ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

**THEOLOGIES OF MINISTRY AMONG OLDER
ROMAN CATHOLIC SISTERS IN THE UK**

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ABSTRACT

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Theologies of ministry among older Roman Catholic sisters in the UK

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Although the theology of Roman Catholic apostolic or active religious life for women continues to develop, one group of voices rarely heard is that of older British women no longer engaged in external, formal or paid ministries or works.

The study investigated the experience of these women and asked in what ways they continue to be apostolic until the very end of their lives, and how they understand their vocation to apostolic religious life. Narratives emerging from the data collected were analysed using a combination of the Voice-Centred Relational Method and in recognition of the theological nature of this research, *Lectio Divina.*

The study found sisters operating in a new context of reduced social influence where opportunities for ministry are increasingly community-based. The sisters come to embody their vocation to apostolic religious life through three new forms of ministry: ministry to each other; to their carers and through intentional presence, as ministry which is both sacramental and incarnational in nature. This embodiment of their ministry and vocation means that their orientation towards others is constitutive of their identity, as they minister out of their God-given self. From my identification of the richness of the sisters' on-going ministry, I found that reduced social influence and physical limitations do not constitute a diminished response to their vocation.

The originality of the research lies in identifying that the predominant theology of ministry for religious women needs to be redefined and expanded to reflect the sisters' own understandings of ministry which is unrelated to activity. The finding that being with and for others is constitutive of the sisters' identity has broad resonances. It makes a specific contribution to the evolving identity of post-institutional apostolic religious life for women both practically and theoretically.

Key words: apostolic; ministry; ageing; presence; self-gift; Voice-Centred Relational Method; *Lectio Divina*

ABBREVIATIONS

CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
CCL	Code of canon law
CICLSAL	Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life
CMSWR	Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious
CoREW	Conference of Religious of England and Wales
IBVM	Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary
LCWR	Leadership Conference of Women Religious
PC	*Perfectae Caritatis*
RLI	Religious Life Institute
RLVP	Religious Life Vitality Project
UISG	Union of International Superiors General
USG	Union of Superiors General
VC	*Vita Consecrata*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Theologies of ministry among older Roman Catholic sisters
in the UK

CATHERINE SEXTON

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the experience and understanding of Roman Catholic sisters of their vocation, or call, to the apostolic form of religious life, at a stage in their lives when they are no longer in formal or paid ministry external to their communities. I worked with a group of British and Irish sisters aged between 66 and 90 at the time of first contact, in an age range which mainstream society would consider retired and the research explores to what extent the women would consider themselves as such. The purpose of this is to understand how these women describe their own understanding of their vocation to service and activity at a time in life when these are curtailed by physical diminishment and, we might assume, increasingly reduced social interaction and influence.

I sought to hear and re-interpret the lived experiences of, and theologies expressed by, a specific sub-set of sisters. The study's title refers to theologies of ministry in recognition of the different theologies encountered through engagement with these voices and the literature. Knutsen (1995 cited in Eldred, 2002, p.218) points out that individual women will have different experiences and truths, and that these cannot be captured in a single theology. Each sister has developed her own theological voice, formed through experience, knowledge and reflection. I have heard in these voices different experiences of, and perspectives on, ministry which continues to the end of their lives, when physical infirmity and age have stripped them of external ministerial responsibilities. My research both expands on the theology of ministry encountered in the literature and point to new theologies of ministry. I draw on concepts such as presence, becoming and self-gift, unrelated to activity as such, where the self plays a significant role. I have also identified in the sisters' experiences a perspective on apostolic religious life which has ramifications for the identity and theological reality of apostolic religious life for women more broadly.

Definition of apostolic in this study

It is important to clarify how the word "apostolic" is used in this study, in relation to other common usages in a Catholic context. The first and perhaps most familiar to Catholics is as one of the four marks of the Church, professed to be "one, holy, Catholic and apostolic" in the Nicene Creed. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) explains this apostolic nature as "founded on the apostles… the witnesses chosen and sent on mission by Christ himself" and "taught, sanctified, and guided by the apostles until Christ's return, through their successors in pastoral office" (CCC, § 857). This final point links to the second common form of usage in the term "apostolic

succession" or the handing on of authority through an unbroken chain of office. The first of these usages speaks of the mission of the Church and the second of the conferring of authority. Both have their roots in the experience and reality of the apostles, as Christ's first followers and as those who are sent in an unbroken chain of succession, in which the sisters in this study would include themselves.

The word "apostolic" is used here in a third context, as it relates to and describes the core mission and identity of a specific form of religious life, with an external, charitable or ministerial focus. The term "apostolic congregations" features in the Code of Canon Law of 1900, which finally approved this form of life for women. The charitable works were traditionally known as apostolates and now widely described as ministries. Suenens helpfully defines apostolic as bringing "Christ to the world" (1963, p.23) and "communicating life and grace, in giving Christ to others" (p.117) and reflects the words of the women in this study.

Research questions

This thesis will explore the **following research questions:**

What does the "apostolic impulse" mean to apostolic women religious, and how do they express their identity, their understanding of their vocation and the purpose of their ministry within that vocation?

What happens to apostolic women religious when they are no longer able to be involved in external, paid or congregational apostolates; what is their understanding of how they continue to "minister" and be apostolic in retirement?

What does this tell us about the theology operant in their understanding of their vocation to apostolic religious life?

Originally these included a fourth research question:

What impact, if any, is the lack of new, younger members having on a) the choice of individual/corporate ministries/apostolates and b) the understanding of the (future) role of ministry?

However, this was not systematically explored as the congregations with whom I worked had few, if any, newer members entering and so few sisters still in active ministry. Therefore, the question was not deemed practical or appropriate to pursue with this cohort.

Context

The research is set in the context of two issues which continue to shape the nature of ministry for women religious. First, declining membership which is now thought to have begun in the mid-1950s in the UK (O'Brien, 2017), sometime before the Second Vatican Council, earlier than had previously been thought. Second, the relinquishing of large, institution-based apostolates, such as schools and hospitals, run by the sisters themselves. Because of this they can be described as "post-institutional" and those members still in active ministry are now involved in a diverse and sometimes disparate range of ministries. This research is conducted in response to calls for a renewed understanding of the theological nature and purpose of apostolic religious life (O'Murchu, 1980; 2005; Schneiders, 2000; 2010; Collins, 2012; Sweeney, 2012) at a time when many apostolic congregations continue to question their identity, and discuss the theological meaning and place of the "apostolic impulse" (after Sweeney, 2012, p.139) in religious life. Most women's congregations have, in the post-conciliar period, made great efforts to live out of a renewed and shared understanding of their founding charism and its relevance for today.

Many religious congregations

> are not sure about the meaning, contemporary relevance or mission of religious life and…find it difficult to cope with often rapidly declining numbers, few or no vocations, and the rising average ages of membership.
>
> (Arbuckle, 1987, p.1)

Although that observation was made over 30 years ago, it continues to be a reasonably accurate summary of the situation of the majority of women religious in Britain today. This was something I found when I investigated the language of diminishment widely used as a descriptor of the current state of religious life. In interviews with sisters conducted as part of my studies towards a Professional Doctorate, which I then discontinued, sisters rejected the use of the term "diminishment". Instead they preferred to say "there's still life in us yet" and "we need to keep going until the end". For this PhD, I then reframed my question away from exploring the specific experience of diminishment to understanding what motivates or drives sisters to keep going, and how they live and understand apostolic life at this stage in their lives.

Summary of chapters

Chapter One of the thesis provides a survey of the significant voices and issues in the current and recent discourse on women's religious life in the Roman Catholic Church.

The chapter finds that the voices of British women religious are minimally represented in the literature available in English. I have found no reflections from older sisters or on the later stages of religious life in literature reviewed. Thus, the chapter identifies the gap in knowledge to which this research contributes.

In Chapter Two I present the theoretical lenses which I use to respond to and interpret the conceptual issues which arise in my study. These tools are: hermeneutical phenomenology; feminist approaches and subjectivity. I show how they form the theoretical foundation for my choice of methods for data collection and data analysis. They are appropriate to the task of hearing a largely unheard set of voices and developing theologies, and they further provide a rationale for my role as re-interpreter of the women's voices.

Chapter Three explains the three elements of method used in data collection and analysis: holy listening, the Voice-Centred Relational Method (VCRM) and *Lectio Divina*. I employ tools which address the increasing reliance of the field of practical theology on social science research methods, and thus make a specific contribution to practical theology methodology and method. Drawing on a combination of the VCRM and *Lectio Divina*, I am able to pause and listen attentively to the voices of the individual women as they begin to emerge from the narrative texts. I identify these texts as constituting suitable material for *Lectio.* Thus, I am able to both approach method as a theological enterprise and to begin to identify the centrality of the role of the self in this work and the contribution it makes to the self-understanding of the women in the study.

Chapters Four to Seven of the thesis address my research questions. I explore the meaning of the data gathered during the study and begin reflecting theologically on my reinterpretation of the sisters' experiences, presented through both themes and narratives. Chapter Four is largely devoted to the use of two main narratives in order to introduce some of the concepts which are then central to chapters Five to Seven and demonstrates how the sisters' understanding of "apostolic" changes over their lives. I describe hearing the sisters' hesitation in describing themselves as either apostolic or ministerial, and this leads to a discussion of the language sisters use or claim in order to describe or name themselves and how they are apostolic.

In Chapter Five, I identify how the sisters' own understanding of what apostolic means has been shaped in and by their narratives of claiming identity and of fulfilment in their ministerial lives and thus how they become apostolic as themselves. I emphasise the importance of this process of narrative becoming. The sisters' growing concern for self

is partly based on challenges faced in being able to develop as themselves, and minister out of their interests and gifts in a context where these have often been subverted to the needs of their institutions. Therefore, their sense of self is shaped in the interplay between self, other and their communities. In this chapter I begin to identify how their understanding and practice of being apostolic influences how they exercise ministries through use of self.

In Chapter Six I name the sisters' apostolic identity in terms of being with and being for. This takes their self-understanding beyond one defined by employment or a specific task, so that the nature of apostolic religious life becomes recognised as focussing not on what sisters do or what they are, but on who they are. The integration of self and apostolic is taken one step further as the centrality of the narrated self to their understanding of being apostolic until the end of their lives becomes clear. This is the self each sister has become through her openness to conversion by the God "who participates in our personal becoming and makes us more rather than less the selves we seek to be" (Stogdon, 2012, p.73).

I frame the sisters' experience of being apostolic until the end of their lives in terms of three emerging forms of ministry: of presence; to each other and with and to their carers. I argue that these forms of ministry contribute to a new self-understanding of apostolic or active religious life, both in old age and more broadly. I present ministry of presence, in particular, as both a form of ministry in terms of accompanying and being present to, and a way of being. I recognise the sisters' form of being apostolic as both incarnational and sacramental, in making God's presence a reality, through their ministry to others and their relationships.

Throughout Chapters Six and Seven, I identify and work with the concept of self-gift as a unifying feature of the theological concepts operant in the data gathered: availability, and gift as reciprocity and mutuality. In recognising that these concepts underpin the three emerging forms of ministry, I identify a theology which gives expression to the lived experience of the sisters in a context of increasing physical constraints. Furthermore, I consider how, through the emergence of these forms of ministry, the sisters can be obedient to their context of physical limitations and resulting social diminishment in a way which contributes to service and continues to be dialogical and relational. I find that bringing Schneiders' theology of ministry as gift into conversation with the sisters' experiences of ministry of presence, to each other and to and with their carers suggests a different theology of ministry unrelated to activity.

By bringing the sisters' voices into conversation with the initial literature, and speaking into the gap originally identified, I contribute to the development of models and theological concepts explored in Chapter One. The sisters' words and experiences, presented through my own re-interpretation, add new elements to the developing self-understanding of apostolic women religious more broadly.

In a final point I locate this study and its findings within practical theology, as well as in the more specialised field of theology of religious life. I understand practical theology to be the theology of everyday lives, or "theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with the practices of the world with a view to facilitating faithful participation in God's practices in, to and for the world". (Swinton, 2017, slide 4). I claim this study as a contribution to practical theology for three reasons. First it takes as its starting point the experience of the women religious as they live the practices of the church. The study recognises the validity of this as a starting point for theological reflection, and critiquing and building theory. Second, it claims data collection and analysis as a theological enterprise and way of knowing, rather than drawing solely from the social sciences. My final justification for this claim is based on the work I do in breaking open the concept of self-gift, revealing aspects such as reciprocity and mutuality which can also apply to a wider audience. We see not only where and how God is present in these women's lives, but also what there is here to learn for those of us who are not vowed religious. Considering how to remain outward-looking and aware of the needs of others in our own old age and in the midst of physical suffering is one of the greatest challenges any of us may face.

CHAPTER ONE: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to situate the present crisis in apostolic religious life in its recent historical context and explore its nature. The issues of declining membership and concern with identity, particularly but not exclusively in post-institutional congregations, come to the fore. I will review literature which emerged at three different stages in the history of religious life since the Second Vatican Council. The third of these stages will focus on the discourse on apostolic religious life, particularly the apostolic or active form, taking place in the British context.

The purpose of this is first to establish the context within which the women religious, who participated in this study, inhabit and, second, to set the background for their voices. Finally, I will demonstrate how and why these voices add to the understanding of the theological underpinning of apostolic religious life for women.

A review of the relevant literature will show that there are very few apostolic women religious speaking to a British context and also that little is being written and published by British writers. Post- Second Vatican Council writing in English on religious life is dominated by work originating in the United States, along with a small number of Irish and Australian writers. I will show why that may be the case and consider whether the US voices can, and do, apply to the British context and to what extent those voices are shaping and influencing the British discourse. I will also situate the literature in an overview of the current context and recent history of religious life, particularly apostolic. This more sociological overview will necessarily draw on voices from across the English-speaking world.

The current context of the missing voices

In this section I will present several of what I consider to be the most immediate factors shaping the current context of the women at the heart of this study and their lives today. These women are survivors in many senses, and I believe that the religious life they continue to live in the UK finds itself at a very particular point in its history: one of institutional diminishment (in terms of visibility, influence and membership). There are at least three reasons for this. First, the re-examination of almost every aspect of religious life which followed the Second Vatican Council and the upheavals caused by its emergence out of a semi-monastic existence. This, in turn, contributed to large numbers of women leaving their congregations (Ebaugh, 1977; 1993 cited in Stark and Finke, 2000, p.170; O'Murchu, 1980; Murphy, 1995, p.192; Flannery, 1997). Following

this, the middle of the twentieth century saw a dramatic reduction in the number of new religious entering (Stark and Finke, 2000) so that there were one million Catholic women religious worldwide in 1960 (O'Murchu, 1989) yet by 2010 that figure had fallen by almost 30 per cent to 729,371 (Staff reporter, Catholic Herald, 2011).

The Conference of Religious for England and Wales (CoREW) estimate a total of 320 religious orders (both men and women, and monastic and apostolic/active) present in the UK including 4,075[1] professed women. In 2012 they recorded 36 people entering religious life in the UK and 216 who died. With the majority of their membership aged 70 and over, and no entrants for some years, many of these congregations are facing the possibility of disappearing completely from this country within the next 20 years or so after a presence stretching back 200 years. The sisters featured in this study all belong to congregations who face such a prospect.

Second, with a semi-monastic lifestyle imposed upon them through the Apostolic Constitution *Conditae a Christo* (1900 and 1901, in Lanslots, 1992), many apostolic orders developed institution-based corporate apostolates, such as nursing and teaching, which enabled them to live within the confines of a "total institution" (Sweeney, 2001, p.279 after Goffman). As they have either chosen or been forced to relinquish these apostolates, many congregations now find themselves engaged instead in a wide range of individualised and sometimes rather disparate ministries. All of the sisters included in this study entered in the period following the Second World War, and spent their working lives largely in either congregational and/or common apostolates, until statutory retirement, and then worked in individualised ministries.

A third factor contributing to this particular set of circumstances, and identified in Sexton (2013) is that there are a sub-set of congregations established either simply to live the Gospel in community and meet the needs of the local church, or to meet a particular need at the time such as the education of girls, a function now largely filled by lay professionals. Religious women interviewed in Sexton (2013) spoke of how being in 'post-institutional' congregations is affecting their relationship with the hierarchical/institutional church and local parish as they strive to find a new place for ministry to, and within, the church. Wittberg (2006) describes how, in their former semi-enclosed contexts, women religious experienced influence and power, and the room to grow and develop, living almost beyond the direct control of the institutional church (see Simmonds, 2014, p.150). Many of these women, who have not traditionally served

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[1] Boner, J. 2014, now published but does not include these figures. CoREW's website lists 177 women's congregations as members; not all congregations in the UK are members.

in parishes, are having to negotiate new roles with priests who are often disinterested, even hostile, or who simply do not understand the potential they may have to offer.

This uncertainty about role and purpose of religious life in relation to the church is exacerbated by uncertainty about the identity of religious. Sexton (2013) also found women expressing concerns both about their sense of identity as religious and their lack of visibility. Furthermore, being 'post-institutional', these religious and their congregations are no longer identified with a clear and well-known 'corporate' ministry, particularly as the majority of apostolic women religious in the UK no longer wear any form of distinctive dress which identifies them as religious. For both Simmonds (2012, pp.116–28) and Tobin (2014, p.36) this is something which undermines the potential sign or witness value of religious life and thus further serves to weaken the eschatological potential and role of religious.

The above are three of the main distinguishing features of apostolic women's religious life as an institution as it is lived today in the UK; they indicate the context of institutional diminishment to which I refer. In this next section I will explore the deeper historical context to allow a fuller understanding of how this particular situation has developed.

From active to semi-monastic life: the historical context pre-the Second Vatican Council of 1962 - 65

It is now believed that female religious communities with some form of apostolic or external ministerial focus have existed since the early church (McNamara, 1996; Mangion, 2010). Schneiders (2000; 2009b) claims that from the early days of the Church, there have been members who sought to live a way which embraced an external, ministerial or charitable focus. O'Brien (2013, p.161) notes that "medieval historians have taken the existence of women's apostolic life in community back to at least the thirteenth century" with the Beguine communities of northern Europe (Soelle, 2001, p.117; Malone, 2001, p.125). Communities of women in simple vows, as opposed to the perpetual vows of established monastic orders, began to emerge more formally in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with the development of the Ursuline order and later, in the UK, Mary Ward's Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM). However, these groups of women were not unproblematic for the church. The idea of women living non-monastic religious lives, unenclosed by convent walls, but characterised by some form of common life and working to meet the needs of the poor has never proved palatable for church authorities and the founders of these early congregations had to fight for approval (Rapley, 1990; Sweeney, 2012; O'Brien, 2013).

Yet, this apostolic life form flourished in the late-eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century, in Britain, continental Europe and in the United States so that by the dawning of the twentieth century, there were many hundreds of such congregations unrecognised in the church. When finally papal recognition and approval came with *Conditae a Christo* (1900) and its *Normae,* or executive instructions in 1901, it was something of a mixed blessing. Although this accorded the lifeform validity, it also had its downside in that the *Normae,* in particular, imposed a standardised semi-monastic lifestyle on the women, often taking them away from their original purpose and founding charism. Although many would already have been forced by social norms and pressure from ecclesiastical authorities to live a semi-monastic form of life, for example the IBVM, the Apostolic Constitution made this a formal legal requirement in canon law and part of the price to be paid for the Vatican seal of approval. It had the effect of imposing one uniform model of apostolic religious life upon what had been, to that date, a wide variety of approaches to apostolic work (Maitland, 1983 cited in O'Brien, 1997; Schneiders, 1986; 2009b; O'Brien, 1999; Sweeney, 2001). This led to a curtailing of the women's freedom and of their ability to innovate in apostolic works as these had to fit around a daily *horarium* or rigid timetable of prayer, work, meals and communal recreation times.

Thus, this form of apostolic religious life, lived particularly in the UK and the US, was neither apostolic nor monastic, but a "hybrid" (Schneiders, 2009a; 2009b) of the two, the details of which are described in several sources (Wittberg, 1994; Flannery, 1997; Schneiders, 2013). The irony is not only that this was never the form of life that the foundresses of these congregations had intended for their membership, but also that, in seeking Vatican approval, they found themselves being further institutionalised under pressure of Canon Law, and societal pressures which preferred not to see women "abroad".

O'Brien (1999) describes the period between recognition and the years before the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) as one of consolidation of these semi-monastic congregations. Despite the imposed lifestyle it was, for a period, a very successful model. There are a number of factors which might explain this. Services offered by active religious orders at the time met a range of health and educational needs not yet provided for by government and their apostolates and their commitment to service to the poorest gave them a strong and clear identity which earned them the respect of the Catholic community. Furthermore, their way of life provided opportunities for women in professions otherwise closed to them at the time as well as the possibility of missionary work for the more adventurous women, with plenty of initiative.

Numbers of Catholics both in Britain and the US at the time were at their peak and the strong support of the Catholic population meant that orders were able to recruit from among people experiencing the insecurity and instability of the impact of two world wars. Thus, the period saw very high numbers of women joining apostolic congregations (Stark and Finke, 2000). It was a time of large novitiates, with groups of women working together in common apostolates, often owned and managed by the congregations themselves. This came to be viewed by religious, the church and the Catholic population at large, as "the norm" (Wittberg, 1994; Flannery, 1997; O'Brien 1999; Schneiders, 2000; 2013). It meant that the sudden and quite marked decline in numbers from the late1950s onwards, and possibly earlier in Britain, (O'Brien, 2017, pp.280-281) was experienced as a serious crisis by both the ordinary Catholic and the hierarchy, especially as the decline in membership has continued to the present day. It may also be one of the concerns which prompted certainly the second of the two investigations in the US into women's apostolic life: in 1983 and 2009 – 2014 (Cummings, 2009). There has been much speculation as to the real reasons behind them, particularly the doctrinal investigation into the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), one of the two National Conferences of religious in the US. Commentators have read it as having initially been an attack on the alleged "radical feminism" and "secularity" of the LCWR (Schneiders, 2014) or even a form of punishment for sisters for their lack of apparent doctrinal compliance. It is unlikely that the real motivation behind the investigations will ever be known; "there's probably no real satisfying answer to why this did happen in the first place" (Holland, 2014) but this lack of transparency and even secrecy has been very damaging.

The Second Vatican Council and apostolic religious life

The Second Vatican Council changed the very fabric and understanding of religious life (Wittberg, 1994; Flannery, 1997; O'Murchu, 1980; Schneiders, 1986, 2000; O'Brien, 1999). The Council produced one document specifically dealing with religious life: *Perfectae Caritatis* (Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life, 1965) and a further two shortly afterwards setting out the approach to the implementation of the proposed renewal, *Evangelica Testificatio* (Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of the Religious Life, 1967) and *Venite Seorsum* (Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns, 1969). However, the documents which pulled the ground out from under the feet of religious life, were not these, but two of the core documents which captured the theology and ecclesiology of the Council. The first of these, *Lumen Gentium*, or the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1964), established the concept of the "universal call to holiness" of each baptised Christian (Chapter Five)

and, in doing so, blurred the lines between lay and religious vocations. It brought to an end any idea of hierarchies of states in life whereby religious life is a superior or more perfect form of life. Wittberg claimed that "in one stroke, it nullified the basic ideological foundation for eighteen centuries of Roman Catholic Religious Life" (1994, p.339). It left religious as neither fish nor fowl with sisters and brothers being incorporated into the lay state, and religious priests being drawn further into the category and identity of the ordained. The work and the identity of religious lost, in one fell swoop, the clarity of its definition and purpose, particularly in relation to other vocations in the church, and in terms of ministry and the lay vocation. If religious were no longer special and no longer uniquely called, what was the purpose of religious life?

The second document was *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 1965) which ended the centuries-long hostility of the Catholic church to the outside and increasingly secular world. Sweeney notes the natural law-based approach of encyclicals of the earlier period which "tended to reinforce a two-tier nature-grace cosmology and to distance Church from World as two distinct 'perfect societies'" (2010, p.14). This shift in approach heralded an era of *aggiornamento* or opening up to and engagement with the world and its needs, representing an ecclesial "turn to the world". This new stance was particularly significant for apostolic women religious as it was instrumental in bringing down the convent walls and grills as well as the disappearance of habits and structures seen to represent a barrier between apostolic religious and "ordinary" people.

Many of the depictions of religious life in the years following the Council describe it as something of a roller coaster experience of great excitement, as religious responded vigorously and enthusiastically (Keely, 2014, p.83) to the call for renewal. Flannery (1997) states that women religious responded to the Council's teachings particularly positively and whole heartedly, and perhaps more so than any other single group in the Church. The excitement of re-writing constitutions, rediscovering foundresses and charisms, and stripping away the externals that made the "norms" of twentieth-century religious life so recognisable was, however, replaced by an exhaustion and in many cases disappointment (Flannery, 1997). Many of the changes were ultimately to prove unattractive to both new and many existing members.

The "first wave" of writing: 1980 - 1997

During this period, religious, both academics and others, had the distance and the opportunity to reflect on the changes since the Council and their impact, both real and potential. This period of writing from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s was

characterised by a number of common themes and perhaps an emerging common purpose. First, although these writers were all themselves religious, mostly they were critical of what they saw happening and encouraged religious to "wake up and smell the coffee". The majority were quite clear that religious life was facing a crisis (O'Murchu, 1980; Nygren and Ukeritis, 1993; Wittberg, 1994; Murphy, 1995; Chittister, 1995). O'Murchu, an Irish missionary priest and social psychologist was one of the first to speak of the imminent death of the Christian form of religious life in a book which was hugely influential among religious in Ireland and the UK. His work *The seed must die* (1980) was one of several prominent texts of this period which referred to the "death" of religious life in their titles (O'Murchu, 1980; Murphy, 1995; Flannery, 1997). Several years later, Nygren and Ukeritis conducted a ground-breaking and highly influential piece of research covering the period 1989 to 1993 involving up to 10,000 religious in the United States. Although both were religious, they were not afraid to pull their punches, finding that "If religious life is to continue to be a vital force in the church and the world…dramatic changes must occur in most religious congregations in the US." (1993, p.42).

These writers also identified several common factors in their understanding of what had brought about the crisis. They all recognised the significant role that the Second Vatican Council had played in upending religious life, particularly for women (O'Murchu, 1980; 1989; Schneiders, 1986; Wittberg, 1994; Chittister, 1995; Murphy, 1995; Flannery, 1997; 2004) with Wittberg (1994) concluding that the new Church teachings had brought about the collapse of the ideological frame that had hitherto given religious life its legitimacy:

> The speed and extent (of the collapse)…happened partly because the orders had discarded many of the internal commitment mechanisms that had formerly shielded their distinctive ideology from outside contamination, and outside events, both in Catholicism and external culture destroyed the source of recruits.

> (1994, p.207)

Although the other writers did not employ the sociological language of ideological framework they did identify issues internal to religious life as contributing to the apparent collapse. O'Murchu (1980) saw the roots of the crisis in a negative, introverted spirituality. He argued that the inward-looking focus was a certain sign of the end of the current form as it absorbed the values of the surrounding culture and thereby risked losing its prophetic relevance.

Murphy (1995) was more radical, and critical of those not going far enough in their "diagnoses" of what was ailing religious life. O'Murchu had identified that religious had made "changes rather than change" (1980, pp.4-5), referring to small adjustments made in a rather superficial manner. Murphy applauded O'Murchu for recognising this, but went further in saying that religious themselves were to blame for not having recognised the full depth of the spiritual crisis, due to their preoccupation with "surface structure translation", a term taken from Transpersonal Psychology, which he used as a lens through which to examine religious life. For Murphy, what was needed was a transformation of faith and belief, of religion itself even, to take place at a deep structural level. Like O'Murchu (1980), Chittister (1995) and Flannery (1997), Murphy saw the root of the crisis as internal, criticising religious for embracing "comfort" but he went significantly further in calling for religious to undertake the serious work of religious transformation and develop a deeper, more mature faith. Murphy is a religious Priest and psychologist based in Australia and perhaps, therefore, not as visible in Europe and the US. Nonetheless it is hard to find any evidence of this interesting work having been widely read; it is not cited in any of the works cited in this study, nor is it a text studied on courses on religious life. Was it possibly seen as being too challenging for religious at the time, or did they simply disagree?

This is especially puzzling as Nygren and Ukeritis (1993) had come to a similar conclusion to Murphy: their report found religious to be very inward-looking, having spent "at least 20 years focussed largely on the internal reorganization of congregational life" (1993, p.44). Their second finding was that the "impulse to generosity" of religious is "being eclipsed by self-pre-occupation…stark individualism, and a lessening of the willingness to sacrifice" (1993, p.44). This finding now seems very surprising, looking back from this point in time, when American sisters proclaim their commitment to social justice; The report suggested that women religious were too closely assimilated into the predominant, individualistic and consumerist culture of the time, noting that even though

> recent literature on the theology of religious life has espoused as normative for religious the preferential option for the poor…a significant number of religious feel no personal commitment to this espoused value.

> (ibid., pp.44-45)

They recommended that the gap between the espoused and operative values be addressed, issuing a stark warning about the very survival of religious life itself.

In contrast, Schneiders offers a more positive analysis insisting that "women's congregations have grasped the depth of the contemporary spiritual crisis" and that the depth of their experience and creativity in ministry means that they are well positioned to contribute to the renewal of the church (1986, pp.12–13). She published her *New Wineskins* just as Nygren and Ukeritis were beginning their research and one has to wonder what it was that allowed Schneiders to see such hope; had she seen something already happening in the development of new directions in women's ministry which allowed her to see a future? She was a member of quite a radical and very independent congregation which had explored different forms of community, leadership and individualised ministries and perhaps this allowed her to have a more positive perspective on the work religious sisters were already engaged in. In addition, Schneiders writes from an openly feminist perspective, so that she privileges the work she sees women religious already engaged in, and promotes the contribution this is making to the mission of the church.

So, whilst much of the literature surveyed above is critical of the quality and depth of the spiritual life of religious, it seems to have performed a key function in rousing and inspiring religious to take action to address the situation. As Nygren and Ukeritis' work received national coverage in the US, and they were addressing the Union of Superiors General[2] in 1993, Chittister[3] was publicly calling on religious to embrace their vocation as the prophetic dimension of the church recognised by the Second Vatican Council. She encouraged them to be the "signs of an age to come" (1993), embrace a spirituality of diminishment, find strength in their newly experienced smallness and be prophets for their time and the voice of the voiceless.

The significance of the United States' context for the discourse on religious life in the UK

Whilst the purpose of this review is to assess the nature of the discourse, in the UK, on apostolic life in this context of diminishment, I would contend that the British discourse cannot be seen in isolation from what is happening in both the Catholic Church as a whole and in religious life in the United States. The US has represented, and continues to represent, a very significant resource for and influence on the British context and yet the contexts are substantially different (O'Brien, 1999, pp.134-35).

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[2] An international umbrella association of the leaders of R.C. religious congregations based in Rome.
[3] Chittister, Schneiders, Nygren and Ukeritis and O'Murchu have been frequent speakers at major conferences of leaders of women's congregations, as well as frequently undertaking speaking tours to Europe (from the US) and the UK (from Ireland) and have thus been very influential. See later section.

Catholic religious life was established in the US at a time when the modern state was in formation and when Catholicism in America was growing rapidly through mass migration from Europe. Active women religious (known as sisters in America) supported immigrant communities through large-scale educational, health and welfare initiatives. The sisters' apostolates were vital from a Catholic perspective, given Protestant hegemony in nineteenth century America but in due course their services were also welcomed by the wider society and became socially significant. In this pluralist society with no established religion the Catholic Church developed a public presence across all social realms which mass migration from Latin America has sustained in recent decades. As a consequence of this context and history sisters have enjoyed a high social profile there (Freeman, 2012; Mickens, 2012; Zagano, 2012).

Two recent investigations into women's religious life in the US, conducted by the Vatican, have further increased the sisters' profile, establishing them firmly on the moral high ground and winning them significant public support. In 2008, the Vatican's Congregation for the Defence of the Faith, a department with responsibility for overseeing Catholic doctrine, launched a five-year doctrinal evaluation of the LCWR. Its membership is highly active in social justice work, of liberal leanings doctrinally, and represents over 80 per cent of American women religious. The Vatican focussed exclusively on the LCWR and not on the smaller, and more traditionalist Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious. Thus it appeared to endorse the traditionalist congregations, while admonishing the LCWR, exacerbating an already highly polarised landscape amongst American religious and more generally in the US Catholic Church[4]. One year later, in 2009, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), the Vatican department responsible for religious congregations, announced a visitation of all congregations of women religious in the United States, overtly driven by concern for the decline in membership (Fox, 2009). Taken together, these aspects of the American context may have contributed to a process of radicalisation of sisters which has not taken place in Britain. The report produced by the Apostolic Visitation (2014) is largely, and unexpectedly (although not unreservedly) positive about the sisters and their commitment to apostolic service. Nonetheless the Visitation was widely seen and experienced as an attack on sisters and the sorry episode won them even greater public support.

In the following section, I will describe a second, later body of work which emerged out of the North American context, in which writers set out two contrasting understandings

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[4] National Catholic Reporter April 27 2012; The Tablet 28 April 2012; 5 May 2012; CAN/EWTN news April 17 2012; UScatholic.org/authors November 24 2009.

of apostolic religious life. I will consider its relevance to the British discourse and to the experience and voices of the women in this study.

A second wave of writing: two emerging understandings of apostolic life for women

The literature in the US dating from 2000 onwards seems no longer to be speaking of crisis, and attempting to provoke sisters into action. Rather it is already looking over the top of the hill and seeing that there is indeed a road ahead. The two models presented here are not necessarily in direct debate with each other, but representative of the progressive and traditionalist positions which have emerged in relation to that road ahead. The members of the LCWR and writers such as Chittister (1995), Wittberg (1994; 1996; 2006) and Fiand (2001) would certainly identify with Schneiders' vision of ministerial life presented below and indeed in places Schneiders herself positions her model firmly in the LCWR membership. The more traditionalist, pre-conciliar approach to apostolic life is presented by six American religious, predominantly theologians, in a collection of essays (2009) which constitutes an articulation of the CMSWR's theology of religious life. As will be shown below, the main differences lie in their ecclesiology and relate specifically to terminology, the nature of and locus of the "apostolate", the emphasis on a common life, and distinctive dress.

Schneiders claims that member congregations of the LCWR have "birthed a new form of Religious Life" (2009a) which embraces a clear preferential Option for the Poor"[5], which she terms ministerial life. She states that although it is based on the true origins of apostolic religious life modelled on Christ's itinerant ministry, it is also a new form of apostolic life for women:

> Congregations like ours [the kind represented by LCWR in this country] … are really no longer 'Congregations dedicated to works of the apostolate'…We are ministerial Religious. Ministry is integral to our identity and vocation.

> (Schneiders, 2009a)

Schneiders' ecclesiology is grounded in *Lumen Gentium*. This states that all Christian believers are equally called to minister in the steps of Christ, but not all are called to this form of ministerial religious life: "a particular assimilation to Jesus's prophetic identity and mission" (2010, Part 2, p.6). She draws on this ecclesiology to differentiate

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[5] A basic principle of Catholic Social Teaching and liberation theology, articulated by the Latin American Bishops Conference at Medellin (1968).

the way she and her LCWR sisters live out ministerial life, from the older form of apostolic life, in stating that congregations like theirs (CMSWR)

> read *Perfectae Caritatis* and did what it asked: deepened their spirituality (I hope), and did some updating -- shorter habits, a more flexible schedule, dropping customs that were merely weird, etc. We read *Perfectae Caritatis* through the lenses of *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium* and we were called out of the monastic/apostolic mode and into the world that *Gaudium et Spes* declared the Church was embracing after centuries of world rejection
>
> (2009b).

The defining element of "consecrated life" for the CMSWR writers is the concept of consecration. The use of this term dates from the papacy of John Paul II and was first used in the teaching document *Essential Elements* (1983), which refers to three elements of consecration: divine initiative and human response; linking consecration to mission; and third, the mediating role of the church, establishing the locus as ecclesial. The term is used throughout *Vita Consecrata* and in the 1983 updated Code of Canon Law as a unifying element to describe a range of forms of religious life. Some theologians have objected to the use of the concept of consecration as a defining characteristic of religious life (Anon. n.d. Claretian teaching materials Paper 2) seeing it as undermining the theological understanding of religious life which emerged from the Second Vatican Council, that of "*sequela Christi"* or the following of Christ (*Perfectae Caritatis* #2a), one so clearly espoused by Schneiders.

Among the CMSWR writers, Donovan and Wusinich build on their understanding of consecration as self-gift. This describes the act of consecration as creating "a state or stable condition…in which a person or thing belongs exclusively to God, and is therefore separated from ordinary or irreligious use" (2009, p.15). They understand the consecrated religious as set apart from "many of the good things of the world for the sake of the Kingdom" (2009, p.22). This is a view of religious life which harks back not only to before the Second Vatican Council, but back to the Council of Trent, viewing it as a superior life form, separate from the dangers of the world and centred on personal salvation and sacrifice. In contrast, Schneiders' ecclesiology sets ministerial life firmly in the world and in response to its needs. Jesus was preaching "an alternative reality" (2010, Part 2, p.5), that is, the Kingdom of God "the earthly realisation of the love of God in the community of love of neighbour" (2010, Part 2, p.5) and Schneiders understands the public vows taken by religious as an eschatological sign of that alternative world.

The two models also differ in their interpretation of the nature of, and emphasis on, community. Schneiders understands community to be based on an ecclesiology of equal discipleship, driven by ministry which serves to undertake communal discernment in reading the signs of the times. Unlike the traditionalist writers, she does not see a life lived physically in common as an essential feature and in fact distinguishes between the "common life" and community. She embraces the notion of community life, but believes it can be achieved through single living, as it must always be shaped by the needs of the itinerant ministerial life. Nor does Schneiders see the necessity of visible forms of religious life, such as a rigid communal prayer life or the wearing of habits, another clear point of difference with traditionalists. In fact, she is clearly resistant to an "organized effort to get us back into the older form" (2009a), which was her interpretation of the purpose of the Apostolic Visitation.

For Schneiders the call to, and nature of, religious life is intrinsically and exclusively Christian and ecclesial but she is also adamant that ministerial religious are not the workforce of the church, serving its institutional needs. The meaning of the life is to participate in "the prophetic mission of Jesus rather than as a support system for an ecclesiastical power structure" (2010, Part 3, p.4) based on understandings of a prophetic dimension of religious life which had developed since the Second Vatican Council (O'Murchu, 1980; 1991; 1995; Nygren and Ukeritis, 1993; Wittberg, 1996). She, therefore, justifies the involvement of religious in ministering to those "who suffer from the tensions between the Magisterium[6] and the faith convictions of the majority" (2010, Part 4, p.4). She sees the church as potentially both the subject and object of mission on the part of religious. In contrast, Um (2009) understands the Church itself to be the subject of mission and the apostolate, which should be corporate and communal, located within an ecclesial mission.

Vita Consecrata (1996) states that the consecrated life is willed by Christ (n.18) and as such, forms part of the life of the Church (#31) – not just a structure within the Church, but a structure of, and constitutive of the Church (#3, 30-31), thereby reinforcing the ecclesial identity of the consecrated life. Molinari and Gumpel, cited in Nygren and Ukeritis (1993, p.13), also ask whether consecrated life is a structure in the Church or of the Church: the former implying that there is one, united and hierarchical Church structure, and the latter implying greater diversity and multiple components. Schneiders' ecclesiology would side with multiple structures within the Church with

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[6] The teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

religious leading the way in modelling new understandings of authority and obedience in contrast, again, with those with a more traditional understanding of apostolic life.

A concern with Schneiders' model of ministerial life is that it is formed from the lived experience of her generation. This life lived individually, shaped totally by ministerial needs and recognised by few external signs, has come very much from the experience and pen of someone who began religious life in "total institution" and is reacting against this, and is also the by-product of a highly individualised culture. Schneiders (2013) contends that by and large, the old model of apostolic religious life no longer exists. This is not accurate, certainly not in the United States where congregations such as the Nashville Dominicans attract large numbers of young women to a traditional teaching order whose website features serried ranks of habited young faces reminiscent of the 1950s. As Stark and Finke (2000) show, this model with what they term high costs and high benefits is extremely attractive to younger generations. Research conducted by Mahoney (2010) found that the majority of women entering religious life in the US want to live in a community located in the same physical location, and not a virtual community. They want to work in traditional apostolates and be externally recognisable by wearing a habit; for example, in direct contradiction to the way of life Schneiders is advocating, and in fact lives.

Although no research has been conducted to date in Britain which gives such insight into motivations and visions of younger women religious and those exploring their vocations[7], there is anecdotal evidence of a similar trend and similar views among these groups in Britain (Gilbert, 2012; Jones, 2013). Nonetheless, the more traditional understanding of apostolic life, lived and worked in common, is not being successfully revived in the British context. This may simply be due to lack of a significant enough number of new vocations or it may be that those of such leaning are drawn to monastic orders. During a Symposium with Schneiders in the Religious Life Institute in London in August 2014, the responses from British women religious clearly indicated that they do not wish to give up community life physically lived in common as easily as she suggests it should be done. Nor do they necessarily feel that "traditional" apostolates are no longer relevant. Therefore, it would appear that neither of the models established or emerging in the US context are necessarily applicable nor attractive to the British context.

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[7] However, as of January 2016, a project funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation is researching this topic.

A third wave: an emerging discourse on religious life in the United Kingdom 2000 - 2014

The third body of literature relevant to the context of the women in this study is that which has emerged in Britain since 2000 and since Schneiders published the first volume of her trilogy on religious life. Before examining this literature in more detail, I would make some points about the British context and the nature of this discourse.

In the last 50 years, the vibrant North American context referred to above has exerted great influence over religious life in Britain, replacing the earlier influence exerted from France, the birthplace of many congregations now present in Britain. The presence of Catholic universities in the US with flourishing theology departments and sabbatical programmes has attracted many British religious for leadership training and retreat and renewal programmes. These same universities have trained American women religious theologians and academics who reflect publicly on the state and future of religious life.

In Britain, Catholicism and its women religious have had a very different history. Even after the emancipation of Catholics in 1829, with the return from the continent of many exiled congregations and the arrival of newer ones, religious life adopted a low profile in response to a highly charged and negative reaction to the re-introduction of convents and religious life into Britain. There are only a handful of British women religious academics, particularly theologians, and even fewer with a public profile. The only tertiary education managed by sisters was almost entirely focussed on teacher education and there was no Catholic university sector until the twenty-first century. In Britain there have been no Vatican investigations and public outcry, no lively discussions of obedience or resistance nor the same level of polarisation. Going by the evidence of the extant literature, the culture of women religious in this country is not as openly assertive. British women religious are not as sure of their identity or place in the hearts of the public or Church as their American sisters.

Perhaps some of this is due to a long-standing atmosphere of anti-Catholicism in Britain, within the political establishment and elite, if nowhere else. This meant that few British Catholics paraded their Catholicism publicly. Over the last decade or so, a series of scandals related to paedophilia among Catholic priests have forged new stereotypes. It may also be that just as British religious have responded to, and been influenced by, the situation of religious life in the US, so they have become associated to some extent with aspects of the religious life and the Church in Ireland, portrayed in films such as the Magdalen Sisters and Philomena. It is hard to draw parallels between the experience of being a religious sister in the UK, where Catholicism has not been

mainstream since pre-Reformation times, and those in Ireland, where the Catholic Church is retreating to the margins of society. Nonetheless religious sisters in Britain these days are often either viewed as malicious child molesters[8] or as figures of fun, such as "Nunzilla'. These contextual factors would certainly affect the self-image, identity and confidence of women religious.

