entered without a dowry. Only after my final vows were made after eight years did this collection of “expenses” stop. At this point my mother was informed that it was “only poor people” who paid up in this way.

‘I certainly earned my keep by working very hard within the convent: all varieties of cleaning mainly. There was also the embroidery I did, the materials for which my parents and siblings paid. I have no idea who ended up with the countless items, large and small, that I made.

‘I was college trained by the nuns to become a teacher, and subsequently taught for four and half years. I left in 1969 on account of outgrowing my vows after Vatican II. I loved the changes but they were not appreciated by my sisters, who resisted them and me. When I left in the middle of a Melbourne winter the convent gave me \$200 for clothing and that was that: no more financial support would be forthcoming.

‘I was on Valium for weeks afterwards, trying to cope without any friendly guidance with life in a world where shillings and pounds had turned to dollars and cents. I knew nothing about relationships or how the world ran. Within two weeks, I was supporting myself by teaching at a state high school, pretending that all was normal in my world when it most definitely was not.

‘I am now nearly seventy and renting because my knowledge of the world never actually caught up. I am one of only two in my family of ten who does not own a home. I am still working, self-employed.’

The core problem

The difficulties experienced by many former nuns in the wake of the decision to leave their order exposes a core problem within the Church: treatment on departure that too often was inadequate, poor and unjust.

Both institutional and structural elements contribute to this problem. The Code of Canon Law (the collection of ecclesiastical laws binding the Catholic Church over the centuries and most recently published in 1983) does not in itself have a great deal to say in relation to how religious are to be treated if they voluntarily depart from their institute. But what it does say has frequently had, in contemporary times at least, far-reaching negative consequences for individuals.

The relevant law, CL 702, is in two parts. The first is clear and prescriptive. Part §1 states that those who have legitimately left a religious institute or have been legitimately dismissed from one can request nothing from it for any work done in it (our emphasis).

Part §2, however, instructs an institute to observe ‘equity and evangelical charity’ toward the member who is separated from it. In comparison with the previous unambiguous statement, this latter clause embodies a more helpful but also more imprecise intent. What, for example, is implied in practical terms by the notion of ‘evangelical charity’?

But that is not all there was for institutes to go on: a decree from the (then) Sacred Congregation for Religious in Rome as far back as 1974 stated that institutes had the responsibility to provide for the spiritual, moral, social and economic welfare of former members and that they should likewise investigate programs whereby these provisions could be made available.

Discrepancies in interpretation of these ecclesiastical instructions and in degrees of real and perceived available resources have worked against the women who left. Orders and convents differed in their awareness of, and response to, departing members’ needs. And since convents were largely selfsupporting, they in any case differed as to what they (believed that they) could spare when a member left and as to what they believed she needed.

The autonomy of the various orders has always been highly prized and zealously safe-guarded. But it has meant in relation to treatment of ex-nuns that there has existed no congruity and little or no shared information or consultation between orders/congregations, and in turn between orders and the Church hierarchy.

Inadequate financial resourcing on departure

What occurred in Australia in the decades following Vatican II is that individual amounts of money accorded by convents to their former members on leaving were in actuality often very small. The thread that runs through accounts of those who were granted dispensation over this period, and which is the focus of this document, relates to the huge difficulties that could be created when ex-nuns received from their institutes only paltry sums, too low for whatever they were notionally intended for.

Anecdotal and written evidence suggests that being given as little as a few dollars to a few hundred to several thousand dollars was the norm in this country over a long period. It is generally only into the 1990s and beyond that one starts to hear of former nuns receiving greater amounts – \$10,000, \$20,000 and \$50,000. But, even so, these amounts are still relatively token considering how far they had to stretch for women who had foregone wages for decades (and any other money that might otherwise have come their way over that time, such as inheritances).

The overwhelming evidence is that many former nuns experienced enormous practical and psychological problems, at the time of departure and later. Where they did not fairly quickly go on to long-term, well-paid employment or where they did not marry (and many did not) or where they were in poor health, physically or mentally, funds typically received on departure were in no way commensurate with their requirements then or later.