This situation has contributed to the dearth of material published in Britain on the present and future of religious life. For many years, almost all of the published material about the theology and practice of religious life read and used by women religious in Britain was written in the US or Ireland. The imbalance in the literature has contributed to the gap in knowledge and discussion in Britain and has also meant that this study has had to rely heavily upon US sources.

British religious have not responded to the post-conciliar upheaval by publicly critiquing religious life and calling on their fellow religious to respond now before it is too late; this has largely been undertaken by Chittister and Schneiders, on speaking tours to the UK and Ireland, and even more so, by O'Murchu. Simmonds notes a certain crisis in identity among British religious (2012, p.17), seeing evidence of this is in the lack of information (initially) about religious life and vocations on the CoREW website. However, information on the social outreach work of religious, particularly in addressing the causes and impact of trafficking, was prominent. Of this, she says: "It is tempting to see the causes as displacement activities, supplying some sort of credentials which the vowed life itself did not". The website has since been updated "but the silence about religious life spoke for itself" (2012, p.17) On the founding of the Religious Life Institute (RLI) (2007) at Heythrop college in the University of London, Simmonds says that it came out of a sense that "the renewal of religious life in Britain and Ireland needed collaborative work towards a renewed theology of the consecrated life" (2012, p.18). Some of this has been addressed in recent years, with structured initiatives to address vocations and the development of the RLI itself, offering courses on religious life, and a centre for discussion and now publications.

In considering a "British discourse" this work focusses on a small number of collections of edited papers presented at symposia and conferences and a small number of journal articles. Aside from these publications, no books have been published on religious life by British writers in recent memory[9]. Individual reflection takes place internally in

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[8] BBC Radio 4. 2013. Where have all the good nuns gone? Woman's Hour.
[9] McAinsh, R. 2014: *Living the Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*. Redemptorist publications.

individual orders, for example within the Dominicans[10] but this is often specific to those orders. The key works on the future of religious life published recently, Simmonds (2012; 2014) and Jamison (2013) do not list, or refer to, any British writers or works on religious life or any CoREW documents or publications.

Reviewing this work presents a number of issues. It is largely comprised of papers presented in symposia held with a particular purpose in mind. This means that generally the writers are not responding to, or in dialogue with, each other, but have been invited to address specific aspects of a topic chosen by the host, the RLI, or the Claretian order in hosting the now annual conference on consecrated life.

I am not attempting to define these writers as a group but rather to identify whether they offer alternative models of apostolic religious life which may speak to the context of women religious in Britain today. I also wish to clarify the way apostolic religious understand how they minister and to whom, and why.

New but continuous literature: recurring concerns and themes

The first striking feature of much of the literature and discourse reviewed here is that although it is current and emerging, it raises many of the same concerns addressed in the earlier literature of the 1980s and 1990s. This, therefore, suggests that either the situation has not changed, or that it is slightly more difficult in the UK than in the US. First, there is still a sense of religious life being in an ongoing and unresolved crisis (O'Murchu, 1995; Sweeney, 2001; 2012; Flannery, 2004; Collins, 2012; Radcliffe, 2012; Simmonds, 2012). Sweeney refers to "the deep trough in which religious life is currently snared" (2001, pp.278-279), noting that the Second Vatican Council led to change which deepened rather than resolved the crises: "the present situation in religious life is, in general, one of stasis or stalemate…an ongoing battle between the forces of charisma and entropy". He sees attempts at transformation now under threat from "anomie (waning energy within the orders), institutional suppression and a resurgent restorationism", referring to the fact that "an aging religious community, failing to attract new members and suffering the loss of an esteemed social role, is quite likely to become a reactive community intent on forestalling change". Here Sweeney is acknowledging that diminishment in numbers and increasing average age can lead to a diminished engagement with life and context, much in the same way as a small pool of melt water sitting on a glacier can lead to exponentially greater melting.

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[10] Such as Timothy Radcliffe's *Sing a New Song* (1999).

By 2012 (p.143), Sweeney does not see any significant change: "the mood among the established religious orders after all their efforts at renewal is one of puzzled inertia".

Furthermore, these writers are still cautioning religious against denial of the reality of the situation, and complacency. Collins (2012, p.25) notes that "some barely surviving forms of religious life are clearly hovering on the verge of extinction, beyond even palliative care"; he further cautions "we do ourselves no favours by choosing to live in a land of denial".

Third, this literature continues to identify the need for a renewed theology of religious life, a need first identified in the early 1980s (Schneiders, 1986; O'Murchu, 1980) and this has continued (O'Murchu, 1990; 2005; Sweeney, 2001; 2012; Collins, 2012; Simmonds, 2012). This desire to explore more deeply the theological nature of religious and particularly apostolic life is driven by several factors. Schneiders' own theological reflection was shaped by the loss of certainty of purpose and previously unexamined superiority of religious life as a "state" over the lay state, resulting from *Lumen Gentium's* "universal call to holiness" (2000, pp.124–127). There is also clear recognition among North American writers that apostolic sisters can no longer be viewed as the workforce of the Church, supplying labour to congregation, Church and parish apostolates (Wittberg, 1994; Schneiders, 2000; 2001a). This conclusion leads them to address the particular purpose of religious life at this time. Although individual religious in Britain may hold this view it is not being expressed in the current literature.

For Sweeney theological reflection ought now to focus on what he calls "the fundamental impulse of the apostolic religious life" (2012, p.139). Despite the years of reworking and re-visioning, he sees apostolic orders, in particular, continuing to find themselves in difficulty. In part he ascribes this to the move away from "the religious" towards "the ordinary" within apostolic congregations and, therefore, "while some stabilisation of religious life is now discernible in at least some of the monastic-mendicant inspired orders, for religious life to be fully fit for the future depends ultimately on a renewal within the apostolic paradigm".

Barrett (2014), writing about the sense of confusion and loss of direction of male English Benedictine communities undermines Sweeney's argument, suggesting that all is not so rosy in the monastic gardens. However, the Benedictine communities Barrett refers to have had to give up their former apostolate of running schools, thereby facing the same issues of identity and purpose as those post-institutional apostolic communities referred to earlier. For Sweeney the reasons behind the continuing difficulties in the "apostolic paradigm" are fundamentally historical and relate back to

the difficulties they faced in earning recognition from the Church authorities, noting "this was especially true of orders of women which were put under pressure, even into the late nineteenth century, to adopt monastic enclosure" (2012, p.142). Despite the changes and the efforts to revisit and recapture their founding inspiration, "this apostolic religious life charisma is a difficult 'fit' with the predominant patterns of the institutional church. It was ever so."

So, whilst some form of crisis is widely acknowledged, few of these writers counsel despair. Radcliffe (2012, p.14) urges religious to look outward, beyond their own survival, at the crisis of meaning in society, suggesting religious "live at this frontier between faith and modernity, mediating between the Church and the world…we are important interfaces, places of interaction between faith and modernity". Sweeney (2001, p.275) also draws our attention away from an obsession with numbers and other outward signs; "… decline in numbers, institutions, works and influence does not touch the heart of what the religious life tradition has been in and to the church". Therefore, in this next section, I draw attention to several points being made in contemporary British writing which attempt to articulate what is the heart of religious life, and which are relevant to the context of this study.

British perspectives

This British discourse seems to seek both a path which avoids the polemics of the US situation and a form of apostolic or active religious life in between the two extremes - ministerial and traditionalist - currently being articulated in the US. This seeking cannot be reduced to simply a response to the North American or Irish contexts. However, it is hard not to see the central concerns articulated as both a response to the entrenchment and polarisation in the States and a desire to avoid the same kind of situation developing in the UK.

This may explain the emphasis on dialogue and a sense of a "middle way" being forged through the various dualisms which have characterised attempts to describe religious life, particularly since the Second Vatican Council. There appears to be either a conscious or unconscious concern to eschew dichotomies, to move beyond what are identified as two (generally) opposing images or models and envisage a more unified religious life (Stogdon, 2012).

There is also a concern in the UK to avoid the open conflict between women religious and the Church hierarchy as seen in the US over the last several years: rather to be a bridge or to be "experts in communion" (*Vita Consecrata*, 1996). This is evidenced by the interest at the RLI in the updating of *Mutuae Relaciones* (1978), the Vatican

Directive on relationships between religious and Bishops, in the wake of the report of the Apostolic Visitation (2014).

There are two writers in particular who seek to move beyond dualisms. The first is Poulsom (2012), a priest of the Salesian order, who presents two images of religious life. The first he terms "Mystic", for whom the emphasis is on being rather than doing. This is identified with *ressourcement*[11]; and 'Prophets', who responded to the call of Vatican II to *aggiornamento*[12] by taking "religious life to the margins of society and church" (2012, p.56). His call, rooted in the Transfiguration theology of *Vita Consecrata* (#14 – 16) is for his own generation of religious to find a way of

> crafting anew the language we use about Religious Life so that traditional ways of speaking about contemplation and action can hang together intelligibly once again.
>
> (2010, p.56)

Poulsom seeks to move beyond the dualism by identifying God's presence in the interaction between these two modes so that "our being and doing are dynamically interlinked" (2012, p.62) in a reflection of the image of God.

The second writer is Sweeney (2001; 2012), a British sociologist and a priest of the Passionist order. He also identifies two models: the prophetic and the observant, based on Weber's (1963) distinction between the roles of priest and prophet. These reflect the American progressive model, and the traditionalist writers respectively, which are referred to earlier in the chapter. Sweeney sees shortcomings in both models, suggesting that the prophetic model has suffered from being caught up in the turn towards individualisation in contemporary society but also that the observant model will hold back the much-needed development of religious life. He views them as two different articulations of ecclesiology: the prophetic model wishes to transform the Church itself whereas the observant model stays within the nineteenth century framework and bolsters the institutional Church (2001, p.289). Again, we see clear echoes of the positions of Schneiders and the CMSWR. Sweeney, however, believes that without dialogue between the two models, one will emerge as the dominant model by default: that religious life will be observant unless it is prophetic.

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[11] *Ressourcement*: a return to the earlier sources, symbols and traditions of the Catholic Church, or in this case, the original charism received by the founder of the religious order itself.
[12] *Aggiornamento* – Italian term used during the Second Vatican Council to denote the need for religious life to open up to the world.

Sweeney turns to the past in order to see the future of religious life: "Religious life has maintained the basic apostolic form inherited from the sixteenth century and relied upon building up its institutional strength….[by way of] adaptive re-institutionalisation" (2001, p.284) and asks whether this "received form of religious life" (2001, p.284) is adequate. Like Schneiders he questions the validity of the former, but still extant, form of apostolic life and in a direct reference to the 2014 decision to "reform" the LCWR, notes that a completely new paradigm in apostolic religious life may not be possible for fear of taking congregations beyond canonical jurisdiction (2012, p.142). Both he and Simmonds (2012) note the irony that some women's congregations, in striving for ministerial and charismatic authenticity, may in fact move beyond canonical jurisdiction and be forced to abandon their efforts. Again, the discussion of future forms of religious life comes back to ecclesiology. Sweeney questions (2001, p.289) whether the institutional church is ready to face the implications of a fully "prophetic" model of religious life.

One characteristic which links the British discourse with that in the United States is the generally consistent view of religious life as an ecclesial state of life. An exception to this unquestioning position is O'Murchu (1995; 2005) who holds an understanding of religious life as an archetypal model common to all faiths and not necessarily rooted in Christianity. O'Murchu's body of work on religious life, written from 1980 up until the current period, is, however, the model which has been most consistently worked at over a period of years, outside of the United States.

O'Murchu's work would also seem to have had a significant influence upon many British and Irish women religious. O'Murchu has been a frequent speaker and retreat giver to gatherings of religious for some 30 years. Despite his 1995 work being publicly censured by the Spanish Bishops Conference of Bishops (2006), he addressed CoREW in 2011, and was a featured speaker during the events for the Year of Consecrated Life. Women religious I have met during the course of this study have often said that his books have been significant for them, particularly in articulating their frustrations with the Church and the expansion of their spirituality to include eco-spirituality where they increasingly locate themselves within the wider cosmos, rather than narrowly within the Church.

This expansion of spirituality was an important finding of Sexton and Simmonds' (2015) report on the Religious Life Vitality Project (RLVP) and many of the Project's major findings were already indicated in O'Murchu's earlier writings on religious life in the 1980s and 1990s. Nonetheless, his work is not always well regarded among

academics concerned with religious life in the UK. Collins (2012, p.26) criticises O'Murchu for inconsistency in relation to the objective validity of Christianity and the "ecclesial" nature of religious life. His first work (1980) was regarded as breaking new ground on religious life. However, none of his books are cited in the three recent books of edited essays referred to above, nor do they feature on the syllabus of RLI courses on religious life. Maybe this is because his recent work on religious life has become more and more esoteric and less theologically grounded, rooted in and influenced by a very broad range of sources from the contemporary physics to what might be regarded as "alternative" spirituality.

Elements of a ministry for ageing religious?

There are two other concepts I have identified in this body of British writing which are relevant to understanding the perspective on apostolic religious life of the women of this study. These are community and presence, which sit alongside each other, rather than as a binary. The theological exploration of community is pertinent for several reasons. It may increasingly become the locus of ministry for older women religious and second, again there is a resonance with the two emerging models in the US.

Collins (2012), Sweeney (2012) and Jamison (2012) all express the possibility of addressing the current situation of religious life with a renewed emphasis on community. Collins (2012 p.36) suggests a number of useful theological concepts. One of these is the Trinitarian dimension, emphasising the theologies of *kenosis* and *koinonia.* He hopes that a renewed awareness of *kenosis*, as a means of building community, in all the now disparate ministries and life forms of apostolic religious life, may "generate *koinonia* in the likeness of Jesus Christ's self-emptying" (p.36). This offering of self speaks both to the practicality of Schneiders' understanding of ministry as gift, operating within a gift economy, to be explored later in this study, and to the mystical elements of the total self-gift of the more traditionalist understanding of apostolic life. Consequently, it may offer the moderate, yet inspiringly radical and passionate way forward which many contemporary British writers seem to seek.

Jamison (2012) also proposes a theology of *koinonia*, observing that "community" is a devalued and misunderstood term whereas "*koinonia*" contains within it a Trinitarian emphasis on interconnected relationships. For Sweeney (2001), this embracing of *koinonia* would show a way through the tension between the post-modern turn to the individual and the desire and need for some form of community life (see also Rumsey, 2014). Sweeney (2012) recognises that a new paradigm for religious life of the kind proposed by Schneiders' ministerial life may not be feasible. He does, however,

suggest a paradigm shift, driven by two factors. First, the need to develop a renewed theology of how God is to be found through and in religious life for example, in the Option for the Poor. The second is what he sees not as a search for community, but for meaning and he suggests that communion ecclesiology or a Trinitarian understanding of communion may offer a fresh approach to this.

The above discourse on a theological understanding of community can be brought into dialogue with another theological concept in this body of literature which relates to the experience of elderly and perhaps infirm religious in a very particular way: the ministry of presence. Sexton and Simmonds (2015) found the language of ministry of presence, prayer and presence or ministry as presence being widely used among sisters participating in the research. Sweeney (2001, p.281) had already identified the language and practice of accompaniment as one way of addressing the post-conciliar identity crisis among religious, pointing to a new sense of their purpose and a deeper understanding of the meaning of the eschatological value of religious life. He offers a model where religious understand themselves as following an exemplary path or modelling, in contemporary language, and accompanying lay people in their work, increasingly through collaboration and collaborative ministry: "Religious now see themselves as 'leaven' – not apart from the world" (2001, p.282).

Poulsom (2012) develops the idea of religious life as presence, partly to address the unhelpful being and doing dualism and understands the very presence of religious in apostolic situations as an important way of showing, in this instance young people, that they are loved by God (2012, pp.61-62). If we bring this idea into conversation with Wittberg's statement (2006) that as religious can no longer be the workforce of the Church and can no longer rely on traditional apostolates then religious life is no longer defined by what religious do. Ministry, therefore, becomes as much about how things are done, as what those things are (UISG Theological Reflection Group in Keely, 2014, p.83).

As an acknowledgement of the struggle taking place for apostolic religious to identify their specific ministries within the "*missio dei*". Keely (2014) observes a tendency among religious (particularly women) to confuse charism with mission and to see the charism of their congregation as somehow separate from the Church's wider "*missio dei*". This appears to be symptomatic of being post-institutional congregations who are unable to identify a gap, or an unmet need which they feel able to address. A re-discovery of the understanding of the concept of being on mission by virtue of consecration (Tobin, 2014, pp.26, 31, 35) points to the possibility of a movement away

from a strategic process of trying to identify unmet needs to address and either seeing the needs to be met as spiritual, or seeing a new understanding of a presence as ministry with a focus on the how and not the what.

Conclusion

In 1986 Schneiders stated that in writing *New Wineskins* she was addressing a gap left by the fact that none of the (then) contemporary theologies of religious life had been written by women. She argued that theological reflection undertaken by religious women tends to be rooted in their everyday experience of religious life, and for this they don't need to be trained in systematic theology. I am not seeking to challenge her observation. The point here is that, even without the training in theology, this theological reflection either hasn't taken place in the UK, or has not found its way to publication. There may be a small window of opportunity for religious women to re-discover and articulate the meaning of their apostolic vocation, as they have emerged from semi-monastic enclosure and engage with the contemporary world, and before many of their congregations cease to exist in the UK. However, recent British publications on religious life reviewed in this work have resulted in three books comprising a total of 31 essays, plus introductions. Of these, nine are contributions from seven individual women religious. A new annual conference on Consecrated Life inaugurated in 2012 was widely criticised for putting forward an all-male line-up of speakers to address a majority ageing female audience. This has since been addressed and recent speakers have included both apostolic and monastic women religious.

In this chapter I have considered some of the factors which may be causing this "gap" where women's voices should be, but this is of course, only speculative. The British discourse offers a number of theological concepts which are of use in describing and underpinning the apostolic impulse, and from a range of perspectives: Sweeney as a sociologist; Poulsom as a theologian with an interest in theology's interplay with science, and O'Murchu as a missionary with interests in the new science, cosmology and ecology. However, the fact remains that first none of these offer a comprehensive interpretation of, or model for, emerging apostolic religious life, and particularly not for women, which could sit alongside those coming from the US, and second, they are ordained men, who do have the theological education. If, as Schneiders proposes, women don't need a formal theological education to reflect theologically on their lives, then there is an opportunity and a need for these voices to be heard. This is particularly so for those women who are least represented but now form the majority: those over

the age of 75, who through their lived commitment have forged an apostolic practice on which to reflect. The need to hear and listen to those voices indicates a research methodology which recognises the value of their experience and suggests data collection methods based on interviews with religious women themselves.

CHAPTER TWO: Research Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I present the research methodologies or critical tools of this research and demonstrate why these are an appropriate means of addressing my research questions. These research questions seek to explore and understand the lived and articulated experience of a group of women religious of their apostolic vocation particularly at a later stage in life:

1. What does the 'apostolic impulse' mean to apostolic women religious and how do they express their identity, their understanding of their vocation and the purpose of their ministry within that vocation?
2. What happens to apostolic women religious when they are no longer able to be involved in external, paid or congregational apostolates; what is their understanding of how they continue to "minister" and be apostolic in retirement?
3. What does this tell us about the theology operant in their understanding of their vocation to apostolic religious life?

My choice of methodology is further influenced by the particular context of the lives of the research participants, taking into consideration the patriarchal nature of the institution in which these lives are "nested" and also the broader context of diminishment of women's religious life in the UK.

Research methodology

In considering how best to investigate my research questions, I drew on a number of perspectives in establishing a methodology, or "a theory of how enquiry should proceed" (Schwandt, 2007 cited in Bazeley, 2013, p.8). I will relate the methodology to two aspects of the research questions, the first of these being to explore the research participants' understanding of how they continue to be apostolic into their old age. In relation to this first issue, I consider how meaning is developed from what is found and lived, based on a belief that there is no objective truth or reality to be discovered in relation to research participants' experience of their apostolic vocation. Thus, the theoretical approaches of this research are rooted in a view of reality as "something that is constructed by the interactions between people" (Cameron and Duce, 2013, p.29) rather than there being an objectively independent real world which can be observed and measured.

Thus the first of the critical or theoretical tools upon which the research will draw is phenomenology, as the research does not involving applying a theory or testing a hypothesis but rather involves observing, being attentive to how the situation appears and allowing the women religious to speak for themselves. Collinson (1987) describes 'pure' phenomenology as a method of observing and describing objects or phenomena, with a focus on observing it's "intentionality" (Thompson, 1981, p.105). This involves a recognition that what is being observed includes "an object intentionally within themselves'" (Collinson, 1987, p.128). It is achieved through paying attention to the object's own intentionality or its interiority and experience of being aware of a particular thing. Phenomenology "seeks to begin by not making assumptions about whether the things described really exist or not" (Pellauer, 2007, p.11), adopting the position that an object is only "real" in our perceptions of it. This is why Knott (2005) considers a phenomenological approach appropriate in the study of religion, in order to understand "the "insider" position while refraining from forming a judgement as to its truth or falsity".

Second, the research is concerned with how the researcher interprets the data collected and makes her own meaning from that data, in that it also seeks an interpretation or hermeneutic of participants' actual experience and articulation of that experience. In this case the methodology is, therefore, necessarily interpretivist (Cameron and Duce, 2013, p.29), and in common with most research in practical theology, begins with our lived experience of a situation and "seeks to explore the complex dynamics of particular situations in order to enable the development of a transformative and illuminating understanding of what is going on within these situations" (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p. xvii).

This interpretivist approach means that a "pure" or even a descriptive phenomenological approach is not appropriate or possible here. A key element of Husserl's phenomenology is the idea of reduction or bracketing off not only of the question of existence of the "phenomena", but also of the preconceptions and assumptions which the observer might bring into the process, and describing what remains after the "bracketing" (Collinson, 1987, p.129; Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.111; Bazeley, 2013, p.9). Husserl's concept of "bracketing" is important to consider here because it contrasts with my own approach of acknowledging the experience and perspectives I, as researcher, bring to the research process. Whilst I would accept the usefulness of observation and description in the phenomenological approach, my own position is influenced by Ricoeur's approach to phenomenology as a hermeneutical task. Hermeneutical phenomenology seeks both to understand and explain,

emphasising the relationship between these acts, and on the subject-object relationship (Ricoeur, 1981, p.105). I believe that I cannot and do not wish to bracket off my experience, responses and assumptions (Ricoeur, 1981, pp.10-12; Pellauer, 2007, p.65). I claim that these responses and my interpretation as the reader of the text is a necessary part of the process, valid in itself. I am not aiming for a pure, objective description or for a "transcendental phenomenology" (Pellauer, 2007, p.64) and do not seek to pursue this ideal of purity of intention towards what I am observing as a "pure knower" (2007, p.65) coming to this work with a "view from nowhere" (2007, p.65).

What I am seeking to do is neither describing nor even re-describing (Swinton, 2012c, p.17; Pellauer, 2007, p.69) but refiguring and my concern here is to explain my role as re-interpreter of the narrative, though the act of refiguring. Any description that a research study might elicit from sisters of their apostolic identity would be through their narrating of their particular experience and stories, which would constitute narrative text. Ricoeur's concept of *mimesis* and the three levels of the hermeneutical task can "describe the relationship between narration and praxis or life" (Haker, 2004b, p.141) and thereby clarify the link between life and story-telling. It also sets out the role of the narrator and the listener/reader and clarifies what each brings to the process, and the relationship between them.

Mimesis is perhaps best approached through the second level, or $mimesis_2$, the central act of narration or configuring, where the participants recount their lives and experiences. $Mimesis_1$ or prefiguration refers to the process of both narrator and reader/listener of drawing on their "preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character" (Ricoeur, 1984, p.54). Their capacity to draw on this preunderstanding is what the narrator and reader/listener bring to the process and shapes what they contribute and how the listener hears. In the third level of mimesis, the plot of the sisters' recounting of their lives in answer to my questions, is refigured by the reader, me in the first instance. "Finally, it is the *act of reading* which completes the work, transforming it into a *guide* for reading with …its power of being interpreted in new ways in new historical contexts" (Ricoeur, 1991a, p.27). Daughton notes that the relationship between the levels within mimesis is "a dialectic activity of three simultaneous levels" (2016, p.20), rather than three distinct steps or stages, so that it can be understood more as an ongoing movement of interpretation. Thus, Pellauer states that Ricoeur's key claim is that narrative meaning "can be 'taken up' or appropriated by new subjects in new times and contexts" (2007, p.60) and, therefore, the text can be read and understood through its

own world, potentially beyond the meaning and context of the original author or as received by its original audience.

Ricoeur therefore proposes that "the process of composition, of configuration, is not completed in the text but in the reader…the sense or the significance of a narrative stems from the *intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader*." (Ricoeur, 1991a, p.26). In this he draws on Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" between that of the text and that of the reader where "emplotment is the common work of the text and the reader" (Ricoeur, 1991a, p.27). Ricoeur asks that the reader enter into this "world of the text", which gives the text sense and reference or meaning beyond itself, so that we can imagine ourselves inhabiting this particular world. In this way fusion becomes possible. This process of fusion is central to Ricoeur's understanding of the hermeneutical task, and relies upon both description and understanding as key components of interpretation: "hermeneutics is placed at the point of intersection of the (internal) configuration of the work and the (external) refiguration of life" (1991a, p.27). Reading is thus a pivotal point in the hermeneutical process: "in reception, the world of the text and the world of the reader overlap" (Haker, 2004b, p.142).

In adopting this perspective on hermeneutics, I am drawing on an approach which has already been widely influential across the field of practical theology (Browning, 1995 cited in Smith, 2012, p.246; Swinton and Mowat, 2006; Ballard, 2012; Brown, 2012). Both Brown and Smith acknowledge the contribution Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics has had on the field, with Brown noting that "a hermeneutical sensibility pervades contemporary practical theology and has shaped its work profoundly" (2012, p.115) and that Gadamer's concepts of horizons and fusion of horizons "have proven richly informative for practical theology" (2012, p.114).

Swinton develops Gadamer's notion of fusion to propose that the interpreter in a research process cannot be removed from the process, arguing that the researcher bringing her own meaning into the research process is not only useful, but necessary in the interpretive process (2011, p.86). Trzebiatowska (2010), also in reference to Gadamer, writes of her experience of fieldwork as "two horizons fused and… renegotiated as a result" (2010, p.11). My own perspective recognises the voices of the women participants are not the only source of data. As researcher and participant, I and the women interviewed are bound together and are engaged in a task of joint sense-making. I believe that knowledge as to how the women continue to be, or understand themselves to be, apostolic when no longer in formal employment is

constructed both through the conversation taking place as part of this study and also through my hearing and interpretation of their words.

Ricoeur and narrative identity

Ricoeur's understanding of the construction of identity through narration and his use of mimesis as an approach to hermeneutics help shed light on this joint task of sense making and what is experienced by the researcher as a shared background of symbolic meaning and significance with the research participants. In this case it would refer to experiences of the Catholic Church as an institution, or being in Catholic schools, and of concepts such as obedience and ministry. Identity is formed by articulation and expressed in the telling of their life story whereby "narration is a constitutive element" of that identity (Haker, 2004b, p.137). Identity for Ricoeur takes two forms, the *idem*-identity constructed over time and the second, the *ipse*-identity, or self as person in time. Both are facets of identity and address the questions of "who" and "what" I am, and they interact with each other throughout narrative, particularly when we look back at earlier experiences and memories of the self. An example of this struggle can be seen taking place in *Augustine's Confessions* (Ricoeur, 1991a, p.31) as he seeks to explain and even refigure his actions and behaviour (praxis) in the past in relation to and in the light of his striving for a deeper relationship and even unity with God in the present. Even though he perceives that in *Confessions*, discordance is stronger than concordance, in terms of Augustine's awareness of the instability of human time *vis a vis* God's "kairos" time, Ricoeur believes (1991b, pp.198-199) that we come to know ourselves through the recounting of our stories: "subjects recognise themselves in the stories they tell about themselves" (Pellauer, 2007, p.84).

What is the relevance of this for this study? If the research participants express and even constitute their identity through the telling of their stories, does this contribute to the creation of a common identity with the reader? In Chapter Three I will consider the nature of my research journey shared with the women religious participants and the fact that we share some common themes in our search for God. For Ricoeur, a reader is often implicit in a text, which "suggests that a text can shape its reader and help contribute to a personal or communal identity" (Pellauer, 2007, p.83). It may be that in refiguring the text for myself, I am recognising the common symbols and understandings that I share with my research participants and in making sense of their narratives for myself, hearing a meaning which is relevant to me: anchoring it in my own experience. Ricoeur sees this interaction as crucial: "to a large extent, in fact, the identity of a person or community, is made up of these identifications with values,

norms, ideals, and heroes, in which the person or community recognizes itself" (Ricoeur, 1992, p.121).

A feminist approach

The second critical tool I will draw on is a feminist approach. I say "approach" as there is little if any consensus among feminist writers on a distinct form of feminist methodology (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Maynard, 1994; Harding cited in Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Wickramasinghe, 2010). Some writers (Reinharz, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1993, p.188; Slee, 2004) reject the notion altogether. The lack of a common understanding of a feminist research methodology largely results from the wide range of ontologies and epistemologies made use of by feminist researchers. However, most see feminist methodology comprising the following elements: the provision of insights into the lives of women which we wouldn't otherwise access (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, p.147); the recognition of the value and worth of those voices; and making a difference to those lives on either a personal and/or political level (Reinharz, 1992; Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994; Maynard, 1994; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Wickramasinghe, 2010). For Slee, the key is to ground the methodology in "feminist principles of research" (2004, p.43). She understands that the fundamental principle is to "deliberately privilege women and girls as the focus of our study" (2013, p.17). This is a particularly appropriate principle to apply in research which seeks to privilege the unheard voices of British women religious speaking about their own context and experience.

For Reinharz (1992), what constitutes feminist research is where the researcher self-defines as a feminist. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) too state that research practice is feminist if the researcher claims it is. That leaves us with the question of why I would want to claim or adopt a feminist approach to this research.

Feminism is not specifically addressed by Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology as set out above. Many aspects of a feminist approach would reflect much of Ricoeur's thinking, such as the stress on interpretation of experience and reflexivity; the insistence on a 'view from somewhere' and recognition of the importance of the socio-cultural context of experience. However, reliance on this approach would not necessarily privilege the women's own voices in developing an understanding of the "apostolic impulse" to which Sweeney alludes (2012, p.139). A hermeneutical phenomenology in this instance is strengthened by an epistemological framework

which not only privileges their voices and experience but values them as a contribution to producing knowledge about this topic.

A feminist approach would connect its epistemology to the realities of the women's situation. It favours a strong and symbiotic relationship between ontology and epistemology (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Wickramasinghe, 2010). Although the women participants have lived their lives within autonomous religious congregations, these are "nested" within, and regulated by, a highly patriarchal institution which regards its received teaching as the transmission of a body of truth and rarely concedes that the women themselves and their experience have a contribution to make. Moreover, the highest authority in every religious congregation has to be a cleric, such as the Pope, a bishop, or male general superior. The women's autonomy is circumscribed by this reality as the investigation into the Leadership Conference of Women Religious showed. This is recognised by feminist theology, which views Church institutions as sexist. "Feminist theology is first and foremost a critical comment on the sexist, exclusive character of theological reflection and church practice" states Hogan (2001, cited in Eldred, 2002, p.16) who also claims "the dominant experiences of women in the Christian tradition have been of exclusion and marginality" (Hogan, 1997, p.104).

For women religious this is evidenced by their lack of participation in the formulation of papal teaching on religious life. Examples of this include the experience during the 1994 *Lineamenta* preparation (see Keely, 2014) and in the recent history of women religious in the United States who have only been able to articulate publicly in the Church context their lived understanding of apostolic religious life through a prolonged battle with the Vatican involving two formal investigative processes. Therefore, in adopting this feminist (and feminist theological) approach I am expressing my own position of belief in the validity of the women's experiences, voices and opinions as a source of knowledge.

The centrality of women's experience and attendant challenges

Women's experience is central to feminist research methodology. It is also the starting point (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002) and the primary resource for reflection in Christian feminist theology (Radford Ruether, 1983; Hogan, 1997). However, both fields also recognise that this centrality can present methodological problems. Experiences tend to be articulated as individual rather than collective and can, as such, lead to fractured findings and analysis, presenting challenges to developing unified or universalised perspectives. This is

particularly the case in feminist theology where grounding theological reflection in individual women's experiences (both negative and positive) has the potential to undermine some of Christianity's core teachings as well as the Christian identity claims of the researcher (Hogan, 1997).

Over-reliance on experience as the sole source for research is thought to be insufficient to demonstrate validity claims (Maynard and Purvis, 1994, p.6). The "unmediated subjectivity" (Hogan, 1997, p17) of experience demands "interpretation, evaluation and critique" (1997, p.17) and needs to be taken beyond the individual, in order to make wider connections, although as we have seen, subjectivity still plays a role and often a welcome one. The impact of postmodernism on feminist methodology (Maynard, 1994; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002) is seen in its questioning of the previously assumed direct link between experience, knowledge and reality. Its opposition to metanarratives or grand narratives (Lyotard, 1979 cited in Ramazonglu and Holland, 2002, pp.93-94) which might seek to "explain" or underlie an analysis, such as the patriarchal nature of the Catholic Church has also had an impact. Nevertheless, none of these writers abandon their emphasis on the importance of grounding feminist theory and theological reflection in experience. Instead, Radford Ruether answers these concerns by recognising the bias inherent in all research; Hogan calls for the recognition of difference and diversity to be central to feminist theological methodology; and Maynard re-emphasises the role of the researcher in the interpretation and representation of texts, complementing Ricoeur's theory of the interpretation of the text. Ramazanoglu and Holland, after full consideration of the reasons for and against considering experience as a source of knowledge conclude that "there is a case for grounding feminist knowledge in experience" (2002, p.127) but maintain that there is a continuing role for interpretation.

> Experience is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political.

> (2002, p.128)

It is important to acknowledge the potential limitations of grounding my research in women's experience and voices. However, I conclude that this approach continues to be the best means of accessing 'knowledge' held by the participants as their contribution is otherwise unavailable as a source of knowledge. I accept that their experiences and my interpretation will be necessarily individualistic and subjective, but this forms part of my recognition that there is no "objective truth" to be found in relation

to my research topic. Indeed, I value the women's experience as "holy ground" which includes "experience of the divine, experience of oneself and experience of the community and the world, in an interacting dialectic" (Radford Ruether, 1983, p.12). It is a source of revelatory experience and theology which Radford Ruether claims begins with the individual (1983, p.13).

I also value the sisters' encounters with me in this research process and acknowledge the validity of the experience I bring to the interpretive process. In recognition of the challenge to validity, I will now turn to consider the role of subjectivity and reflexivity in the research process.

Subjectivity and reflexivity

A feminist approach also allows for the researcher to "write herself into" the process. Having been brought up as a Roman Catholic I have, to a large extent, been shaped by the institutional experience of not having a voice or role in shaping theological knowledge. Reinharz (1992) recognises that for many feminist researchers "finding a voice" is a central part or even aim of the research process. Reflecting the perspectives of Ricoeur, Gadamer and others stated above, a feminist-influenced methodology also recognises that the researcher herself will bring valid perspectives to the process. She is "an active presence, an agent, in research and she constructs what is actually a viewpoint…that is both a construction or version and is consequently and necessarily partial in its understandings" (Stanley and Wise, 1993, pp.7-8). This reflects Swinton's perspective of the researcher as "the research tool" (Swinton, 2012a, p.81). This recognition, particularly from a feminist perspective, demands that the researcher embraces both self-disclosure and reflexivity in her work. I will address these as methodological tools later in the chapter but first I will turn to explore some points about my own personal and professional background which I believe are relevant to how these tools have been used.

The researcher's background and position

The research methodologies I have drawn upon to investigate the research questions demand a high level of self-awareness and disclosure, as emphasised by feminist approaches (Llewellyn, 2014). I believe this self-awareness and disclosure to be particularly pertinent to this research process because of the complexity of my own relationship with Catholic religious life. Unlike Orsi (2005) and Trzebiatowska (2010) I cannot describe myself as straight-forwardly lapsed or distanced from Catholicism; mine is a relationship which blows hot and cold.

I was brought up in a Catholic family and educated in Catholic schools and, briefly considered exploring religious life during my teens. However, as a young adult in university, I began to reject what I experienced as the stultifying and authoritarian form of religion I had been brought up with. It was only some years later when I encountered the post-conciliar Church in the form of Catholic missionaries in Indonesia that I re-identified myself both as a Catholic and with Catholicism and began to practise again in response to these encounters. I discovered in those missionaries a different, more reflective, open-minded and responsive form of Catholicism, alive to the socio-cultural realities of context. This led me to a renewed interest in exploring a vocation to religious life, which I did with two different communities during my thirties and forties.

After that stage in my life I realised that if I wasn't going to be a religious, I felt I would be able to acknowledge my criticisms of and discomfort with the institution, particularly in relation to the lack of consideration of roles for women in the church. Since that time, I have continued as an occasional practitioner, in terms of mass attendance or parish affiliation, but have maintained a strong prayer and spiritual practice, making regular retreats and having a spiritual director. I also began to attend Quaker meetings which is where, for some time, I found not only the silence which is attractive to me, but the equal and direct engagement of all worshippers in their church and with God and the recognition of their contribution to the development of practice and doctrine. However, I have now continued to practise more regularly as a Catholic. Nonetheless, I still find myself straddled somewhere between the two, finding an intellectual and in some ways, theological home in the Quakers, but a spiritual one still in the Catholic Church. Therefore, I would not describe myself as an estranged or lapsed Catholic, but as an ambivalent and intermittent one. This, together with my strong cultural associations with Catholicism means I am still very much an insider, but one who hovers on the margins. Following their own field work with faith communities with whom they had a personal link, Ganiel and Mitchell (2006) concluded that these religious "boundaries" are in fact "constantly in flux" (2006, p.4), highly permeable and "contextually variable" (2006, p.18), which would very much reflect my experience, both generally and in terms of this research process.

My engagement with religious life has been almost lifelong. The time spent living in religious communities, discerning a vocation, has given me some "insider" knowledge of both apostolic and monastic religious life. I have also had professional experience of working with women's apostolic congregations; first as a facilitator and accompanier of change processes which led to my being exposed to a deeper engagement with the issues of diminishment and apostolic women's ministerial focus. Second as a

researcher on the RLVP: work which has brought me into contact with a wide range of sisters and congregations.

My experience of the context of diminishment in congregations inspired my original interest in this topic and my curiosity as to what motivates apostolic religious women to be so driven in ministerial terms, and to be so driven to the end of their lives. However, as I have moved through the research process, I have come to realise that my approach is also coloured by that very personal experience of discerning a vocation to religious life and which has at its heart a vocational and spiritual search which is lifelong. The brief exploration of Ricoeur's notion of mimesis earlier in the chapter shows the role of what is prefigurative for me as researcher in this process. Furthermore, the personal nature of my own previous encounters with religious life points to the importance of a consideration of my own stance in relation to women religious.

Insider/outsider stance

One of the primary ways in which I have used reflexivity is to attempt to clarify my insider/outsider stance in relation to the women participants. Although Ganiel and Mitchell believe that is both an inadequate and, to an extent, irrelevant binary (2006), I believe some consideration of this is warranted by my history and relationship with religious life. This question of where the researcher stands in relation to those being researched is increasingly relevant in the field of practical theology as researchers draw on empirical and social science research methods. Cameron and Duce state that in practical theology researchers are likely to be internal to their own faith context: "'insiders' of the same world view and tradition" (2013, p.91) and this near assumption that our position is straightforwardly one of an insider adds to the necessity of a fuller examination of this in my case.

I was initially and very specifically prompted to consider the relevance of this stance by discussions with two religious sisters about my research. The first sister I approached, Sister A, had taken part in research I undertook towards the Professional Doctorate. This earlier research had concerned the experience of diminishment on an organisational level. However, this time she stated that she felt uncomfortable about my pursuing this particularly study, as she felt that as an outsider to religious life[13], I would not be able to either access or understand women religious' experience nor that it was appropriate for me to be researching the very personal nature of their

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[13] Personal email correspondence 7 August 2014.

relationship with Christ. To support her response, she quoted Schneiders' justification for why she concentrates on apostolic women's orders: "I am simply not competent to analyse experience I do not share." (2013, Preface xii). In short, her perception of me was straightforwardly as an outsider and in her eyes, this undermined my ability to undertake research in this area.

Sr A's response led me also to question the validity of my position as an outsider and ask myself such questions. In my research journal on October 13th 2014, I wrote: "do I have a right as an outsider to be trying to do this work and could I possibly understand or offer any insights; is it even a question of hubris, my believing that it is valid for me to do this?" Therefore, in light of Sister A's concerns, I contacted another sister, with academic experience and whose opinions I trusted. She made several relevant points: first, that I have a particular perspective and contribution to make as an outsider which can be very useful for a group, and which needs to be acknowledged both in the research and beyond; second, that there are very few women religious in the country who are young enough and available to undertake research in this depth; third she set out the point of my research as she understood it:

> inviting people to speak of their relationship with God, their *raison d'être,* their sense of change, their sense of continuity within their lives. Your intention, as I understand it, is to give the religious herself the upper hand – it is up to her what she contributes. Personally, I can think of quite a few older religious who would value the opportunity to think about and articulate their sense of what their life is about: they might well see participation as both personally helpful and as a way of continuing to be apostolic.

She continued by saying that she had found the experience of another "outsider" writing about her congregation and their foundress hugely positive because:

> she often calls attention to stuff that we know (and probably know more about than she does) but we do not know that we know, or we aren't aware of the significance of what we know…. I find it stimulating and certainly not in any way intrusive or inappropriate.[14]

Approach to self-disclosure

This correspondence points to the value and validity of the outsider stance as offering perspectives those "inside" may not be aware of: a point endorsed by Trzebiatowska

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[14] Personal email correspondence with Sr Judith Lancaster SHCJ September 22 2014.

(2010). Those initial comments made me realise that I considered myself to be more of an insider to religious life than the participants did. I saw myself as a former religious who has worked with and researched sisters extensively, even from an "outsider" perspective, and I thought my continuing interest in religious life made me a near-insider. This question of "insidership" (Meads, 2007) relates directly to issues of self-disclosure to the research participants and how they responded to me in relation to either my Catholicism or my having been a novice religious in two different congregations. It was in this context that I and my supervisory team felt it important to disclose my previous history to the women participants.

In terms of my faith identity and the degree of "insidership" in relation to Roman Catholicism, I consider myself an "insider", being at the very least a "deinstitutionalised" Catholic. Orsi (2005) reflects on the experience of being neither insider nor outsider and attempting to work in this context with integrity. His "complex autobiographical relationship" (2005, p.149) with the Roman Catholic community he was researching results from his discovery that, having distanced himself from Catholicism, his one remaining link was a cultural one, which he felt did not afford him the intuition and insight he had believed he had: a situation not unlike my experience with religious life.

Whilst Orsi offers some useful perspectives on researching in one's own faith context, this dichotomy of insider/outsider does not feel nuanced enough to bring to bear on the complexities of my own relationship with the research participants. I wrestled with being both former insider and outsider in one dimension and both insider and outsider, or certainly outlier, in the dimension of Catholicism. However, Orsi refers to the difference between the research and those or that being researched: between his own "religious culture" and that which he is researching as being "both other and not …forever shrinking and expanding" (p.162). This sense of moving closer and moving away, which Trzebiatowska refers to as "constant boundary shifting" (2010, p.11) echoes Ganiel and Mitchell's conclusion earlier on p.41 and combined with the multiple insider and outsider "positions" led me to agree that such a clear distinction or binary between the two is not useful in this case. This realisation led me to explore whether there may be a more accurate way of describing my stance and in fact whether insider/outsider is indeed the question.

Knott (2005, p.246) offers a continuum of positions, from observer to participant but I am certainly neither of these, and perhaps the closest – "the participant-observer" (2005, p.252) does not particularly address my stance either in relation to Roman

Catholicism or religious life, as I am not fully either, and neither am I attempting to act as an interpreter for either context to the outside world.

Labaree also rejects the insider/outsider binary, seeing it instead as a "continual process of introspective enquiry which researchers can use to monitor their position, view and conclusions" (2002, cited in Meads, 2007, pp.282, 289). Collins (2002) is helpful in that he moves beyond both dichotomy and typology, making them largely redundant and offers a postmodernist view of "a more processual society and a more dynamic self, in which worlds are overlapping and interactive rather than isolated and separate" (2002 cited in Meads, 2007, p.291). He understands all research participants to be creating "social meaning through the common practice of storytelling" (2007, p.291) which breaks down insider/outsider boundaries and allows for in-out movement.

The positions taken by Labaree and Collins complement those of Ganiel and Mitchell who conclude that "most people occupy some place in-between" (2006, p.17) the insider/outsider binary. Like Collins, they challenge the dominance of this particular binary in consideration of researcher and participant relations. They contend that this is only one lens through which to view that relationship and that not only is it not fixed, but "can be changed through the research process itself" (2006, p.17), something I will consider later in this chapter. Alone of the writers cited above, they ask whether this religious identity, however flexible and permeable, is really the basis for our relationship with research participants as it will comprise a range of multiple identities, which will shape our response. They also ask whether any of the researcher's social identities such as nationality, role in academia, reputation and other factors are the primary medium through which researchers and participants relate to each other (2006, p.3). Ultimately, they found that they identified with their respondents on spiritual and emotional levels in ways which overcame doctrinal positions and issues of insider/outsider binaries "and often mediated social categories" (2006, p.18) concluding that "emotional engagement between researcher and respondent…becomes more significant than their initial social assumptions about one another" (2006, p.16). This conclusion challenges my own concern with my insider/outsider status both in relation to Catholicism and religious life, and places a new emphasis on the actual nature and quality of the relationship in both spiritual and emotional terms. Although this offers a new way of viewing the focus on insider/outsider, it still highlights the need for reflexivity.

Having identified the rationale for articulating the complexity of my insider/outsider experience in terms of relating to research participants and recognising what is prefigurative for me, I have to ask the "so what/now what?" question of reflexivity. Is this a critical tool or simply a method and if so, how am I going to use it and more importantly, will it add anything to the quality of this work: "does all this self-reflexivity produce better research"? (Patai, 1994 cited in Pillow, 2003, p.176).

Reflexivity as a methodological tool: a theoretical basis

The importance of reflexivity in qualitative and particularly feminist research is well established. Mauthner and Doucet (1998), Ramazonglu and Holland (2002) and Wickramasinghe (2010) provide a comprehensive articulation of the nature of reflexivity. How it might serve this research process is to be found in the "reflexive stance" advocated by McCutcheon (1999 cited in Meads, p.85) and entails "a position which addresses the manner in which all observations are inextricably linked with the self-referential statements of the observer". It is more than a method of data collection, but rather an approach which takes into account the feelings, responses, experience and thoughts of the researcher and, more importantly, the impact of these on the research process and findings. It thereby enables the researcher to "examine[s] his or her personal impressions and responses to experiential encounters and record these reflections" (Moschella, 2012, p.225).

The complexities of my relationship and connections with my research participants make it important to state my location in relation to them. Pillow proposed that "a reflexive focus requires the researcher to be critically conscious through personal accounting of how his/her self-location, position and interests influence all stages of the research process" (2003, p.285). Pillow also sees several benefits of working reflexively in that it "assists in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of the social world, but also…how that knowledge is produced" (2003, pp.285-286) and to this end "remaining critically reflective in this context is vital", thus linking the issue of insider/outsider stance with that of reflexivity.

Wickramasinghe (2010) offers a more theoretical perspective on the researcher's role. She argues that the key role of subjectivity is not only to "reflect on the self as/in making meaning" (2010, p.52) but as a means of addressing the concerns of objectivity and validity which occupy many feminist researchers. She, therefore, understands reflexivity to be a function of subjectivity that serves us by way of addressing concerns of "strong objectivity" (Reinharz, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Maynard, 1994;

Harding in Wickramasinghe, 2010) in recognition of our not being able to access our unconscious selves. It is based on a belief that reflective practice can help recognise and acknowledge "the conceptual, cerebral and emotional aspects of the research process" (2010, p.56). Reflexivity is both "an epistemological/theoretical standpoint and a method/practice in researching" (2010, p.56) so that a "theoretical understanding of subjectivity will be put into methodological practice through reflexivity" (2010, p.57).

Returning to Ricoeur's work on narrative identity, we see that he, like several of the feminist writers referred to in this chapter, believes that the interpretation of a text is not merely a linguistic task. He notes: "from a hermeneutical point of view, that is to say from the point of view of the interpretation of literary experience, a text has an entirely different meaning than the one recognized by structural analysis in its borrowings from linguistics" (1991a, pp.26-27). However, in this theory he offers a perspective which sheds light on the reflective processes of the research participants. For Ricoeur, the significance of the text has three dimensions. First as a reference or "mediation" between a person and the world; second as something communicable between persons and third as a form of self-understanding or self-reflectiveness between the person and herself. Viewing the research participants' self-understanding as text, and adopting Ricoeur's approach to hermeneutics as something which "begins where linguistics leaves off" and goes beyond that which is descriptive and utilitarian and seeks "features of reflexivity which are not narcissistic" (1991a, p.27), illustrates that data collected can contain a level of reflexivity within itself. The women operate at a level of reflexivity in the construction of their narrative. This conscious or unconscious process of reflexivity is offered to the reader, and contains important references to the sisters' own world of religious life and how this is communicated to those of us outside it. It is a further contribution to the emplotment which "is the common work of the text and the reader" (1991a, p.27).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have identified the three distinct but related bodies of theory which inform my research methodology: an epistemology of hermeneutic phenomenology and feminist research approaches to methodology, which are both brought into conversation with reflexivity. Together they represent a means of addressing the conceptual issues arising from my central concern to hear and interpret the experiences of religious women of living their vocation to apostolic religious life, as expressed in my research questions. Although reflexivity is usually considered an intrinsic element of feminist research methodology, I have established it as a separate

tool in recognition of what I think is prefigurative for me in terms of my previous experiences of religious life. I have also used Ricoeur's notion of mimesis to justify my own role in this process as one of reinterpreting rather than simply explaining. A further element of Ricoeur's work which is particularly useful in laying the foundations for my research design is his work on the construction of identity through narration. In the next chapter I will work from these bases towards a concrete research design and show how my choice of specific methods of data collection and analysis are informed by the tools set out in this chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: Method as holy listening and sacred reading

Introduction

This chapter outlines the design of the methods of data collection and analysis employed during this study. It will demonstrate that these are embedded in, and informed by, the research methodologies and critical tools outlined in Chapter Two, and by the research questions for this study. To an extent the design is also based on my experience of conducting the actual interviews, which I experienced and now understand as holy encounters.

In designing the method, I sought one which would reflect the depth of these encounters. I, therefore, combined the analytical rigour of methods drawn from the social sciences, the Voice-Centred Relational Method, and thematic coding, with an appropriate theological "tool", which is *Lectio Divina*. In this I acknowledge the theological character of this work and that empirical research, in the widest sense, can be "an act of primary theology" (Mellott, 2005 cited in Moschella, 2012, p. 227) and theologically formative when we are engaging in God-talk with participants. I conclude that the approaches to participants and the texts constitute more than simply method, but rather "holy listening" and "sacred reading" and are, therefore, strongly theological. Based on the quality of my encounters with the research participants, themselves, arguably "living gospels" (Casey, 1996) and the depth of wisdom encountered therein, I propose that the women's voices constitute material suitable for engagement through the practice of *Lectio Divina*.

Laying the groundwork for listening

Principles informing research design

The three critical tools presented in the previous chapter prompt particular methods of data collection. My epistemological framework of hermeneutical phenomenology calls for a research text that can be thoroughly engaged with and re-interpreted. My feminist approach seeks to privilege the voices and experience of the female research participants, recognising them as a valid source of knowledge. Currently these voices and experiences are largely unavailable, which calls for a form of data collection and analysis which allows direct access to them, making them available for re-interpretation. This form is likely, therefore, to be qualitative (Byrne, 2004 cited in Silverman, 2014, p.172).

Finally, my approach of subjectivity and recognition of the validity of my own perspective and active presence in this process demands a high degree of reflexivity. If

we accept that it is an approach whereby the researcher "recognizes, examines and understands his or her own social background and assumptions and how these can intervene in the research process" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.129) then we accept that this applies throughout the entirety of the research process, particularly the stages of data collection and analysis.

Choice of research methods

The study drew on qualitative methods of data collection as these value and celebrate "the richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity" of the social world (Mason, 2002, p.1). This form of exploratory approach through open-ended questioning, rather than a fixed question survey allows the researcher to dig deeper into individual responses. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the particular method of data collection because they allowed the participants to narrate their ministerial lives and the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of these stories.

The interview strategy consisted of two rounds of interviews. In the first I explored the women's apostolic activities and what these had meant to them and their understanding of who they are as religious. After completing the initial analysis of the first-round data, I then conducted a second round of interviews with the aim of hearing the sisters' responses to these first findings, and eliciting any further thoughts or comments.

A final consideration was that the research design and methods should ultimately be driven by the research aims and the nature of my research questions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p.36; Silverman, 2014, p.9). The research questions are open ended and exploratory as there is no hypothesis to be tested, and they seek to understand participants' experiences. This is particularly true of the first question, which explores how the sisters understand the "apostolic impulse". The second question is sensitive in nature as it explores the sisters' experiences of a stage when they are apparently no longer in ministry and ostensibly retired. The final question explores the theology heard in the women's responses. Individual, in-depth interviews are more private than other qualitative data collection methods, such as focus groups, and participants would be more likely to speak to me candidly than in a group situation. The focussed time with individuals provided more opportunity to explore and understand the experiences described and views expressed.

Such interviewing can produce large amounts of data which is time-consuming and complicated to analyse but is a method often used in the field of practical theology. It

can produce a rich and "thick description" of Christian life and practices which lends itself to the theological reflection that is identified as a primary element of practical theology (Swinton and Mowat, 2006; Lunn, 2009).

Considerations in interviewing older participants

As the research targeted a sample set with female participants aged between 68 and 90, I employed methods appropriate to working with this group. Gee and Kimball (1987 cited in Eldred, 2002) suggest that "more naturalistic and qualitative methodologies…are appropriate to the study of women and aging, given that women may define their social world in a way that emphasises the quality of interpersonal relationships". Bell (2010) states that the format of semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to be more adaptable in her approach, and freer to probe, following up ideas as they arise.

In most cases I began the interviews by asking participants to tell me the story of their ministerial lives, and given their age, this took some time. The chronological narrative often expanded so that the re-telling of the ministries became a re-telling of not only their religious lives but early childhood and family relationships. This became an opportunity for both the participants and myself to make sense of their ministerial and religious lives. The method of data collection selected enabled participants to tell their stories in this way because it became an entry point to making sense of oneself or of claiming an identity, through narrative. Furthermore, some of the participants were not able to write well or use a computer, and methods drawing on written responses would have needed adaptation and impeded the ability to engage in such narrative, or impeded the narrative flow.

Criteria for selection of congregations

In considering which voices to include in the study, I adopted a purposive sampling strategy (Bryman, 2004, p.33). Within this, I considered three factors: the nature of the congregation to which the sisters belonged; the age of the sisters; and the extent to which they were still in formal or paid external ministry. Participants were purposively selected from active or apostolic congregations. One of the five congregations is slightly different in that the sisters live a form of life which is apostolic, but lived in a stable monastic community, as opposed to the mobile form of life lived in fully apostolic congregations. As such they may represent a valuable counter example, as they present a perspective from a particular type of experience. The Code of Canon Law (CCL) (1900) makes no distinction between this form of congregation and an apostolic one, but only between apostolic and monastic congregations.

Generalisability and replicability are not core concerns in qualitative research due to its inductive and exploratory nature (Bryman, 2004, p.73). However, I had some concern that a small study such as this, necessarily limited in scope, was unlikely to reach more than 12 to 15 participants from a small number of congregations and could not claim to be representative of British apostolic women religious. Therefore, I decided to limit the size of the wider population and restrict this sampling frame to English foundations of women religious.

A second reason to focus on English congregations was to attempt to limit the cultural influences exerted on the sisters being studied and, therefore, the findings. Many congregations present in the UK were founded in France, Italy or Ireland where the cultural and ecclesial contexts are very different. O'Brien (2017) in her study of the Daughters of Charity, found that the culture of their founding country, France, was deeply embedded in their life in Britain and this would equally be the case with other international foundations. This study focusses on the voices of British women, and draws on literature in English. I, therefore, attempted to identify a group of congregations which were English foundations, so that there would be minimal Italian and French or broader continental influence, on the sisters' understanding of religious life.

There was a different and specific reason to limit the involvement of Irish foundations, in that many were initially diocesan foundations established by a Bishop and not of pontifical right, which entails being approved by, and under the protection of, the Vatican[15]. Therefore, their understanding and explorations of "apostolic" would have been constrained by this history and patrimony. However, religious congregations are increasingly recognised by historians and sociologists as transnational in character (Wuthnow and Offutt, 2008; Ebaugh, 2010; Raftery, 2015; 2017; O'Brien, 2016) and in practice, even English foundations present in the UK comprise members of varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This was reflected in the profile of the participants, whereby six were English; five were Irish and one Scottish.

O'Brien (1999) identified up to 18 English foundations in the UK but it was difficult to establish their continued existence or to find personal contacts within all of them. I

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[15] The distinction between the legal character of diocesan and pontifical right was formally established in *Conditae a Christo*, 1900. See Mangion (2010) for a fuller explanation of this.

identified five congregations who would likely be willing to participate and had sufficient sisters remaining to be considered still viable. Religious orders can be considered "exclusive institutions" (Trzebiatowska, 2010, p.6) in that they are outside of mainstream society, and are most likely to respond to an approach from or through someone already known to them. Therefore, ease of access was another criterion for choice of congregation which resulted in targeting those with whom I either already had a personal contact, or could be reached through a trusted personal contact.

Recruiting within congregations

As the research sought to explore attitudes towards ministry among women religious who are no longer in formal or paid ministry external to their community, the other criteria for inclusion was age. I sought participants who were above the statutory retirement age. I took 65 as the lower age threshold and of the 12 participants, all were between the ages of 68 and 90 at the time of the first interview, with the majority in their eighties. Nonetheless this still resulted in a cohort with a relatively wide-ranging profile, which is perhaps a limitation of the study. Although inclusion in the study was self-selecting to an extent, this was actually limited by the gatekeeper role played by the Provincial Superiors. I could have focussed more specifically on sisters who are housebound or in care communities, which might have provided a set of experiences and responses more focussed on the later, less active stage of life. However, a study of that nature may well have encountered more complex ethical issues in terms of the vulnerability of sisters.

I began recruitment with the two congregations most familiar to me. After conducting several interviews, I was then able to approach the less familiar congregations with evidence that others were already cooperating with me. This form of snowball sampling is often used with hard-to-reach populations (Atkinson and Flint, 2001) where the researcher relies on her own networks to recruit further research participants, and led to positive responses from the further three congregations.

All initial contact was conducted through the Provincial Superior of each congregation, who necessarily acted as gatekeeper. All were sent copies of the Participant Information Sheet and the Participant Consent Form, as well as my research proposal. Other than the initial Sr A., referred to in Chapter Two, no congregations declined: all five Provincial Superiors responded positively and no sisters who agreed to participate have withdrawn during the process. This may reflect that my trustworthiness as a researcher had been established through my work on, and the outcomes of, the

Religious Life Vitality Project[16], and through personal contacts. It may also reflect the felt relevance of the research.

Some Provincial Superiors sent me a list of names and contact details for sisters interested, and others asked sisters to contact me directly. Initial contact was followed by a telephone conversation with each prospective participant initiated by their receipt of the information I had sent. I used this initial conversation or exchange to explain the project, what the interviews would entail and to check if they had any questions before they gave their consent. I then sent copies of the Participant Information sheet and the Consent Form in both electronic and paper forms.

Profile of interview participants

The 12 sisters interviewed were all formally retired from paid ministry external to their communities. Ten were retired teachers who had then taken up pastoral work; one was a retired probation worker and one had worked in domestic duties in her own congregation's houses, originally as a lay sister[17]. Two sisters had roles in their own congregation's retreat houses; five were retired but still involved in voluntary ministries outside their communities, such as in schools and parishes; four were largely limited to ministry within their home community. Three sisters lived alone; two lived with just one other member of their congregation; five lived in communities of four or more sisters and one was resident in a care community[18].

Holy listening: encounters with religious women

Conversation and power – a feminist approach to interviewing?

The first round of interviews took place between November 2014 and June 2015 and the second between January and March 2017. I met all but one sister in her home community. Hospitality was always an associated feature and the interviews either began or ended, or were accompanied by tea and biscuits, or preceded by lunch. In one case the participant used lunch with the community beforehand to explain the research to them, including why the Provincial had invited her to participate, rather than any of the others. This then developed into a discussion about the future of religious life, which the participant commented further on during the interview.

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[16] See earlier reference in Chapter One.
[17] Up until the 1950s and later, many congregations maintained a two-tier system, usually class-based, of choir and lay sisters. Lay sisters generally worked as domestic servants in their congregations' houses. Many Irish sisters who entered teaching orders in the UK became lay sisters. See Walsh, 2002, pp.125, 142 and 197.
[18] During the course of the study another research participant moved to her congregation's care community.

Before each interview, I began a conversation about my research. Although I had included some background both to me and the research in the Participant Information Sheet, I wanted to expand on this and to give the participant the opportunity to ask further questions and to sign the consent form, if she hadn't previously done so.

In keeping with my methodology, I tried to draw on "a feminist ethic" (Eldred, 2002, p.105) in my approach to participants. In practice this meant showing respect for participants, taking care to listen to and explore their concerns and demonstrating what Fontana and Frey (2000, p.84) call a "heightened moral concern". It also meant trying to build a rapport based on trust, aided to an extent through self-disclosure. One example of this was my disclosure that I had been a novice for a short time in two congregations, explained in the Participant Information Sheet. For Kaufman (1994, p.130), the time spent chatting both before and after the interview is essential in order to build this rapport. A feminist approach seeks to counter the traditional hierarchy and what Kvale (1996, p.126) calls the "asymmetry of power" inherent in an interview situation. Telling and sharing our own stories and disclosing personal information helps establish a relationship of trust between researcher and participant (Oakley, 1981 cited in Fontana and Frey, 2003, p.83; Kaufman, 1994, p.131). I finished each interview by asking if the sister had anything else she wanted to say to me. Following the interview, and usually over a cup of tea, sisters often wanted to explore what would happen to the data. They were keen to establish its possible contribution to widening people's understanding of religious life and to the future development of this form of life.

Each interview took approximately two hours and was recorded. I quickly found in the first and second interviews that I had too many areas to cover. I, therefore, prioritised areas most directly linked to the sisters' understanding of the apostolic impulse and what happens to this as they age, or their expectations for their own later years. This meant a natural prioritising of my first two research questions, and ensuring later in the interview that I had explored the third. Lofland and Lofland (1984, p.53) recommend starting with "relatively neutral items", in this case questions about age, education, age at entering the congregation and so on, and addressing sensitive topics towards the end of the interview to allow for an establishing of trust earlier on. However, with this age group, these were not "relatively neutral items" but questions which often led straight into the heart of the interview. Working from an interview guide (see appendix three) was helpful as it offered a loose "menu" of topics and questions, rather than a rigid set of questions to be asked verbatim (1984, p.59; Hesse-Biber, 2007, pp.116, 121). The guide drew on three sources: my research questions (Kaufman, 1994,

p.124); the substantive literature sources on religious life and a review of the interviews from Stage One of my studies for the Professional Doctorate.

The guide eventually contained up to 23 questions exploring 15 broad areas of inquiry. It enabled me to cover the topics I needed to (Lofland and Lofland, 1984, pp.53, 59; Kaufman, 1994, p.124) but also to be guided by the participants' responses to initial, opening questions, and to discard some and/or focus in more depth on others. The planned second round of interviews would offer a limited opportunity to rephrase unsuccessful questions or pursue open ends thus initial piloting was not necessary.

However, despite my desire to embrace a "feminist ethic" in my approach, I expressed some ambivalence about this in my research journal at the time. I noted several points. First, I had tried to approach the interview as a conversation or even "a temporary community of two with each interviewee" (Eldred, 2002, p.105). I inevitably found myself trying to balance this with a contrived interview setting whereby I was seeking "answers" to research questions (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.64). I ultimately aimed at a balance between the women's desire to tell their stories and my need to ensure that certain topics were addressed.

The opening questions exploring the participants' "story" of how they had entered religious life, and an overview of their own ministry often took up half the time allocated for the interview. I had initially seen these questions as introductory and neutral, and several times I noted in my research journal that this wasn't necessarily the type of information I thought I needed in order to "answer" my research questions. However, as Anderson and Jack (1991 cited in Eldred 2002, p.109) noted, I needed to adapt my methodology away from this concern with asking the right questions and getting the right answers, "towards a focus on the process, on the dynamic unfolding of the subject's viewpoint".

In earlier interviews I was a little dogged in trying to bring the women back to the question; I was very much attempting to exert "control" (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.65). However, as the interviews progressed, I realised that this was neither possible nor desirable. It felt that at this stage we were in fact "co-creating" meaning, as my own receptivity to, and understanding of, what the women were disclosing began to develop. I also realised that this often-emerging narrative was an integral part of their stories and self-understanding, and consequently gradually affected my thinking about the approach to data analysis, towards one which recognised their life stories, particularly in relation to their call to religious life. Furthermore, I realised that even if I had thought these "stories" weren't providing "direct answers" to my research

questions, obtaining "direct answers" probably wasn't possible. Therefore, although I would have described myself as having come into this process from a constructivist approach (2006, p.35), in practice I was working as more of a naturalist or even positivist in my approach to "obtaining data". It is probably through embracing reflexivity as a practice that I became aware of and was able to learn from this.

I began to understand that this was simply women telling or re-telling their experience. It was highly subjective, and experiential and, therefore, not to be regarded as "truth" in the positivist sense, but the truth of self-understanding. This was valuable in and of itself as the starting point both for much qualitative research (2006, p.31) as well as theological reflection within the discipline of practical theology (2006, p.5). My own operant methodological practice began to line up with my espoused methodological and perhaps theological practice (Cameron, et al., 2010).

Therefore, whilst initially I may not always have followed the flow of the women's stories, what the women said began to shape my own practice and analysis at an early stage so that I was "actively constructing knowledge around questions and responses" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995 cited in Fontana and Prokos, 2007, p.13). In my research journal at the time I noted this as an instance of them influencing the process. According to feminist theory, the researcher holds the power in the research process (Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992; Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.128) and feminist researchers seek to address the power imbalance. Yet I experienced this very much as a process of negotiation and even an example of the "fusion of horizons" between the worlds of the text and the world of the researcher which Gadamer argued as necessary for the hermeneutical task to proceed (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.114). This issue of power in the research process became the second area of ambivalence for me in espousing a feminist approach to method and understanding my own role within that. My starting point had been an acceptance of the feminist position that the researcher holds the power and yet my experience challenged this in several ways.

First, during the process I came to experience the influence or power of the participants and to realise that this was partly due to their age. Although a group of women of this age might be considered vulnerable participants, (Kaufman, 1994, p.126) and in many ways they were, their age demanded respect from me. In fact, many were close to my mother's age, and I felt it was appropriate to accord them the same gentleness, care and respect I would my own mother. Kaufman (1994, p.127) notes that interviewing elderly people can be "emotionally charged" as the interviewer is inviting the participant to "recall, reveal and construct aspects of the personal life and to make that discussion

coherent and meaningful." This refers to the experience for the participants, but I suggest that it may also have been emotionally charged for me, and it is likely that I projected some of this maternal/parental role onto them and adjusted my own behaviour accordingly.

Second, and very importantly for this study, my attitude towards the women was shaped by the very fact of their being religious. Although I just narrowly fit into the category of the "post-Vatican II generation" (Johnson, Wittberg and Gautier, 2014, p.64) I was brought up in a time when women religious were still very visible in the church and my encounters with them then, and later in life, engendered a sense of respect for this "superior" form of life. Consequently, whilst I recognise that they as individuals have probably had a life time of struggling with commitment on a daily basis, I am aware of viewing them as "religious virtuosi" (Wittberg, 1994, after Weber).

Furthermore, my awareness of an interest in or call to religious life began in my late teens and has also shaped my view of women religious. I wrote in my research journal during the interviews that I saw them, largely as a group, and some individuals more than others, as women who were living a life that I had at one time thought I was called to. Although clear I hadn't wanted to stay in religious life, working with these women awoke in me some residual sense of having lost this vocation. This may have been compounded by the fact that all the interviews were held on the sisters' home ground, in religious communities. The hospitality offered by the sisters, and the food, prayer, and chatting both before and after the interviews, often centred on my own vocation, and relationship with religious life. One sister even assured me that I wasn't yet too old for religious life, commenting "I'm sure someone will still have you."

Consequently, instead of being easily able to embrace the feminist recognition of the power all being in the possession of the researcher, I actually often felt, like others before me, (Oakley, 1981 cited in Fontana and Frey, 2000, p.83; Llewelyn, 2014) rather exposed and vulnerable. However, I do believe that this choice aided a sense of mutuality and trust. The women could at least be certain that they were telling their stories to someone who valued religious life and was likely to honour their lived experience. For example, sisters often initially declared they had nothing useful to say but quickly became very relaxed. They seemed willing to divulge sensitive information quite freely: without my seeking it. However, this sense of mutuality and trust further highlighted the need for careful attention to any possible bias towards them in all stages of my analysis.

A third presence in the space in between

I would now like to turn to an exploration of the theological aspect of the interview encounters. Increasingly within the actual interviews, I began to experience a sense of something else happening on a level deeper than simple conversation or information gathering: almost an enriched sense of my being and presence through my encounters with the women themselves. I felt somehow more fully myself. I identified this in Merton's terms (1979, cited in Flanagan, 2014, p.128) as "that *scintilla animae*, that 'apex' or 'spark' which is freedom beyond freedom, an identity beyond essence, self beyond ego, a being beyond the created realm and a consciousness that transcends all division, all separation" as I saw that my research might actually take the form of contemplative inquiry.

After the second interview, I wrote in my research journal that it had felt oddly reminiscent of some of the practice sessions conducted in my earlier training as a spiritual director. I was reminded of that sense of God being present in the space in between the Director and Directee. In the "concentrated human encounters" (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.63) that are research interviews, when the talk is of God and, therefore, theological, it is surely unsurprising for those involved to experience the presence of God. Conroy (1996), in reference to the supervision of spiritual directors writes "awareness of God's presence in spiritual direction and supervision sessions is essential, resulting in spiritual directors becoming interiorly freer to linger more deeply with directees' experiences" (1996, p.5). She notes that this is the case because "spiritual directors are in relationship with God and have a desire to help others find God". The three-way encounter is described as "the threefold communication of the spiritual director, directee and God" and indeed as explicitly Trinitiarian (1996, p.8).

This analogy is helpful in several ways. First, the idea of "becoming interiorly freer to linger more deeply" with the heard experiences points to the possibility and necessity of a practice of attentive listening, which allowed me to develop a view of contemplative engagement with the text as a form of *Lectio Divina*, which I explore later in this Chapter. Second, the analogy reflects my experience of being, in this context, not only "Director" but also "Directee" as one engaged in spiritual conversation and "talk about God" with a Director or Accompanier and in receipt of the gift of their wisdom. And so at times, the power imbalance leads to role reversal in an unexpected direction.

I return at this point to Orsi's (2005) reference, explored earlier in Chapter Two (p.44), to the difference between the researcher's own "religious culture" and that which she is researching as being "both other and not …forever shrinking and expanding". Orsi's

words resonated with me from a second perspective. Midway through the interviews, I reflected in my research journal, on April 16th 2015, on the sense of "rising and falling, almost like a tide" which I experienced coming and going during individual interviews and in between interviews, when transcribing and beginning to read through the texts.

Continuing with the analogy of spiritual direction, Conroy (1996) notes that although accompanying another, the spiritual director nevertheless experiences "a variety of interior reactions such as consolation or movement toward God…drawn into the experience – attracted engaged and resonating with…" (1996, p.7). This she attributes to the director herself being a "prayerful" person "drinking regularly from the living waters of God's loving presence" (1996, p.8). The participants in this study were most certainly "prayerful" people and yet I felt that I, as researcher, was also accompanying them, and in this also as attentive to God's presence as a practical theologian operating as researcher strives to be.

As Conroy is working within the tradition of Ignatian spirituality, she draws on the concept of the discernment of the movement of spirits introduced by St Ignatius Loyola in the Rules for discernment of the first week of his Spiritual Exercises (Fleming, 1996). In these Rules, Ignatius identified movements of the spirit which affect our interior lives, and which might drive us to action. He saw the need for discernment of the sources of the movement, whether from a good spirit, which he called a sense of consolation or a movement towards God, or of the Spirit, or from the evil spirit, or a counter-movement, known as desolation. Conroy notes that a director may experience both consolation and desolation, becoming bored, feeling restless, distracted and "move away from a contemplative stance to a problem-solving, preaching and advice-giving stance" (Conroy, 1996, p.8). I recognised this ebb and flow in several ways and when I reflected on this later in my research journal, it actually resonated with that Ignatian sense of movement of the spirits: a flowing between desolation and consolation. Initially it was in recognition and awareness of the presence, influence and actions of God in the present and our lives. Sr Collette, in her interview, spoke at length about seeking to work out of a "contemplative stance" rooted in the present moment. She undoubtedly influenced the way I thought about a more explicit practice of working contemplatively in that awareness of the presence.

A further deepening of this awareness came as I was gradually able to "let go" of trying to control the interviews and was able to listen attentively. This most open and energising listening felt holy and "care-full" (Moschella, 2008, p.141). Reflecting back now, the sense of consolation seems to have been a confirmation of a vocation to

research, and to "talk about God". That is what we were engaged in: "talk about God" or faith seeking understanding. Together in this context, we were engaged in meaning-making and we were doing theology.

Reflecting on the interview as a theological encounter puts the focus back on me and what I took away from it as a researcher and reinforces the idea that I had the power in this process. Slee (2013) notes that feminist practical theologians must embrace "the conviction that our work is not just for us, but for others: first and foremost, our research participants". (2013, p.22). I would concur with this, although it is difficult to know how or whether my work impacted upon the participants, or what ramifications it may have beyond this small group. I can, however, observe and record that it appears to have had a lasting impact on me. To return to Slee: in "a kind of paschal process…a sharing in the passion of God to make and remake the world" where I was formed and transformed as a researcher (2013, p.24). In a later section in this Chapter, I consider how I sought to continue honouring this encounter of "care-full" and holy listening through sacred reading. However, for now, I turn back to the stages of data analysis.

After the interviews: the process of data analysis

In this next section I move away from reflecting on the process and turn to describing the shift into the next stage of data analysis. Following the interviews, I downloaded each one onto my computer and transcribed each one myself. Although this was time consuming, it was beneficial (Lofland and Lofland, 1984, p.61) in that I began to familiarise myself with the data from a very early stage in the process.

Transcription is perhaps the point in the research process when we begin to move beyond co-construction, and power becomes most firmly located in the hands of the researcher. The process of re-interpretation begins to establish itself through the decisions the researcher makes about what to include and what not to include; where she hears emphasis, hesitation and silence, and even where she places commas and punctuation (Kvale, 1996, p.171; Hertz, 1997 cited in Fontana and Frey, 2000, p.84; Bazeley, 2013, p.51).

Initially I sought to transcribe the interviews verbatim and to note significant periods of silence and other para-linguistic features in responses. However, I did not continue because I felt that these were partly being generated by age and more importantly, I quickly realised that these were not going to be crucial to my method, which focussed on content and not on linguistic analysis. Thus I took a pragmatic approach to transcribing (Bazeley, 2013, p.73), with an emphasis on preserving "the flow of the narrative and total integrity of text" (2013, p.75). Once the transcribing was completed, I

re-listened to check unclear passages, and for accuracy. Although a feminist approach would recommend providing a copy of the transcript to the participants for member-checking, I chose not to do this. Many of the participants had difficulty reading large amounts of print, and this would present them with a considerable physical challenge. Instead I chose to conduct a second round of interviews to ensure participant validation.

The first component of method: choosing the Voice-Centred Relational Method

I had intended to approach data analysis through use of thematic coding. However, early on in the process I noted that the women all used story as a way of reflecting on their coming to understand their apostolic vocation: "story represents the mode nearest to experience, most concrete and accessible, and yet…most capable of capturing the complexity, dynamism and nuanced nature of lived experience" Slee (2004, p.68). I realised I was hearing narratives that deserved careful and attentive listening. I began to view each transcribed text as "a subjective document worthy of attention and study in its own right" (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p.136).

This made me wary of moving too quickly into thematic coding. I was struck by the language associated with coding: a language of "breaking open" the data; chunking; splitting; lumping; dissecting; breaking down; distilling, cutting up, reducing and "fracturing" (Strauss, 1987 cited in Bazeley, 2013, p.44; Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p.138; Braun and Clarke, 2006). I realised these terms jarred with me and my experience of the women as individuals. Furthermore, I feared this might contradict the approach of seeing each transcript as a complete text in itself (Kaufman, 1994, p.136). Like Slee, I found that "…narrative emerged from the women's interviews as a primary and fundamental mode of patterning experience" (Slee, 2004, p.68). I wanted an approach that would allow me to listen attentively, trying to be present to the women's telling of themselves.

The process of data analysis had really begun in the interviews (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p.124; Swinton and Mowat, 2006). Consequently, I was already recognising the extent to which my research participants saw themselves as relational. I was, therefore, open to an interpretation of their spirituality being highly relational (Gilligan, 1982; Slee, 2004). In my search for a method, I encountered the Voice-Centred Relational Method (VCRM) (Mauthner and Doucet 1998) which I will now explore further. VCRM is rooted in the work of Gilligan (1982) and the Listening Method developed by Brown and Gilligan (1992). VCRM has at its heart a relational ontology or "selves-in-relation" (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p.125) and places particular emphasis on three

principles. First, spending as much time as possible hearing the "I" voice and perspective of research participants (1998, p.119). Second acknowledging fully and making room and time to explore the influence of the researcher in shaping and determining the analysis. The third principle emphasises the relationship between the researcher and the participants and relationality more broadly.

The method's recognition of the importance of reflexivity in the researcher echoes my own phenomenological position and concern with representing and respecting what I heard from the women in a way that "embodies respect for individual respondents" (1998, p.135). I concluded that this method would also enable me to remain with and among the voices in the deeply contemplative way of working I was already developing.

The four readings of the VCRM

The method comprises up to four structured and intentional readings of transcripts. There are two aspects to the first reading. The first is to identify the overall story being told by the participant through the main events, subplots and characters. The researcher listens for "recurrent images, words, metaphors and contradictions in the narrative" (Mauthner and Doucet, 1997, p.126) so as to "follow the unfolding of events (the who, what, when, where and why of the narrative)" (Brown and Gilligan, 1992, p.27). As I worked through the first reading, I took notes which I formed into a short narrative report on the participant, noting each of the elements above.

In the second "reader-response" part of the first reading, (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p.127) I read to listen to how I responded to the text, shaped by my background, social location and experiences in relation to the participant, attempting to hold an awareness of my own thoughts and feelings in response to both text and participant. Brown and Gilligan (1992 cited in Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p.127) claim that "writing out our responses to what we are hearing, we then consider how our thoughts and feelings may affect our understanding, our interpretation, and the way we write about that person". Therefore, as I read the text, I "wrote myself in" to my analysis by noting my own responses and recording them in the short report I was producing on each transcript, using a different coloured font.

The purpose of the second reading is to read for the "I" voice of the participant: listening for "how she speaks of herself before we speak of her" (Brown and Gilligan, 1992, pp.27-28). This is where the method departs from one such as Grounded Theory, which focusses less on the individual voice (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998,

p.130) and pays less, or little attention to the subjectivity of the researcher (Charmaz, 2003 cited in Hunter, 2009, p.45) or the researcher's influence on the process (Hunter, 2009, pp.45-46).

I highlighted all the "I" statements in each transcript and asked the following questions of the transcript: how often does the participant use "I", "you", "we" or "one" when speaking about herself? Does she move oddly or inappropriately between these, or avoid the use of "I" altogether? Are there contradictions in her narrative? Is she drawing contrasts/distances between herself and her congregation and where is she singling herself out? It was not always clear. I also noted how "active" the "I" statements were and to what extent they were dominated by "I think" and "I suppose", perhaps indicating hesitation, lack of confidence or a reluctance to make definitive statements, but also possibly denoting personal depth and openness to the process.

At this stage I recorded three points in my research journal. First, that I was getting a lot more out of the first reading and finding that the second reading was largely deepening and confirming. Second, that I was developing a very real sense of each text as a whole, and of the person and her experiences and the issues she was presenting. Distinct narratives were emerging from each transcript. By the fifth transcript, I was using the second reading to identify and number emerging narratives. This confirmed that VCRM was an appropriate choice of method, given my desire to listen attentively to the sisters' narratives.

VCRM encourages and enables the researcher to stay with the participants' voices for as long as possible before trying to fit what she hears into her own categories and focussing on answers to her research question (Gilligan, et al., 2003, p.169). In practice this was difficult, as I noticed that I was now again identifying sub-themes and codes, having begun this to a limited extent before settling on the VCRM as a method for analysis. In effect, I found myself coding in something of an *ad hoc* way and, therefore, I decided simply to note potential codes within the short report, and to return to a more formal thematic coding after I had finished the four readings.

The process of working with VCRM and the thematic coding thus became intertwined and iterative. Initially it felt overwhelming to work with two such different processes: the one feeling very vertical, and the other horizontal, almost forming a matrix through which I was viewing the text. However, using the two different tools brought both the narratives and the themes to life and ultimately the findings of both became mutually reinforcing, as the coding later reinforced the narratives that emerged.

I took notes on the second reading and wrote up a second short report, commenting on the use of "I". I began to pay more attention to narratives and how independent self-contained or nested narratives are used to illustrate a point. I then incorporated these notes into the initial reports; either strengthening the "subplots" identified in the first reading, and naming these as narratives, or noting new narratives. I then numbered each of these narratives, for example N1 – N10 (see appendix eight).

In an effort to identify the plot/s in each text, I wrote a short two- to three-page summary of the chronological or important events, (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p.135; Hunter, 2009, pp.48-49). I did this because, initially, the chronological sequence of events itself seemed to be the main story and the way of making meaning of their lives and ideas. I was also trying to identify patterns across the participants, so I began to work more horizontally. Moreover, I wanted to see if there was any connection between particular events and a changed understanding of what it means to be apostolic. At this stage, I also wrote a one-liner moniker for each sister, for example Peace Nun and "what you see is what you get" nun, which helped me focus in on what the participant seemed to be saying about herself.

Mauthner and Doucet (1998) recommend selecting smaller sub-sets for the later readings. For this third reading, focussing on relationship, I selected four participants whose talk of relationship seemed particularly rich. I printed out another set of transcripts, and using coloured pens I highlighted all discussion of, and reference to, relationship and noted how this covered the vast majority of the text. I focussed on their relationships with: their community and congregation, as an institution and with individuals; friends; family; the neighbourhood; God; her relationship with herself and general theorising about relationship, or presenting canonical narratives (Phoenix, 2013) about relationship. These categories were inductive in that they emerged from the first and second readings of each text. At the end of each third reading, I wrote another short report drawing together comments on relationship in the above categories, highlighting significant quotations as instances, and making observations as to how these categories were developed and addressed in the text.

I then selected a different set of four participants for the fourth reading. This was to ensure that I conducted at least three readings of as many of the participants' texts as possible. I read to listen for the interplay between the participants' narratives and voices and their environment in terms of organisations and institutions, and cultures and contexts "placing it within broader social, political, cultural and structural contexts" (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p.132). Some participants I selected for this reading had

either particularly complex relationships with their congregations, or striking attitudes towards the institution of the Church. I selected others for whom the socio-cultural or historical context had been significant. I wrote another short report on my reading of each of the four texts and noted significant contextual or institutional factors that arose and how the participant had spoken of these in her interview.

The VCRM is not prescriptive or directive and, therefore, is very adaptable. However, the concomitant disadvantage is that it does not always provide enough guidance on how to use the material gathered. The method generates a great deal of data extra to the actual transcripts (Slee, 2013, p.21) in the form of analytical reports on the original texts. I was uncertain how to use these separate reports and whether or not to bring them together. What I did note, even when I worked on the second readings, was that little new emerged from the further readings. For Mauthner and Doucet, one of the advantages of the method is that of "tuning our ear" (1998, p.134) to the data and voice and story of each participant, allowing them to be more fully heard. I experienced this to be very true and the purpose of the further readings seem to be a further tuning, and deepening, rather than encountering new elements.

If the actual interview and then the transcribing are processes where researcher power becomes an operant issue, then this is even more so at the stage of data analysis which can be "a deeply disempowering stage" (1998, p.138) for participants as they have no control over their representation, underlining the need for researcher reflexivity. Mauthner and Doucet (1998, p.138) call this stage "the moment when we are most powerful and voices can be lost", concluding that "data analysis is our most vulnerable spot" (1998, p.123). While Mauthner and Doucet repeatedly emphasise the reflexivity inherent in the method, little guidance is provided on how to use the personal reflections which emerge from the first reading.

At the end of the process I had a "main" report on each participant, incorporating the first and second readings. This focussed on drawing out and substantiating (with quotations, line references and some analysis) the main narratives I had identified, as well as some initial highlighting of sub-themes. I also had a further report from a third or fourth reading on each participant. Although time consuming (Finch, 2011), this method means that the eight transcripts read formally for the third and fourth times are necessarily engaged with at a deeper level.

When Hunter (2009, p.49) worked with VCRM for her PhD research, she found that this method "didn't seem to draw out the similarities and differences between the stories". In order to explore the similarities between narratives, she took a more social

constructionist or narrative approach to the analysis. VCRM claims to promote a highly reflexive stance and an inductive approach: "bringing the listener into responsive relationship with" participants (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p.135). I did find myself very immersed in the world of each participant, and throughout this period I felt I was going quite deeply down, vertically, into each person's voice and stories such that at one stage I had the image of being among a wood of 12 straight tree-trunks, moving among them and almost embracing each one in turn. I felt I was physically sitting among these women, in what Slee calls "an intermingling of lives that leaves us profoundly changed by the process" (2013, p.20).

Mauthner and Doucet (1998, p.135) claim that working vertically, as opposed to linking themes immediately "helps maintain differences between respondents" and the method does indeed serve to emphasise their individuality. Perhaps because I was so deeply immersed in each personality, I then found it difficult to "extract" myself from what, by this stage, was the privilege of a close-up, "holy" encounter with a group of individuals, rather than "data".