Ironically, the symbolic poverty of the convent for many became an unsought reality back in the world. Given the immediacy of their needs and stress of reentering the world, not having enough money – and no savings or superannuation – meant that they had nothing to fall back on for some basic requirements or larger, essential purchases such as a car. It could take time to start earning, or earning enough, and the employment scene could be confusing and depressing.

Some women who had previously worked as teaching nuns discovered that the Catholic education system was now closed to them. Those from different disciplines might find on applying for jobs that revealing they had been a nun went against them; on the other hand, if they did not admit to this fact the gap in their background was hard to explain. In addition, applicants could find that their training, skills and experience did not always match what was required for work in their previous field or entering a new one. Age, of course, could also prove a barrier, as could a lack of knowledge of the way one located suitable employment or managed interview situations.

Many ex-religious had to take on any work they could find, some of which was far below their capabilities, and badly paid; and a number found themselves applying for unemployment and other benefits. Access to finance and lines of credit were not an option in these circumstances and although some orders had suggested to former members that they re-apply to them if they needed more money than originally given, this was a further humiliation and in any case often resulted in little or no real assistance.

The wash-up of these earlier circumstances continues into the twenty-first century. The impact of on-going financial hardship is being experienced by some former nuns now in their older age, preventing them from living out their lives with dignity. Starting as they were behind the eight ball when they left, they face economic insecurity, accommodation difficulties, isolation, inadequate aged or disability pensions leaving them with not always enough money to cover necessities, lack of access to the health care they may need, inability to buy or run a car, and other deprivations. The sources of these circumstances can often be traced back to the fact that they left the convent with insufficient funds and poorly equipped in other ways for re-entry to this external world.

Surely these women were entitled to expect that they would be properly resourced by their orders when they left, or if they re-applied for assistance?

Obviously every experience of leaving was different and every outcome individual, at the time and down the track. Some women have been reembraced by families or friends who assisted them to find their feet, and depending on their age and other factors, many have gone on, sooner or later, to satisfactory jobs and/or marry or to achieve other personally satisfying paths. Some have been able to maintain on-going contact with their convent or ex-convent friends, or benefited from other supports and parties interested in their welfare. But the fact remains that in regard to women leaving religious orders, no universal resignation policy, regulatory body or protocols have prevailed, nor a universal approach to interpreting and implementing Canon Law so that there is fairness across the board.

A vague regret that things were not done more justly in the past in relation to former religious is no help to those who have suffered the consequences, then and now, of earlier practices. The situation of these women must not be overlooked or allowed to slip into history because time has moved on. Aspects of their past are still their present and in too many cases those aspects are negative.

(Older nuns will not be unaware of some of what used to happen when a sister left, even if they did not know details of financial settlements and their outcomes. Younger nuns, on the other hand, may not realise what their orders' past practices were or what happened to some of those who came before. And although official records do not reveal anything like the full story, there is the danger that if such records are lost or destroyed, especially likely where congregations move or break up, what was recorded will disappear for good.)

Now in her mid-eighties, 'Helen' is a former teaching nun who left after forty plus years of service to her order as a teacher (including the position of principal), superior of a convent, and administrator of a children's home. Back in the world, she has chosen to live out her vows privately.

Given only \$3500 (the return of her dowry was refused) when she left her convent in 1983, 'Helen' has been struggling financially ever since. Although she receives the age pension, she also needs to continue working part-time in order to survive. Now in precarious health, 'Helen' urgently requires modifications to her home.

Discrepancies compound the injustice

The basis for decisions regarding the amount of money to be given to a departing member depended on a number of factors, different in each case. Key among them were the cash assets an order/convent had to draw on, and the opinion of the Superior and her advisors regarding what the woman in question would require for her new life. This latter consideration took into account particular aspects – some factual, some interpretive assessments – such as the nun's age, her degree of education, what employment might appear to be available to her, her health, her perceived psychological/mental/spiritual makeup, what family or other support there was likely to be, and so on. Further hierarchical factors could have been at work too, such as an unacknowledged policy or a personal response to an individual; it is impossible to know.