Unlike Hunter, however, I did not find it such a challenge to identity and connect the themes horizontally, possibly because I had already begun to identify at least impressionistic themes. Both Mauthner and Doucet (1998) and Hunter (2009) found they had to move from "holistic understandings of individual respondents" (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p.135) to addressing the whole data set. I also did this reluctantly and felt some sense that I would "lose the complexity" (1998, p.135) of each woman's voice and story. However, I recognised the necessity of this next step of identifying commonalities across the data. This was then the point to move to thematic analysis and try to connect the branches, and start seeing the wood, as well as the trees.

Listening for the voice through Sacred Reading: the second component of the method

To date I have described and reflected on the first of the two social science methods of data analysis used to work with the data in this study. It would make sense in logical terms to proceed to the second of those methods which was the thematic coding. However, this would not reflect the chronological story of my own engagement with the women's voices. In order to do that, I will again adopt the attitude of "holy listening", to consider how I read and engaged with the transcripts as texts through Sacred Reading, within and across the VCRM. As a Cistercian novice I was taught the "art" of *Lectio Divina* as an approach to contemplative reading and prayer and I have continued with a daily practice. This has had a significant influence on how I read in general and in

particular, on how I engaged with the texts. Casey (1996, p.4) speaks of the deep sense of respect and of reverence for the text with which early monks came to *Lectio Divina* or Sacred Reading. Like Slee (2013, p.17), I found myself standing on holy ground whereby reading for the "I" voice felt a particular act of reverence. I, therefore, decided to explore whether I could bring anything of my own daily practice of *Lectio* into conversation with a method of reading the transcripts. In reality, it happened the other way around.

Lectio Divina is an ancient monastic practice, whose four stages of *lectio* (reading); *meditatio* (meditation); *oratio* (prayer) and *contemplatio* (contemplation) were set out by the twelfth-century Carthusian monk Guigo II, literally as four rungs on the ladder of ascent towards Christ. It enabled monastics to use Scripture as a source of prayer, but sought to minimise or contain subjectivity in prayer, whilst also allowing deep engagement with a particular word or passage which caught the reader's attention.

It is tempting to draw parallels between *Lectio Divina* and the VCRM. Both have "stages". Casey likens the process to painting a wall, whereby "two or three coats of paint" are necessary (1996, pp.24–25). The process is circular rather than linear, much like the hermeneutic process itself, as we visit and re-visit, deepen and move from top to bottom and from bottom to top in search of understanding and meaning. As I read I chewed over the words and ruminated (Veling, 2007, pp.207, 211), stayed with particular sections that caught my attention, and then continued. I read difficult sections out loud, often later returning to the actual tape to listen again more attentively. Both methods are forms of listening actively and attentively to the words.

The purposes of both processes also have much in common. Like Moschella (2008, p.254) I recognise that the act of listening, in the context of practical theology is "an act of love". Like Slee (2013), I experience the faith lives of the women with whom I work as "a place where we expect to discern the presence and activity of the divine" (2013, p.17). The purpose and underpinning theology of *Lectio Divina* more explicitly and single-mindedly focusses on the search for God in "the forming of our heart and minds according to Christ" so that "our actions can be vehicles of grace to others…it is a school in which we learn Christ" (Casey, 1996, p.39). Viewing or experiencing qualitative research as spiritual practice, and using VCRM in this way, can lead to an inhabiting of the voices of those with whom we work (Slee, 2013, p.21) and "an intermingling of lives" (2013, p.20). Moreover, it has more been my experience of the participants' own presence as a "vehicle of grace to others", in understanding and

witnessing their apostolic purpose that has highlighted the final commonality between both processes that those who participate in either bring a willingness to be changed.

However, the analogy is limited and drawing it any further may undermine the value of this ancient monastic practice. Nonetheless, I would say that I read and listened to the texts with the attitude of *lectio* (as in the first stage of *LD*). I would also claim that I moved from this reading into the second stage of *Lectio Divina*, that phase of *meditation*, through my engaged, and embodied attentiveness to the words. I conducted the first and second readings in place of my early morning *Lectio* "practice" in the same physical space and with the same attitude of reverence and to coming to something of God, as a "Godly" activity. I approached the texts, therefore, in expectation of discerning some revelation, not by any means from all parts of all texts, but certainly with the attitude that the texts were capable of revelation. However, it is here, after the first two stages of *lectio* and *meditatio*, that my own personal contemplative practice and my academic contemplative practice parted company as I took the women's words into the next "stages" of *Lectio*: *oratio* and *contemplatio*.

Theoretical considerations

In this this next section I will step back a little from my personal engagement with *Lectio* in order to view the process through a theoretical lens. I will explore in more depth the issue of whether these women's stories constitute suitable texts for *Lectio* and also to note the influence of the texts over me, in effect, the continuing power of the women in this process. For Casey, matter suitable for *Lectio* must be such that "it can sustain in us a sense of reverence and submission" (1996, p.103). In practising *Lectio* with the texts, and sitting and resting with the words, sentences and passages that had caught my attention (Casey, 1996, p13), I was both actively choosing to do this, but also indeed following Casey's injunction that in *Lectio* we "safely suspend our critical faculties and freely lay bare our soul to be moved" (1996, p.130).

Yet, it is the voices of the sisters who now speak, and what catches my attention is the stories of their own search for God; they are expert guides in this process. I am indeed submitting myself to be changed; to be "formed and transformed" in this "paschal process" (Slee, 2013, p.24) through the confusion of the "not-knowing" inherent in the research process: the transformation to which both qualitative research and practical theology speak (Veling, 2007, p.209).

Nonetheless, we need to examine the suitability of the texts as source material for *Lectio*. Casey (1996) acknowledges that monastic tradition does not limit *Lectio* to Scripture, and includes Patristic texts, but the practice has traditionally been limited to

works which "express the perennial faith of the Church and not the transient opinions of an individual" (1996, p.103). Given my inclination to engage with the 12 transcripts through *Lectio*, to what extent then, could they be considered to be suitable material? Appraising the full extent to which the transcripts would meet this criteria of expressing the "the perennial faith of the Church" is beyond the scope of this study. However, the women religious participating in this study live an ecclesial vocation, vowed to the conversion of hearts and minds to Christ and represent the kind of "experienced guide" (1996, p.15) Casey states may lead us to God through *Lectio*. Furthermore, as vowed religious they are part of the community of interpretation that addresses itself to the question of what is genuinely "perennial" through ongoing processes of communal discernment.

One factor which may prevent these experienced female guides being regarded as "suitable" material is that they are mostly excluded from the canon of Scripture and Patristics drawn upon by Catholics in daily prayer and worship. Lectionary readings rarely feature female figures from the Bible (Schenk, 2009, p.168), despite the encouragement by the Synod on the Word (2008) to include more writing by and about women, and similarly, The Divine Office[19], and congregation-specific versions of the Office used by women's monastic communities. Traditionally, as we have seen, these were the sources for *Lectio Divina*, practised daily by monastic and other religious women throughout the centuries. In recommending reading suitable for *Lectio,* the "resources" pages of the Order of St Benedict (http://osb.org/lectio/) contains only four female names among a list of nearly forty, and Casey, in his own list of "recommended reading" includes only three women. In the later part of the twentieth century, communities of religious women increasingly used writings by women drawn from beyond the official Lectionary or Divine Office books, as material for their daily *Lectio* practice. The sisters of one monastic community in the UK have been using their own translation of the Rule of Benedict, written in inclusive language for at least 20 years, and now increasingly draw on sources as wide-ranging as the writings of their own "mothers", such as St Gertrude of Helfta and those of Claudine Moine, a seventeenth-century French seamstress[20]. Taking some of these decisions into their own hands at least allows them access to these women's stories, opening up a new canon of "suitable material".

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[19] The Liturgy of the Hours according to the Roman Rite – used by Catholics and religious communities to recite or chant liturgy throughout the day.
[20] Private correspondence with the Prioress of the Cistercian community at Whitland, August 2017.

Veling claims that a text "of any compelling stature" (2007, p.213) might be suitable for use with *Lectio* and as noted, I did indeed find their texts compelling. Tracy's (1981) exploration of the "religious classic" presents it as text which "both demands constant interpretation and bears a certain kind of timelessness" (1981, p.102) and which has a "claim to attention on the grounds that an event of understanding proper to finite human beings has here found expression" living as a classic only "if it finds readers willing to be provoked by its claim to attention" (1981, p.102). This explanation points also to a fundamental exercise in making meaning, which is a task in which the women in this study are engaged. I do not claim that the texts of these women constitute religious or spiritual classics particularly perhaps in terms of timelessness, but to a large extent I have experienced and treated them as such. There are parallels in terms of their claim to my attention, to meaning-making, and to provoking and challenging my own understanding of God. Tracy goes on to say "If the text is a genuinely classic one, my present horizon of understanding should always be provoked, challenged, transformed…we are compelled to believe….'that something else might be the case'" (1981, p.102).

In experiencing both listening and reading in this way, I want to acknowledge that I am also adopting a theological epistemology meaning that I also understand my research practice as one of discernment, in relation to what I hear the women say about their lives and their own exclusive search for God, and in listening both for, and to, the voice of God. This is what Cameron and Duce (2013, p.106) call "creating a conversation in your mind between the data and the Christian tradition" so that I see research itself as a theological task and ask myself whether how I write up my research will "reveal the mark of the Christian tradition on me as a researcher and on my research context?" and, therefore, be truthful to my own stance. "The mystery of Christ is to be found in the *humanum*, within the complex of human experience and history" wrote McDade (1991, cited in Sweeney, 2010, p.17) reflecting what Sweeney calls "Theology's post-conciliar anthropological turn" (Sweeney, 2010, p.18) and, therefore, I would concur with Sweeney that it is necessary for practical theology in particular to draw on methods and perspectives of the social sciences. In this study I have drawn heavily on social science research tools but to rely solely on these, and not take a theological stance to this work would neither be truthful to my own stance, nor to what I perceive and hear from these women's lives, in a process and in lives which I understand to be Spirit filled and driven.

Slee holds that within a feminist qualitative research process several things are taking place: we are being shaped as "women of faith" (2013, pp.15–16); the process itself

then "challenges us to dig deep within our own spiritual resources" and it "teaches us how to discern the sacred" in others' lives, as well as our own. I would suggest that through my engagement I am challenged to dig deep into my own spiritual resources in discerning both a sense of vocation as a researcher, and a sense of the presence of God through my work, as I work. It is in this context that Slee (2013) sees the potential of research to be transformatory for the researcher.

Adding two further elements strengthens this point. Veling's texts of "compelling stature" must offer what Ricoeur calls "a proposed world which I could inhabit" (1981 cited in Veling, 2007, p.213), in this case, texts which offer more than simply a description of the women's ministerial lives. They bring us to the "shared horizon" Ricoeur holds to be necessary, as explored in Chapter Two of this study, in order for a hermeneutic interpretation to take place, whereby we seek to listen and understand but not explain (Veling, 2007, p.213). In this context the transcripts as texts lead our gaze towards a way of being that speaks of, and points to, God which is sacramental in making real that which it signifies.

Thematic analysis: the third component of the method

In order to follow the chronology of how I worked with the transcripts, I will now return to the description of the activity of thematic analysis, the next stage of engaging with the data after the reflective process described above. Following the thorough process of engagement with the texts through both VCRM and *Lectio*, my method drew on a third element. I again adopted a different mode of working and moved into a more systematic approach to data analysis. Consequently, I employed a general qualitative data thematic approach (Seale, 2004, p.314) and more specifically, the thematic approach set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The familiarity with the data gained to date provided "the bedrock for the rest of the analysis" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.94). I had first begun to work with the data thematically before I adopted the VCRM, but to an extent, the two were intertwined, and the process iterative.

Taking a broader thematic approach to analysis does not demand line by line referencing for coding. Instead I read through the data, and identified descriptors or codes, which are "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" Boyatzis (1998 cited in Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.88). Sometimes these codes arose from the data itself and even comprised the actual words of a participant, known as inductive or *in-vivo* codes (Ryan and Bernard, 2003, p.1). Other codes were more deductive in nature, or *a priori* (Taylor and Gibb, 2010, p.1) and related to my research questions, and the

literature and theory already reviewed, and so were more theoretically informed. I analysed every transcript in detail for the appearance of a theme, no matter how weak or strong. As a new code emerged, I noted it, wrote a short memo explaining or defining the code (Bazeley, 2013, p.131) and logged it. These initial-level codes are called sub-themes by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.88). Identifying distinct themes in qualitative analysis is often difficult due to overlap and consequently some codes were included in or generated multiple themes (Bazeley, 2013, p.144). I then used the method of constant comparison (Ryan and Bernard, 2003, p.3; Bazeley, 2013, p.130) with successive transcripts to amend each code, or register a new one.

Returning to the reports generated through use of the VCRM, particularly the report which now incorporated the first and second readings, I combed them to cross-check emerging sub-themes and "parked" any which did not seem to fit. I also then coded the third and fourth readings for relationship and context and followed the same process. It was now clear that I had reached saturation point (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p.134; Miles and Huberman in Bazeley, 2013, p.152).

I then began to search for larger level themes in order to re-focus "the analysis at the broader level of themes" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.89). I combined sub-themes to form overarching themes; I experimented with setting the lists of sub-themes out in tables, in thematic maps and I wrote notes. I noted the amount of space taken up by each code to see which were emerging as weak, strong or very strong themes. I began to play around to see if the largest sub-themes acted as "gathering themes" or "candidate themes" (2006, p.91). I had ten of these candidate themes initially. Further thought and writing, and the use of thematic diagrams, refined this down to four.

Those "miscellaneous" themes which emerged were put to one side until I had finished the entire process. I then returned to them to decide on their relevance and usefulness (2006, p.91). I felt it important to reflect on and interrogate examples of inconsistencies, negative instances, contradictions to the dominant themes and narratives emerging (Seale, 2004, p.313; Squire, 2013, p.57). These included the sisters who found the experience of teaching very positive, and as apostolic in nature, and also those who didn't appreciate the understanding of "presence". Although the initial stage of data analysis is to develop a set of codes or themes which reflect the research objectives, the deductive nature of VCRM also helped reflect a wider range of issues which emerged, both expected and unexpected.

Second interviews

From a methodological perspective, it was important to obtain some form of participant validation. Holloway and Jefferson (2000 cited in Squire, 2013, p.56) made use of their second round of interviews "to return to points in the first interview that their theoretical frame pointed to as significant". The main purpose of this second round was to hear the participants' response to my re-interpretation of their stories and to deepen the conversation. Therefore, I prepared for the participants a short summary of the four main themes that had emerged from their transcripts and included some anonymised quotations by way of illustration (see appendix four).

Member-checking or participant validation is widely viewed by feminists and others (Creswell, 2003; Swinton and Mowat, 2006 and Hesse-Biber, 2007; Silverman, 2014) as an opportunity to address participants' lack of power in the research process. However, Patai, (1991 cited in Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.128) and Stacey (1991 cited in Mauthner and Doucet, 2006, p.39 and cited in Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.128) warn that such attempts may serve only as a "feel good measure". We may fool ourselves into thinking that this stage balances out the power issue when Stacey (1991 cited in Mauthner and Doucet, 2006, p.39) warns that it may actually do damage to the participants. Patai further notes that in trying to gain participant approval, the researcher "may forgo his or her intellectual responsibility of interpretation to gain rapport and approval" (1991 cited in Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.128).

I was certainly nervous when I contacted the participants for the second time. I wrote in my research journal on December 10th 2016 that I was conscious of wanting to produce an analysis which endorsed their own sense of the value of religious life and that this endorsement from an outsider might be particularly important to them. I was aware of balancing my desire to make them feel involved in some way, whether sought or not, against my need for independence as a researcher. I was conscious of feeling relieved when the initial comments received were positive. In fact, all sisters were happy to be further consulted and the majority of comments in response to the content were very positive. Any negative responses are addressed in Chapters Four to Seven.

The method of analysis followed that I used for the first round. I coded the transcripts using the coding structure already established, but due to the deepening of the conversation, some new codes emerged, and some existing ones were modified. I had also posed four particular questions to the sisters, asking them to reflect a little on the process, and to engage with two new questions which had emerged for me (see

appendix four). I also analysed the data in relation to the responses to these four questions.

Conclusion

In designing a method of data collection and analysis for this study, my first consideration was to identify methods which would provide a structured framework and rigour for the analysis. I understood that those drawn from the social sciences, namely the VCRM and thematic coding would perform this function. However, as the women's voices opened up to me, I realised the limit of these tools. I wanted to reflect the depth and the holiness of the encounters at the heart of this study and was aware of a desire to reflect and express the theological nature of the process. In adding a third element, by incorporating my practice of *Lectio Divina* into the data analysis, and the analysis into my practice of *Lectio Divina*, I have sought to make this stage of the study "theological all the way through" (Cameron, et al., 2010, p.51). The combining of these three elements provided a method which reflected my experience of the process to date and confirmed my growing understanding of the Godly nature of my research practice.

CHAPTER FOUR: Framing the apostolic becoming

Introduction

This chapter, and the three which follow explore the experience and engagement of the research participants with the concept "apostolic" throughout the course of their lives. Over these four chapters I will relate the findings of this study to the stated research questions. The structure of these chapters follows the chronology of the women's lives comprising what I term conversion narratives, after "a journey of continual conversion, of exclusive dedication to the love of God" (*Vita Consecrata*, #109).

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First to anchor chapters Five to Seven in an exploration of the sisters' understanding of the impulse of their "apostolic" call and second, to introduce the concepts which arise in later chapters. The chapter begins to present the study's findings, through discussion of two narrative threads which emerged in the study, both focussing on the sisters' experience of and response to "apostolic". The first is that of the initial call and the motivations for entering religious life and re-interpreted by them at this later stage in their lives. The second thread charts how the nature of this call and response has changed and deepened throughout their lives. Furthermore, the chapter uncovers the sisters' struggles with the term apostolic as they search for language to name this way life in terms of who they are becoming. It also begins to establish how the sisters' understanding of an apostolic vocation shifted from one associated with works and purpose to one rooted in an experience of self which becomes through helping others become.

Making meaning of vocation

The call narratives

The first of the narratives explored in this chapter are the sisters' call narratives. Exploring these will shed light on what the "apostolic impulse" meant to sisters at an earlier stage in their lives and begin to address the first of the study's research questions. Unsurprisingly all of the sisters told some form of story of their initial vocation. These cover a period between where this awareness of call was first acknowledged and/or articulated up until their entering their congregation.

Chapter Three documented that I did not specifically seek to explore the sisters' call to religious life, nor their choice of congregation. Rather, I viewed these as opening or introductory questions. I had perhaps thought it possible to explore where the women have come to, without considering the journey. However, many of the sisters either

chose to begin their stories at this point, or returned to it at a later stage, which shows its importance.

The first reading of the VCRM, in particular, led me to identify the central and sub-narratives of the sisters' religious lives. Stories of conversion rose up out of the texts to confront my assumptions about their vocation as a place at which they have arrived. The narratives that emerged showed that vocation or call is not a once-in-a-lifetime event, or static phenomena. It is a life-long lived response, experienced and developed on a daily basis which unfolds before us as we live it. "I hear my vocation in the harmony between the path that is before me and the mystery that is me" (Hahnenberg, 2010, p.156). In this, Hahnenberg distinguishes the Protestant theology of vocation as a call to place from which we respond, from a Catholic theological understanding "as the place to which God calls" (2010, p.46–47). It is a call to movement, journeying and conversion. This struck me powerfully from the sisters' interviews; their experience of call is one of ongoing daily conversion, which will continue till the very end of their lives, and this shaped my awareness of, and openness to, their narratives.

In the sisters' stories, we see "the articulation or development of meaning" (Squire, 2013, p.48) as they explore how to speak of their vocation. Within their responses I recognised a form of sequence in time and sometimes place indicating "the line of thematic and causal progression" (Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou, 2013, p.2). My approach to interpretation of the data is outlined in Chapter Three and I have sought to work in the gap(s) between the living and recounting of the women's experiences and my own re-interpretation of these, beginning to hear them as narrative selves. In this, I am adding my own layer of meaning acknowledging Squire's claim that narrative is "always multiple, socially constructed and constructing, reinterpreted and reinterpretable" (2013, p.5) as my and their understanding of their vocation is deepened.

Context

As this study considers the lives of a particular generation of religious women, and is, therefore, historicised, the context cannot be ignored. Each individual sisters' call was influenced by their own situation and background and I attempt to locate the narratives in their varied contexts. However, a detailed consideration of the historical context in which the sisters' vocations can be placed, is beyond the scope of the study[21].

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[21] For a detailed exploration of the context in Ireland in which five of the sisters entered see McKenna (2003 and 2006) and for the English context over that period, see O'Brien (1999).

It can be difficult to disentangle cause and effect when exploring motivation to enter religious life, particularly when sisters are looking back 50 years or so, and re-interpreting that call. Nonetheless, two clear motivations can be identified: the desire to be a missionary and family influence on the choice of congregation. Both can be situated in the wider socio-cultural context of the period, the Church and women's religious orders.

Of the twelve sisters, five were born and grew up in Ireland and either entered there, or came to England to enter[22]. The other seven were born and grew up in England and Scotland. They all entered religious life between 1945 and 1964, over a period of 20 years following the Second World War. Seven of the sisters were between the ages of sixteen and twenty when they entered, and the remaining five between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-seven. Out of the 12 sisters, 11 were themselves educated by sisters at either primary or secondary level, or both. All but one completed a minimum of secondary education, with several completing higher education in the form of either a university degree (three sisters) or specialist teacher training (two sisters). The extent to which they were educated by religious and the fact that they were able to "look around" often in local congregations is itself evidence of the widespread presence and numbers of religious in Ireland and England over this time period (Walsh, 2002, Ch.1).

In all these countries, the Catholic Church was a considerable physical presence in the lives of these women (Malone, 2003, p.221). This was particularly the case in Ireland (McKenna, 2003, p.299) which would often have had several convents in each small town, with the Presentation sisters and the Sisters of Mercy being the most widespread (Malone, 2003, p.221), running the majority of schools for girls. Sr Kathleen, for example, mentions there being several convents near her home. The Catholic Church would have been part of the very air that the young women breathed, brought up in Catholic households, in Catholic communities and educated in Catholic schools. This was certainly a "religious atmosphere" (McKenna, 2003, p.229).

Catholicism was not identified with state or national identity in England and Wales in the way it was in Ireland by the early twentieth century (Inglis, 1998; Donnelly, 2000 cited in McKenna, 2003, p.299). However, due partly to the Catholic emancipation act of 1829 and the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in England, Catholicism had become physically very present in England and Scotland by the early to mid-twentieth century. Churches and convents were an increasingly visible and numerous element of the geography of small towns (O'Brien, 1999; Walsh, 2002, pp.20-24; Mangion, 2010).

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[22] A phenomenon extensively researched by McKenna (2003).

Religious life in England certainly, and Scotland was consolidating its presence and expanding its activities. Like the Church, it was growing in confidence (O'Brien, 2017, p.17), as if it had always been there, and would always be there, having what O'Brien calls a "rock-like immobility" (O'Brien, 1999, p.15).

The women in this study were part of the "steady and sizeable flow of well-catechised Catholic young women into novitiates" (O'Brien, 1999, p.17) as the numbers entering in the UK peaked around the middle of the twentieth century (Mangion, 2010). In Ireland, the period of the 1930s to the 1960s forms part of "the peak period of vocations for the religious life amongst women" (Mckenna, 2003, p.26) and vocations reached their actual peak in 1967 with more than 19,000 women religious in Ireland by that time (McKenna, 2003, p.296).

The lure of the missions

A strong motivating factor for at least half of the sisters in this study was the desire to go on the missions. As part of that expansion of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, women's religious orders moved into what were then seen as "mission lands" (Flannery, 1997; O'Brien, 1999; Raftery, 2015). Having established educational and other institutions in countries beyond Europe, sisters frequently returned to their native countries (here, the UK and Ireland) to recruit young women to join the order and serve these institutions. Raftery (2015) has documented a well-established and structured pattern of such recruitment in Ireland certainly up until the First World War and after, as experienced by several of the sisters in this study. Sr Maeve had already decided against entering with the sisters who had educated her, but said of them:

> They would be the ones who introduced us to the nuns coming round in Ireland looking for vocations. They would always welcome them and bring them into the classroom.

Three out of the five Irish sisters spoke of this call to be a missionary, but it wasn't only limited to those growing up in Ireland. O'Brien (1999; 2017) notes the influence of encyclicals and appeals by Popes Benedict XV and Pius XI in encouraging this movement among sisters. It was at this time that Sr Pamela's congregation opened their first mission in Africa. McKenna (2006) explores the appeal of "the missions" among the women she interviewed, noting both the romance of saving heathens and teaching young children, and the appeal of the foreign and exotic, which she ascribes to a sense of adventure. Flannery writes of "the image of the 'Black Babies'" (1997,

p.11) prevalent in the Ireland of this time, and Sr Martina recalls being influenced by this missionary fervour:

> I was hoping to go on the missions… because we used to call them the "black babies" and it was always in the book about the girls going on the missions and that was really what attracted me to them.

And Sr Kathleen, who also grew up in Ireland:

> The house was coming down with missionary magazines; you'd need to be in Ireland when we were growing up; we sold missionary magazines; we raised money for the missions; it was constantly before us and I had visions of myself going out to the lepers like Damian [laughter] or something like that. That was the draw. Not to a life of prayer – that never entered my head. It was to do missionary work, you know… helping these people.

In actual fact, only one of these sisters was to have her desire fulfilled; Sr Kathleen spent over forty years living overseas before eventually returning to the UK. Sr Martina entered a congregation believing she would go on the missions, but was never offered the opportunity. She talked about this repeatedly during her interview:

> It was like we were taken in the wrong, but there was nothing we could do unless we wanted to leave… I know the two of us said it doesn't matter, we made our vows to God, so what does it matter? We are here for God, so, there was no more about it and that was it. We didn't go on the missions….

Family influence

A second factor which influenced the women's decision not only to enter religious life but their choice of congregation, was the attitude of their families. Half of the sisters described this choice being influenced by their families. For at least two sisters, this family influence both shaped and thwarted the (then) young girl's desire to go on the missions in particular. Sr Beatrice, from the north of England experienced a very strong sense of call to a missionary order: an attraction which seems to be both to the exoticism of a particular order and to the missions itself:

> I was always attracted to missionary work. The White Sisters – they had a gorgeous white habit. Myself and my sister went to what they used to call gospel evenings…They were marvellous nuns and they came from all over the globe…and I was extremely attracted to their way of life and I thought "Oh I'd love to go out to Africa".

However, her mother intervened and put a stop to this particular dream:

> Three of those nuns came to see my mother….she said to me "oh you can't go
> with those" she said "they can't speak English" – And she said "no", so that
> gave me a lot of problems…And I went to a priest and I said "I want to become
> a White Sister; I want to go out to Africa and nurse", you know, like Fr Damian
> with the lepers. And he said "well, if I were you, I'd listen to your mother". They
> were words I did not want to hear, let me tell you.

Her mother did not stop her entering altogether, but family did impact significantly on
her choice of order:

> My mother had two cousins with the Order I'm in now. One of them came to see
> me and I talked to her. My mother would have been quite pleased, she said if
> I'd entered with them… They understood the kind of person I was; they were
> Irish. And so I read the life of our founder and I was quite attracted to her and I
> thought "isn't she a wonderful woman. Isn't she brave?"

Other writers (O'Brien, 1999, p.18; McKenna, 2006; Raftery, 2015, p.722) have also
found that the Church was such a dominant influence on the lives of Catholics both in
Ireland and in the UK, that families often had several members already priests and
religious. Sr Kathleen was influenced by having family members who were
missionaries overseas, but also who were in the congregation she eventually went on
to join, with an uncle on the missions; one aunt in Ireland, one in North America, three
in England and her father's cousin in Argentina.

A call to an occupation?

All the sisters in the study offered more than one reason for entering religious life.
Amongst these varied and multi-layered motivations, can any evidence be found of an
early acknowledgment/understanding of and attraction to an "apostolic impulse" or is
there more evidence of an attraction to a particular profession such as teaching or
nursing?

McKenna (2003; 2006) describes Ireland in the period from the 1930s to the 1960s as
a place where the belief that a woman's place was in the home, with children, was
protected by state legislation. She notes that opportunities for professional training for
women were limited but that religious life itself was regarded as a profession (2006,
p.198). In Britain, in contrast, this was already changing. In 1950s Britain, the gendered
stereotypes of husband as breadwinner and wife as full-time housewife (Spencer,
2005, p.1) continued to dominate but were increasingly found in tension with other

societal changes. Since the 1944 Education Act, educational opportunities for girls and women had opened up, and Britain was experiencing full employment in the period following the Second World War (Spencer, 2005). The first women's colleges in Oxford University were established in the late nineteenth century[23] and university education for women became more widespread, especially after the first world war, although it remained limited for many years (O'Brien, 2017, p.296), often by class (Spencer, 2005). This new development though is reflected in the levels of educational attainment some of the sisters had reached before entering in the fields of nursing, teaching or office work, the largest fields of employment for women in the early 1950s (Todd and Young, 2012). It is likely, therefore, that all could have trained for and entered into a profession but that, on marriage, they would probably have given up work and become a dependent wife and mother. However, this also was changing, as by the 1960s, many married women and mothers began to return to part-time work (Myrdal and Klein cited in Spencer 2005, p.12; Todd and Young, 2012).

In the narratives, some sisters express an interest in a particular occupation, most notably nursing and teaching. Four sisters wanted to nurse, but were told when they entered that this wasn't needed. Others, as seen above, expressed a clear longing for the missions, and also possibly nursing. However, it was difficult to separate out the extent to which women were attracted to a congregation because of a specific apostolate from a more general impulse to serve and the desire for God. Two of the sisters spoke of having a "dual call": for Sr Martina, it was: "I wanted God and I wanted to go to the missions". Sr Dorothy, echoing the fascination with the divine referred to in *Vita Consecrata* (#17 – 19), the call was to teach and to be closer to God:

> It's a teaching congregation; that's what they do and I'd be getting to know more about God and having a spiritual life; both those things attracted me. … wanting to teach and the wanting to know more about the transcendent, or the spiritual life.

It is difficult to establish a relationship between a sister's attraction to a particular congregation and her attraction or not to their apostolate. It might be easy to ask why enter a teaching order if you didn't want to teach. Three of the sisters were already trained to teach, or already teaching; they were clear they wanted to continue in that field, and this was part of the appeal of the order they joined.

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[23] http://www.ox.ac.uk/about/oxford-people/women-at-oxford

Several other sisters, such as Sr Collette, said they had no real thoughts of a profession before entering, either being open to whatever would be needed, or experiencing a strong call to join a particular stable community, where they would likely teach, even if this was not what they felt drawn to.

Reasons for attraction to a particular congregation were similarly varied. Sr Kathleen's choice was influenced by family and her desire to get away, out of Ireland, to somewhere where she wasn't known. For the majority, the attraction to a particular congregation was experienced in very human terms; Srs Maeve, Pamela and Bernadette described the sisters they met from that congregation as being "fun" and "human". Other congregations were variously described as being open or broad-minded (Srs Dorothy and Clare); considerate of their families (Srs Collette and Maeve); encouraging you to develop as an individual, with little pressure towards uniformity. Others said that they just felt at home (Sr Dorothy); for others there was a sense of familiarity and even security during a difficult period in their life (Sr Susan).

Most of the sisters had not been attracted to monastic or contemplative life: seven sisters said definitely not, giving reasons such as fearing being confined to one place and one way of life, or even that the only monastery they entered smelt too stuffy (Sr Jayne). Two had considered it and rejected it, but there was still some lingering sense of something lost, or an unfulfilled desire. Sr Collette said that she had always wanted both: the prayer and the activity. Two of the sisters entered a stable community anyway, and Sr Anne describes this attraction.

> The attraction to religious life was the personal relationship with our Lord, Jesus Christ, which was very personal and my sense of call was that it was there, to which I was being called and which is where I would find Him …that's where I was being invited to live it out.

A call to serve? An apostolic impulse?

The majority of sisters spoke of a desire to serve others and to do something useful with their lives. Sr Bernadette experienced a call to attend to the needs of others and was attracted to the sisters' strong sense of social justice.

> Although the [congregation] nuns' charism is teaching, and I was coming out to be a teacher, I did not see myself being one just like that, because my father was one who always was in the Catholic men's society and studied a lot on the social encyclicals etc. - and so we had been brought up, all of us, to look at social problems and to think about how you could alleviate things like that.

For Sr Clare:

> Well, I didn't want to teach. I didn't want to be in a classroom. I didn't mind what I did, as long as it contributed to the overall aims of [Congregation]… It was a call to give up the life I was leading and to do something purposeful. [ ] Well, to have some…some goal, something to aim at.

Sr Jayne explained:

> When I was about fourteen or fifteen, I had decided I wanted to do something useful with my life. My eldest sister was definitely going to train as a doctor ….but I would like to be a nurse…

Several of the sisters understood their call in terms of service, and the issue this highlights in relation to language is discussed at the end of this chapter. The final chapters of this study will also consider some of the consequences of the attraction to "service" and "usefulness" later in the sisters' lives.

A call to God

No matter what other motives were apparent, the desire to know or to develop a closer relationship with God, identified also by Schneiders (2001) and Wittberg (2006), emerged from the sisters' interviews. The primary call here was to give their lives to God: to give themselves back to God in return for what they had received. Thus, the narrative of self-gift begins early on in their lives, and in their conversion stories. Sr Anne again:

> ….For me it was the relationship with Christ…And that was personal…. And I suppose it's one's understanding of God's relationship with us and what God wants for all of us which is for me the apostolic bit

Sr Jayne (continued from p.79):

> But somehow in the meantime I thought, no. I had this idea of really doing something for God, because I had quite a close relationship with God at that time…. God, Jesus – meant a lot to me… I had this feeling that I wanted to give myself and do something for the God who'd given me so much. Yes, I think those words – what return can I make to the Lord for all he has given to me?

When I asked Sr Jayne to what extent she was aware of a call to a specifically "apostolic" congregation, she responded:

I definitely thought of any religious as giving their life to God. It's appreciation for all He has given to me and what can I do in return? well, He can use me… I didn't think of becoming a religious as really teaching people about Jesus, although I had ambitions as a child to go out to Africa as a missionary – that was a vague thing, but it was more that I was there, that I was giving what I had - my life, my time and He could use it in any way and if I was useful, fair enough.

Sr Susan describes the unfolding of her own call:

I think it was probably familiarity. I think that there are a lot of hidden motivations. I was twenty-three… and I could probably tell you NOW what my hidden motivation was, but I didn't recognise it as such when I joined the community. I think I used language like "I think it was God's will" and "I heard God speaking to me" – just traditional language. I wouldn't describe it in those terms now because I think probably one of the big motivations was that we'd had a family break-up and an insecure childhood and therefore to join the community which had given me a sense of belonging and continuity and security was a good place to come back to.

Both Sr Jayne and Sr Clare state clearly that they now understand or reinterpret their motives for entering quite differently. Schneiders similarly found that "most sisters would now repudiate those original motivations" (2001, p.13), as we recognise vocation to be a living, developing phenomenon. However, the point is that the place or the life itself provided the sister with the starting place the anchor from which to venture out and explore this vocation.

Narratives of a changed understanding

This next section will explore the second of the two narrative perspectives featured in this chapter. This is the story of how the sisters' understanding of "apostolic" changed and developed through their lives and illustrates how the sisters arrived at the understanding they have of their vocation in later life. It therefore contributes to answering the first of the study's research questions, and begins to address elements of the second.

In understanding a narrative as a story "that gives shape, significance and intentionality to experience" (Slee, 2004, p.67), I identified that 10 of the 12 sisters present a clear thread or "a patterned whole" (Slee, 2004, p.67) of how their response to their "call" to live an active life has changed. The narratives are set against the backdrop of the post-

Conciliar period in religious life, being lived out and responded to both in the Church in their country of residence and to the changes taking place within their own congregations. It is hard to attribute the changed understanding of "apostolic" to a specific event but many sisters, mentioned particular experiences which took on significance, as something which triggered a shift in their understanding of their vocation. Srs Anne, Martina, Pamela and Susan said that a key event was going on sabbatical, and as part of that, on long retreat (usually the Ignatian Thirty Days Retreat). However the shift in understanding took place over a longer period of time, and took the form of a recognition of a growing or changing awareness within themselves, often set within a process of active discernment: listening to what God wanted of them.

From apostolates to individualised ministries

The sisters in this study lived through a period when, from the 1960s onwards, "the very meaning of religious life was reinterpreted" (O'Brien, 2016, p.402). The changes which took place particularly in the 20 years following the Second Vatican Council affected every aspect of their lives as religious sisters[24], particularly their occupations, as they made the shift from congregational apostolates to individualised ministries. For 10 of the 12 sisters in this study teaching, or education, was their main occupation up until formal retirement. Seven of them either taught in their congregations' own schools, or (as with Sr Kathleen) teaching together with her own sisters in a diocesan-owned school in a mission setting. These are among the last generation of sisters in this country to have this experience of congregational apostolates. Sr Collette, for example, was the last sister in her province to teach in school.

For most of the sisters, this move from "apostolates" to ministries was linked to, and part of, the change taking place within their congregation or community. As noted in Chapter One, the post-Conciliar period was, for many congregations, a time when they responded not only to the call to *aggiornamento* but that of *ressourcement*[25], urged on by *Perfectae Caritatis* (PC) (1965). PC called for the recognition of the congregation's founding spirit and aims: "let their founders' spirit and special aims they set before them as well as their sound traditions - all of which make up the patrimony of each institute - be faithfully held in honor" (PC, 2b). This was in contrast to the norms of the earlier

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[24] For in-depth explorations of the changes, see Sweeney, 1999.
[25] See Chapter Two of this study.

Conditae a Christo (1900) which sought to impose some common and standardised forms of life upon the congregations[26].

The initial response did not immediately transform these congregations into the ministerial religious life of which Schneiders writes (2000; 2009b), but it did lead to an ongoing series of reviews of their apostolates as sisters sought to explore and put into practice what their founding charism had to offer to the contemporary world (O'Murchu, 1989; Flannery, 1997; O'Brien, 1999; Schneiders, 2000; 2001; Wittberg, 2006; Mangion, 2015). Over the period from the late 1960s up until the current time, change for these congregations has, rather ironically, become a constant. O'Brien (2017) notes at least three reviews and renewal of ministry undertaken by the British province of the Daughters of Charity between 1971 and 2009. In this study, two sisters talked specifically about their congregation carrying out a review or "audit" of ministries which led to the first of what would have been several changes in ministry for sisters. As Sr Bernadette explained:

> We did a ministry evaluation back in 1981 and what we did was to get every sister to look at their ministry in the light of Justice and Peace….and were they actually serving the poor and then a couple of sisters came out of their ministry – one or two went to teach in areas that they knew were poor –and others changed direction and went into social work.

The shift out of institutional apostolates in schools, hospitals and orphanages to more individualised ministries was driven both by demographic changes (fewer, elder sisters) and the embracing of renewal (O'Brien, 1999; Wittberg, 2006). Schneiders sees the desire for congregations to "jettison baggage" (2001, p.271) as the main motive for divesting themselves of large institutions. Srs Bernadette, Collette, Dorothy and Beatrice were happy in teaching but even so, for them and for other sisters, coming out of the school environment was liberating. Both Srs Anne and Susan either asked, or responded eagerly to an invitation to explore and follow their own interests and talents outside of the school environment. For Sr Bernadette, coming out of school meant the opportunity to work with women in inter-faith engagement; for Sr Maeve, to work in catechesis with adults, and for Sr Beatrice, to run a retreat centre.

The rise of the justice and peace paradigm

We see from Sr Bernadette's words above that concern for social justice was also a motivation that drew congregations away from the maintenance of institutions. The

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[26] Ibid.

period of change and exploration in the post-conciliar period coincided with what Van Heijst (2008) has termed the rise of the justice paradigm, as the concept of "charity" came to be seen as old-fashioned and paternalistic. "From the 1960s onwards, the new slogan claimed 'no charity but social rights'" (2008, pp.356-57). This growing interest in social rights and justice was fostered by a changing environment within the Church internationally and the publication of *Justice in the World* (1971) by the World Synod of Catholic Bishops, a document which embraced elements of liberation theology. This gave the sisters' movement further impetus and Flannery (1997, p.36) notes the rise of a similar justice-focussed movement in Ireland.

An emerging preference to attend to social justice or justice- and peace-related issues which moves to the forefront of sisters' lives as a result of their lived experience is a significant element in the narratives of four of the sisters. Sr Susan is one of several who describe how they began to feel the "itch" of concern for social justice, and experienced this as a tension with teaching in a private school.

> Well one of the things that happened early on, during my teaching, I had become very convinced about the whole thing about justice and peace and in those days [the 1970s] it was considered a bit fringy and freaky…you know how things come about gradually…, but in the days we are talking about, I was straining at the leash…

She continues with her story by recalling that the unease continued through 1976–1977, when she took a sabbatical, out of school, and out of the community, but when she returned, she continued to experience the tension between her growing interest in justice and peace and staying on in school. She named her efforts to live with this sense of contraction "squaring the circle" and it continued for some years until an opportunity to move presented itself.

The mission context

For Srs Kathleen and Pamela, the two sisters in the study who served for many years as missionaries overseas, this new awareness of a justice and peace perspective mirrored their own personal response to the poverty and injustice they saw around them in their "reading or scrutinising the signs of the times", as encouraged by *Gaudium et Spes* (1965, #4). Sr Pamela also experienced a sense of contradiction between being in a school for children of wealthy parents, and her awareness of a call to respond to needs she saw in the community, and "to begin to address needs that no one else was meeting and their congregations had not yet corporately addressed" (Schneiders, 2001, p.236).

I said to myself after ten years "what am I doing here? Whether I'm here or not these children are going to get an education because their parents have money. Their parents are moving in high society and there's so much poverty, so WHY am I here?" So, I thought the only other thing I can do here now is - I need to make them aware that the [Country X] they know is not the only [Country X] and they need to be doing something for the people less fortunate than them – the disadvantaged – to awaken their social conscious. So that's what I started to try and do.

This impulse felt by Sr Pamela led her to ask to be transferred into a school in one of the local slum communities where she became involved with a movement of priests and religious who were prepared to put their lives on the line to fight for justice. This was a profoundly transformative experience for her and one which ultimately took her back into education, but to work from a very different perspective of "conscientisation" and education for justice.

Sr Kathleen taught in a country badly affected by the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, and her growing awareness of the need to respond was nested within the experience of the sisters who were on mission with her.

Then, we had the AIDS epidemic which hit [Country Y] very, very badly and it was a time when all the congregations were looking for new ways of being and this really challenged us. People were just dying of AIDS; it was just beginning to get very bad.

Similarly, Sr Pamela, when asked what prompted her to think differently, responded simply: "What I saw all around me." Her gradual awakening to the poverty and injustice around her was further nurtured by the Latin American Bishops Conference embracing the home-grown liberation theology movement, with the expressed preferential option for the poor embraced through statements issued by two episcopal conferences held at Medellín, Colombia (1968) and Puebla, Mexico (1979):

We worked a lot with those documents - Puebla and Medellín; those documents were very powerful and we used those in church and in school.

Sr Kathleen and Sr Pamela's experiences of awakening to the poverty and injustice around them, and the needs of the most marginalised, affected both of them deeply and shaped the remainder of their lives and their understanding of what it means to be an apostolic religious.

Back to the UK

The majority of the sisters in this study, however, spent their lives in the UK and Ireland and although this setting may seem to lack the stark contrast between poverty and wealth found in developing countries, and the apparently clearer moral choices faced in such situations, the sisters nonetheless often found themselves part of dramatic shifts and movements. The impulse for social justice is equally evident in these shifts, as seen in the experiences of two UK-based sisters in two different congregations. Both congregations underwent significant upheaval between the 1970s and 2005, when private schools and institutions were handed over to lay control as the congregations re-focussed their mission on work with the poor and marginalised.

Sr Anne describes the impetus for the profound change process which took place in her own community

> … we had been involved in education, but since we didn't have people who came to join us, we didn't have the personnel to go on running a large independent school, which is why we decided to hand it over to lay governors, so it did mean that we had to find our way into a way of being that was not associated with a particular apostolate, if you like to call it in the old fashioned sense…

She goes on to say that the community experienced:

> …the call to be apostolic in a different way… we were already beginning to get the idea of having smaller groups in areas which we identified as areas of deprivation, so it was a big shift from running our own private school into situations of deprivation which required that we use not necessarily specifically the skills and experience we'd gained in the school but skills and experience which could be adapted to the needs of the surrounding areas.

Sr Anne found teaching children very challenging, and she was delighted to have the opportunity to be involved in a new congregational ministry: opening a centre for spiritual retreats and education. Both her and the community's lives changed radically over a period of ten years and, as a result, led to a very significant change in their self-understanding.

> One of the things that we have re-discovered is the true character of what it means to be a [Sister of X] which is to be among the people, to be people of prayer and to have this community life and be there at the service of the people among whom we live. So, there's definitely been a shift in how we understand ourselves.

Sr Beatrice taught until the statutory retirement age. She describes the movement through several stages of development of "apostolic" religious life in her congregation, from a semi-monastic institutional life, to external apostolates, to how she now lives, in her late eighties, in a small "inserted" community on a housing estate.

> …the way we used to be as apostolic religious, we were monastic religious and our doing was inside and not so much as an evangelisation or a thrust towards people but a thrust towards first of all cleaning our houses and making it beautiful, praying and sharing among ourselves, very good, all good things but that was in the beginning many, many years ago.

> Today I live in this small house, well we call it small, it is four bedrooms and most of our families think it is quite big. We are in this house… in a housing estate very close to our neighbours.…This is a completely new experience for us and I would say in our congregation we are an ageing congregation this side of the Atlantic anyway, this is the future, the thing is smaller houses close to our neighbours, close to people we serve and also people we are just friendly with and that is a tremendous apostolate.

Naming their way of life

The preceding section has presented some of the events, change processes and movements shaping the sisters' lives and bringing them to a new, deeper awareness of what it means to be apostolic. It has also highlighted two important elements of this awareness: the growing inclination to pay attention to issues of social justice; and the importance of relationships with people whom they encounter as their lives have become more "ordinary".

The introduction to the chapter points to a third phenomenon which has seemed to emerge from the data, which is that many of the sisters seemed to have difficulty in naming the way of life they have chosen, and who it is that they are called to be, particularly at this later stage in their lives. In this next section, I want specifically to link some of the change in the sisters' lives shown above, both with how their understanding of apostolic changed, and how they struggle to name what they do and how or who they are. I would argue that the changes in way of life experienced by the sisters are reflected in how they respond to the word "apostolic" and search for other ways of describing the reality of their call and response.

When asked what they understand by "apostolic", five of the sisters immediately explained it as a way of life rooted in the lives of the apostles: Sr Anne, for example:

I understand "apostolic" to encompass a way of living which is rooted in the models that are given to us in the letters of Paul, particularly, in the teachings of the Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, specifically.

Although this was a relatively common response, many sisters were either negative in their response to the word, or were reluctant to use it. Sr Clare, when asked simply said "I have no idea…I don't know what it means" and Sr Kathleen said "Even now the word apostolic, I never think of it; it never crosses my mind." Sr. Beatrice felt it was "narrowly religious" but happily used the term "apostolic thrust".

Several sisters noted that it just feels plain old-fashioned, reflecting the journey they themselves have undertaken to individualised ministries, for example Sr Dorothy:

We use the word ministry; we say ministry. (*CS: Do you ever use the word "apostolates"?)* Sr Dorothy: No, not now. It just seems a bit of an old-fashioned word…a bit dated.

Sr Beatrice similarly:

Apostolate is a nice word because it is like the apostles. I rather quite like it but it has gone very old fashioned now, but we talk mainly about ministering because that is much more like a servant.

However, reflecting on the journeys they have experienced, several sisters demonstrated a very much changed understanding of the "apostolic" call and looked back on the former (or still prevalent) understanding as being too narrow. Sr Susan obtained permission to take a sabbatical from teaching to go and experience a new ministry:

...by the time I came back [mid-1990s], the community was being facilitated through our exploration of what we were doing about this change in the community and it became an experimental house. But before that, I think perhaps I'd understood what apostolic in a too channelled way, like teaching, nursing, that sort of way.

Many sisters rejected the association between "ministry" and "doing", usually in the sense of "out there" helping others. Sr Kathleen said she used to understand it as "going out" and "helping these people" and now she laughs at the language she used because "apostolic" for her now means something less "done to" people and more "being with".

Sisters refer to how their earlier religious lives were often dominated by a "work ethic", often firmly planted during their novitiate. Sr Beatrice describes how they used to be driven and defined by this "work ethic":

> We always got the impression that you had to be 100 per cent into the work ethic. I always felt that this was wrong because I felt that, if you were a sister… I could do that anywhere, but, within the work that you're given to do – like I was a teacher, there are an awful lot of possibilities for actual apostolic thrust in your work….. That work ethic always remained with me. If I wasn't there doing my job, I wasn't a proper nun. It sowed the seed of it, because it seemed to me that they put that at the top of their priorities."

Sr Kathleen agreed but used even stronger words:

> We felt that if you weren't working all the time, and by working I mean physically working, or out in a school or something, if you weren't occupying every moment of every day, then you were a failure.

When I mentioned the term "apostolic impulse" (after Sweeney, 2012, p.139) to Sr Susan in her first interview, she responded positively to my use of the word "impulse" as a way of shifting the emphasis away from task.

> The first thing that came to my mind was a charge of energy …which is I suppose an activation of the gift that one has, that I've received, but also knowing that that can go to and link with the other person - an interconnectedness… yes, make a connection with – relate – make a relationship with.

She continued:

> The word "impulse" actually helps enormously because it takes away the sense of work, in the sense of a defined work, so that's why this is really helpful because the apostolic impulse of our charism is to take out the good news that Jesus lives… and to use the word "impulse" rather than work, frees me…: enormously…

Most sisters noted that the use of "ministry" is now more widespread and were more positive about this, such as Sr Maeve, and Sr Beatrice, here:

> I think you can know what ministry is and do it, without using that word, but I can't think of a substitute word. I certainly don't like apostolate. It's lifted from a book "apostolate" isn't it?

Sr Dorothy revealed mixed feelings:

> I can remember when the word "ministry" came in and it seemed to me stiff and
> artificial. I used to think of C of E clergymen having ministry but it's something
> that's come into the Catholic Church isn't it?... I used not to like the word
> ministry at all; it was years before I used it… but now I'm more comfortable with
> the word, but for years I didn't like it... I thought it was an affective sort of word
> for years.

However, other sisters have now also become less inclined to use the term "ministry" to
describe work or an occupation. Many have clearly begun to question the
appropriateness of the word and to explore how to talk about their "ministry" and their
"active" vocation as they have had to give up "active" ministry themselves, as seen in
Sr Jayne's response, and questioning of what this means for her future.

> I don't like this word ministry but to come to be of service to well.. hopefully to
> God, the Lord…but that has to come into the very word apostle this idea of
> being sent out to carry the message somewhere and that is where the problem
> of feeling you have got to have a special job to do, no matter how small or how
> big the very idea of being apostolic comes in so how does it work out with being
> apostolic to the end?

She continues:

> An awful lot was made of it in our, may I say recent years, I am going back 20
> years or so or maybe after the change, what was your ministry, you had to have
> a definite ministry…why don't I like ministry? Because there was too much
> emphasis on the doing something so it has left a legacy of feeling that unless
> you have, yes that connection with people outside your small group that you live
> in, in community that unless you are doing something, it is this doing thing that
> is my objection to the word ministry because I am linking it all the time with a
> definite job, and that unless you are doing that you are no good, you are not
> being apostolic.

In her struggle to describe what she "does" now that she is largely housebound, one
sister singles out her spiritual accompaniment work from the rest of how she is in
community. She uses the term "recognisable ministry" to describe it. This provoked
some marked reactions when reflected back to sisters in the second round of
interviews. They seemed to associate "recognisable ministry" with apostolates or work
and their discomfort perhaps again suggests that continued use of "ministry" can be

problematic for older sisters who struggle with a loss of a sense of purpose and value to the congregation:

Sr Beatrice explained her view:

> We came from a situation that we had recognisable ministries, teaching, nursing as you say "walking with people" giving them, helping them in those many, different ways. Many religious… we.. have experienced it when they retire from that or are no longer able to do it physically because they are not strong enough. They feel of no account and stay living in the past - oh I used to do all that, it was lovely and now I don't do anything.

Sr Dorothy similarly struggles with it, but finds no alternative

> I don't like the phrase, which comes in a few times – "recognisable ministry". I'm sure some people use it – some people know what it means. I know what it means, but I think it's a very…cold, stark phrase really. In fact, come to think of it, I'm beginning to not like the word "ministry" [laughs] but I don't know what I would use in its place.

Another sister felt disinclined to use either apostolic or ministry/ministerial, feeling that they both seem "confined", due to the association with work. Overwhelmingly, sisters resisted the association between either apostolic or ministry and "doing", particularly a specific work and articulated a concern for a balance between "being" and "doing". Sr Pamela noted that:

> Apostolic has so much more to do with being who you are than anything that you do and I would feel very much identified with that. Yes, I would.

This seemed to strike a chord with several sisters, but also to point to some confusion about language and terms used in relation to religious life for women. Interestingly some sisters recount how in the years following the Second Vatican Council and the call from PC to return to their founding charism, they were simply told that the nature and identity of the congregation had changed. Srs Jayne and Dorothy both relate having a visitor from the congregational leadership "telling" them that they were now returning to their roots as an apostolic congregation rather than being what they regarded as contemplative or semi-monastic, and this creating some considerable confusion. This reflects both the ambiguity of these terms and how little differentiation was made between "contemplative" and "monastic". It also reflects how congregations gradually were able to emerge from the uniformity imposed on them by *Conditae a Christo.*

Later in the women's religious lives, the nature of the apostolic life became more fully understood, particularly for those congregations who were "contemplatives in action" by virtue of their often newly re-discovered Ignatian charism. Thus, Sr Kathleen recounts:

> That was a period of criticism that we went through – that that's all you're interested in; that's what we were always hearing; it's not a matter of just doing; it's a matter of being as well and we were always told that we were contemplative religious as well as active, but they never explained what that was.

Some sisters reacted badly to hearing that they were now suddenly both contemplative as well as active, fearing that they didn't personally have a "contemplative" vocation. In a related point, several sisters described how the emphasis formerly placed on work and "helping", in the earlier stages of their religious life, had then shifted to "being", and it may be that this partly reflects the changing demographics of membership. Sr Beatrice also spoke about "guidance" from her community on the nature of their life:

> Now that's what we talked about and the emphasis always used to be on doing. Now it's much more on being.

However, as the congregations have worked to uncover their true nature and identity as intended by their foundress, returning *ad fontes*, the nature of their lives has become clearer. These words from Sr Dorothy capture the sense of balance between "doing" and "being" very well, as she read from her congregation's Constitutions:

> "The [congregation]'s primary mission is to live the incarnation by being God's merciful love in the world. This takes priority over any specific work" and I think that sums up very well the charism and what we are about, so the apostolic work – "live the incarnation by being G*od's merciful love."*

I would like to end this section with the voice of Sr. Anne. The excerpt is lengthy, but what she says seems to capture the dilemma the women face in naming:

> I know that the sort of traditional way of talking about apostolic ministry is rather narrowed down to people being actively outside; I would like an idea of apostolic ministry to embrace some of the more interior ways of being with people, so quite a lot of my time is taken up with individuals who come for spiritual direction and that's very private, but I still see it as apostolic ministry… if we narrow down apostolic ministry to a rather formalised concept, we would miss perhaps 90 per cent of what apostolic ministry can be.

I think therefore that my role is somehow to become, as a member of this community, a person who is a channel of the love of God. Richard Rohr has this wonderful image of the water wheel and I think that if the millpond is the damming up of God's love, it then turns the water wheel and that's me, and that then turns the mechanism which grinds the wheat, but the water flows on and it can feed another water wheel as well, so it's much more this, being a channel of the love and the grace of God.

She goes on to ask a very pertinent question.

I just wonder whether we have to find a completely new set of vocabulary, because if we use the words that have been applied to religious life in the past, they're freighted with quite a big weight – understanding – which has been transferred perhaps unknowingly to people in the twenty-first century.

Name and identity

It appears from the range of comments above that the sisters are uncertain what to call their form of life. It may be that this struggle to name and describe is gendered. Srs Beatrice and Dorothy explain ministry as "service" but they do not use the word "*diakonia*" – a contentious term in itself in the Catholic Church in relation to women's ministry[27]. Schneiders (2000; 2001; 2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2013) has done more than almost anyone to re-frame and re-name apostolic religious life for women, including claiming the use of the term "ministry". O'Brien (2015b) suggests that the naming of this form of life for women has long been problematic. She attributes this partly to the Church's reluctance to recognise this form of religious service by women in the world. This struggle is acknowledged and well documented (O'Murchu 1980; 1989; Wright, 1997; McNamara, 1998; O'Brien, 1999; 2017; Malone, 2003; Maher, 2011).

Sr Dorothy's association of the word "ministry" with male clergy (particularly in the Church of England) may illustrate this issue. Similarly, Sr Jayne admitting that she didn't have enough confidence in herself "to think that I could be an apostle" may be because of the historical association of this role with men. We do not know. This study lacks sufficient data to do anything other than ask whether this points to a specific experience of women religious rather than also of male religious.

It may also be that the difficulty in naming relates to the uncertainty of identity noted in Chapter One. Work has always been central to the identity of apostolic women

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[27] For a discussion of this see O'Brien 2015b.

religious (O'Murchu, 1980; Aschenbrenner, 1986; Maher, 2011). As women's apostolic congregations have emerged from their semi-monastic existence, the nature and role of work has changed as sisters have moved into individualised ministries. Wittberg argues that the move out of institutions with which congregations were often identified has caused the loss of clarity of identity (2006, p.59).

Schneiders, on the other hand, believes that this has strengthened the women's identity. In post-institutional religious life, she sees work as no longer "a secondary end, but absolutely central to their vocation and identity" (2013, pp.271-72). For her, the concept and experience of ministry has become central to the self-understanding of women in "ministerial" religious life; it was "not something they did to express who they were, but was intrinsic to who they were" (Schneiders, 2013, p.271–72).

The sisters' hesitancy to embrace either of the terms "apostolic" or "ministry" may indicate that they are still caught between the two worlds of post-institutional or ministerial religious life, particularly as they move into a stage of their live when their ministerial lives are not so obviously identifiable. They also question the long-held associations between work and identity; between doing and individual worth. Their responses seem to point to their seeking a way beyond the "being and doing" dichotomy discussed in Chapter One. This may be a consequence of the changes being forced upon the women through physical and social diminishment and through the declining membership of their congregations in the UK and Ireland, challenging long-held certainties. They highlight the question of whether religious life for women in this time and context is less about the binaries of being/doing or apostolic/contemplative, and even diminishment/vitality, and indeed less about "recognisable ministry" and more about ways of being such as witness, channels, signs, eschatology and most importantly witnessing as themselves.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have begun to address the first of my research questions in asking what sisters understand by "apostolic" and "apostolic impulse" and how these relate to their identity and their understanding of their vocation. I have explored their initial call to religious life and the extent to which they were already conscious of an impulse to a specifically apostolic or active form of life and whether this was a factor in their discernment. I have also considered how their understanding of both the word "apostolic" and their vocation have changed and deepened over the course of their lives, thus beginning to address the second research question in the study. Although this has led to a chapter with a strong narrative focus, the purpose of working in this

way is to establish whether the motives identified for entering religious life or the mapping of the changed understanding of "apostolic" shed any light on the sisters' recognition of any such thing as an apostolic impulse, and on their identity.

In considering the sisters' explanations of "apostolic", both of what it is and what it is not, I have encountered their discomfort with the word. The literature (Schneiders, 2000), and some of the sisters themselves present "ministry" or "ministerial" as an alternative, but not all the sisters fully claim these terms. This discussion about language has begun to uncover a central point about the sisters' identity, which is that they reject being defined by what they have done, or what they do, or even by what they are. Thus, the naming of the way of life reflects issues of identity and self. What has begun to emerge is the role of the self and a desire to assert an identity in spite of what and how others might name you. The next chapter will begin to explore the emergence of the self and its role in being apostolic.

CHAPTER FIVE: Becoming apostolic as themselves

Introduction

Presentation of the data thus far has explored how sisters in this study have articulated their motivation for entering religious life, and how they have understood "apostolic" during their lives. This chapter investigates how the women experience "becoming" apostolic as themselves and thus addresses all three of the study's research questions. It will take as its main source material two further sets of narratives identified in the interview transcripts. The first of these coalesces around a theme of the sisters establishing their identity, which I argue they do in relation to external attempts to define them as Catholic sisters. The second tells the story of the degree to which the sisters were fulfilled or conversely, what I have called "thwarted" in their ministerial lives.

The previous chapter demonstrated that the women's understanding of apostolic is not limited to "doing" specific work. Therefore, the concept of "becoming" is a particularly helpful lens through which to illustrate the development of the women's responses to the idea of apostolic. These responses have often changed in line with the opportunity of being able to draw on and realise their gifts and interests.

I will argue in this chapter that the sisters demonstrate a clear concern with identity and self and that this can be attributed to and is reflective of, their changing context particularly when viewed through Taylor's (1989; 2007) work on the development of the modern identity. Their concern can also be interpreted in the light of two further factors. The first, in terms of their reading of, and responding to, the signs of the times is constitutive of their growing prophetic witness. The second is this growing focus on the self as a reaction to their own earlier experiences of religious life and of the theology of self-denial, prevalent at the time. The sisters did not necessarily embrace self-denial but understood it as necessary for their growth towards God. However, the increase in their concern for self, at least for the sisters in this study, has actually been fundamental to their understanding and practice of being apostolic as an exercise of self and presence, as they have aged.

The context

The sisters' concern with the self is shaped by the context of the changes that had taken place in wider society (Western Europe and North America) and which eventually influenced the Catholic Church and the religious congregations themselves. There are two significant perspectives through which to consider the individual sisters' growing

awareness of themselves and their needs. The first of these is Taylor's (1989; 2007) exploration of the modern identity, as he traces and builds on the turn to the self.

Taylor locates the beginning of the development of the modern identity in the demise of the "enchanted world" (Taylor, 2007, pp.25-7 and pp.268-69). He claims that up to the Reformation all aspects of life were viewed through a sense of the transcendent. The loss of this framework as part of the gradual shift to a "disenchanted" or secular world drove and shaped the need to make sense of and fulfil ourselves. Along with this, Taylor sees the affirmation of ordinary life (1989, pp.211-234; 2007, pp.79–81,144) or the turn to the ordinary. He locates this in Luther's re-alignment of what constituted a good Christian life away from "higher" callings in the Church and towards one centred on work and family, whereby production and reproduction take on a new value. Ordinary life is affirmed with the development of the idea that our destiny is simply to engage fully with what lies in front of us, and live in the world well. This idea has taken hold in Western society since then so that the sisters' own desire to be "ordinary" can be understood in terms of this societal shift.

Alongside the disenchantment of society and the affirmation of the ordinary, Taylor plots the rise of the inward turn, from Augustine onwards (1989, pp.127–42) towards an increasing emphasis on the self. He builds on modernity's "turn to the subject" and Descartes' siting of the self within and calls it the turn to the self, thus bringing us to the modern concept of selfhood as one which values freedom, authenticity and individuality (see also Sweeney, 2012, pp.132–33). This concern with self is further nuanced by Taylor's identification of the "age of authenticity" (2007, pp.475-83) characterised by our embracing and displaying an ethic of authenticity which tells us that it is good to be our "real" selves and to always act out of our "real" selves. The sisters' "becoming" takes place in the light of the turn, both in society and recognised and responded to by institutions and the Church.

The second crucial perspective is that these societal changes have affected the Catholic Church as an institution. The extent to which religious life itself would be impacted became evident during the Second Vatican Council. It could be argued that the main documents of the Council which influenced the lives of sisters could be seen as part of the shift towards the ordinary, as sisters lost their special status, with its apparently superior way of life, and become lay or ordinary (see Chapter One, p.12). Set alongside the affirmation of the role of lay people within the Church, this looks very much like an effect of wider societal changes. Furthermore, the shift to world engagement and the sisters' eventual emergence from the "total institution" meant that

they came more into contact with "ordinary" life. They came to see themselves as part of rather than set apart from ordinary life and to view that as a good thing. The period following the Second Vatican Council saw the emergence of the individual sister with her personality, experience, talents, interests, and an interior life, and furthermore, signs that this development was increasingly accepted and valued in congregations. As Sr Collette explains:

> It's so different from the past when decisions were made by our superiors and people that were in charge of us but the Holy Spirit is working in individuals and we need to listen to and be open to and respond to whatever is coming from them.

Free to become oneself

Schneiders, in a discussion of vocation (2001) rightly points to the fact the religious life is not a profession or an organisation, but a "state of life" and so, she argues, religious do not join, they become. "Religious Life is not really something one 'enters' or 'joins' so much as a life one lives. One *becomes* a Religious. Being a Religious is not primarily something one does but something one is" (Schneiders, 2001, p.9). She emphasises the being over the doing, reflecting the shift she saw both happening and needing to happen in apostolic religious life. However, from my experience of engagement with the sisters' narratives in this study I would take that one step further and suggest that being a religious is some<u>one</u> rather than some<u>thing</u> one becomes, or even in the present continuous, is becoming.

Hahnenberg's (2010) work refocussing Catholic theology of vocation on the notion of call towards a place offers further insights into the sisters' stories of becoming in response to their call. He charts the development of vocation theology from the Protestant Barth towards the Catholic Rahner, identifying a trajectory towards a link between "who I am and the God who calls" (2010, p.123). He understands vocation as "forward movement - the 'whither' of vocation" (2010, p.231) which resonates with the dynamic generativity of the concept of becoming. Hahnenberg grounds this observation in the recent reception of Karl Rahner's theology of grace and particularly in the possibility of an immediate experience of God being available to each of us (Endean, 1978). Hahnenberg styles this, after Rahner, "*Selbstmitteilung Gottes*" or that God self-communicates to each of us on a very personal, individual level. "God gives God's very self to us" (Hahnenberg, 2010, p.132, likely relying on Rahner, 1978), dwelling within us, and this has influenced the development of an understanding of both grace, and vocation or "call" as inductive, rather than something visited upon us externally.

It is the very personal, individual nature of this experience and call (Rahner, 1978) which is of relevance to us here: that God speaks "through *me* – through the dynamism of my own personality and inner life" (Hahnenberg, 2010, p.143) calling each of us as we are, rather than as someone we ought to or could be. We only have the freedom to make choices, as ourselves, if we are deeply rooted in a self-awareness which is in turn rooted in God's in-dwelling. Hahnenberg interprets this as there being a place of freedom, out of which we make our own choices, located in between our creaturehood, and our acting out of the power of grace. This is how we arrive at and live out our individual personality and self: "so, by freedom we become unique" (2010, p.150). There is a paradox in following the Gospel, the word of God and in being open to being conformed to God's loving purposes: "there is a freedom in this limitation, the freedom to be me, marked as I am by all the particularities of the existence granted to me by God" (2010, p.120).

In the narratives which follow, the sisters strive to establish their own identity, wanting to make choices for themselves. In doing this they are seeking to be both religious and apostolic as themselves: the person God has called them to be. Hahnenberg's points help to interpret the meaning in the sisters' stories: the sense of forward movement; the desire to become as oneself; the realisation that this has to be inductive as they look within and their becoming someone, and not something.

Narratives of claiming and asserting identity

These narratives demonstrate a strong thread of constructing and conveying a sense of identity. This is unsurprising as this weaving of patterns of experience to project or claim identity is a fundamental function of narrative. Taylor (1989) makes the point that the self is constructed in its telling to others. It is through talking to me, and how I re-interpret their story, that the sisters construct their identity, and in this sense, are continuing to "become".

Whilst this study does not seek to provide an exhaustive exploration and analysis of the projected or claimed identity of each of the participants, some consideration of this issue is relevant. Taylor (1989) provides a helpful definition of identity.

> To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame of horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand (1989, p.27).

In other words, identity helps supply us with a framework or ethic in which we can be, to which we can respond. The first reason why identity is relevant here is that the sisters also use this opportunity to tell me about their frame of horizon or where they stand. They are at pains to point out that they are very much connected to others but some do this in relation to who others say they should be. Taylor goes on to qualify the definition above, by adding that we can only be a "self" in response to some defining community or framework:

> We cannot but orient ourselves to the good, and thus determine our place relative to it and hence determine the direction of our lives; we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a "quest" (1989, pp.51–52).

He then continues with an alternative:

> because we have to determine our place in relation to the good, therefore we cannot be without an orientation to it, and hence must see our life in story.
>
> (1989, p.52)

This latter point sheds some light on the sisters' changed understanding of apostolic, which is very much for and in relation to others, which I re-interpret as becoming apostolic as themselves.

The second reason why identity is relevant here is that I believe the sisters are establishing the importance of being "free" or allowed to be themselves. Turning again to Hahnenberg:

> Empowered by grace in the core of our personality, we freely shape our own individuality. What God is calling me toward, what God wants for me is to be myself.
>
> (2010, p.151)

Hahnenberg's words help explain why the sisters say that it is important to be apostolic as themselves and not as someone they are not, as they respond to God's call to be more fully themselves.

Resisting externally ascribed identities

The sisters all made use of a variety of devices to build up a picture of who they say they are. These included self-descriptors, examples of how family, friends, and others describe them, anecdotes, experiences, relationships with others and institutions.

Seven of the twelve sisters appear to do this in reference to other voices or forces ascribing identity to them, to "who others say I should be" as a nun. Sometimes this other is the public in general, or people outside of religious life. Sometimes this "other" is named. For Srs Martina, Kathleen and Jayne, it is other sisters in their community or congregation, or the community or congregation itself; for Srs Bernadette and Maeve, their family is a strong voice in defining and describing them and for Srs Bernadette, Clare and Jayne the Church is a strong external force, particularly in setting expectations of who and how women religious are expected to be.

Brock (2010, p.486) states that "notions of what it is to be woman are constructed on multiple sites in the social, political, religious and economic world" and in her work, she explores the extent to which the Catholic church has created and regulated the "norms" of identity for Catholic sisters. However, despite these constructs and norms being set and accepted, women can claim identities for themselves which are not bound by those constructed for them by the church, their congregations or more widely. In Taylor's terms, they can choose their own ethic (1989, p.27).

One group of sisters claimed their own identities, and their first act of claiming is expressed in terms of: "I'm me: I'm different, but I've always been allowed to be different" and "I'm not a conventional nun". Three sisters in particular described how they broke the mould when younger, being the unconventional sister who, despite wearing a habit and, therefore, conforming externally, taught sport, or refereed matches. Sr Beatrice tells of challenging others' expectations.

> When I appeared in a full habit and things, they said to me "Oh your meeting is down the corridor in the library" and I said "What meeting is that?" "Something to do with books". And I said "Actually, I've come for the sports meeting" – to do with netball it was and they said – absolute total silence…

Later on she describes being invited for an interview on a sports programme on local radio.

> They said "no nun has ever been on [programme] before" and I said "oh I'd like to be the first"…. he wanted me because it would have been a big coup for him, to have got a nun coming on doing this. Lots of people would have laughed, but there would have been an interest. …And then he put on the most popular ones for the New Year and mine was the top of the list – not because of me, but because I was a nun (laughter). They didn't expect a nun to be like that.

Sr Pamela similarly challenged convention and appeared energised by having done so.

[I was asked] so would I teach football, so I taught football…my photo was in the [national newspaper] – we've had the singing nun and something else nun, and now we had the soccer nun. So that went viral; it went all over the papers and… the photograph that they took at the primary school, at a football match, ended up in one of these books "when I were a lad" – about the north of England, well I'm in one of those; they called me Sr [X] and said I could swear like a trooper.

Sr Bernadette was also keen to demonstrate that she's "not the usual type of nun", contrasting herself with another nun in her family whom she describes as pious, but also showing an awareness and rejection of prevailing stereotypes regulated by the Church.

I'm interested in football… I have a very good sense of humour and it kind of shows in all sorts of ways. I will dress up at the drop of a hat. I'm no introvert and a lot of nuns are introverts.

She used comments by her family, with them joking that the congregation would never be able to cope with her in order to reinforce what an unlikely nun she makes. She recounts that unlike others, her family never put her on a pedestal:

There was no artificial adulation in any way, so I think that was why I didn't have to act out in any way or look like I was walking on wheels….

In doing so Sr Bernadette acknowledges the kinds of expectations those outside of religious life might have of sisters, and that other sisters were subjected to. In her second interview she continued on this theme:

It can be a bit daunting to live up to that [expectation] all the time, when you'd really just want interaction. But it's the way people were brought up in the 50s and early 60s, to respect the religious and the priest and all the rest of it.

The sisters above almost delight in "being themselves" in a way that challenges prevalent stereotypes. Srs Kathleen and Jayne, on the other hand, show how the expectation or actual experience of negative responses can restrict their identity or curtail behaviour, particularly when it comes to revealing that they are in fact sisters. None of the sisters interviewed now wear a habit, although most wear some external sign such as a ring or cross or can be identified in other ways, as Sr Kathleen explains.

I don't feel the need to tell other people that I'm a nun… I would never hide it and in church circles I would always say and to parish people, because I've no

trouble explaining it….maybe Irish people my own age…often when I'm chatting to people on the buses – the gossip that goes on there on the bus, and I say I was in Africa for so many years and they say now how was that – they ask what kind of person would go and live that long in Africa and then come back here and I would then say "well, I'm a nun" – you know, for Irish people, that's no problem, but for other people it only deepens the problem!

Sr Jayne gives several examples of feeling challenged by others' responses to her being a Catholic sister:

On the whole, I would rather be just myself, an ordinary person, rather than being a member of an institution, especially as we got rather a bad press recently, child abuse and the rest of it. It's either the abuse or the sentimental good little sister who's a bit naive. So I have been much happier since I took off my veil and wimple or whatever you call it.

I'm talking to somebody I've never met before and I'll say well, you know I'm an RC sister – I'm a nun. Oh, you're wearing trousers – that sort of thing comes out. Ok – but they don't mind – well, some of them do; some of them will say 'Oh I was taught by nuns and ohh, I didn't like them.'

We see in these excerpts, not only a concern about how others might react, but also an expression of a desire to be perceived and accepted as ordinary women. This will be explored in detail later in the chapter.

Resisting internally ascribed identities

In contrast to the group in the previous section, a smaller number of sisters showed some resistance to identities being ascribed to, or imposed on, them by their own congregations. Initially I treated these sisters' experiences as outliers or exceptions, as they seemed to be in a minority. However, on encountering Brock's work (2010), I realised that these sisters, although few in number, had a real significance. Brock identified independent living as one of the main markers by which sisters in her study demonstrated personal agency. Two of the sisters in this study live singly and Brock's work (2010) offers a framework for viewing these sisters' experiences.

Sr Kathleen lived in small mission-based communities in Africa for many years, the informality of which contrasts with the institutional community life she encountered on returning to the UK just five years ago. She elected to live alone, but in close proximity to her community. However, her lifestyle and decisions to continue to work and move

around independently, attracted what Brock (2010, p.484) terms "the disapproving disciplinary gaze" of her own sisters.

> And the older sister, who's a very well educated, experienced, with-it person, she said something when I came in "oh so you've been out and you never told us where you were going" and that sums up an attitude that – oh dear sister has been out and she hasn't told us where she's gone. I thought my answer was a bit sharp, but I think it was the right one. I just said "Your dear sister is back now". I wasn't getting drawn into it, but that lack of freedom – that's going on all the time for years and years and you internalise the criticism that's going to come to you. And then you behave accordingly so they don't ever have to say to you "you're stepping over the line". This is the idea of community, and if you're not conforming…those hidden things, little things – that would be what I found hard – I anticipated what they [her community] were going to say to me.

This expectation of conforming to norms of behaviour she didn't herself espouse was a leading factor in Sr Kathleen's decision to live alone and she says of that move: "the happiest day of my life; the freedom of leaving all the… that situation". Problems she had experienced earlier in her religious life still dogged the way the community saw her: "still it was on my CV, if you like; it was there and it's there today even still." Her independent lifestyle, refusal to conform and the way the community viewed her point to her being judged not a "proper nun" and she is paying the price for her separation and perhaps alienation from her community.

> You know the thing that nuns don't behave like that – that sentence was thrown at us so much when we were young and then, talk about your mother's voice talking to you – the voice of our superiors go on speaking to us in our old age.

It is clear that in these cases the sisters' own congregations had absorbed the Church's regulating of the women's identities and establishing what constitutes a "proper nun". This was made explicit in myriad ways, such as judging other members of your community for not conforming and an implicit expectation that sisters ask, if not permission, then seeking some kind of informal consent. These cultural norms and restrictions which were "petty and out of date…ritualism for its own sake" (Campbell-Jones, 1979, p.121) governed every aspect of the sisters' lives.

Sr Clare lives singly and also seemed something of an anomaly among a group of sisters who appear, by and large content to be living in physical community with their sisters. She was the only sister in the cohort who was a member of a teaching order

who had never taught[28] but forged a path of ministry in a new field. Although she didn't experience disapproval or judgement from her congregation, she does speak of not feeling understood. She is also very outspoken about the way the Catholic Church both views and treats women generally and women religious in particular. She is critical of her own congregation, and women religious more broadly for having been very passive in their acceptance of this. Viewed alongside these other factors, her choice to live alone, not teach, live a different form of religious life, could well be seen as a form of resistance.

Sr Jayne on the other hand, lives with her community but talks of feeling out of step with them on several important issues. She confesses to being slightly envious of the sisters in her congregation who live singly, but who come together regularly for prayer and a meal. "In their acts of resistance, [they] create new discursive truths and material practices about what community is and how it best functions for them" (Brock, 2010, p.485). Sr Jayne feels that it is now too late for her to be part of creating "new discursive truths" herself, and indeed for her congregation to do so, but nonetheless sees hope for new forms of religious life in the future, where this may be encouraged.

Narratives of fulfilment and frustration

The extent to which sisters appear to find fulfilment or not in their apostolates and ministries emerged as a significant second narrative running through the majority of their interviews. Certainly up until the late 1970s, congregations were under a lot of pressure to staff their own institutions. They came to regard, perhaps unintentionally, their sisters as a work force; they had "instrumental goals" (Campbell-Jones, 1979, p.128). This instrumentalisation of the sisters (Sexton and Simmonds, 2015) served not only congregational needs but also the "works" of the Church at parish and diocesan levels. This was a practice that tainted the true nature of apostolic religious life up until the Second Vatican Council, by carrying out what Schneiders terms "external 'apostolates' such as administering and staffing Catholic institutions…exercised exclusively within the context of the institutional Church to support, sustain, and implement the ministerial projects of the hierarchy." (2013, p.356). Elsewhere she contrasts "the hierarchy's understanding of Religious as a dedicated "work force" within Catholic institutions" with the emerging self-understanding of religious as they moved closer towards claiming their "fully apostolic character" (Schneiders, 2011, p.2). So, we see both individual and collective identity being re-shaped. However, in the early lives of the sisters in this study, their congregations were still caught up in this dynamic

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[28] With the exception of Sr Martina who was a lay sister, and never expected to teach.

which often obscured the congregation's true founding charism. Sr Susan was a member of a community that continued to live a mixed life, or hybrid form or religious life until the 1980s and explains how her Superior justified the need for her to teach:

> [She]… told me "we are a contemplative order that teaches". Now that's not exactly true; in a sense there you can hear the lack of clarity that I spoke about, and it's almost a contradiction anyway.

What follows below are narratives of "thwarted desires" or loss, and satisfaction, where individual sisters are caught up in this dynamic. I take the example of teaching as the means of exploring fulfilment and frustration in their ministerial lives as so many of the sisters taught. However, through the stages of thwarted desire and acceptance, all come to a point of growing agency.

Ten of the sisters taught and nine of them spent the majority of their "professional" lives, that is until retirement age, in school. Of the other two, one was a lay sister and domestic worker and one chose not to teach and worked in the probation service. Five sisters enjoyed teaching and seem to have felt fulfilled in this apostolate, loving both the contact with children and teaching their subjects. They appreciated the opportunity to influence the lives of young people and build a wide range of relationships. They understood this as a real opportunity for apostolic work. This experience needs to be acknowledged and the analysis presented here is not intended to undermine that in any way. However, alongside the positive experiences of teaching, there are some striking alternative stories which are less commonly heard and indicate that there were many sisters unhappy in school level education. Mostly these sisters taught out of obedience, even when either they didn't feel a particular call to teach or felt they particularly excelled at it. Sr Anne was not attracted to teaching, and yet felt a strong call to a particular stable community which ran a school. For her, agreeing to teach even though it wasn't her personal choice, was just what you did at the time.

> It would be pretty much automatic that you would go into the school to teach…it was just one of those things. When I joined the community, I accepted what was asked of me, so I suppose if I had been asked to go off and train to be a nurse, I would have said mm, yes, ok. It was a very different mentality we had.

Sr Anne narrates and locates her own shift to self as having begun from a very different focus on seeking perfection through obedience, and participating in the congregation's apostolate. In her second interview she expanded on this.

I would never have chosen to be a teacher but I was asked to be a teacher so in obedience [laughs] I did it. I can't say that I didn't enjoy some aspects of it but I didn't really on the whole enjoy it that much.

Sr Susan described herself as not a "theoretical educationalist" but also found the relationships fulfilling.

Perhaps it's better to say that teaching never attracted me as such, when it came about that I taught, it was the engagement with the children and colleagues...the human bits rather than the notion that attracted me.

Other sisters either taught happily, or didn't teach, but were clearly aware of the level of dissatisfaction among others who had to teach. In the second round of interviews, I fed back to sisters what I had heard of this unhappiness and it prompted many comments. Sr Bernadette taught until formal retirement age and loved it. Nevertheless she spoke in her second interview about sisters who were told to go into ministries which weren't "always what they had thought for themselves" or not properly trained for jobs, or moved from one community to another: "like a square peg in a round hole, it would be so debilitating. I think it does resonate with some of the things that we've all met in religious life."

Sr Martina noted:

[h]ow many nuns had to teach when there was nothing in them for teaching; it was the last thing they thought of – to teach.

Sr Dorothy had also loved teaching but nonetheless noted the unhappiness of others from her experience of being a head teacher.

Some of ours were [unhappy], and it was quite obvious, if one was put on your staff, that she should never be here. There were quite a few who were not suited, and they've blossomed since they were able to find another outlet…I think you either loved teaching or you didn't, and if you were not at ease with it, it must have been agony really, to be in the classroom, I've had some of them on my staff.

For many sisters this being assigned to a profession you weren't suited to must have meant many long unhappy and unfulfilled years. Others undoubtedly left as a result of the "talent-stripping" which Campbell-Jones (1979, p.82) observed among congregations she studied, when sisters were sent to do work which did not make use of their talents, and where they had no other outlet for personal interests and gifts. The

sisters, by and large, did what they were told and what the congregation needed. As Sr Martina says: "That's how I understood obedience - in the old days, the obedience was 'do it'". However, this gradually began to change from the late 1960s onwards, as congregations revisited their founding charism, re-wrote their constitutions, and in the 1970s, began to widen the sphere of their apostolates in response to both interest and need (White, 2013). As part of the gradual breaking open of the total institution, many sisters became aware of new possibilities: the possibility of taking the dust sheets off their "selves", or even of beginning to discover what that "self" was for the first time. This was a clear point in the move from an ethic and theology of self-denial to self-discovery and self-development.

Examples of thwarted desire

I will now illustrate the development from total, unquestioning obedience to expression of desire through the stories of several sisters, particularly Srs Jayne, Maeve and Martina. Sr Jayne appeared briefly in Chapter Four as the sister who had originally wanted to go nursing, but when she entered in the 1940s, was assured that the congregation did not need nurses. The congregation was already shaping her "desire" in support of its own needs. She told her Superior that she was "scared stiff of teaching" and thought she could only cope with the youngest children. She was pleasantly surprised, therefore, to be sent on a three-year course to train to teach young children.

However, there then followed in her narrative a series of at least six, what I have termed, "institutional buts" or obstacles. Each time she was either told where she was to be sent next, or each time she began to articulate a desire for herself, this was met by a "but" from the institution, such as:

> but the Provincial at the time had other plans for me, really without much, without any discussion…I was a bit dropped on because it came in a typed letter that said I was going, so anyway I went.

This expression in her narrative of a desire, then blocked by a "but", indicating an institutional need, manifested itself throughout her interview as a series of waves, met by a hard, straight line, so that I waited for the next "but" to arrive. On each of these six occasions in her ministerial life, her plan came into conflict with an institutional need, so that her own desires were thwarted. Sr Jayne never actually said no to any of the requests or directives which came from her Superior. Indeed the degree to which it was possible to say no would have varied between congregations. Sr Pamela, for example,

says that she could have said no to a mission posting because it was overseas, whereas Sr Maeve felt unable to say no to being sent to the United States.

Sr Jayne relates that on occasion she tried to say no, but in obedience, she accepted each "missioning". There is however some irony to the final "but". In accepting the challenge of a difficult prison ministry, at quite a late stage in her working life, she then found herself engaged in what turned out to be "the best bit of apostolic work I ever went into".

The interviews offered at least two other narratives of thwarted desires or loss, from Sr Martina and Sr Maeve and they share some similarities. They were either given no training at all for work they were then sent to do, or they were trained for something in particular and then sent to do something else or repeatedly sent to play roles they were either unsuited to, or were unhappy doing. There is a sense of the "talent-stripping" referred to earlier. In both cases they showed their unhappiness. On being pulled out of teacher training mid-way through her course, Sr Maeve said:

> I was in [TT] college and I was very happy there. At the end of the year I was sent for – the God of surprises – I was out on teaching practice and when I came home, Mother [name A] was looking for me. She wanted to speak to me and it was to say that I wouldn't be going back because they needed me – I would be going to [place name] because they were opening a house in [place] and there were two sisters ready to go and I was qualified to go also, as a third. I mean, it wasn't asked in those days; she just told Mother [name B] that I wouldn't be going back…

When asked how she felt about this, she responded:

> I was heartbroken; I cried for a whole week. I loved [college name].… but that was the way it was.

A further common point across the narratives is the sisters' use of language, particularly passive forms, and their use of "they". Sometimes this is in reference to a faceless anonymous superior, and sometimes in reference to the congregation itself: "and I stayed on in London for another year and then they changed me"; "they took me out of it"; "they sent me" and "they asked me to" and "…they were still deciding. And then I was told by – before officially I was told – that I was destined to go to [X]".

These all suggest a clear experience of lack of agency earlier in their lives: of being done-to in order to support an institutional need. As they got older and more confident and in concert with the changes taking place around them, the sisters' being done-to

was gradually transformed into expressions of agency and collaborative responsibility. This also took place in the context of the *aggiornamento* within congregations whereby they turned their attentions to the needs of the wider world and the collective locus and ethic for the sisters' identity was formed within that larger story.