The Victorian Women's Trust recognises that, given the numbers of religious who left post 1965 and the structural organisation of the Church, providing all former members with a realistic level of funds for remaking a life in the world would have greatly stretched resources, especially where the order or convent was particularly cash-strapped. It also recognises that decision makers of the time were unlikely to have a concept based on reality as to what a departing nun would need in financial terms to help re-establish herself 'outside'.

Nor would Superiors have appreciated the impact that severe shortage of money might have on the women's physical and mental welfare, especially where the convent lacked knowledge of the welfare of nuns who had left previously. (At the time of departure, the nuns themselves would have possessed as little awareness as their Superiors as to what resourcing they might require; in any case, they were not in any sort of negotiating position.)

Despite these limitations, however, orders had a duty of care towards members who left for any reason. It is a matter of injustice that many departing religious did not receive anything like helpful amounts of money, nor was there accountability or transparency in the process. Decisions were no doubt made in good faith but this did not mean they were good, wise or fair.

‘Margaret’ was an Australian nun who served as a missionary in a Third World country. After she was raped by insurgents her order was uncomfortable with the fact that she was no longer a virgin. Dismayed by her superiors’ attitude and feeling rejected when she desperately needed help, she left the convent.

‘Margaret’ now lives back in Australia. She lacks resources as a result of her lengthy service as a religious, and struggles on a government pension. She works when she can both to help support herself and pay for vaginal and facial reconstructive surgery.

Other unmet needs

It seems, from our research, that the Catholic Church in Australia, at the period when so many left their orders post-Vatican II, was ill-prepared, and remained so for a very long time, in terms of adequately addressing and meeting its obligations to former nuns.

Their basic requirement on leaving was sensible financial assistance – ideally, a realistic lump sum plus the offer of future loans. Support and empathy from the convent hierarchy and recognition of other needs also played a major role in helping ensure that the process of re-entry to the world would not prove more brutal than it had to be. The following measures, of the type alluded to in the 1974 decree – which was doubtless based on the reported experiences of former religious – have been shown to help over the transition period:

- time to disengage slowly from the religious life, if wished;
- advice or practical assistance in finding accommodation and employment;
- if necessary, the opportunity to acquire basic living skills;
- links offered to relevant outside organisations and services, especially in the early days post-dispensation;
- if desired, on-going pastoral care and social contact with the convent.

The fact that for some former nuns in Australia none of these factors were in fact in place when they left has led to their continuing dismay and upset at the way they were treated after years of unremitting input to both their convent community and the wider community. Some report that receiving so little money, plus no expressed valuing of their contribution or interest taken in their future welfare, was like their own family turning its back. Adding to the distress for a number of them was the practice in earlier times of obliging nuns who had been granted dispensation to depart the convent almost immediately and without the opportunity for proper leave-taking or preparation...the next day there would merely be an empty place and no explanation to the rest of the congregation. (Had the sisters later wondered how

their former colleague was faring, they would doubtlessly have assumed that her basic needs were well taken care of.)

If many years later some ex-religious are still adversely affected by what happened or didn't happen when they left, the problem clearly lies with the process that did not meet human needs.

As a young woman 'Joan' felt called to enter an enclosed convent. After seventeen years of dedicated service she decided to leave; she was exhausted and also strongly felt the separation from her parents and siblings. The convent sent 'Joan' home with no financial or other support, expecting her family to accept her back as if nothing had happened in the intervening years, and for 'Joan' to find a place there under these circumstances.

'Joan' has since married and had a family and has worked hard to re-establish her life. However, she still suffers the emotional and financial effects of lack of Church responsibility for her welfare on departure and beyond.

The more recent situation of ex-nuns

On a more positive note, although some aspects can still vary significantly, the 1990s and beyond has seen improved overall treatment of nuns who leave their order. Many orders have implemented transition programs: providing emotional, psychological and spiritual support; offering leave of absence; in some cases permitting access for short terms to flats and cars they own; making available employment information and assisting with job interviews. Convents have created opportunities for on-going contact with former members, and such contact is usually deeply valued on both sides.