Using voice to exercise personal agency: from obedience to discernment

The journey through obedience to discernment emerged as a narrative interwoven with the two earlier narratives of claiming an identity and fulfilment in apostolates (See Appendix Eight). The sisters in this study have lived through a very radical change in the understanding of the vow and the nature of obedience. This issue has been extensively documented elsewhere (Campbell-Jones, 1979; Fiand, 1991; Merkle, 1998; Schneiders, 2009b; 2013, Ch. 10). In its earlier form obedience was largely understood as "keeping the rule" and as absolute and unquestioning obedience to a Superior who represented the figure of Christ in the community or congregation, whose will governed almost every aspect of a sister's life. However, obedience is now interpreted as listening to, and for what, God wants for sisters as individuals, and being open to hearing the Spirit from and through a variety of sources. This change took place in the context of the unfreezing of the "total institution" of the post-conciliar period.

Within the historical changes, including the demise of the enchanted world, there are smaller level factors socio-cultural understanding of, and increasing mistrust of, authority and obedience, coupled with an embracing of psychology which taught that human development continues throughout life (Keely, 2014). Conversely whilst the traditional idea of absolute obedience to a Superior was being questioned, Schneiders (2013) re-locates authority from Church hierarchy to within the congregation itself, but to be expressed and explored communally through discernment processes. Discernment has become the "how" of obedience, so that often decisions are taken after a long period of careful prayer and reflection together.

Sr Collette explained:

> The understanding of [obedience] has changed, but in a deep down way. You are more involved in the decisions and you take the responsibility on yourself as it is collaborative – it's kind of together we make the decisions now – it's not the leaders… whereas in the past, the Spirit said you go to such and such a place and in obedience to that, you went.

Apostolic women religious have struggled both to re-shape internal understandings of obedience, and with how authority is exercised within the Church especially in relation

to women religious. These struggles have played a crucial role in enabling congregations to re-claim their fully apostolic nature. Schneiders (2013) has argued that a new understanding of religious life as a prophetic calling, wherein obedience is exercised in response to an identified ministerial need, was an important factor in enabling this to take place. A ministerial sister is obedient to her call to bring about the Reign of God as an alternative reality, in a particular time and in a particular place. Schneiders writes of religious "re-imagining the obedience they profess and live" so that it is "life-giving for themselves and prophetically effective in Church and world" (2013, p.423).

Although for Schneiders the primary aim of this response to the Word of God is through and for ministry which points to an alternative reality, she also acknowledges that "developing and living their life in and for their own times is in and of itself a form of prophetic witness" (2013, p.432). Comments in interviews (see below) evidence the sisters' changes in attitude and self-understanding, as they begin to ask for things for themselves. I would argue that in doing this, they are exercising a form of prophetic witness to the role their constructed self can and will play in their ministry in later life. Sisters move from unquestioning obedience and submission as part of a workforce serving a congregational need, to an awareness of need in the community and society around them; an increasing expression of self and desire but within their community and in response to others. This is coupled with the growing sense of freedom which allows them to identify their own gifts and interests and articulate their desire to follow these.

In contrast to the earlier lack of agency in some of the sisters' stories, there is a growing sense of agency across almost all of the narratives. Sr Maeve wanted to train to be a nurse, but it took her many years before she felt able to ask. As a lay sister, she was always needed in a school kitchen, or as housekeeper. However, finally, unable to face another intake of children into the school, she asked.

> And I said Oh I can't bear that, because I'd never get out of it. [Laughter]…and then I thought I'll go and ask again if I can go nursing before it's too late. I had my last shot with it. I wouldn't have any more…and so this time I asked them again and I got permission but I was just lucky to get in, in Scotland, with [religious congregation] because I was too old for being accepted, but they took me.

She did not ask until she was aged 50. Although her request was received positively, her age made getting a place difficult, and the only course that would accept her was

run by another religious congregation. Furthermore, qualifying in her mid-fifties, she found it hard to find work. She eventually found nursing work for a short time, and says she could have resented what happened, but seems now to have come to a position of acceptance.

This slow acquiring of agency in the sisters' religious lives has not always been a smooth trajectory from total obedience, to asking, and having their requests granted. There seems to have been a long period of testing this out and a gradual move towards more joint (Superior and sister) or more communal discernment processes prior to decisions being made, such as when to retire from teaching. It is possible that the stories demonstrate a growth towards genuine obedience to their call to become Christ-like, and the witness that this form of obedience can offer. Sisters ask but generally they are only asking for a new form of ministry, or training to increase their ministerial effectiveness.

The sisters also never spoke of the need for fulfilment directly. I introduced language such as satisfaction in my feedback to sisters on the first round of interviews (see Appendix Four). This seemed to open up for some sisters the possibility of discussing fulfilment in ministry, and elicited a lot of comments, particularly in relation to the relief felt by sisters on retiring from school and being able to explore a new form of ministry. Sr Clare relates the sense of relief and release from other sisters.

> Others told me about their experience in later life…of being released from working 9 to 5 in school and preparing kids for exams and they found a new life dealing with people and they did various things in retirement.

Sr Anne, when asked how the decision was made for her to come out of school said:

> I think I had become increasingly unhappy and that people recognised that and offered me… I can't remember the details but I was just SO relieved I was able to get out of the school and I happily said "Yes, I'd love to go to the [new centre]".

In her second interview she expanded on the significance of this for her, and also then for her sisters.

> … that was a transition which opened up a whole different way in which I might be more happy and at home with myself, because it was then that I realised that the study of scripture was something I was being drawn to – that was 1972 – 1974 – but I went on teaching in the school for another 15 years –and by that time we'd opened the Centre and that gave me the opportunity to offer scripture

courses and from 1989 onwards, that has been my focus, so that gradual transition from school teacher to adult education has…fulfilled something that I knew instinctively was more in communion really with my inner being….So, yes, I suppose, the gradual freedom that was extended to any members of the community to pursue a course which seemed to resonate with their inner being and helped them to develop more.

The language she, and other sisters, use focussing on being drawn, being fulfilled and resonating points to more than simply meeting a hitherto unmet ministerial need; it is rather an expression of a desire to meet a hitherto unmet need within themselves. Viewing this through Schneiders' lens, it could be seen as a form of prophetic obedience in that this is what was needed at that time and in that place. The forms of, and understanding of, apostolic ministry which the sisters were to move into as they aged, rely and draw on a strong self-knowledge and awareness, so that one can be fully present to and a resource for others.

Hahnenberg (2010) recognises the importance of opportunities to use God-given talents and interests, saying that "God calls us as we are" (p.122) and, therefore, doesn't work against who we are (p.134). However, he goes on to say that talents and gifts "are but cues – we should glance at them but should not stare" (p.123) and that "God can always call us to transcend our context and our personal limitations. The call to faith and obedience cuts across all human spheres. Faith is our first and greatest calling" (p.123). This desire for a form of self-fulfilment is nonetheless an important and very human element which, if completely disregarded can cause considerable damage and pain. Like all Christians, the sisters are still on that path in between their call and their response, and their longings are very ordinary.

St Paul in Ephesians 4:22-24 exhorts Christians to

…put away our former way of life, our old self, corrupted and deluded, and to be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and to clothe ourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

This is the call to all Christians and the sisters, through the profession of public vows have made an additional, single-minded commitment to this life-long conversion. One wonders whether thwarted self-actualisation or even damage reflects on us as *imago Dei* and whether the life-long process of conversion is able to embrace and convert this disappointment.

The concept central to these words of St Paul above, that of the old self contrasted with the new self has been taken up, in line with the "turn to the self" and even the "therapeutic turn" in modern psychology and spirituality as a true self and false self-binary by more popular writers such as Richard Rohr (2001). In contrast Taylor (1989, pp.127–133) identifies the strong Augustinian roots of the notion of the human "good" being based on our desire for, and orientation towards, God. For Merton, holiness consists of being able to "offer to God the worship of our imitation" (2007, p.32). This well-known passage from his *New Seeds of Contemplation* may shed light on what he means by this, and on the process the sisters are embarked on, particularly in expressing the choice they are making.

> For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore, the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self. …God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours (2007, p.32).

Encouraged to be themselves

In exploring the first of the two main narratives presented in this chapter I considered two groups of sisters: one claiming their identity in the face of external stereotypes, and one in response to internal expectations. There was, however, a third group of sisters who claimed an identity in which they are very much "themselves". Srs Bernadette, Clare, Dorothy and Maeve all emphasised that either their school or congregation placed value on their individuality as a person as opposed to trying to "mass-produce" nuns from a mould. Even before we began recording the interview, Sr Dorothy wanted to stress that she believes she is the person she is regardless of being a sister and re-iterated this several times during the interview.

> I think I'd be like that as a person –I always enjoyed people, and meeting different people, so I think that's me – not necessarily [the congregation], though it may have been nurtured, fostered whatever.

She attributed this largely to the fact that from the earliest days of being with them in school, her congregation had always encouraged her to be an individual.

> There was never, either at school or in the initial training, any putting you into a mould. We weren't moulded in any way at all.

Sr Dorothy felt this was related to her congregation's charism which is rooted in incarnational theology, understanding each human person to be made in God's image.

This recognises that God calls us to be ourselves, but also proposes that the call is to become that self that God wants us to be, recalling Hahnenberg's earlier point that discernment begins with being fully rooted in the awareness of God's presence. The more we come to know God, and accept that we are made in God's image, the more "real" our self is, and the more freedom we have and thus we come to know our "true self".

The sisters appear to hold this as a truth for themselves, as they turn inwards to the self, more fully reflecting God's image. Taylor draws our attention to the paradox at the heart of this search: "where I strive to make myself more fully present to myself, to realise to the full the potential which resides in the fact that knower and known are one, that I come most tellingly and convincingly to the awareness that God stands above me" (1989, p.135). The sisters know and recognise that this inner, God-based freedom is how they can realise their unique God-given self or creaturehood. Furthermore, they seem to have been aware of this since the early stages of their discernment to become a sister. The desire to be accepted for who they were was an important factor for many of the sisters in considering which congregation they joined.

Chapter Four established the sisters' belief that "apostolic" means so much more than doing. Furthermore, they claim that being apostolic is part of their identity and an expression of their deepest desire, which is to love God. They are keen to establish that they draw on their deepest selves in being apostolic, and that in being apostolic, they are drawing on their deepest or "true selves". As evidence of this, Sr Bernadette told me:

> I exercise ministry just by being the Jolly Green Giant – opening the door, welcoming people, making them a cuppa and showing that I'm happy and just being myself – that's my ministry of presence.

Sr Jayne also explained:

> I think it's over the years that I've come much more to think of being apostolic as being a sort of human, Christian, religious, just person, just me….

Some sisters went slightly further than simply making the connection between being apostolic and being themselves. Both Sr Martina and Sr Beatrice seemed to be saying that this apostolic impulse was in some way innate to their being. Sr Martina explained about being apostolic: "it's part of my nature; it's because it's in me, it's in me by nature". Sr Beatrice talked about praying for, and doing things for others, and being apostolic and said "without it I would die" implying in some way that it is such an

integral part of her that she could not live without it, and would certainly not be the person she is without it.

Sr Brenda was keen to emphasise that nuns are "real" people.

> Nuns are not people who are not real, who have not had experience, who have not been in love; they are real human beings with human desires.

In this she displays, along with many other sisters, a desire to be seen and accepted not only as themselves, but as "ordinary". This is a noticeable theme in the sisters' interviews, as in Sexton and Simmonds (2015). In one sense, the Second Vatican Council's removal of the superior status and holiness of religious and their reclassification as lay set the scene for this change. It may also be a response to a form of class system amongst religious orders, with those owning and running prestigious schools being seen as grand or superior. Another factor may be the negativity of Western attitudes towards the Church and religious, in the context of numerous abuse scandals, and sisters' fear of a response rooted on these negative experiences, as expressed by Sr Jayne and Sr Beatrice.

However, it must be seen most clearly in relation to Taylor's affirmation of the ordinary life (1989) where the "ordinary" has taken on a moral relevance as we judge both ourselves and others by how "ordinary" we are. This affirmation of the ordinary has given us an ethical direction. In spite of our celebrity culture, the "ordinary" is good, and Catholic sisters are not immune to this. They are keen to portray themselves as ordinary Christians, with the same call, and making the same journey in response, and several of them really wrestle with any notion that they or their life is in any way chosen or "special". This is of relevance, as the desire to self-describe as "ordinary" is so evident in many of the excerpts in this chapter. Sr Beatrice, for example, celebrates her new "ordinary" life in a small community on a housing estate: "You are just part of what everyone else is doing. I find that very freeing." This is an expression of release, of relief and of the freedom of just being able to live as and be received as oneself, narrated and located in the ordinary.

A concern with freedom

The theology articulated in teaching documents on religious life such as *Vita Consecrata* (1996) and Starting Afresh from Christ (2002) is based on a belief that the call from God and the "special consecration" which distinguishes vowed religious are sufficient rewards in and of themselves. The religious does not therefore need to look for affirmation from other people:

> Consecrated life does not need praise and human appreciation; it is repaid by the joy of continuing to work untiringly for the kingdom of God, to be a seed of life which grows in secret, without expecting any reward other than that which the Lord will give in the end. It finds its identity in the call of the Lord, in following him, in unconditional love and service, which are capable of filling a life to the brim and giving it fullness of meaning. (CICLSAL, 2002, §13)

This claim contrasts with the sisters in this study who speak of unfulfilled desires, and a sense of not being appreciated for who they were nor what they had to offer. Sr Collette presents her perspective on this is:

> I don't know, maybe before this I just focussed on my work as teacher, as a teacher and how I could do that to the best of my ability. I put so much into that whereas I felt maybe my own self was left out of it, I know I was always thinking of others (second interview).

The beginning of this chapter noted the post-conciliar turn in religious life away from external compliance, authority and structure towards "the subjective" and an acceptance of the importance of the individual call, personal discernment, and on relationship. This acceptance has enabled the transition to individualised and diversified ministries. The sisters in this study were taught not to consider their own needs, interests or self-fulfilment, but that varying degrees and forms of self-sacrifice would contribute to the sanctification of their own souls, and those of others. This would have been inculcated from early on within their novitiates, as illustrated by Mangion: "The abnegation of self and the taming of one's self-will demonstrated their dedication to religious life" (2007, p.412).

This explains the level of concern with freedom, primarily, or superficially at least, in terms of being *free from* past strictures, rules and regulations, and being *free to* be apostolic religious as themselves. The stories of frustration and loss demonstrate why sisters show interest in choice and freedom, and why use of these words in their stories is surprisingly common. We also see a longing for, and appreciation of, the "freedom" they were given to explore and respond with their own gifts and talents and a sense of loss or grief for what they were not able to do.

The sisters use the language of freedom in several ways. First the recent-found freedom to explore interests in a new and individual ministry making use of their gifts, evident in the excerpts presented above and even among the sisters who loved teaching. Sr Beatrice, at the age of 80, is finally free to make choices for herself.

> She [Provincial Superior] said I could go where I like – imagine that…She said I want you to use your gifts and I said oh thanks very much. And she said you have a gift for writing, which I knew I did have, and she said I want you to spread the Word through your writing…

Sr Bernadette and Sr Collette both speak extensively about the importance of being free to be yourself, and to live your own life, and Srs Collette, Maeve and Kathleen all contrast this with their previous lack of "freedom". Sr Collette, for example, comments on being *free from*, in terms of contrasting the present situation of religious life with that of the past and locates this "freedom" in the experience and context of her own congregation.

> …Whereas you know in the past we'd have had a day of recollection once a month but now I'm free to choose whatever, and I find that's strength for me as well, to be able to choose

In her second interview, two years on from the original interview, she talks about freedom in a different way again, showing a concern to pay attention to her own needs in a more intentional way. She understands that freedom is a prerequisite of responsibility and choice. "Yes, only in freedom can a person assume responsibility for her life". The theology operant in her speech emphasises being free to witness as herself.

> It's not somebody else's life I am trying to live, it's, just, to live my own as best as I possibly can.

A religious is a witness by virtue of who she is, through herself. In response to my asking if it is important to witness as a religious she replies:

> I'm not sure its witness as a religious, but as a human being; you're a developed human being… you're not just a religious, but a spiritual, religious person and you're recognised for that, that you're a whole human being; I think that's the witness in society today, that you can enjoy, that you can socialise and develop all parts of you yourself and then go out and help to develop, help others. I think that speaks more to people - that we are human beings, and not people up in the clouds and can't relate to them. That's the witness I feel called to give now; I don't want to pretend I am somebody else…I want to be true to my own commitment.

In the second round of interviews, Sr Kathleen reacted quite strongly to my "finding" that being or becoming free to choose appeared to be important to the sisters. She

judged this subjectivity as overly individualistic, seeing it as a negative development among religious:

> The people who made this… it's all of us but I was just kind of shocked at how individualistic we have become. Like...all mission ministry whatever we call it, apostolate, it has become very, my pain, my being true to myself, what I have to offer individually…

She acknowledged, however, that she recognised herself in this.

> They see their strength is in their own being free, finding themselves and I am one of the people who contributed to that and when I saw it coming back in such an abundance I was thinking, my God is that where we are now?

In response to Sr Collette's (among others) delight in being free to choose how she prays she noted:

> Even in the way we pray there is an awful lot that suits me individually, like in older times listening to readings say from the Old Testament, Jeremiah, Isaac it challenged us but now we choose the prayer we want to say that suits me for the day, there is a lot of that having a nice setting… and finding nice words maybe in a song or poem or something that looks, I don't know what but its more, I am not allowing myself to be challenged from the outside.

From self-denial to self-gift

The extent to which religious life has been affected by the individualism which is now such a feature of the culture of Western Europe and North America has been noted and explored (Nygren and Ukeritis, 1993; Wittberg, 1994; Flannery, 1997; Sweeney, 2001; 2012). However, I do not interpret the desires for choice, freedom and to be themselves, expressed by the sisters in this way, nor as Sr Kathleen has done. Rather they seem to form part of the sisters' response to their own past and the experience of a form of "self-abnegation". Schneiders (2011) suggests that religious, in moving away from the pre-conciliar ideal of "self- denial" or "self-abnegation" had to then move through a period of self-realisation or self-fulfilment, when many believed they had succumbed to the temptations of individualism. She argues that, to the contrary, they have emerged through this dark night, into a place of "legitimate and life-giving personal development which is the *sine qua non* of a mature capacity for self-donation" (2011, p.11).

In the second round of interviews, I asked sisters what they thought of Schneiders' proposal. Of the ten sisters who responded, two said quite firmly that they did not recognise the experience of self-denial or self-abnegation. Sr Dorothy laughed heartily, and Sr Jayne said:

> Well I am not sure that I ever did have that experience of religious life - self-abnegation or self-denial - that to me is not a very good starting point. Maybe I did start from that but I didn't think of it that way, it was more…if you are in love with somebody you don't immediately think of denying something that you would like… and that is where to me religious life starts.

Five sisters, however, agreed with Schneiders' depiction quite strongly; they recognised this as a path they had travelled themselves. From the perspective of an outsider, it appears to map onto the sisters' "thwarted" narratives quite strongly. Even those sisters who felt they had been encouraged to be themselves identified aspects of "self-abnegation" in the shape of all the petty and pointless regulations of their earlier lives. Many sisters in this study, however, noted that although their novitiate was hard, they didn't take it too seriously, as they had their eye on the greater prize. They understood that in some way this path would lead to growth (at least for many who stayed) and for the sisters in this study it could be argued that it did. Their desire for some form of self-fulfilment is a sign of a healthy, mature self-awareness. It is also a response to the signs of the times, and of prophetic obedience, both operating out of, and embracing, free will as self-determination. I argue that this has been fundamental to their understanding and practice of the forms of ministry of later life, which I explore in the following chapters, and whereby they give of themselves so freely and knowingly.

Conclusion

Pre-conciliar theology of religious life considered self as something to be denied. The data from the interviews presented in this chapter has shown some of the impact of this theology on the sisters' lives. The chapter has also shown how the sisters have resisted the church's and their communities' efforts to shape their identities. Through this process they have become apostolic as themselves.

Ricoeur would recognise in this process the three elements of: the self's own desires and the self being shaped with, and for, others, and in concert with a just institution, as "the ethical constitution of the person" (1999, p.45). The reality of living for others through relationship, that has been implicit in this chapter, will be made explicit in the next chapter, as the study considers the sisters' understanding of apostolic as being

with and for others, expressed through the gift of themselves. These elements address both the first and second research questions of this study as they point to the heart of the apostolic vocation and how it can be lived in later life.

CHAPTER SIX: Being with and being for

Introduction

So far, this study has explored the sisters' journey of conversion but the time has now come to consider their current context. This does not mean looking at a point of arrival, as the theology at the heart of this study indicates that the sisters are still and always becoming. However, their current context has a direct bearing on the ways in which the sisters understand themselves to be apostolic at this stage in life. This and the following chapter will explore the relationship between whether sisters are home-bound or in a care community, and the degree of external activity they are still involved in and how these affect their attitude to living out their vocation in later life. Accepting that the sisters are for the most part no longer in active, recognisable or external ministry, this particular chapter will explore who they are as they find themselves being apostolic largely in and through relationship with others, outside of the framework of formal employment. I consider the sisters' orientation of being with and being for, through the central concepts of self-gift and availability. To explore these I will draw on Schneiders' theology of ministry, and the perspectives of Marcel on availability and Marcel, Ricoeur and Milbank on gift.

Schneiders (2013; 2014b) refers to the "new normal" of religious life which is being shaped by a demographic shift in Western European and North American society with the growth of an ageing population. During the lives of the sisters featured in this study, the demographic profile in the West has changed from those over 65 being a minority, to them rapidly forming a very significant sector of society. Analysis from the U.S.Census Bureau (cited in Vacek, 2010, p.162) shows that the number of people over 65 in the population in 2010 is double that of 2000. According to Rutherford (2010), the numbers of those aged over 65 in the UK has increased by 80 per cent over the last six decades.

Schneiders claims that this new normal of longevity means the human life span can no longer be viewed in terms of a childhood, adulthood and then an old age of inactivity. Rather there will be a second adulthood, which she terms "Adulthood II" (2013, p.21) which may last from the mid- fifties into the late seventies or early eighties and that sisters in their second adulthood will continue in active ministry probably throughout that stage. Schneiders says it is, therefore, inappropriate for sisters in their seventies to be considered in retirement. Today, sisters in this age bracket and over are often "not retirees psychologically, socially or ministerially, even if they might be such in terms of society's employment structure" (2013, p.572). The sisters in this study would concur,

as several state that religious do not retire, and they do not see themselves as retired from ministry. If we accept, as stated by Schneiders in Chapter Five, that religious life is not an organisation but a state of life, then the sisters clearly cannot retire from being religious. As Sr Maeve says:

> I am maybe retired, but what am I retired from? I haven't retired from being a sister and our way of life and the values that have been passed on and have been imbibed by me over the years.

The question then for consideration in this and the following chapter is if the sisters' state of physical health and stage of life mean that they are no longer able to be involved in formal, paid or external ministries, what is the ministry they are involved in and what does ministry at this stage of life look like?

Context

The factors that have led to a changed demographic profile and reduced visibility and, therefore, social influence of religious in the UK and beyond have been discussed at various points in this study. However, two factors have a strong bearing on how sisters continue to be apostolic, and on their understanding of ministry at this stage in their lives. The first of these is the extent to which they continue to be involved in ministry outside of their own community. At the time of the first interviews, four of the sisters were still involved in some form of voluntary ministry outside of their community. The remainder are now no longer involved in external ministries, although three are still involved in prayer and retreat work and spiritual direction or working with their congregation's Associates, which is done from within their own community and so can be regarded as home-based.

A second factor is the extent to which a sister is being cared for. By the time of the second round of interviews five of the sisters were largely housebound due to a change in their health, and two were resident in their congregation's care community. Both these factors appear to influence how the sisters talk about their current understanding and experience of being apostolic. Their activities are now largely home-based, domestic, focussed on other members of their community or carers, or taking place entirely through relationship-based ministries. The way in which sisters understand how they relate to each other or to their carers, and the extent to which these are considered as forms of ministry will be explored in the final chapter.

Analysis of the narrative texts shows two findings. First, it shows that the sisters understand their being apostolic in both broad and specific relational terms. This is

unsurprising because being in relationship does not depend on physical mobility, although it may depend on having good speech, hearing and other faculties. The second finding is that the sisters see their ministry, and perhaps their lives now in terms of self-gift. These findings are not unexpected as both enable sisters to make meaning of an active vocation within the physical limitations of their lives. Even if a sister can no longer leave her own community, she can understand what she does and who she is in these terms, and continue to find her life meaningful.

The extent to which the sisters are realistic about their physical limitations and abilities is perhaps an indicator of their being obedient to their changing context. It was my impression that none of the sisters in the study are unrealistic about their capabilities nor do they speak of a reluctance to let go of things they can no longer do. They appear to embrace relinquishment, rather than see themselves as defined solely by diminishment.

Ways of being apostolic

Evangelising

Within these ever-reducing spheres of activity, mobility and social influence, sisters speak about being apostolic in a number of ways: apostolic as relationship and as being with and being for, and articulating these as both self-gift and reciprocity. It can be difficult to separate these concepts out from each other because they are so closely intertwined both in the sisters' words and in reality, but overall reflect their self-understanding in terms of intersubjectivity. Sr Bernadette's explanation of apostolic is typical in its setting out a self-understanding as apostolic which encompasses all of these concepts.

> …[B]ringing Christ to others …following in the footsteps of the apostles in that you try to preach, or rather to live the word of God, in a world that isn't always open to it, so you have to become all things to all people, to try to get the message across that what you are saying and what you are living has relevance, and has an ultimate purpose and goal, the Kingdom of God and that you really believe that is where your ultimate destiny will be. You've got to do your best to express that in terms of your living, your being, so it's just more outward looking.

Sr Bernadette here describes apostolic in more traditional terms such as through following in the footsteps of the apostles and preaching, but integrates these into the way she lives her life and who she is, and all the while looking outwards to others.

Seven of the sisters used the more traditional language of "evangelisation" to explore the meaning of apostolic, although none used this word to describe what they believe themselves to be engaged in, with Sr Jayne and Sr Beatrice (see below) noting how much they disliked the term. In their transcripts there is a group of frequently recurring set of words used to denote their apostolic activity: bringing Christ to others; bringing God to people; preaching, taking out or spreading the Good News or the Gospel; drawing people to a life of prayer; bringing others with you and showing them the Kingdom and spreading God's love. Sr Anne sees spreading the good news as an essential part of her mission.

> "Go, tell the brothers where I am, what you have seen, what you have heard" and that model of the women at the tomb being told to go – that's a missioning – go and spread the good news and when Jesus appears to the disciples in the upper room in John's gospel – "as the Father sent me, I have sent you".

Sr Susan links "taking out the good news" very clearly to the apostolic impulse towards others and her congregation's charism.

> The apostolic impulse of our charism is to take out the good news that Jesus lives– he lived the human life that we live; he died a real death and he lives in the new way that we are all being invited to enter into.

Although the language used by sisters, such as spreading, bringing and taking out, speaks of a one-way action, a central element of the sisters' view of this "activity" is that it involves sharing the good news with others, through a clear outward orientation, towards and with others as articulated by Sr Beatrice.

> To be apostolic is to be an evangelist, I think. I hate the word evangelist, because it has other connotations that I don't like, but if you're talking about an apostolate, you can't keep it to yourself; you've got to share it with others. And it's just as our lady carried Jesus wherever she went – she carried Him before He was born. We MUST do that. To be apostolic is to be a prayerful person and second it's to share that prayer and the joy of the gospel with others, in whatever way we can do, we are allowed to do or we are called to do.

This suggests the sisters can "be" through doing, for example through spreading the Gospel and sharing the good news. There are, however, other ways in which they do this which are less explicitly missional.

Availability in the everyday

Although sisters describe specific activities as expressions of being apostolic, these all form part of the gift of their time. In turn, they are also all aspects of self-gift through availability, and give expression to the sisters' self-understanding as focussed on gift of self. The sisters' greater availability at this stage in their life reflects not only the changes in attitude which have taken place in religious life but also that they have more time to give to others now they are no longer in full-time ministry. Sr Collette explains:

> ...it's feeling not quite guilty, but should I be doing something else because of my ministry? Now I feel that whenever I meet people I can have time to share – to smile, and to say good morning. I often meet people around here now, taking their dogs for a walk and things like that, and I feel that that's part of my ministry now and I'm not saying "Oh, it's a waste of time or whatever", whereas before I'd have thought "Oh I should be doing something else, I should be doing something for preparation for school for tomorrow" or something like that, but I don't feel a bit guilty now.

Sr Kathleen also appreciates the benefits of no longer being in full time ministry: "it's not like when we had piles of exercise books to correct or running around here and there." Sr Pamela recalls how in earlier religious life, simply sitting and listening to someone would have been viewed as "a waste of time". Sr Dorothy notes that time has come as a gift to her, with old age.

> At least I have time on my side; I can give them time. I can't go running around the country now but I can give them time.

In this time that they give, the sisters listen actively to others, and they also share their own stories, in what is often described in terms of deep conversation and mutual exchange. Furthermore, they say they are consciously trying not to judge, but to welcome and accept others for who they are. Sr Collette explains this below.

> The more I hear peoples' stories, the more I think "Oh my gosh, who am I to judge in any way their life and how good it is or how bad it is" so I tend not to do that but just accept them as they are and see if I could in any way help their situation by sharing.

This reflection from Sr Collette explores not only being welcoming and accepting what the person offers, but gives us an insight into the sisters' belief that they in turn have something to offer, in an exchange of experience and perhaps vulnerability.

In a demonstration of the complexity of the concept of "being", much of the sisters' understanding of being apostolic is described or explored in terms of specific activities which have come to express apostolic at this stage in their lives. These fall largely into the following categories: helping and helping others become: hospitality and welcoming and listening, which is sometimes exercised through the particular ministry of spiritual accompaniment. These are all activities which can be engaged in within their own community and with those who come in to them. As Sr Jayne says of being apostolic: "you don't have to have a job to do it, do you?"

The common thread through these activities is being in relationship with others. I have referred to this as both being with and being for and I would argue that this now forms part of their own self-understanding. Consequently, I suggest that this turning towards others be recognised as an attitude, or orientation, rather than a series of acts or practices, something Marcel (1950) describes as *disponibilité* or availability. A feature of Marcel's philosophy of relevance here is his central concern with the individual human person and the importance of her experience as a starting place for philosophical enquiry (Blundell, 2010, pp.58–60; Tattam, 2016), along with his examination of individual identity in relationship with others (1951). According to Blundell, Marcel works out of this "primacy of concrete existence of the embodied person" (2010, p.58) not so much as a rejection of abstraction *per se*, but more from a belief that the abstract and the conceptual needs to be considered in concert with the concrete experience. Rather like practical theology's concern that theological theory begin with and be rooted in everyday lives, Marcel worked out of a dialectic between the concrete and the abstract, lest the reality and dignity of the individual be overlooked in the face of abstractions such as political systems.

Marcel's philosophical concept of availability to and for others arises as he explores how to determine identity. His concern is "highlighting the intersubjective community in which man [*sic*] is situated and exploring how existential 'availability' can be promoted between the self and others" (Tattam, 2015, p.23). Thus for Marcel, questions of human identity can only be resolved through relationship with others and the ability to respond to the "calls made upon [him] by life" (1950, p.163) or by others. He sees it as essential for humans to be oriented towards life's call as it is lived in relation to, and in communion with, others (1950, pp.163–64). One reason why this "availability" is so important to Marcel is because "rendering the self available to otherness" (p.24) involves risk, and relies on an act of faith on the part of the individual as she makes herself open to an encounter with the unknown. For Marcel, life only has meaning when lived in intersubjectivity: through being "with" others, we find communion

(pp.172–77). This echoes the call in *Vita Consecrata* whereby "Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practise the spirituality of communion as "witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God's design"" (1996, # 46). Sr Pamela commented:

> [i]t's just accepting that we are all one family and by that I include the earth and the planet and the cosmos; we're all part of the same kin-dom, without the 'g'.

Another form by which sisters express being apostolic and self-gift is through "helping". Sr Pamela explained her understanding of the apostolic call of all women religious in this way:

> We're all in the process of being the people that God would want us to be and helping other people to be the people that He wants them to be.

This is echoed by Sr Jayne.

> It's really the idea that we are to show to other people that God is IN people – in humanity; He is here amongst us, living and living through us.

Thus, they claim that this process of becoming their true selves involves not only their own becoming, but helping others on that journey of becoming. Sr Bernadette's words demonstrates this.

> I wouldn't put the emphasis on saving my own soul but on trying to help others, on their journey to God and finding God in their lives and anything I could do to help.

Over half the sisters are now primarily home and community-based and unsurprisingly welcoming and hospitality play a substantial role in the meaning they make of their apostolic call. Sr Bernadette has a formal "welcoming role" with guests in her community and she explained:

> …being here in the house and welcoming guests – hospitality is a ministry and people can come at any time and need to be welcomed, given a cup of tea, chatted to or listened to.

When I asked her about the older sisters in her community she said: "Some are ambulant, but can't do much …but a 90-year-old can still be there to welcome people" and in her second interview she affirmed my recognition of welcoming as a ministry.

> I thought that was good - thank God somebody was on the ball for that one… that's exactly how, in many ways, you saw yourself; you had to give your time,

your gifts and the listening, helping, welcoming, hospitality – I would certainly see that as very important in religious life.

Sr Maeve is in her late eighties and housebound since a recent fall, but sees much of her every day activities in terms of ministry:

The time was when we were outside, caring for others and now a number of us are in but it is amazing what we can do… the Associates, the prayer groups, we are all involved in some of that working with the poor at the door, making sandwiches, giving them tea.

Listening plays an important role in sisters' ministry and can be engaged in anywhere or at any time. Many of the sisters see the act of listening as very much needed in today's world and, therefore, a relevant part of being apostolic. Sr Bernadette expresses it in these terms: "The listening ear is the important part – where in today's world so few listen". Sr Clare concurs: "there's a great need for people to be listened to", a need also endorsed by Sr Susan. Several sisters including Sr Collette, Sr Clare and Sr Beatrice identified this as a role religious can helpfully fulfil at this point both in society and in the history of religious life. Sr Jayne spoke of the role of listening in a former ministry of hers in prison chaplaincy, in a situation where often there was little else to be done:

I wasn't talking about God to them – maybe with the prisoners occasionally in some very vague way, He would come up, but on the whole, it was what that man said to me; it was listening to them; trying to be understanding; seeing the good in them, as well as the fact that they'd murdered somebody or, supporting them. To me, that is what Jesus really wants from people: it's being with people; it's listening to them… that is being apostolic.

Facing others

In this orientation towards others and self-understanding as being in relationship with and available to others, the sisters see themselves as ordinary practising Christians, as they reminded me repeatedly during interviews. They follow the commandments of loving God and loving their neighbour and anchor their sharing with, and doing things for, others in their relationship with God, seeing it as a fruit of that relationship.

However, the sisters are also vowed religious and have embraced a form of life which places seeking God through the following of Christ at its heart, with all the turning towards the Other and others that this entails. Chapter Four (pp.97) noted that apostolic works in the form of service to, for and with others has long been part of the

identity of the apostolic or active religious. Furthermore, the vows publicly professed by active religious include that of celibacy which is understood by contemporary writers on religious life as a vow of availability for, and to, others and increasingly as a vow of or for right relationship with others, which includes intimacy but also healthy self-development through relationship (Fiand, 1991; O'Murchu, 1989; Merkle, 1998; Schneiders, 2013).

Hahnenberg holds that God's call is always mediated through others (2010, p.159) so that the sisters hear their call shaped or determined by and through the needs of others. He also contends that our contemporary, post-modern world, which is almost defined by diversity, demands "a particular kind of conversion… namely, the conversion that comes through openness to "the other"" (2010, p.160). The "other" in this sense extends beyond the familiar, pointing to those who are different and, therefore, challenges us to step beyond the comfort of ministering to those who are like us. The sisters' conversion depends on others for both its progression and realisation. "We grow in this openness to God who is *the* Other precisely by growing in openness to others" (p.173).

Volf (1996) also recognises a contemporary need to be open to the other. He calls for an openness, as God is open to the other, drawing on the imagery of the open arms of the cross as a metaphor for God's openness, and an invitation to, and embrace of, the enemy (1996, p.126). Thus, the call here is to be inspired by divine openness. Writing in the years following the Balkan war, Volf was concerned with reconciliation, but draws heavily on the recent revival of Trinitarian theology. He makes particular use of Moltmann's work (1992) highlighting the character of self-donation inherent in the Trinity, and in Christological self-donation and draws on this for his model of how we might make space in ourselves for and relate to the other:

> At the centre of the New Testament lies the narrative of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ understood as an act of obedience toward God and an expression of self- giving love for his followers as well as the model for the followers to imitate.

> (1996, p.30)

In Volf's and Hahnenberg's theology, both influenced by liberation theology, there is an element which could be described as activist. For Volf the call is to work actively for reconciliation in the face of conflict. Hahnenberg seeks to call his readers away from the comfort of ministering to the familiar, in order to engage with the other who is different and discomforting. Several of the sisters, notably Sr Bernadette and Sr

Collette, have been able to respond to the call to open themselves to the other, through involvement with multi-faith women's groups, particularly in urban contexts where the neighbour is increasingly of different ethnicity and faith. However, the sisters in this study are now largely limited to encountering those who are able to come to them, and often, these are the known and the familiar. Furthermore, not all sisters are activists in this sense, and even those who are, and continue to be so well into their later years, come to a stage where this is no longer practical for them. I would contend that for sisters at this stage in their lives, and for those who are perhaps less "activist" in nature, a theology of service to others based on activism does not serve them or their congregations well in terms of providing a framework to give meaning to those years when they are beyond activism and activity. As Sr Dorothy says: "I can't get out as much now and go out and do things for people but there are other ways people can come to me."

There is a third model for this orientation to others. Moltmann's model of "open friendship"' calls on Christians to be in communion with all others (1992, pp.255–259). Moltmann draws our attention to what he sees as a central tenet of Christianity, that is to be open to the other, the one who is different, and offer friendship. Friendship should not be limited to those who are like us but "acceptance of others in their difference, for it is this experience of our neighbours, and only this, which is in line with the Christian experience of God" (1992, p.258), as modelled by Christ in the New Testament. Moltmann claims that "The difference is experienced in the practical encounter which mutually reveals what we are and what the other is" (1992, p.258) and points to a mutual recognition of each other, rather than loss of identity in the face of others. In contrast to the forms of engagement with others being offered by Volf and Hahnenberg, there is no activism inherent in open friendship. In fact, Moltmann is explicit about the fact open friendship is simply about welcoming all.

> The motive for this is not the moral purpose of changing the world. It is a festal joy over the kingdom of God which…has thrown itself wide open for "the others".

> (1992, p.259)

I will revisit Moltmann in my later exploration of reciprocity. At this point though, I want to note that I have argued that being with and for is fundamental to the sisters' self-understanding but a theology with activism at its heart may not be the model for their self-gift this study is seeking. However, what Hahnenberg, Volf and Moltmann have in common is a call to openness to those with whom we share elements of life, and those

who are unfamiliar. I have noted that as sisters are increasingly housebound, the range of "difference" with which they can engage becomes reduced. However, at the same time, their choice about whom to engage with is reduced, and so perhaps the task of availability and openness to the other becomes in some ways more difficult and demands an ever greater commitment to self-gift. In light of this, the chapter will go on to consider Schneiders' work on ministry as gift to consider whether this gives a theological expression to the sisters' lived experience.

Ministry as gift: fit for purpose?

Engaging with the main features of Schneiders' (2013) theology of ministry as gift will help to reflect a little more deeply on the nature of sisters' ministry at this stage in their lives. The first feature of this theology relevant here is her interpretation of the three vows of poverty, obedience and chastity as a combined articulation and expression of self-gift, modelled on Christ's self-giving and with the aim of being "in union with Jesus in his total self-gift to God in the Spirit for the salvation of the world" (2013, p.291). Second, she locates her theology of ministry as gift specifically within the vow of poverty. She understands religious to be both living in, and pointing to, an alternate world which is the Kingdom of God. Their life within that world operates within an economy of gift (2013, Ch.5), as opposed to an economy based on commodity and profit. Ministry for Schneiders is understood not as something a religious undertakes in order to earn payment either for herself or her congregation but rather as prophetic action to bring about the Kingdom.

In a further feature of Schneiders' model of ministry, she reads Arendt's (1958) understanding of action, in her distinctions between labour, work and action as "transformation of persons and society through structural change" (2013, p.271) and sees this as the basis of ministerial activity for the contemporary world. Whilst there is great coherence in Schneiders' theology of ministry, it also forms part of her aim to show the emergence of a new form of ministerial religious life, and mark the break with the past form of apostolic life. Schneiders here puts "action" at the centre of her theology of this form of life, centred not on charity and alleviation of the effects of poverty and injustice, nor on listening and being with an individual person's pain, but on tackling the fundamental causes. In this, she is setting out a clear demarcation in the evolution of apostolate into ministry. There is also a slightly didactic element here as she appears keen to encourage religious (2013, p.274) to move on from seeing ministry primarily as work to support themselves and an institution and view it instead as service and gift.

In her consideration of ministry, Schneiders' emphasis is not, however, entirely focussed on "action". In her recent work she makes it clear that ministry is now intrinsic to the very identity of ministerial religious, and notes furthermore the primacy of being: "What Religious are…is at least as important as what they do" (2013, p.248). Again, I would challenge her to say that the focus should be "who" religious are, rather than what, and one wonders whether the emphasis on action to tackle structural causes of poverty is a theology that easily maps onto the reality of the women in this study. Whilst Sexton and Simmonds (2015) found that many older women religious continue to look outwards and engage in actions such as online petitions or lobbying parliament, the women in this study were facing increasing physical limitations and health needs that may limit their capacity for "action". They may no longer be able to lobby parliament and yet still live meaningful lives filled with expressions of concern for others. Is Schneiders' theology of ministry, therefore, sufficiently extensive to offer meaning to a sister with an apostolic calling in her later years?

Ministry as gift

Despite the physical limitations they now face, the sisters in this study understand their ongoing "ministry" in terms of both gift and reciprocity. In discussing how they are apostolic with others, they use the language of giving and receiving. A question to ask at this stage is what is it about their motivation and their relationships that enables both them and the reader to identify their ministry as gift? I will turn to Marcel, Ricoeur and Milbank to explore this question. All of these writers support Schneiders' own differentiation between gift and income generation. Both Marcel (1951, pp.117–24) and Ricoeur (2005, pp.225-26) identify and discuss the distinction between gift-giving and commercial exchange. For Marcel, gift is more than simply transactional as it has to be unconditional in nature in order to be gift. Although sisters in this study do speak of what they receive in return for their giving, they do not appear to be seeking a return, nor do they know what the return might be; it is unconditional. Milbank (2009) similarly sees the purpose of gift to establish exchange and relationship in some way because "though there is equivalent return, the same thing does not come back. Something passes never to return at all" (2009, p.257). Gift is both, therefore, one-way and reciprocal as although it elicits a return, its nature cannot be known. Marcel traces gift back to generosity in the soul and claims that generosity itself is not the cause of gift, but makes gift possible. "Generosity…seems itself to be a gift" (p.120), that is, a manifestation of grace (p.151). Sr Anne recognises this in her understanding of being apostolic as "being a channel of the love and the grace of God".