The amounts of financial settlements, however, although often far greater than previously, are still based on the private assessment of individuals by Superiors and their advisors, and are still non-negotiable. There continues to be a lack of information sharing between orders, and between orders and the hierarchy, and little evidence of joint participation or of universal guidelines or framework. Stories are still heard of individual hardship experienced by those who left relatively recently.

The situation for priests and male ex-religious

For the record, parish priests and male religious who sought dispensation from their vows had both similar and different experiences financially from former nuns. Some were given almost nothing with which to re-establish after they left, and underwent great hardship as a result. Their personal outcomes have often been much the same as the women.

Other men received more useful sums (in some cases calculated at \$1000 per year of service), and some had personal savings to draw on as well or were assisted by parishioners or others. Departing parish priests, who had not in case been required to take a vow of poverty, had a direct community base which may have served to help them find jobs and housing, gain public acceptance and self-confidence, and develop networks.

Age and career prospects, psychological health, and being more in the world in any case were all factors that played a part in a possible successful transition. The fact that men earned more than women and in the past had greater access to bank loans, opportunities to start businesses and so on, also worked in their favour.

In regard to male religious, some sympathetic bishops have recognised the reality of life for those who leave and they openly focus on the practical and psychological/spiritual needs of former members of the clergy. They acknowledge, on the grounds of justice and charity, the need for on-going kinds of support, long and short term, and have set in place policies for adequate financial assistance and continuing association.

Unblocking for change

Throughout this research, when evidence of poor and unjust treatment of former nuns was raised with people in positions of authority within the Church, a number of prevailing views were often articulated to justify past practices as well as the status quo. Because they hold the key to any progressive change on this matter, it is crucial that these justifications are outlined and challenged.

Statement

The young women knew what they were getting in to as religious. In any case, plenty of time was allowed for reflection before final vows were taken.

Response

No one can fully know ‘what they are getting into’ in advance. Decisions intended to be life long that are taken when one is still in one’s twenties sometimes prove not to be lasting ones, in religious life as well as other settings.

The passage of years could bring for some nuns a valid desire to change their way of life. If the feeling persisted in the face of final vows it clearly had to be listened to and acted on. This is not failure but normal human development.

Statement

Those who left obviously didn’t have a vocation in the first place. Too many people entered the Church who shouldn’t have; they should have been better screened.

Response

Whether another person’s judgement is that those who left did or didn’t ‘have a vocation’, the fact is that all nuns worked hard and long for the Church and each made the greatest contribution of which she was capable. On that basis, if a nun decided to leave, she was due fair and equitable treatment to enable her to move on.

The nature of the screening process was up to the Church. Failure to reject someone who subsequently left does not mean there was anything wrong with this process, nor does it alter the reality that the nun made a substantial input to the Church before leaving and had a concomitant right to financial justice and other assistance.

Statement

The nuns who left and who are still unhappy were obviously misfits who couldn’t make a go of life inside the convent or out.

Response

Whether ‘misfits’ or not, as nuns they gave service to the Church, and they needed on leaving to receive sufficient resourcing to help establish a new life. For some women formerly in religious life, lack of adequate funds on leaving has impacted negatively over the long term, and their strained circumstances and possible upset of mind in older age can be attributed to this. There is a clear cause and effect in their difficult situations.

Statement

Nuns who left were given what the particular order could afford at the time, which may not have been very much, especially if there were many calls on it. Some of the smaller, poorer orders would have had difficulty in sparing significant amounts in any case.

Response

The issue is greater than what an individual convent 'could afford'. Each nun was due an amount appropriate to her future needs, and the realistic capacity to draw on more if required. A strategy which enabled this to occur would have ensured that sufficient funds were available when they were needed. For equity across the board, such a strategy needed to be implemented at a high level, overarching the resources of particular orders. Basing what a nun received when she left on the alleged financial assets of a particular order/convent or the assessment of a particular Superior was unjust.

Statement

Religious orders were at the mercy of developments in the 'real world' in terms of what they are able to give someone who left. For example, after state aid for church schools was introduced and lay teachers in Catholic schools were paid by the government rather than the Church, teaching orders had more funds available and some of these went towards those nuns who left.

Response

Again, financial justice for nuns should not depend on the direction of governments at any particular period but a core commitment and undertaking of the Church, which needs to make universally available the funds required by those who leave.