Ricoeur (2005) also differentiates between commercial exchange and gift-giving and identifies "a form of recognition that announces itself to be immanent in personal transactions" (2005, p.227). He interprets Anspach's (2002 cited in 2005, p.227) "transcendent third term" present between the giving and receiving which "even if nothing other than the relation itself, impos[es] itself as a separate actor entirely". He seeks to identify this "third element", which Marcel has interpreted as grace, present in the gap between first giving and receiving. Ricoeur names this as a form of mutual recognition between the giver and the recipient, whereby the two parties identify, recognise and accept each other. Within this Ricoeur also identifies a paradoxical cycle of expectation built into gift-giving, which sees the recipient experience an obligation to return the gift. In order that mutual recognition itself does not become an obligation, Ricoeur, like Marcel, recognises the role of generosity, and suggests focussing on the generosity of the giver (2005, p.243). "Gratitude lightens the weight of obligation to give in return and reorients this toward a generosity equal to the one that led to the first gift." However, unlike Marcel, who identifies this as grace, Ricoeur, claims that what makes this ultimately possible is the "giving without return" of *agape,* love which does not demand any return and which ultimately has a role in establishing a state of peace.

Ricoeur sees the presence of *agape* in mutual recognition as the factor that helps turn a potentially vicious cycle of giving and obligation to return into a virtuous cycle. Milbank also does not see gift as a one-way action or movement, nor even as a complete circle "Rather it is a spiral or strange loop…there is no first free gift, because to give to another one must have received at least her presence" (p.257). The sisters' understanding of gift is rooted in what they themselves have received from God: the first gift. Their sense of gratitude for this moves them, as posited by Ricoeur, to respond not reciprocally, but with another first gift. Sr Collette speaks of having received the "gift of faith" and feels called to share this and her God-given gifts with others. Sr Maeve also links giving and receiving.

> I feel it's only right and proper that I should [give]; we've been given so much. When I look at the situations outside, and the boat people and all; you just feel such sorrow for them and I think that is important, to be involved, in so far as we can.

Sr Susan talks of the apostolic impulse as "the activation of the gift I have received" and Sr Jayne explains her initial motivation to enter religious life in terms of giving her life to God.

It's that phrase - what return can I make to the Lord for all he has given to me?
It's an appreciation for all he has given to me and what can I do in return – well,
he can use me.

So sisters give not in return for a gift, in a transactional sense, but as another first gift.
Sr Susan, in her second interview explained this.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is that he came with a message of what God
wants for all of us and the grace of God is given to us through Jesus Christ, to
receive what God actually wants for us, does that make sense?... because we
don't have anything that is ours to give, we witness for God…. we need to
follow what He is actually gifting us because we are not going to get there on
our own or by our own good ideas.

In reference to Milbank (2009), none of the sisters explicitly recognise the first gift from
God in terms of their presence, but they do acknowledge that they are nothing in and of
themselves: they accept their dependence on God, in an attitude of poverty of spirit, as
Metz (1968) terms it. Sr Beatrice expresses this utter reliance on the gifts of the Spirit
several times.

I have never ever had anyone who didn't like it in this house; they love it when
they see you laugh and smile at them, and they say when you read you become
so alive and I thought that's the Holy Spirit it is not me, … I tend to say it
because I get scared then and I say oh well that is the Holy Spirit anyway. I
don't want them to think I'm doing it, that I mean this and it is my gift; it is my gift
but it is a gift that God has given me for them and tomorrow if I had a stroke I
wouldn't have it would I?

For Schneiders (2013), this ability to accept our utter dependency on God is not just at
the heart of but a prerequisite for ministry through self-gift: "in experiencing their very
being as gift, ministers reach out to foster, promote and enable the very being of those
to whom they are sent" (2013, p.305). She offers a hermeneutic of Jesus' call for us to
receive the gift of life and the Kingdom of God "as a little child" which invokes and
invites "us to embrace our ontological contingency, our very real total dependence on
God not only for all that we have, but for all that we are" (2013, pp.304–305), which for
the sisters means accepting that "they are called and *gifted* to participate in the Reign
of God" (2013, p.305). The emphasis on "gifted" in this last quote from Schneiders is
my own, as it links back to my introduction in Chapter Five of the sisters' understanding
that they need to draw on their selves in order to minister and serve.

There are, therefore, several identifiable movements within this desire to give. First, sisters acknowledge their first gift from God and also want to give back to God. There is clearly a desire for mutuality within this but they also recognise that they cannot "do" things for God or give God anything; they can only do this through first gift to others. Sr Martina tries to connect her desire to do something for God with her desire to do things for others.

> You were doing it for God but you were doing it through people – you're not doing it direct – you can do it in several ways, apostolic … you are giving part of your life….that you are doing something for somebody not necessarily a job for earning money, or doing anything, just some way beyond yourself…

Second, the movement apparent here is towards others: doing something for somebody else beyond themselves, without reward or expectation, and thus making themselves available to others. Schneiders sees self-gift as centred in the vows, lived out as a lifelong commitment to availability. Linking this to Marcel's idea of *disponibilité*, or availability, discussed earlier, shapes this as a fundamental almost existential orientation on the sisters' part.

In an analysis which complements Schneiders' own understanding of economy of gift, Milbank also understands giving as both a sign or feature of, and pointing to, the alternate world and thus imbues it with a sacramental quality. Christianity has, by virtue of the incarnation, made all things sacred: "everything is a sign of God and His love" and "In Christ this is shown again" (2009, p.257). This provides the continuing means by which all can be sanctified, emphasising the sacred nature of the relationship established, as givers and receivers are one in Christ. Milbank identifies gift-exchange as one of the constitutive features of St Paul's vision of *ecclesia*: "a kind of universal tribalism of gift-exchange over-against both local polis and universal empire" (2009, p.256) between those who are no longer strangers, but sisters and brothers in Christ.

Reciprocity

The recognition, noted above, that reciprocity or mutuality is at the heart of the nature of gift, is deeply embedded in the sisters' apparent orientation towards others. Sr Anne described it thus:

> [m]y concept of apostolic ministry would be something which encloses, gathers together more than doing the soup run and going out; it's a little bit like the disciples and Mary going back to Jerusalem to await the coming of the Holy Spirit; it's something which is all part of one movement.

Sr Anne's words bring to mind the concept of *perichoresis* drawn from Orthodox or Eastern theological traditions, which recognises the divine inter-penetration of and, therefore, reciprocal relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. This has formed part of the re-discovery of Trinitarian theology in recent years within Western theology (LaCugna, 1991; Moltmann, 1992; Volf, 1996; Collins, 2012). This theology informs the sisters' recognition of their dependence on God and on others, and that in giving they receive, as sisters say below. Their seeking out of the other reflects their awareness that in doing so they become more closely united to God, and part of establishing Milbank's *ecclesia*, and Schneiders' Kingdom, as explained by Sr Anne.

> What I've learned through my own experience is that you can only give what you have received and if the most important thing is that I become a channel of the Holy Spirit and God's love for other people, then I have to have a certain space in which I do open myself and allow myself to be invaded by the Spirit so that my response to people, individuals or to any ministry that I've undertaken, is based on that inner relationship… I think this is the establishing of the "God space": I don't like the word "kingdom" because I think it's got too many attachments to it, but the whole question of the Kingdom of God - Tom Wright actually has got a very nice phrase – he said to think of it as the God space – are you helping to create the God space – in collaboration with God?

Returning to Moltmann, the theme of self-gift or self-donation in his work is inspired by a recognition that the self-giving love of Christ is rooted in the self-giving love of the Triune God (Volf, 1996, p.25), which in turn inspires Moltmann's concept of "open friendship" (1992, pp.255–59).

> The reciprocal self-surrender to one another within the Trinity is manifested in Christ's self-surrender in a world which is in contradiction to God; and this self-giving draws all those who believe in him into the eternal life of the divine love.
>
> (Moltmann, 1992, p.137)

At times sisters speak of this reciprocity and mutuality as if they are being completed or made whole by the intersubjective nature of their relationships. They do not give in order to receive, but recognise that they are nonetheless enriched by what they receive. In Moltmann's understanding of *koinonia* or fellowship of the Spirit, the Spirit gives itself and enters into fellowship with believers, drawing them into fellowship and thus into community. "Fellowship means opening ourselves for one another…fellowship lives in reciprocal participation and from mutual recognition" (1992, p.217). There are two points of note here. First, as with his concept of open friendship, Moltmann

believes that fellowship can exist not only between those who are alike, but between those who are truly different, as the Holy Spirit's fellowship is open to all. Second, that fellowship "is never unilaterally determined. It is always reciprocally defined" (1992, p.218); those in fellowship must share some element in common. Moltmann notes that through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, God enters into a relationship which is both reciprocal and mutual, thereby allowing those with whom He enters into relationship and influences, to influence Him (Godself) in return (p.218).

La Cugna supports this, saying that it "provides a dynamic model of persons in communion based on mutuality and interdependence" (1991, p.271), pointing to the dynamic nature of that relationship. If we are made in God's image and likeness and can understand God as "an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving" (LaCugna, 1991, p.272) then surely humans are invited "in love to enter its communion" (Collins, 2012, p.35).

> God self-reveals as a communion (*koinonia*) of divine persons united in an eternally self-constituting/self-sacrificing web of mutual relations. God is a flowing circle of inter-penetrating, self-giving lovers, whose source is the first person, the Father. The divine life is a communion of giving and receiving…so absolute that with each one dwelling within the others through *perichoresis*…there is but one subject, God
>
> (Collins, 2012, pp.34-35).

The sisters become more closely formed to the *imago Dei,* in their ongoing process of conversion, and the love they show towards others reveals another aspect of the nature of God. Sr Kathleen's experience of volunteering with asylum-seekers demonstrates this.

> …I'm helping those people and in return I'm getting a life that I love; a way of life that's giving me so much happiness… there's a man in the very beginners' class and he's a very fast learner. He really needs to go up because he's too fast for us and I told him one morning, I said, we've decided that now you're ready for this class. Well he turned round and he hugged me, and he hugged me and he loved me, you know.

When Sr Collette was asked by the Superior why she wanted to enter their particular congregation she responded:

> I said to save my soul and that of others - that was the usual answer but I must have felt that I would be doing both really- how they complement each other.

Even at that point she had begun to see how the two movements were inextricably linked and this has continued.

> For me to try and help them to live their lives as best they possibly can and for me to gain from helping them as well; that they help me as well – a two way thing.

In her second interview she welcomed my feedback that sisters give and receive in return.

> That is true, we give and we receive in life all the time, right now I am receiving, you know, no matter what we are doing, where we are or who we are sharing with or what is happening in our lives.

Sr Bernadette speaks of "giving empowerment we ourselves have received as women religious to other women": a channelling, but she also notes:

> I get a lot more from people – family, friends, casual acquaintances, than I give. I'm a people person and I like observing people and I get my energies from interacting with them.

The concept of the ordinary again makes itself known. Sisters want to feel ordinary themselves; it is important to them to be among ordinary people and part of a local community, immersed in a spiral, or virtuous circle of giving and receiving. Sr Kathleen derives "a lot of nourishment from listening to people – again this is where the ordinary people come in." She speaks movingly of the experience of visiting ordinary homes and simply sitting with, and being among, people affected by AIDS in Southern Africa. Sr Beatrice understands the presence of her community on an inner-city estate in similar terms.

> People around here, a lot of them, would never have been brought up to know much about God but they know an awful lot about caring, about being with you when you are in need and that is something that we have to work out together. I found that very wonderful and they are bringing us with them as well as, it works both ways doesn't it? We are an apostolic community; we are meant to be part of people all around us and yet at the same time we are also meant to be, I was going to say guides but we are not really, it is a mutuality. It sounds very posh really but it is a reaching out and a mutual outreach … We will of course be there with you through the whole thing and there is that freedom to talk about not to be holy, but to say yes let us see what we can do together in this.

Sweeney (2001) sees sisters' embracing the ordinary in this way as an indication that, after the years of turmoil, and wrestling with identity in the post-conciliar period, they are turning towards what he terms "the prophetic way".

> Their value is in the fact that the religious "are there", close to ordinary people, inserted in local neighbourhoods. Their credibility lies in the relationships and friendships they strike up; they are seen to value individuals, families and communities who on a routine basis are socially disregarded and used to being discarded. Their mission is to witness to hope in the midst of what seems like hopelessness.
>
> (2001, p.284)

Self-gift

I have considered being with and being for and an orientation towards others in terms of availability and the gift of time, all within the overarching concept of self-gift. This concept forms the third element of Schneiders' (2011) description of the dynamic of women's religious life in the second half of the twentieth century, referred to in Chapter Five (pp.123-4).

The theological concepts of *perichoresis* and *koinonia* or communion, explored both in Chapter One of this study, and in an earlier section of this chapter, have already been helpful in understanding the movements involved in sisters' ministry and relationships with others. As a contribution towards establishing *koinonia* or communion, LaCugna identifies the connection between these concepts.

> "toward-another"…God is self-communicating, existing from all eternity in relation to another. The ultimate ground and meaning of being is therefore communion among persons: God is ecstatic, fecund, self-emptying out of love for another, a personal God who comes to self through another.
>
> (1991, p.14)

This is echoed by Collins, (2012, pp.35–36), for whom some form of *kenosis* on the part of the individual is a necessary component of movement towards communion. Collins' use of *kenosis* was introduced in Chapter One of this study in an exploration of concepts being presented in contemporary British writing on religious life.

In the context of this chapter, Collins's linking of *kenosis* and communion expresses what appears to be at work in the sisters' understanding of their apostolic ministry in terms of both gift and reciprocity. In theological terms *kenosis* is recognised as an

attribute of the divine, as Christ emptied Himself to become human and so cannot, therefore, strictly speaking, be applied to human self-emptying as the concept and movement are of a different order. At a recent conference Kilby (2017) made the point that *kenosis* is best used only when invoking the originating verse in Philippians, 2: 6-7 and God's own self-emptying. Schneiders would seem to concur. She uses the term in reference to God's own self-emptying but relates it to her anchoring of ministry in evangelical poverty. The issue to be confronted is the clinging to material possessions as a form of protection against humanity's fragility. She urges religious to adopt "the same existential stance toward our creaturehood" (2013, p.311), in embracing ontological vulnerability. The response to the self-giving of the incarnation is self-giving in return.

Consequently, it may be more appropriate to use *kenosis* in analogical terms and speak of kenotic-like self-emptying, or giving up, modelled on the Trinitarian self-surrender identified by Moltmann in the previous section. It may even be that Welker's language of "free self-withdrawal" (1994, p.310) is more helpful in considering the nature of the sisters' self-giving. Welker, as with Moltmann, Volf and Collins understands this free self-withdrawal as modelled on the mystery of the self-giving Trinity for the sake of the world. One of the ways in which we see this free self-withdrawal at work among the sisters is in their availability and self-gift, through a form of ministry increasingly termed "ministry of presence". This, and other expressions of self-gift through ministry being practised by sisters in later life will be explored in the final chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter has begun to situate the sisters' experience of apostolic ministry at this stage of their lives in a context of reduced social influence and, therefore, limited opportunities for apostolic ministry. The chapter has also explored how the sisters have recognised reciprocity and mutuality at the heart of their giving of self, both in relationship with God and to and for others. Together with this, the chapter has explored the theology of ministry as gift, and considered the relevance of the concepts of Trinitarian *perichoresis* and Christological *kenosis*, and whether these offer a theological framework which helps make sense of the nature and form of the sisters' experience of ministry at this stage of their lives. The chapter has presented the limitations of the work of Volf, Hahnenberg and Schneiders as a means of giving voice to the sisters' experience of ministry at this stage of life, but Moltmann's understanding of fellowship and Marcel's approach to presence and gift have been helpful as the

sisters' understanding of gift incorporates the concepts of reciprocity and is encompassed by self-gift. The work of identifying theology that gives expression to the theology operant in their self-understanding will continue in the following chapter.

Although we might assume that the physical limitations lead to reduced or limited opportunities for apostolic ministry, it is already clear that this is not necessarily the case, and that sisters seek out opportunities to continue to minister. The next chapter will consider further ways in which sisters exercise "home-based" or domestic ministries, chief of which is increasingly termed "ministry of presence". I would like to end this Chapter with a quote sent to me by one of the sisters after her first interview. Taken from her congregation's Constitutions.

> Each succeeding stage of life brings a new invitation to leave all, to follow him and to find the place where He dwells. We take a firmer grasp of the hope His call holds for us.

The final chapter will continue the exploration of that call.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Ministry in old age: apostolic to the very end

Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the reality of ministry in the context of those sisters who are now physically infirm in some way and increasingly dependent on others. The range of people with whom they come into contact is decreasing. Consequently, this final section will focus on the stage in later life where Vacek (2010) considers the moral priorities to be those of disengagement and completion and which for Schneiders (2013) focusses on relinquishment.

First, I will examine some of the sisters' attitudes towards older age and being able to do less, and the ambivalence and contradictions heard in connection with this. I will reflect on these in relation to the wider social construct of old age, and the context of decline in the membership of religious life. The second part of the chapter will explore three ways in which sisters continue to be apostolic or in ministry until the end of their lives and propose that these can be read as sacramental and incarnational. Furthermore, I will argue that as sisters continue to be oriented towards the needs of others, even in small ways, they continue to be apostolic to the end of their lives, through being relational and dialogical in obedience to the context in which they find themselves. Although the sisters experience physical diminishment, they do not experience diminishment in terms of living their apostolic vocation.

Ministry in old age

The previous chapter began to explore the idea of having a ministry or being apostolic without a specific named ministry or employment in a context where sisters have limited contact with people outside their congregation and community. This chapter, beginning in this section will focus specifically on how sisters continue to be apostolic when their relationships are largely conducted within a community and with those who visit. Each sister was asked whether sisters who are either housebound due to physical infirmity or living in a care community can have a ministry or be apostolic. The majority saw even the oldest or most infirm as continuing to be apostolic in some way. Sr. Jayne for example answered:

> Yes. I do. Definitely because of your inner being and your acceptance and your friendliness – all inspired by what is deep within you, which is hopefully your knowledge of God.

Despite the clarity about continuing to be apostolic, sisters were less certain what might comprise ministry at this stage of life. Sr Maeve noted that, in her community, which is

quite elderly, "there's not one person in this house who hasn't a ministry", including herself in that. Sr Pamela articulates the issue at stake.

> So in one way apostolic doesn't necessarily have to be active, does it or at least I don't think it does but that is something I have come to and possibly because of how I can no longer do actively all the stuff I used to be able to do. So how do I continue to serve?

Ambivalence towards old age and inactivity

Despite the overwhelmingly positive responses when asked about being apostolic to the end of their lives, some sisters were conflicted in their attitude to this stage of their life. I will explore three ways in which this is expressed by individual sisters, and then consider two contextual factors which may be affecting their own self-understanding. These are, first, perceptions of older women in society, and second, the discourse of diminishment in religious life.

The sisters appear to struggle to make sense of the experience of ageing and increasing inactivity in at least three ways. Despite the fact that all say they believe they can be apostolic without a specific role, and that there is no such thing as retiring from being a sister, they have mainly experienced a call to apostolic life which constituted a call to active ministry and to being useful. Sr Bernadette's words on retirement illustrate this dilemma: "It's a figure of speech. You entered this order to be of service". Sr Dorothy confirmed this in her comment: "Well we can't simply sit around all day and fill the dishwasher" and Sr Beatrice observed:

> [n]ow we're not young any longer… we shouldn't equate retirement with doing nothing, because we don't work then we only say our prayers, and go to bed early and have a nice little life. I think that's the kiss of death to religious life – definitely.

Second, the sisters recognise that purposeful activity in service of others has been the focus of their lives and to an extent, there continues to be an association between being useful and worth or purpose and meaning in relation to apostolic life, despite *Vita Consecrata's* (1996) affirmation that the "mission continues to be worthwhile and meritorious, even when for reasons of age or infirmity they have had to abandon their specific apostolate. The elderly and the sick have a great deal to give in wisdom and experience… if only the community can remain close to them with concern and an ability to listen" (VC, #44). I asked sisters if they were able to say how their congregations viewed older sisters in relation to ministry in old age. Several recognised

that this was not always positive. Sr Bernadette credits this to the association between ministry, purpose and self-worth.

> I think it will take another period of time to come to the understanding that you ought to be valued till the very end….there's a lot of work to be done on that…because people see themselves as valued for their ministry.

Sr Collette confirmed this.

> We look at ministry as being out there, whereas we should really see it as here and now…This is ministry – what we're doing now. That's my understanding of it, but I don't know that others would view it so positively.

Sr Bernadette agreed that this association between having a purpose and worth is beginning to change, but that "it's taking a long time to accept". Although this may be true, several sisters, including Sr Beatrice in Chapter Four (p.95) observed that this experiencing a lack of purpose can be a cause of suffering for older sisters. Sr Bernadette explained:

> [t]here is a great sense of frustration at lessening faculties – and maybe me as well, I can see it – if life gets you down and you can't rise above the petty trials…. not depressed, but disgruntled with yourself that you can't overcome these trials…Some older sisters need outside help to deal with their irritability and depression; behind it is a feeling of "I am no use". We need to give them a sense of purpose.

Sr Jayne also identified the continuing challenge caused by this association.

> The very word apostle - this idea of being sent out to carry the message somewhere and that is where the problem of feeling you have got to have a special job to do no matter how small or how big the very idea of being apostolic comes in so how does it work out with being apostolic to the end?

She adds that older sisters, particularly those who achieved a lot in their working lives are hit badly in later life as "they see themselves only as what they have done and not who they are". The sisters seem to be articulating a disconnect between purpose and meaning and recognising that a sense of loss of purpose can lead to a loss of meaning.

Third, sisters acknowledge that they can be apostolic without ministry, but, when pressed, many describe even the most elderly and infirm sisters as having some sort of "ministry", as if fearing to accept the idea that without this there may be only "undergoing", as in being "done to", and dependency. For most sisters, however, the

ministry identified is acknowledged as one of prayer and presence. Sr Collette described her congregation's elderly as "a powerful praying presence", while Sr Beatrice said of this "we felt that that was a good apostolic thrust for old ladies – to pray for the families around us".

Whilst ministry of prayer is valued by, and for, other sisters, it is not necessarily the only one the sisters want or envisage for themselves. They often give an example of the one sister or person they knew who remained active until a very late age who they clearly think exemplifies the ideal of how to age. Sr Collette remembers:

> [t]here was a sister here once, with me, she lived to be 90 and my God, she was out doing keep fit and doing this and that. People still talk about her – she was part of the Walking Club.

She gave a further example of her uncle who died at the age of 97 but was still very active and was driving up until two or three years before he died; both are described as "great". Sr Susan similarly refers to a sister in their community who, in her late eighties, was still actively involved in external ministries, visiting the elderly, volunteering at the hospice and still driving. The struggle seems to be a very human one: having to accept their own increasing infirmity, diminishment and approaching death, and yet celebrating those who don't become infirm and keep going.

Sisters are, on the one hand, insistent that one can be apostolic without a ministry, and want to underline the separation between a specific ministry or task and being apostolic. On the other hand, they all refer to the most elderly, even those who are "on a bed of pain" (Sr Dorothy) as either being apostolic or on mission, as they acknowledge the activity inherent in their undergoing suffering or dependence. Their position seems to be that you can be of value when unable to do anything, yet they seem unwilling not to ascribe activities to even the most infirm. This could point to sisters reading meaning into every life, no matter how actively lived. However, it could also be a further reflection of the difficulties they face in coming to terms with what may lie ahead of them individually, in some form of cognitive dissonance. It may also be another aspect of the question of language and naming encountered in Chapter Four, such as whether ministry can only apply to activities and active forms of service and, therefore, whether the forms of serving in later life can be called ministry. Finally, it may be another example of the difficulties of either not having access to, or claiming a name for, their continuing service.

I note some reluctance among the sisters to describe what older sisters do, or how they live, as ministry, as with Sr Kathleen saying of the lives of older sisters: "I don't know

whether you'd call it ministry". It was the oldest sister in the study, Sr Martina, herself now living in a care community who perceived least value in talking about ministry at this stage of her life. Although she described her life in terms of what could be interpreted as activities of service such as prayer, and visiting other sisters in her community, spending time with them talking and listening, she did not see herself as in ministry.

> Who, me? No, not now…Well I don't call that…kind of I go and visit people. To me, that's just something I enjoy doing. I like sitting down with them, and just to let them talk to me, and see what's happening today and how they are and, it's just something that…. no, it is, it's a ministry but …it's just for old age.

Vacek argues for the importance of the elderly maintaining contact with others, noting that "[p]eople are greatly constituted by their engagement with persons and things" (2010, p.165). This is likely to be particularly true of sisters who have such an outward orientation and purpose. Vacek (2010) also underlines the importance of older people developing a set of purposes for this stage of life so as to avoid unhealthy introspection and even depression. Several sisters suggest that being religious gives an identity and meaning to their later lives that many elderly people lack, so this is a positive belief: "it should really be easier for us" (Sr Beatrice), but their struggles are evident. The sisters' ideal is those who have kept going, and they want to be active themselves. Interestingly, Vacek notes that many gerontologists view the insistence that the elderly keep active as "anti-ageism" (2010, p.165).

There are two key influences shaping how the sisters view independence and dependence. The first of these is the social construct (Vacek, 2010) which holds that continuing agency is good and old age and dependency problematic. Sisters' increased integration into and openness to society since the Second Vatican Council means they are not immune from these negative societal attitudes towards the elderly, who are now often regarded in Europe as "a problem", constituting what Marshall (2006, p.vii) calls "the Othered category that is old age".

This may affect the sisters' perception and sense of self-worth, particularly as older women are often viewed more negatively by society. This is likely to impact upon their reception of the narrative of diminishment and their self-image as elderly women. Many feminists claim that elderly women are even more likely to be marginalised. Calasanti (2003) uses the term "age relations" to describe the systematic inequality which prioritises the needs of the young over the ageing and Bennett (2002, p.116) notes: "old women are so often treated without respect and indeed may be the last in the

queue for material resources too". Arber and Ginn (1991 cited in Hurd Clarke, 1999, p.1) argue that "stereotypes of elderly women are particularly negative and demeaning". Elderly women who are not economically productive, not significant consumers, are past child-bearing age and, therefore, no longer considered generative, are not considered relevant in a youth and body-image obsessed culture. Ageing women are less visible in most areas of society and their voices more seldom heard (Ross-Sheriff, 2008).

The second of the two contextual factors which may affect how sisters see themselves at this stage of their lives is the discourse about the current state of religious life and individuals within it. In a series of interviews conducted with Provincial Superiors, Sexton (2013) found that the sisters rejected the language of diminishment, with one preferring to talk of "there's still life in us yet". Pellegrino (2017) spoke to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious of the need to combat a narrative of diminishment which has come to dominate the discourse on religious life within the United States and more broadly. She calls for this narrative to be replaced by a more positive one: "a narrative of deepening communion". The communion she refers to is a global communion, between all religious: those of different nationalities within the US and internationally, with those who are different in age, culture and outlook. It is a significant attempt to reframe the discourse.

Schneiders (2013, p.586) also rejects the use of the language of diminishment in wider theological debates for two reasons. First, because of what she sees as de Chardin's understanding of diminishment as passivity in biological terms, particularly in his 1957 work, *Le Milieu Divin*. However, in recognition of the struggle going on within sisters, some in this study acknowledge diminishment, with Sr Susan as an example.

> I can't get out and about; I'm fairly housebound, but in a way,…I suppose it's age, it's all become integrated and merged and I'm so pleased about what everybody [in her community] is doing at this stage, with the new initiatives and so on and in a sense now it's hard not to be able to do it, but that's the diminishment of age, which, as the life cycle, is absolutely part of this - Teilhard de Chardin and all that, and it's the fulfilment of the paschal mystery, because it is the moving in the direction of the end of life and it will come to us all. So I'm very conscious of that at the moment because of restrictions.

Sr Dorothy is very matter of fact in her acceptance of what she sees as a reality.

> Well, it's a fact isn't it? We are diminishing in numbers and people are diminishing in themselves; they are not able to do the things they were able to

do. I still think there's a lot of life amongst the people who are diminishing physically in so many ways.

Schneiders does acknowledge the suffering and loss which may accompany advanced old age and the end of life, but she herself is a member of an apostolic, now ministerial, congregation and presumably wrestling with similar issues. Her second reason for rejecting the use of diminishment is that she believes that to use the term in this context is to judge according to human criteria, rather than those of God. Those at this stage of life are not diminishing; they are "growing into who they are called to be" (2013, p.586). This draws our attention to the choice we face in old age: how to engage with and respond to suffering and physical infirmity. In obedience to a physical reality, we can make an active choice about how to engage with physical diminishment, and choose relinquishment, or choose passive diminishment. Schneiders sees this choice sisters must make to offer themselves to God in this way as a following of Christ's cry "Into your hands I commend myself" (Luke 23:46), the final act of self-gift through obedience: "the obedience of self-surrender takes the form of the final fruit of a life of union with the will of God" (2013, p.593). There are many merits in these attempts to reframe, but they may also be rooted in a fear of dependency and death.

In defence of dependency and passivity

I will now bring these concerns about diminishment into conversation with Vanstone (1982) who, along with several other theologians, (Coakley, 2002; Swinton, 2004; 2012a; 2012b; 2012c; Gillick, 2006 cited in Vacek 2010; Cottingham, 2012) hold that the experience of dependency, vulnerability and undergoing, rather than "doing" is feared in our contemporary world. Swinton (2012c, p.130) argues that society has embraced a form of personhood defined by cognitive attributes and agency, whereby a person's worth is judged according to their capacity for rational and articulated intelligence, economic activity and independence. Coakley (2002, p.xiv) notes "the continuing cultural fear of 'heteronomy', that is of submission, dependency or vulnerability" and interprets this as "not just an intellectual, but also a spiritual, crisis of some magnitude". Vacek 2010, (p.173) sees the desire for and self-definition by autonomy, or the desire to be as independent of others as possible, as one of the factors "which inhibits growth in trust towards others and towards God." Vacek (2010) also does not recognise the life of Christ as a model for how to live in old age, presumably because he only sees a life of active ministry. This view sits in stark contrast to that of Vanstone.

Vanstone (1982) offers a hermeneutic of the passion narratives in the Gospels where the focus of Jesus' passion is not the physical suffering endured, but the act of handing Himself over. Vanstone reads this act as a decision to pass from an active person who does, to a passive subject or recipient who undergoes (1982, pp.16–25) and, therefore, as an experience of losing control and making Himself vulnerable. He argues that human dignity and worth cannot, therefore, be based solely on the capacity to be an independent, active agent. As we are likely to face dependency at some stage in our lives, Vanstone encourages us to re-discover the innate dignity of undergoing; of being dependent and being vulnerable (p.66), rather than associating this with loss of dignity and worth in societal terms (p.54).

He singles out the particular vulnerability in being dependent, waiting for others and having to relinquish control of self, noting that "although we acquiesce in practice in our condition of dependence, we see no positive worth or value in it and where it is possible to assert or pretend to independence, we do so" (1982, p.43). God-in-Christ's embracing vulnerability gives theological significance to the experience of waiting and dependence, claiming that "from a Christian viewpoint [waiting] is never a degraded condition, a condition of diminished human dignity" (p.109) but is actually a reflection of the glory of God as "the handing over of Jesus discloses the transcendence of loving over everything else" (p.99).

This is the place where many apostolic women religious find themselves - particularly the once independent and active elderly religious - waiting, and increasingly dependent on others. They are ageing, living in a situation of corporate diminishment, decreasing in numbers and influence, and cannot know the future of religious life. If religious life is a sign of God's presence and points to it both now and to come and embraces an eschatological attitude of trust and hope in the reality of the Resurrection, then God must be present in their situation. If we accept that the experience of diminishment at least relates to the physical aspects of the individuals, and the numerical decline of the congregations, this need not necessarily constitute diminishment in a theological sense. We may be witnessing sisters finding ways of being within a context of diminishment and suffering which would constitute flourishing and being apostolic to the very end of their lives, and this on both an individual and congregational level. The sisters recognise and accept the suffering, but find continuing life therein.

Forms of ministry in later life

Being apostolic in later life and the use of self therein finds a number of expressions in the narrative texts. When asked whether sisters undertake ministry in later life, the

initial and most common response is positive, and the most commonly identified form is the ministry of prayer, as identified on p.150 in this chapter. However, I also identified three other forms of ministry: ministry of presence; ministering to each other, in community and ministry to their carers. In the remainder of this chapter I will explore each of these and their theological expressions in turn.

Ministry of presence

This is both a "how" and a "what" in that not only is presence identified as a form of ministry, but it also signifies a way of being and an orientation towards others and as such permeates and is even constitutive of the other forms identified in this chapter. Sisters use "present" to describe how they are with individuals, through a ministry of presence. Um (2009, pp.172–73) writes of the impact religious can have on apostolic ministry simply through their presence: "a contemplative gaze capable of generating communion", by imbuing the situation with an indication of God's presence and love. In this section I will explore this concept of presence and consider its relevance in providing the sisters with a framework through which to make meaning of their apostolic vocation in later life.

If the sisters did not themselves use the word "presence" in the interviews for this study, I asked for their views on it. Thus, the word was used quite extensively and most responses were positive. Some sisters, however, understood it in negative terms. Sr Bernadette thought it indicated passivity; Sr Kathleen associated it with the work of retreat-giving and spiritual direction and the opposite of activity, and hadn't thought of herself in those terms. In response to my feedback to sisters in the second round of interviews, several expressed discomfort at describing their ministry as "presence". Sr Maeve, for example, feared that using the word to describe what she or other sisters do would somehow set them apart, as if thinking of themselves as special in some way.

Contexts of ministry of presence

In this study, sisters apply the language of "presence" to at least three contexts. First, and in contrast to Sr Maeve's fear, they link the term to the ordinary and the experience of being present in, and to, the local community. Several sisters including Sr Beatrice, Sr Susan and Sr Anne, live in communities with an intentional presence on a socially deprived housing estate. Sr Anne explains the effect she believes this has.

> The ministry of presence is the reality of either an individual or a group of
> people who live in a particular area, live a particular way of life and simply the

presence of that group can be an almost intangible influence on what goes on around you… actually being in a place inevitably sends ripples out.

This usage expresses a concern to be both present in and to a local community and is one which Sweeney (2012, p.139) regards as being:

> coherent with the founding inspiration of many apostolic religious congregations, particularly institutes of women religious and those established in the nineteenth century.
>
> (2012, p.139)

This suggests that this form of intentional presence may well be a reflection of that charismatic impulse, and the congregations' own journey *ad fontes*. A number of congregations in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s set up such communities, including the Daughters of Charity, the Infant Jesus sisters and the Passionists. Experimenting with this form of intentional presence, often in collaboration with other congregations (McLoughlin and Simmonds, 2010; O'Brien, 2017, pp.358–59) formed part of an exploration of their commitment to the preferential option for the poor.

A second context where the term presence is applied and practised is in response to a situation encountered which is so difficult that nothing else can be offered. Nouwen (1987) used the term to describe his response to situations of abject poverty and injustice in Latin America where he felt that he had nothing to offer except his presence. This understanding of "presence" recognises human powerlessness in situations where we have to recognise the limitations of creaturehood. Sr Kathleen describes being present with those dying of AIDS in Southern Africa and Sr Jayne, who, in her prison ministry, felt she had nothing to offer the prisoners she encountered other than her listening presence.

Sisters also use the term in a third context, where they feel one needs to be present and listen to people, in a world where, as they perceive it, no one listens any more. Several sisters used it to describe their response to individuals who came to them for support. Sr Maeve in her second interview, identified this as a need for our times.

> [C]ompassionate presence…It's required because of the violence *et cetera* out in the world and you have to counteract it by mingling with people, to be that empathetic, compassionate presence.

Marcel's (1951) philosophical understanding of "presence" draws on the concepts of availability (*disponibilité*, as explored in the previous chapter) and communion.

Presence, for Marcel, carries a much deeper meaning than simply being physically present, transmitting to, or communicating with, another on an almost transactional basis. Instead it denotes being fully open, through availability to another, in a way which enriches the presence and fullness of both. This is understood as communion (1951, pp.201–208), perhaps as experienced by Sr Collette.

> [T]o be fully present to the person, and not to think, "I'm meeting this person now, and I'm going to or he or she is going to share with me" but to be aware, to look at the person, to respect the person for who he or she is, to bring out what is good in that person as well, bring out something positive, and to explore that and develop that within the person's standpoint.

This form of presence enriches the other in a way that is reciprocal and mutual. Marcel presents a philosophical understanding of communion whereby we participate in each other's experience and being, which complements the theological concept of communion identified in Chapter Six. He differentiates between a form of being with another which is simply "a communication without communion" (1951, p.205) and true presence which "can refresh my inner being; it reveals me to myself; it makes me more fully myself" (p.206). What makes the difference for Marcel is mystery, which turns the intersubjectivity into something intangible, indefinable: "a something else" (p.218). Presence expresses Marcel's belief that we can only understand and recognise the self through being with, for and among others. As Sr Pamela explains.

> It's a kind of insertion, but it's stronger…- it makes you part of others…I'm automatically thinking of a presence which is living, which has an influence, which is not just a stone statue, present.

Expressions of presence

Sisters express several ways by which they are "present" in this ministry of presence. First, as explored in Chapter Five, through attentive listening and being present for and to the other's needs, all of which denote an orientation to the other, and an attitude of availability. Sr Beatrice described ministry of presence as "being there for them". It points to the role of collaboration and accompaniment which Sweeney (2001, p.281) claims is now part of the self-understanding of apostolic religious. Sr Bernadette referred to one of the more active sisters in her congregation's care community who writes letters for sisters no longer able to do this: "to me, that is a ministry of presence because she is making herself available to them".

A second way comprises, for the sisters, an element of drawing very deeply upon oneself, so that the self is a key resource. Sr Bernadette exercises her ministry just by being herself. Sisters also describe drawing upon themselves as a sister, as explored in the previous chapter, which indicates a belief that sisters can bring something, perhaps indefinable, to a situation because of who they are. Sr Susan felt that "we are doing ministry through how we express our being". Sr Bernadette talked about sisters who go to visit isolated and lonely people in their homes.

> There's that poster on the Underground "*Agnes* hasn't spoken to anyone for a full week" – this is something religious can do and they have the time – they don't have to come in and clean the carpets and do the physical caring-someone else can do that, but they can come and just be with people and spend time – just by being who they are.

Sr Jayne, in her second interview, echoes this, indicating a belief that your self is your greatest resource, particularly at this later stage in life, when a sister may have greater personal resources on which to draw. "It is all part and parcel of you especially by the time you get to my age hopefully." She is present to others through who she has come to be at this stage of her life, perhaps ministering out of her true self, and perhaps this "self" has become more visible to them as they are now without formal employment or work.

A third expression of presence locates it specifically in the experience of old age, recognising that with age comes physical and social limitations, but that being present to, and with, is still possible as an expression of being apostolic. This is a form of ministry, if we wish to still use that word, which is a practical option for sisters, no matter what their state of physical health, as long as they have good hearing.

The emergence of presence, especially linked to age, as an identifiable form of ministry highlights further tensions. First, presence may have become increasingly popular because this is now the only form of ministry many sisters can offer and so the sisters may well be making "a virtue out of necessity", something which Vacek (2010, p.21) notes is often a task of the elderly. Considering the current demographic reality of many women's congregations, this form of ministry may be something which religious life can specifically offer at this point in its history. Sr Bernadette contrasts how sisters used to be "out there" with how they are now called to be present to each other in their care community.

> I think that's what's been given to us now that, in this time of religious life, you know, like when we were in our sixties everything was apostolic and we were

out there and doing things. Now we're …unable to man the barricades and we're…having, you know, a more reflective way of living but it's important for us to realise that that is the way we are.

It may be a question for congregations and also perhaps for practical theology, whether there is a need to give this stage of life a more structured theological underpinning, by which to explore the meaning of an apostolic vocation in later life. This seems to be particularly relevant for sisters who experienced a call to actively serve others and do something useful with their lives. Sr Bernadette suggests above that many older sisters need to be helped to find a purpose. Another perspective is whether or not it is about purpose or about re-imagining or re-describing sisters' ways of being as they age. This would mean highlighting the meaning of these forms of ministry, in order to help those sisters who need support to understand how they can continue to live their vocation, and what meaning their lives can continue to have.

However, this may also have implications for religious life more widely. As Sr Bernadette suggested above, "presence" may have become a form of ministry through which religious sisters, at any time in their lives, have something unique to offer, including the gift of themselves and their time.

Towards a sacramental theology of presence

In this next section I will explore a theological understanding of presence, and argue that we can read into the sisters' self-understanding and orientation towards others a theology that is in itself sacramental. If sacraments are "signs of both the Church and Christ, pointing to the action of Christ in the world, and communicating God's grace to that world" (Kelly, 1998 cited in Brouard, 2015, p.130), then we can read the sisters' understanding of presence and their form of being apostolic as sacramental.

This claim rests on two points. First, that the change in world view articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*, led to a recognition that "the locus of revelation is the living experience of humanity" (O'Leary, 2008, p.59). Schillebeeckx's work in 1963 gives us some conceptual tools to break open and illustrate the shift from traditional sacramental theology to sacramental thinking. Schillebeeckx (1963) called for a reconsideration of the "dogma of the perpetuity of the incarnation" (1963, p.43) so as to understand that although we no longer encounter Christ in His own flesh, His incarnation is made flesh in the world and "this earthly element replaces for us the invisibility of his bodily life in heaven". He understood the sacraments as "the face of redemption turned visibly towards us, so that in them we are truly able to encounter the living Christ" (p.43). This was indeed a breakthrough as Schillebeeckx identifies that

previously sacramental theology had understood humans as "passive recipients of sacramental grace which seemed to be "put into us" automatically" (p.1). He argues for a sacramentality that sees sacraments as "encounters of men on earth with the glorified man Jesus by way of a visible form, the visible and tangible embodiment of the heavenly saving action of Christ" (p.44). Therefore, through human encounter, the invisible can be rendered visible.

A second point, which perhaps was enabled by Schillebeeckx's re-imagining of the formal sacraments, is that developments in the theology of grace during and since the Council have led to a perspective which views humanity and the created world as having the potential to be imbued with God's grace. This theology whereby created things and humanity are seen as the locus of revelation, and sacramentality is no longer exclusively located within the seven formal sacraments of the Church, is now widely discussed. It is essentially what McBrien (1983, cited in Ross, 2001, p.34) refers to as "the sacramental principle" wherein "everything is, in principle, capable of embodying and communicating the divine" and what O'Leary (2008) terms the sacramental imagination which celebrates Catholicism's capacity to "reconfigure reality by seeing it through an alternative lens, acquiring a new vision of its graced character" (2008, p.175). If, as Timmerman holds, a symbol or sign (*sacramentum)* "conveys what it contains" (1999, p.11), then the sisters, through their approach to presence, are indeed signs in this context. Through their approach to presence, they make real that which they convey through a practical process or experience of "knowing relationships as sacramental and oneself as graced by them" (1999, p.12).