Statement

Today, with very few new recruits, orders are preoccupied with caring for their remaining members who are often now elderly. They do not have the money to recompense those who left in earlier times.

Response

The same argument as above prevails. The Church has a duty of care to its elderly members AND to its former members who were not provided with adequate amounts when they left, many of whom are now elderly themselves. The passage of time or an order's lack of cash in the present does not remove the obligation to have provided properly for them.

Statement

The Church may own a lot of valuable land and buildings but these assets cannot be easily converted to money to enable assistance for former nuns.

Response

Certainly the way the Catholic Church is organisationally structured makes it difficult for issues such as social justice for former nuns to be addressed at high levels and from an over-arching national perspective. But difficult is not impossible: if there is a will for justice, a way can be found to draw on existing resources and assets.

The Catholic Church's vast operations have made it the wealthiest non-profit organisation in Australia and the largest property owner in the country, with valuable buildings and land sited in prime locations. Many such buildings which are no longer needed for their original purpose have of recent years been sold, 'transferred,' 'entrusted' or otherwise 'given/passed on to' to health and welfare-related organisations or services within the Church for their use. Former nuns could be the beneficiaries of (the value of) properties currently being disposed of as surplus to requirements.

Also contributing to the Church's wealth is the fact that, along with other religious organisations, it enjoys government exemption from company tax, goods and services tax, fringe benefit tax, capital gains tax on sale of assets, council rates, and stamp duty or land tax. It benefits too from a number of other concessions and grants.

Considering that independent estimates assessed that the Catholic Church in Australia would earn over \$20 billion in revenue from various sources in 2008, it is impossible to believe that out of this amount and accumulated past revenues justice cannot be accorded to a comparatively small number of former members of religious orders. As previously noted, it was to a large part due to the unremitting and unpaid work of nuns that the Church in this country has been able to build up these kinds of assets.

The way forward: establishment of a Church Fund

The Catholic Church today devotes much time and energy to promoting its commitment to, and involvement in, addressing issues of social justice. Consistency dictates that, as former nuns grow older, the Church addresses more fairly the treatment of women who have departed from their order. As with all social justice issues, there are things that can be done to rectify or remediate the situation. Ultimately, however, responses come down to vision, values, political will, and resource allocation.

While the Victorian Women's Trust accepts that it was not the intention of the Church to intentionally cause, through action or inaction, many former members to endure hardship and humiliation after leaving, this indeed is what has transpired.

An important opportunity presents itself for the Catholic Church to be proactive on the question of the welfare of former nuns. There are at least two possibilities here, in sequence.

The first, as an acknowledgement of services rendered, is for the Church to make an ex-gratia payment, for example in the order of \$50,000, to each former nun who served for at least ten years in furthering the work and activity of the Church.

The second step would see the Church establish an over-arching Fund that can provide an appropriate level of financial support beyond the initial ex-gratia payment to meet the challenges of departure and the negotiation of a new life 'outside'. Again, this additional help and support would be available to the nun only and would not extend to children, spouses and/or other family members.

As previously acknowledged, nuns leaving orders of recent times are provided with a better level of support and resourcing than in the past, although it is difficult to establish how widespread and consistent this is, and whether it is optimal. It is the past treatment of ex-nuns, however, that warrants particular attention. In this regard, it is essential that a new mechanism for welfare funding and support embraces the principle of retrospective fairness. It should be noted that in outlining such a mechanism, we have focused only on a broad-brush picture or vision of what it could look like. Clearly, if there was to be a take-up of this strategy, it would require further levels of policy work and operational detail by those acting on behalf of the Church itself.

Q. What would such a new mechanism look like?

A. It is both desirable and conceivable for the Catholic Church to establish a Church Fund with the aim of financially assisting appropriately and justly those women who have lived and worked as nuns in Australia and who leave, or have left, their orders after dispensation.

In taking over existing decision-making processes concerning the discretionary amounts offered by various orders, such a Church Fund would serve as a more coherent, transparent and consistent method of determining the level of welfare entitlement to nuns who leave. This includes those who have already left their orders as well as those who may choose to do in the future.

Q. What would it have as its financial basis?

A. Such a Fund would need an initial capital endowment of a size that would generate enough interest income to allow for on-going applications for support. For example, a capital amount of \$15 million would provide, at relatively low interest rate of 5%, an investment return of \$750,000 per annum. Allowing for some administration expenses, there could be a pool of at least \$650,000 per annum available for disbursements. The important principle is that the capital amount itself should not to be drawn down. Indeed, some of the interest earned should be retained, and not exhausted by disbursements, so that the capital amount is able to accrete and allow for further disbursements.

In order to avoid exhausting this annual amount, personal payments could be made, for example, over a period of three to five years. Thus, a benchmark upper limit of, say, \$100,000 per person might consist of three or more installment payments.

Main parameters of such a Church Fund

- 1. Over-arching capacity.** The Fund would have a broad, over-arching capacity in order to overcome the fragmented nature of the past and present situation whereby each order individually decides/ed what members receive/received on leaving in terms of money and other resourcing.
- 2. Independent.** The Fund would be independent in nature, and independently administered on behalf of the Church.
- 3. Endowment.** The Fund would be, from the start, adequately financially funded, properly endowed and prudently managed. This is basic to ensuring its efficient and effective operation and resource capacity.
- 4. Tribunal.** The Fund would be administered along a tribunal model, with 3-5 panel members, male and female, drawn from independent members of the public, Catholic and non-Catholic, who are highly experienced in relevant fields.

Panel members, who would serve for a nominated period, would need to have a demonstrated concern for justice and be capable of appreciating the specialised and sensitive context of applications of nuns current and former.

- 5. Eligibility.** The Fund would be potentially open to women who have lived and worked as nuns in orders in Australia at any time.

6. Fairness. The Fund would address the issue of retrospective fairness to those who have already left their order, regardless of how long ago, and display equity and fairness towards those who are currently in the process of leaving. Such fairness needs to be apparent among and across applications and between applicants and the Church.

Applicants would need to appreciate that the Fund is not a 'bottomless pit' but is aiming to go as far as it can in achieving (greater) equity for them.

7. Transparency. The Fund would be transparent and accountable in all operations.

8. Accessibility. The Fund would freely promote and publicise its existence, purpose and parameters in various forms in the community at large and within religious communities, including ways in which the Fund could be (easily) contacted.

9. Benchmarks. The Fund would set and publicise realistic benchmarks in terms of whom it would service, the various means by which it could assist, its decision-making process, and its policy of privacy and confidentiality for applicants.

10. Application. The Fund would be fair and reasonable in its application and assessment processes, as well as ethical and respectful, with on-paper submissions and the opportunity to be heard in private. (For those applicants who through age, incapacity, etc. are not able to make their own advocacy or representation, an existing guardian would be liaised with or one appointed.)

11. Disbursement. The Fund would provide for 'staggered' support for nuns who are leaving/have left. Options for disbursement of funds would include:

- a lump sum ex-gratia payment to those who left in the past ('retrospective fairness')
- a lump sum for those currently leaving to cover immediate or foreseeable needs ('anticipatory fairness')
- up to three applications for further funds, contingent on need and the stage reached ('on-going fairness')
- low interest loans.

A flexible approach by the tribunal will be required to ensure that applicants receive an appropriate level and degree of financial assistance. Every former religious will obviously have a different history (years of service, amount/s previously received, etc.), and different needs, past and present.

Acknowledgements

The Victorian Women's Trust gratefully acknowledges the invaluable contributions to the research for this Paper of a wide range of people: nuns, priests, former nuns, former priests, canon lawyers, and interested others. Their honesty, openness and specialist input is much appreciated.

These contributions include personal interviews, telephone interviews, and written information.

The brief case histories in the text are based on the real-life experiences of Australian nuns who left their order over the past four decades. Identifying details and names have been changed for anonymity.

Thanks are extended to Janny Ryan for her early preparatory work which enabled the next stage of research and writing of *The Paradox of Service*. We are grateful to Victorian Women's Trust Directors and staff for their support and feedback and to Andrew Mountford for taking the time to read and comment on the draft.

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