However, whilst these theologians have done much to develop a broader sacramental theology, none, with the exception of Orobator (2012) pay attention to the exclusion of women from the sacramental life of the Church. Ross (2001) argues for a feminist sacramental theology, which views women's lives and experiences as constituting a suitable locus for sacramentality (Ross, 2001, pp.10–13). Although I do not here address Ross's central concern of ensuring that the formal sacraments of the Catholic church more fully represent the lives and experiences of women, I do share her starting point: "to begin by acknowledging the revelatory character of the world, of human beings, and deliberately to focus on the importance of the experiences of women" (p.31). My concern is to recognise the "sacramental beyond the liturgical" (Watkins and Cameron, 2012 cited in Brouard, 2015, p.140) in the lives of the women in this study. This further builds on the reference to religious as signs in both *Vita Consecrata* (1996) which refers on several occasions (# 20, #25, #27) to consecrated women as signs: "they will become true signs of Christ in the world…a living sign of God" (n.25) and

Pope Francis's call to religious to be "a credible sign of the presence of the Spirit who inspires in human hearts a passion for all to be one" (2014, #I.2.).

Presence as incarnational

Building on the above, I will now claim that the sisters' understanding of their presence as embodying Christ can be read as an articulation of an incarnational theology. Earlier I suggested that Marcel's understanding of presence complements the theological understanding of communion. I have shown how Marcel understands presence as both rooted in the lived experience of the person, in the here and now and yet also mysterious, as the experience of presence can transcend the physical (1951, pp.207–218). The sisters similarly demonstrate an understanding of presence which is concrete in its embodied nature, but given meaning by its expression of the presence of God, pointing beyond themselves.

The previous chapters have already established that with age, the sisters' self-understanding develops beyond one associated with undertaking defined apostolic activities, towards being apostolic through an embodied presence of self. As Sr Pamela said in her second interview:

> [i]t's going back to St Francis of Assisi…preach the Gospel and if necessary, use words. That's what he's supposed to have said. It's about *who you are.*

Sr Dorothy, in her second interview, explained how a recently-discovered aspect of her congregation's charism, "to live the incarnation by *being* God's merciful love" is more important than any specific work. Sr Anne, echoing *Vita Consecrata*, #72, similarly uses the language of "being" to communicate a highly developed sense of the embodied presence of God:

> …simply *by being we can be* mission… We can be a mission, like, the example we always say, well you know I was just having a conversation with the woman in Tesco who does the checkout or whatever it happens to be.

Second, sisters also indicate their understanding of the paradox inherent in their ministry: that in being truly present, in being mission, by virtue of being fully themselves as consecrated women, it is not they who are present, but Christ, as experienced by Sr Beatrice.

> The presence is the presence of Jesus – that where two or three are, there am I in the midst. That feeling that there is a presence other than who we

are…because you are empowered by the Spirit. Not because you are anything, but because Jesus in you is everything.

The theology articulated in these two aspects is incarnational. The sisters understand their ministry of presence as incarnating or embodying God; being God's presence; being a channel for God's grace and, for Sr Beatrice being nothing but what God has given her. These are all facets of the "embodied Christianity" that O'Leary says characterises Catholicism (2008, p.49). In my feedback to sisters from the first interviews, I reported having heard an understanding of ministry at this age expressed in terms of physical embodiment and the majority of sisters responded by saying they understood this in explicitly incarnational terms. Sr Susan explained:

> [i]t's one's understanding of God's relationship with us and what God wants for all of us which is for me the apostolic bit, you know reaching out to people in Tesco… it's being counsel…- incarnation - bearing the gifts and the purposes of God for His people.

Sr Jayne spoke very powerfully of her recent experience of prison ministry as an example of what Welker described as "the public person of God's spirit [is] concretized and realized in this communion" (1994, p.311).

> I was really the Catholic presence on the staff. Looking back over my life, that is the time that I think I was most apostolic…does it sound awful to say I was God's presence among these damaged people? That's what I mean by being apostolic – it's being, just bringing God to people isn't it, not so much in words.

In order to explore this sense of the self as incarnational a little further, and something of the paradox of self-empowerment through self-gift, I will now turn to Coakley's (2002) understanding of *kenosis*, which, she claims, is compatible with Christian feminist theology, as a means of embracing the paradox of "losing one's life to save it". She refers to a "right" *kenosis* (2002, p.5) based on Christian contemplation whereby silent prayer enables us "to hold vulnerability and personal empowerment together" (2002, p.5). This constitutes a "power-in-vulnerability" (2002, p.5) or a "right" form of vulnerability which empowers (through contemplation). She asks (pp.25–29) whether vulnerability could be seen as a strength and whether "true divine 'empowerment' occurs most unimpededly in the context of a special form of human vulnerability" (p.32). This "special form of vulnerability" refers to that which is embraced through a practice of contemplative prayer, which centres on "the defenceless prayer of silent waiting on God" (p.33). She contends that only by making space for God in this way, to allow ourselves to be invaded, and converted, by God, can we be fully empowered.

Applied to the sisters this would not refer to the self-abnegation of their earlier years, nor a silencing, but "the place of the self's transformation and expansion into God" (p.36).

In Chapter Six I noted that I recognised some of the difficulties with applying the concept of *kenosis* to human self-giving. However, my concern here is specifically the process by which the sisters have been able both to live self-gift, and develop their "self" and draw on it as a resource. Stogdon (2012, p.74) recognises the need "to have an adequate sense of self before one is able freely to give it away altruistically or spiritually (and without damaging self or others)". Coakley's work identifies a place or process which would have enabled the ongoing conversion and transformation of the self. For Stogdon, this is the "the giving of oneself in love to the purposes of God…the assent to an ongoing transformation through a radical availability to the divine initiative" (2012, p.74). The sisters' "response of self-emptying love" (2012, p.68) would have brought them to this place recognised as the result of their conversion. Schneiders understands this as the prayer of union, and what she sees as the goal of the spiritual life: "the deep wellspring of the selflessness…profound poverty of spirit and total detachment from the ego that frees the true self for full union with God" (2013, p.352). Identifying this as poverty of spirit perhaps expresses more appropriately the issue at stake here, which is recognition of "the deepening conversion that occurs through the life devoted to the single hearted quest for God through union with Christ" (Schneiders, 2001, p.158).

At least half of the sisters spoke of a call to a practice of contemplative prayer or "the defenceless prayer of silent waiting on God" (Coakley, 2002, p.34), which has strengthened with age. Sr Jayne, in saying "I want to be more contemplative in this stage of life", and no longer in full-time ministry, experiences a call to a different way of being. However, as Stogdon recognises, "the resulting strong sense of self is not the end of the story" (2012, p.74). This form of personal empowerment in God indicated by Coakley and Stogdon both makes possible and results from the forms of ministry explored in this and the previous chapters.

Raising up the ordinary

A further perspective on the question of sacramentality is the sisters' concern with the ordinary, explored from a number of perspectives in this and the previous three chapters. In the sisters' language there is a point at which the desire to be and to be seen as ordinary and the understanding of religious life as a distinct life form come

together. This coming together in the sense of being Christ in the ordinary is the fruit of a lifetime of conversion, in the conforming of self to Christ.

The dualistic attitude towards the Church and the world of the pre-conciliar period which might have prevented us from understanding these perspectives as incarnational was finally addressed in the Second Vatican Council through the document *Gaudium et Spes* (1965, §3, §16 and §44) with its world-embracing theology and orientation (O'Leary 2008; Sweeney, 2010; Schneiders, 2013, p.21–25). Baum (1973 cited in O'Leary, 2008, p.45), himself a *peritus* at the Council summarised this unified understanding "In Christ it is revealed that the locus of the divine is the human. In Him it is made manifest that God speaks in and through the words and gestures of people" (2008, p.45) and simultaneously addresses the worldly and the spiritual.

Sr Pamela in her second interview, offered three reflections on the relationship between the ordinary and the extraordinary. In the first, she re-visited her "extraordinary" experience of giving up teaching in school, and moving out to live in a shanty town under a Latin American dictatorship. In response to my feedback on embodiment, she framed this as incarnational: "…we went into the shanty towns; that was called '*encarnándose'*, which was incarnational – incarnating – you see".

In this she takes an extraordinary situation in her life and understands it as incarnating, that is making God real and bringing God's presence into that situation, in an intentional and purposeful way. However, mostly the sisters reflect on the ordinary as extraordinary and in doing so, raise up the ordinary, and the prosaic and sanctify it, particularly through the juxtaposition of encounters in Tesco with being the presence of God, reminding us of Orobator's "sacramentality of mundane events and moments of daily life" (2012, p.14). Sr Susan identifies the need, therefore, to be open to the extraordinariness of God's presence in every day encounters, describing apostolic as:

> a focus on relationship with all who you encounter, so that you have to be much more aware that every encounter can be a meeting with the divine…. I suppose it's a recognition of the presence of the divine in the world, in the very ordinary - the extraordinary as present in the ordinary.

In Sr Pamela's second example, she views presence from the perspective of the ordinary, and feels moved to celebrate this rather than her diamond jubilee, because it was in the ordinary that she saw the sacramental[29]. She feels women religious underestimate the value of their ordinary lives, particularly after or because they have

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[29] Sr Pamela's own word, but only used in post-interview conversation, which was not recorded.

spent their lives fully occupied in recognisable ministries in schools, in parishes, and clinics.

> I think that we [religious] tend to underestimate the power, the influence, of our ordinary, everyday lives, and that it is the little things that we do to help one other in community life that makes life. At the beginning of this year I celebrated my diamond jubilee and what I wanted to celebrate was the "ordinariness" of religious life – so I didn't want a big celebration. What I want to celebrate are the things that we do every day, all day that makes our life so worthwhile.

Her words exemplify O'Leary's "sacramental imagination" which allows us to perceive "God at work in all created reality, especially in human life and relationships, so that they carry the image of Christ" (2008, p.176). He locates the emergence of the ordinary in the Second Vatican Council, stating: "the theology of grace that informs Vatican II recovers 'the ordinary' as the realm of grace…hence the aesthetic of holiness is not something exceptional but the same thing that is shaped in the realm of the domestic" (2008, p.44). His recognition of "the domestic" has particular bearing on the sisters' contexts and calls to mind Soskice's 2007 work *Love and Attention.*

In this work, Soskice argues for an alternative to the received wisdom of what constitutes a spiritual life, lived in silence and prayer and set apart from the noise and demands of ordinary life. She claims that this traditional or received view of what will promote spiritual growth and enable self-mastery does not recognise the value of our paying attention to demands made on us by love in everyday life, particularly on those caring for others. Like Ross, she concludes that this "received spirituality" (2007, p.14) and the image of God it presupposes "disenfranchise[s] many people, and perhaps especially women" (2007, p.14), as it fails to reflect the reality of ordinary women's lives. Her proposal is "to add the spiritual discipline of attention (*prosochē*) to self-mastery (*enkrateia*)" (2007, p.25) and to recognise the worth of our responding to others both with loving attention and availability in everyday life, echoing Marcel's concept of *disponibilité*.

In Sr Pamela's final example, she perceives the ordinary as ministry, as grace-filled, imbuing it with a sacramental meaning, pointing to, and making real, the presence of God. This insight into the sacredness of the ordinary has been formed by her mother's spirituality, and particularly her experience of caring for her dying husband, as she told Sr Pamela:

> "…people kept praying; I could feel the prayer and it was the prayer that kept me going and I was very sad" she said "because I couldn't pray, but everything I

did was a prayer". She could see that her way of praying for my dad was getting his meals ready and looking after him and taking in his cup of tea and being patient when he was being snappy because he was ill…I think my mother was a very wise woman and she found her service in the ordinary things.

She echoes Soskice's call to love and attention, particularly relevant to the orientation of the sisters in this study, through their availability for and to others: "[i]t is by being at the disposal of another that we are characteristically drawn out of ourselves (*ecstasis*) and come to understand ourselves fully as selves" (Soskice, 2007, p.25). LaCugna (1991, p.39) explains *ekstasis* as freedom, and ecstasy is being-in-transcendence, taking us further out of ourselves and more fully and freely oriented towards others, in Trinitarian communion with them.

Ministry to each other in community: sacramentality of relationships

A second way in which elderly sisters continue to be apostolic is in their contribution to community. Within this there is the more ordinary way of contributing to every day domestic tasks, where able, but also simply continuing to be a member of community, in relationship with their sisters, and all that entails in their everyday life together.

Although in the earlier section I focussed on the sacramental character of presence, sisters cannot be sacramental in a vacuum; they are signs pointing to God's presence for others. Timmerman (1999) addresses the Christian misconception that God can only be known in limited ways, and draws our attention to the sacramentality in human relationships, where we can experience God's presence for ourselves. She points to "a theology of God the Spirit understood as the divine *immanence* present in, with and under every encounter" (1999, pp.19–20). Her thinking about the sacramentality of relationships can clearly be applied to the way sisters are present to others, and see themselves as being the presence of God to others. "Relationship…mediates the divine presence and power" both through ritual and "the ordinary actions of everyday life" (1999, p.10). What she sees as specifically sacramental in relationship is the practical process or experience of "knowing relationships as sacramental and oneself as graced by them" (p.12).

As both Sr Anne and Sr Susan live in stable communities, it is hardly surprising that for them an important part of being apostolic in old age is simply continuing to be an active, contributing, member of the community. As Sr Susan says:

I think being a member of this community and, living this life, and joining in everything, genuinely sharing a life of prayer, the work, the things we do

together, like choir, like entertaining, hospitality, all that sort of thing, and welcoming and sharing…the sharing of the space and being happy for that to happen.

Sr Anne here expands on the belief that the elderly or infirm in her congregation would never retire from religious life.

As long as I'm physically and mentally able, there are contributions to community living that I can still exercise; there is the ministry of prayer and intercession, which is important and there would still be the ministry of hospitality. So, I think to be apostolic is something to do with the way in which we ARE with people – people who try to follow "the way" – we are people of "the way", and, to be as much as we can Easter people, people of hope; not always easy but that's the ideal…. as you know we have two elderly sisters who at the moment are pretty disabled because of their condition, so I think we would never retire from trying to be good community members although our external apostolic ministry might well diminish.

There is a sense of contributing to and celebrating the domestic, but also of being in communion with others, and helping each other on her way to God, and this can continue until the end of life. As Sr Beatrice affirms.

We can be apostolic all the time - [Foundress] says be real, be true, be united. That's what we should be, in community. We should help one another to have this apostolic thrust and not say we've done enough; we're tired. Of course we're tired.

When first asked, most sisters did not see caring for each other in community as a form of ministry. However, as more congregations comprise a majority of sisters who are very elderly, sisters have begun to see that increasingly this is a call to which they must respond. As Sr Bernadette says of ministry for her time of life:

[i]t's a ministry inside the house: You can accept that and work on, either with the elderly there in helping care for them, or do what you've got to do like here with guests. Nevertheless, you're doing what you have to do but you're doing it inside the house.

Sisters often have to adapt from being the ones helping others to become more fully themselves, to allowing themselves to be helped by a sister through whom a relationship reveals ever more of the face of God. Vacek (2010) identifies one challenge of infirmity in later life, to learn dependency: "those who have lived their

active lives caring for others as their way of cooperating with God now must co-operate with God by letting God take care of them through others" (p.172–173). This has particular relevance for this group of women. At an earlier age in religious life, sisters often retired at their Silver Jubilee, and were cared for by younger sisters. In contrast with this, it is now common for elderly sisters who are still able to live relatively independently, either to remain in their own small community, or to live in care communities which are increasingly comprised of the large percentage of the remaining sisters in a province, as seen in Sexton and Simmonds (2015). In this there is a new emerging form of ministry: that of caring for each other in elderly communities and this can be understood in the context of both obedience and relinquishment. Sr Maeve notes that her own congregation is only now beginning to acknowledge this, and that this is "new and kind of significant – charity begins at home".

She explains how, after a recent fall, she was cared for by her sisters, many of whom are equally elderly, and experienced their love in a new way. In this period of increasing dependency, the sisters' self-understanding of being apostolic serves them well as they age, as they give increasing value to "being" because they can no longer do so much. Vacek (2010, p.169) sees finding new ways to care for others as one of the moral priorities for an earlier stage of old age, but it is none the less what we see sisters continuing to do in this later stage of life.

Ministry with and for their carers

The third and final expression of ministry in old age which I will explore in this chapter is that of ministering to one's carers. Despite Sr Kathleen's comment that caring for one's carers doesn't really constitute ministry, half of the sisters understand their relationship with those who care for them as offering an opportunity for a very context-specific form of ministry at the end of their lives. Even in their own state of increasing dependency, the sisters in Sr Pamela's congregation's care community find meaning through this form of care:

> They see that they have an apostolate with the carers; the carers look after them, but they also look after the carers. Whenever there's a carer who has some kind of problem at home, they will find somebody down there who will listen to them.

When I asked Sr Pamela if she thought the carers were aware of this two-way aspect of the relationship, she said "I think some of them are. Yes, I do", highlighting the potential for a two-way relationship of gift.

I will now consider the personal experience of Sr Dorothy, who moved into a care community in between the first and second interviews. Although she accepted she needed to make the move, she was not expecting it to be easy. She wanted to offer her reflection that the move had been surprisingly positive and I will draw out a number of points from her reflections. First, she described the move as being "missioned" to the care community. In reality she would have agreed to the move, in discernment with her Superior and her own community; she was not "sent". However, the practice of being missioned, as with other sisters being sent out to any new ministry, gives the transition to a care home both a normalising feel and also a deeper, theological meaning.

Second Sr Dorothy had expected the move to represent simply a loss of independence but to her surprise:

> I've found that coming here – you lose certain freedoms, obviously, but you gain other sorts of freedoms. Just to give a concrete example; I didn't want to go onto a three-wheeled walker and I found it infra-dig and embarrassing, for 24 hours, and I thought "oh I've lost freedom". I haven't. It's much quicker; I've lost pain and there are all sorts of advantages. And they can be psychological as well as on a spiritual level.

Sr Dorothy here is both obedient to the new physical limitations in which she finds herself, and also recognises that she is being presented with a new opportunity. It is also an example of mutual recognition as explored by Ricoeur (2005); the helpers and the helped are recognising each other for who they are and what they can offer. A third element of Sr Dorothy's experience was that she found a community, rather than the helpers and the helped; the dependent and the independent.

> What I find about here is that, I feel that we are all one, one sort of family, and that includes nurses, carers, cleaners – the lot. And some of us need help and some need a lot of help, and some give it…it just strikes me as one group of people and they have different roles in it and, but there's an equality.

Thus, the experience of giving and taking and mutuality within relationship continues. Earlier in the chapter I quoted Pellegrino's call for sisters to understand themselves as being in communion rather than in diminishment. The kind of communion she calls for across age and nationality, and international borders, in increasing recognition of the transnationality of religious life may not be that meaningful for sisters who are housebound. The ministry of presence, and care for each other in community may offer a more meaningful and appropriate model of communion. Sr Jayne is able to see a

specific role for religious in this context, as religious and religious life ages. A friend of hers lives in a care home and is intentionally:

> aiming to spread God's love in a nursing home, being the best you can be in the circumstances, with some inner strength coming from God's grace and help "and she says to me sometimes; I think this is what we should be aiming at".

Returning to Sr Dorothy, in this next excerpt, we see her response to the opportunity to continue to be of service, in what could be described as an encounter with grace.

> Whereas I thought coming here was going to bring a good deal of diminishment – it hasn't….in fact it's opened up ways of ministry that I'd never imagined, and my biggest surprise. I thought you see – coming here – to a care home – oh you'd spend a lot of time praying, or visiting the sick but for me – while I'm still able-bodied, more or less, and able-minded, the staff are the ones to be enabled and encouraged, and I find this very, very interesting and something that never crossed my mind, but they are all human beings and they have needs and they all love to be listened to, and I just find that quite exciting really. It isn't just dealing with the people going down, down, down all the time.

More specifically she identifies the quality of what she can do with and for her carers.

> Well, I've ended up here at the end of my life, after a very busy ministry in school. I find now that I can't go out to people, but they can come in to me, and here, the staff– all have families, and troubles, and I think they need encouragement, and it is something I could do, and, it's a sort of continuation of dealing with school – bringing out the potential, and I do believe that's still there and terribly, terribly important. So that's a big surprise to me.

Her final comment to me on this situation was "there's room for growth there" and the growth she was referring to was her own, as she noted "I just think it's exciting". This, for Cottingham (2012) would be an illustration of the engagement with the depth of the present which can be an indicator of the "idea of moral growth as a continuous learning process that is lifelong" and "the idea that age and its trials can afford scope for the deepening of that process". (2010, p.15). He posits that this continuing moral development can continue right to the end of life, which I claim to see taking place among the sisters in this study.

Obedience of detachment and relinquishment

In this final section, I want to explore being apostolic as sisters cross the threshold to the final stages of life, described by Sr Susan as: "I think I'm on that borderland – things and possibilities declining and so on". In response to my questions, the sisters continued to assert their self-understanding as apostolic to the end. When I asked Sr Anne in her second interview if she thought sisters could be apostolic to the very end of their lives, she said: "[m]y answer would be yes because at the heart of any apostolic living is the following of Christ". Sr Pamela notes:

> [s]omehow your apostolate becomes simpler, more mundane…in the sense that your apostolate is in your ordinary daily life and in the people you meet with and that's how you do your apostolate. It's how you are with people.

I also pushed sisters a little further to ask if this is the case even though bedridden, and Sr Dorothy responded with a clear yes, and, although in a minority, still identifies this as ministry.

> Yes, and it would be, for want of a better word, to suffer and to pray, and I think they would be conscious that that is what they are doing. I mean your ministry will diminish as you're fading out, but I still think you would think of it as a ministry; I think so.

Referring back to her earlier words about a recently explored aspect of her congregation's apostolic charism: "to live the incarnation by *being* God's merciful love", she was clear that this could be applied in a context of increasing infirmity.

> I thought this applied very well to people who are old and out of the active life altogether. We're not involved in any specific work, but you can bring God's merciful love in whatever situation you are in. And I think we did it when we were actively engaged, and it's something that you can go on doing… no matter how little you can do.

A second element which emerged in the responses was the experience of a call towards detachment and letting go. Sr Pamela talked about this final stage of life.

> There's a kind of…what shall I say?....detachment if you like …I remember previously, sitting around this table as part of the team and we'd talk about things and I'd say Well I really thought this was the best idea so I would be there fighting for my bit. Whereas now it's not like that. I can say what I think

and whether you follow it or not, it doesn't really make any difference. It's kind of a detachment – comes with age, I suppose.

Sr Bernadette shows an awareness that this is what God now wants of her.

This is probably the last sacrifice God is asking of me…to give everything up and become dependent – to be free to be able to say I'm here, and not able to do any more than that.

Sr Jayne highlights the need for discernment to identify how to continue to serve.

Apostolic that to me is the essence of following the Lord, being close to Him and so on and actually working for Him as we did when we were younger and had the ability. The needs are still there but maybe he is saying you have got to tackle them in a different way.

Schneiders (2013) argues that religious obedience takes different forms at different stages of life, depending on whether a sister is in formation, in active ministry, or in old age. She terms the nature of obedience during the period of a sister's life when she is in active ministry relational or dialogical obedience, due to the ongoing discernment processes and relationships with which the sister must engage. She describes this form of obedience as formative.

The interaction between who we are, what we think…our spontaneous attractions and repulsions, our experience and conclusions and what enters into our minds and hearts on the words and concerns of others who, themselves, are being transformed by our contributions.

(2013, p.585)

Whilst Schneiders observes that there is no particular cut-off point to one form of obedience and passing into the next, the form she claims is especially operative in old age focusses on relinquishment, rather than formative or even generative. She names this as unitive obedience and sees its purpose - "to relinquish literally all in our life that is not God" (2013, p.590) - as the focus on seeking union with the will of God becomes ever more single-minded. Schneiders views suffering, loss of independence and the physical diminishment faced in old age as "a one-way journey" (2013, p.589) as there is no cure or recovery. Nothing can be done to revert or change this process; "it can only be engaged" (p.589) and so the choice is not whether to accept or reject this, but how to engage with and respond to it. Sr Jayne in her second interview explained:

> [i]t is almost as if God says look I am grateful for what you have done and I want you just to enjoy being with me. It is as simple as that really. So it is the contemplative aspect of life is almost as if that side can swell and grow as your body diminishes.

The call of unitive obedience appears to be relational in terms of its focus on the prayerful union with God, and the response to a call to relinquishment, and Schneiders sees this as "[p]overty of spirit actualized by unitive love… the purpose and the final realization of the vow of evangelical poverty" (2013, p.352). In this sense it also reflects what Vacek (2010) calls the "virtue of detachment in later life" (p.173), as he adds that "we must cease asserting our Yes to earthly life" (p.174). However, I would claim from my engagement with the sisters' experiences and words that their world, although smaller, continues to be relational and dialogical, and even formative until the end. Sr Dorothy, Sr Maeve and Sr Martina continue to engage with, and minister to, others. Sr Dorothy's decision to move into care came about as a result of discernment conducted with others. Vacek (2010), in setting out what he calls the four moral priorities for the elderly to undertake, says that "persons must discern where in this rhythm God wants them to be" (p.166), reinforcing the sisters' experience that discernment continues to the latest stages of life.

Furthermore, the orientation towards and awareness of the needs of others continues well into old age and its stages of completion or relinquishment. Sr Maeve explained in her second interview how she still keeps the needs of others in mind.

> Kidnapped people, you know, what they suffer and the danger today… it is something that you are to try to get involved in some small way myself, even though at this time in my life… but I think it is good to try as much as I can to focus outward. That is what I am hoping to do.

Vacek identifies retirement as a time which "should first bring to mind…new opportunities for serving others" (2010, p.169) and I would argue that this is exactly what we are seeing sisters in the study fulfilling. Vacek sees this as a task likely to be approached in the earlier stage of old age, and Chapters Five and Six have shown how sisters in the study took formal retirement from teaching or social work, and then embarked on a new form of service. However, the sisters also demonstrate that this is a task they seek to undertake until the end of their lives. Although none of the sisters in this study were actually in the very final stage of their lives, they were still discussing how to be apostolic with their carers and those around them at the final stages of their lives, and it is to this I turn in the final section.

Obedient to the end

In perhaps the most challenging question I put to sisters, I asked what hopes they had for themselves as they face possible loss of independence, and eventually their own death. Both Sr Jayne and Sr Pamela hope that they would still be able to be turned towards the needs of others. Sr Pamela explains:

> I would hope that I would be patient and gracious and that I wouldn't be a testy patient and that I wouldn't be a demanding patient. And I suppose that would be my ministry; my ministry would be that I would be gracious and caring to whoever was looking after me, and not demanding.

Sr Jayne adds her perspective.

> If you can, hopefully, in spite of whatever pain you've got, still be ready to listen to other people, to try and understand their problems, just to be cheerful even with them sometimes, at the end, when you're helpless and you have to be turned over, what can you do? You can be patient. I don't like saying "you can pray for people" because it sounds so vague, but you can think of them and in that thinking you're uniting with them – you don't want lots of words.

The sisters accept the possibility of suffering; they don't ask for it to be taken away and they identify the possibility of life and grace amid suffering. Increasingly the work may be inward and concerns their continuing moral growth, but it does not cease to be outward-oriented and relational and dialogical in nature. Their concern shifts from one of actively listening to the needs of carers and trying to respond and help, to one of concern for the impact of your illness and your physical needs on the carers in trying to reduce the burden that you might be: to make the interaction one of love. The sisters are indeed obedient to context but in ways where Schneiders' forms of obedience for ministerial activity and old age clearly not only overlap but run in parallel. Sr Dorothy talks about being on one's bed of pain and that even at this stage of life, it might still be possible to contribute in some way, although she is uncertain how.

> I think you still have something to contribute, but it's in a different way. But I do think you can still make a difference. Unless you're on your bed of pain, I think you can still make a difference…but you might not know you're making a difference; I'm sure they're contributing and I'm sure they're offering it up to – I'm sure, yes.

Sr Anne is able to identify something more tangible; she hopes that the experience of suffering would somehow enable her to enter into the suffering of others, seeing it in some way as an empathic resource to offer to others.

> A Good Friday person – somebody who is being prepared for death, probably, and she has the unenviable experience of pain and the effects that has on a person, but at the same time, if she is able or if I were able, and this would be the ideal, and if it did happen to me, what I would want is that I somehow saw what it is that I am enduring as sharing in some way with the passion of Christ, sharing therefore with the pain that so many other people experience, recognising that even within a situation which is of intense suffering, God is there with you…

It has to be recognised that what the sisters offer now becomes less experiential and more hypothetical, but their ideal is still outward oriented. Sr Martina is perhaps the one sister in the study for whom the question is closest to the reality of her life in a care community. Although in her early nineties, she has spoken, earlier in the chapter about her concern to visit others in the care community who are weaker than she is. However, she acknowledges that her capacity is now less. Even though she is grateful for the gift of time to pray, this can also now be too demanding.

> I like to go into church and just sit there in front of the tabernacle and say nothing at all because sometimes I get tired praying and I'm just…just there, with the Lord, and praying…The thing is, the nuns, when they're sick, many of them, because their mind and because of the situation, you don't pray – you don't see that they're capable of praying any more. They might say a few Hail Marys, some prayers that they know, and they may not. And, all I can say is that you can offer up your future days and nights – what is to come – to our Lord and Our Lady, so that you will continue to fulfil the promise you made.

Cottingham (2012) understands that "our task as human beings is to strive to do what is right, and to live in love and peace with our neighbours" and holds that being attentive to this task is "the key to true human flourishing" (2012, p.14). He rightly asserts that this can apply to any stage of life, irrelevant of human physical capacity. Like Soskice, he sees love and the self-sacrifice it demands as the ultimate purpose of the human life. Vacek's (2010) concern is how to live this stage of life with meaning and purpose, enabling completion to take place, so that people at the final stage of their lives may "come to entrust themselves to Mystery" (2010, p.175).

Sr Martina's words above bring us back to what first called her to religious life, as explored in Chapter Four: love of God and desire to serve others, and a promise to do so all her life. Then, as now, she made a commitment, and even though she has suffered through her own call to nurse on the missions being unfulfilled, she chose to stay faithful to her promise and to her search for God, on a journey of personal conversion, and call to conversion of others. At this point in the sisters' lives, their obedience is indeed more and more unitive in nature. They accept that all they can do is strive to be apostolic to the very end, enjoy God's presence if they are still able to, and trust that all will be well: Sr Maeve in her second interview said:

> [a]t this point in my life now…it is a very reflective time and rightly so and it wasn't that I didn't always have the Lord right at the centre but more and more He is there from morning until night and even during the night as well because I know well that there isn't that much left for me, you know, so that sort of stills me.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the sisters' attitudes towards being apostolic in the final stages of their lives and the challenges offered by these attitudes. These include first, the belief that it is possible to have a ministry without a formal role, yet finding it difficult to describe the later stages of life in terms of ministry. Second, the assertion that a sister does not retire from religious life, and the exploration of what that means as they strive to be apostolic to the end of their lives without a formal role. I have identified at least three means through which the sisters' lives address these challenges, through ministry of presence, through ministry to each other in community, and, increasingly, through ministry to their carers. The chapter has argued that ministry of presence as both a means and a form of ministry can be read as sacramental, as the sisters constitute signs for others, to help them in their own journeys to God. Their being apostolic can also be read as incarnational as the sisters draw on the converted self in their understanding of themselves as mission, and as God's presence to others.

Cottingham (2012) argues that "meaningfulness is an essential ingredient of true human flourishing" (2010, p.7) and that old age offers an opportunity for integration of the various aspects and experiences of a life. He writes: "the process of moving towards old age emerges as a vital part of the fullest human flourishing" for it is that particular process which, if we are fortunate, "allows space for there to be a sense of meaning and connection over the entire span of a life" (2012, p.7). The sisters featured in this study have had this opportunity but in fact, for them, meaning ultimately lies in

the paschal cycle and Resurrection: their hope found in grace encountered within the challenges of physical diminishment and ageing.

It is also clear that even sisters who are apostolic to the end face challenges in making sense of their lives. The chapter has found that there is an opportunity to develop a more robust theological underpinning to support sisters in finding meaning in their later years when their call to continue to respond to the apostolic impulse may be challenged by physical limitation and inactivity. This could comprise recognising and exploring the three emerging forms of ministry. It is particularly important for this to be articulated more clearly in this time of transition in the history of apostolic religious life, both within congregations and the Church more broadly and that this contribution is understood more explicitly to be part of the mission of the Church.

CONCLUSION

In this research I intended to explore the understanding of Roman Catholic apostolic women religious in England and Wales of their vocation at a time in their lives when they are no longer in employment or formal ministry. I have asked who these women are when the external aspects of ministry have largely been stripped away, and how they believe they continue to live their vocation until the end of their lives. However, in searching to hear the lived experience and theologies of these older sisters, I heard something which has resonance for women's apostolic religious life more widely.

I established early on in the study that identity is a challenging issue for post-institutional apostolic religious life. Nevertheless, I found through my re-interpretation of the women's experience that they have a clear identity in their being with and being for others. I found this expressed in three forms of ministry and a strong orientation towards others, which continues and even strengthens into old age. I saw this particularly where the identity linked to outward or active forms of ministry associated with work or a role diminishes, suggesting a characteristic at the heart of apostolic religious life, and not just in the later stages of life. This element is not recognised in the main documents of the Church's teaching on religious life, for example *Vita Consecrata* (1996). I have found this identity being forged and formed in the narratives of conversion and a life of seeking God. In this conclusion I will draw out some of the significant points in my journey of coming to these positions.

Chapter One provided the context for the study and found that the voices of British women religious are minimally present in academic discussion and writing about religious life. As a result, both this research and British women religious have had to rely heavily upon US sources and influences. In Chapter One, I noted the concepts of community, or *koinonia*, and presence in terms of their relevance in the work of re-thinking the sisters' self-understanding. My explorations of presence and ministry in community linked these later in the work to the locus for ageing religious life and a continuing sense of the importance of "how".

In Chapter One I encountered the first of many binaries and dualisms heard during the study: contemplative and active; being and doing; priest and prophet. Veling proposes practical theology as one way of addressing or healing what he calls the "long-standing division of theology into… "systematic theology" and "pastoral theology"" (2005, p.5). Indeed, a function of practical theology is to overcome "the artificial distinction between thinking and acting and become more serious about both" (2005, p.5). The sisters in their lived experience overcome these binaries, with their rejection of the association

between defined work and "apostolic"; between work and identity and indeed work and worth. This, despite their initial, and in some cases, lingering need to be useful.

Attempting to listen and hear my way through these binaries was reflected in Chapter Two as I considered the methodological and theoretical lenses through which to respond to the concepts I encountered. Drawing on hermeneutical phenomenology and, in particular, Ricoeur's notion of *mimesis* applied to the hermeneutical task guided me to understand my role as one of reinterpreting rather than observing and explaining the data collected. The third lens of reflexivity, made explicit within and apart from my second lens of a feminist approach alerted me to the importance of the nature of my response to individual participants. It also informed my use of the Voice-Centred Relational Method (VCRM) in data analysis. Through emphasising reflexivity, I overcame another binary of my own, that of being neither insider nor outsider, appreciating that these binaries need not necessarily apply.

In Chapter Three I addressed the issue of the increasing reliance of practical theology methodology and method on the social sciences (Sweeney, 2010, p.18) by attending to the theological character of data collection and analysis. I experienced each interview as a holy encounter, and acknowledged the theological nature of the conversation. Bringing together the VCRM with *Lectio Divina* allowed me to combine holy listening and sacred reading, forming an approach which constitutes more than a simply functional method. VCRM encourages listening to how the women speak of themselves before we speak of them (Brown and Gilligan, 1992, pp.27-28), opening up a space for stillness and attentive listening. I found myself sitting and resting with the words: attentive to God's presence, as a "prayerful" researcher. I recognised research itself as both a spiritual process and a theological reality, allowing me to enter into the process of practical theology, which as Swinton says is inhabited rather than observed (2017). In my choice of methods of data analysis and data collection I resisted rushing into the dissecting, cutting and pasting of coding and thematic analysis. I was drawn to combine two methods which forced me to listen and be attentive to the "twelve tall trees" as I saw them, and notice the emergence of the women's "selves".

Listening in this way enabled me to claim the women to be "experienced guides" (Casey, 1996) and indeed companions in this process, through what Sr Anne describes as "the interior ways of being with people". My own experience of interviewing the women became an experience of their apostolic identity and presence, as acknowledged by Sr Collette's comment: "[t]his is ministry: what we're doing now".

In Chapters Four to Seven I presented the data, and at the same time, reflected theologically on what I had heard, both themes and narratives. In Chapter Four I began to explore the term and meaning of "apostolic" for the sisters and how their understanding of it had changed over their lives. I encountered their hesitation in describing themselves either as apostolic or ministerial. They have all lived through the transition in religious life away from corporate apostolates towards individualised ministries, and yet they do not claim the language of either.

The word "ministry" is widely used among religious in the UK, and by the sisters in this study. However, its use is also problematic. For some sisters, it has a strong association with a defined "ministry", which few of the sisters in this study now have. Some sisters use the word "service" but are also not fully comfortable with this, although this role of religious life, in opposition to the language of "presiding" is recognised in *Vita Consecrata* (#75). Furthermore, the language of *diakonia* is problematic for women in the Catholic Church. At the end of Chapter Four I suggested it might be possible to reclaim apostolic, as the sisters began to demonstrate some positive usage of this word, but as Sr Anne says in Chapter Four "we have to find a new set of vocabulary". My contention that "apostolic" could be resurrected was challenged by hearing the need to "craft anew" (Poulsom, 2012). There is no going back, only forward; the question is to what.

In Chapter Five, I identified that the sisters' narratives of how they have become apostolic *as themselves* shape their own self-understanding of what apostolic means. Their growing concern for self has been fundamental to their understanding and practice of being apostolic as an exercise of self and presence, as they have aged. My recognition of the role of the self came about in response to two aspects of what I heard from the sisters. The first of these, explored in Chapter Five, was their sense of loss for expressions of their selves which never found voice, and for opportunities to follow interests and use gifts which never bore fruit.

In Chapter Six I identified and addressed the second of the two aspects. I observed a particular tension throughout the study as I repeatedly encountered the claim to, and affirmation of, ordinary life. I found sisters eager to be seen as ordinary and to live and witness among, and as, ordinary people, despite the fact that this may contribute to the loss of visibility of sisters.

One way of addressing the tension in the extra/ordinary binary may be through recognition of the role of the self. The sisters have come to understand that one of the primary ways in which they become apostolic is "through how we express our being",

as noted by Sr Susan in Chapter Seven. This brings the central emphasis of religious life back to how the sisters live and who they are, in ordinary settings, rather than a central concern with what they do. Furthermore, the sisters may have come to be more aware of their "self" as they experience religious life unconstrained by the structures and strictures of formal employment.

In Chapter Six I explored what I now saw clearly as the sisters' apostolic identity in terms of being with, and being for others for the sake of the Kingdom. This takes their self-understanding as religious beyond being defined by employment or a specific task, integrating self with apostolic, so that the self each sister has become as they continue to follow and become conformed to Christ becomes their key resource. This narrated self is the well from which they draw: forged by their relationship with God and their commitment to, and journey of, conversion so that what they employ is the self, or the true self, which Schneiders sees as having been transformed through the prayer of union (2013, p.352).

Understanding the centrality of the self in this way also attends to my own unease about religious life having a purpose, which may risk re-introducing a utilitarian or instrumentalised understanding of religious life. The life needs no purpose as such, other than the single-minded quest for God. Religious life, through the journey of conversion, enables sisters to become the women God called them to be. In turn, this self, transformed by openness to God, becomes their resource in their being with and for others and the Kingdom.

It became clear to me in Chapter Seven that these older sisters practise three emerging forms of ministry. First, ministry of presence to each other and with and to their carers. This, I argue, contributes to a new understanding of apostolic or active religious life, in old age and more widely. I present "presence" as both a form of ministry as accompanying and being present to, and a way of being. Moreover, I have understood and explained the ministry of presence, in particular, as being sacramental and incarnational as it makes real that which it signifies, both through presence and relationships.

In my closer consideration of the later stages of life I found that the women continue being oriented towards others, until the ends of their lives, particularly in their ministering to each other and to, and with, their carers. In this they have been formed by the life itself and, therefore, this constitutes a defining element of apostolic religious life for women.

Throughout Chapters Six and Seven, I identified and worked within the concept of self-gift as a unifying feature of the theological concepts operant in the data gathered: availability, communion, and gift as reciprocity and mutuality. In recognising that these concepts underpin the three emerging forms of ministry, I have brought them into a theology which gives expression to the lived experience of the sisters in a context of social diminishment and increasing physical constraints. Initially I turned to Schneiders' theology of ministry as gift. I found her work to be a rich theological resource, offering a framework for the sisters' self-understanding as she roots the self thus actualised and formed in union with God back in evangelical poverty: "unitive love is the purpose and the final realization of the vow of evangelical poverty" (Schneiders, 2013, p.352). I also found that her theology of ministry does not adequately represent the theologies expressed by sisters in this study in later life. I have suggested that bringing Schneiders' theology into conversation with ideas of gift as reciprocity and mutuality, and with the experience of inactivity, gives fuller theological meaning to the sisters' experience of ministry of presence, to each other and to and with their carers.

The sisters' continuing to be apostolic through these three forms of ministry constitutes their obedience to their context of physical limitations and reduced social contact and influence. I argue that, given the forms and the nature of the three forms of ongoing ministry, then "unitive" is insufficient as a lived form of obedience, as the sisters continue to minister in relational and dialogical ways. For example, in Chapter Seven, Sr Dorothy speaks of the discernment process related to her move to the care community whereby she was missioned to this next stage. That gives weight to the idea that ministry is ongoing and continues to be relational and dialogical, as the sisters themselves largely see these forms of ministry as continuing into and through a context of physical diminishment and even into physical suffering.

Both the sisters and I experienced difficulty in exploring and expressing their ambivalence towards old age, infirmity and dependency, and it is here that the different aspects of my findings come together in creative tension. On the one hand, I draw on Vanstone (2008), Vacek (2012) and the sisters themselves to argue for the theological value of "undergoing" and dependency. At the same time, I am raising up three ways of being into ministry: presence; for each other and with and for carers and, therefore, engaging in the same dynamic, and re-framing their being as doing. The sisters in their articulation, and I, in my re-interpretation, celebrate the sacramental and extraordinary of the ordinary, raising up the small things of the ordinary and everyday into ministry. In doing so, there may be a risk of de-valuing ministry. One way through this dilemma is to recognise that a narrating self can hold different experiences at once, including

those that appear contradictory such as active and contemplative; ordinary and extraordinary.

In a final reflection, I have built on the concepts I found present in my initial survey of British literature on religious life: the concern for *koinonia* and presence, through my exploration of availability and gift as mutuality and reciprocity. Having reviewed the literature, and taking a detour through the lived experience and theologies of these women, I come to an enriched theological understanding of how these women are apostolic until the end of their lives, which in turn enables me to make a contribution to religious life more widely. This is surely practical theology in action as in this I come to a position whereby "theological reflection can regain its intrinsic connection to life" (Veling, 2005, p.5).

The Church as context

Both *Lumen Gentium* (#44) and *Vita Consecrata* (#3, #29) state that religious life is ecclesial and constitutive of the Church, with the CCL noting that it "belongs to the life and holiness of the Church" (Can. 574 §1) as a clear expression of the Church's mission. However, what contribution do sisters who appear to be no longer active in ministry make to this mission? *Vita Consecrata* states that even at a late stage in life, "when for reasons of age or infirmity they have had to abandon their specific apostolate" (VC,#44), there is value in the sisters' ongoing mission:

> More than in any activity, the apostolate consists in the witness of one's own complete dedication to the Lord's saving will…The elderly are called in many ways to live out their vocation: by persevering prayer, by patient acceptance of their condition, and by their readiness to serve as spiritual directors, confessors or mentors in prayer.
>
> (VC, #44)

The document, therefore, does go some way to recognising the continuing contribution of sisters. However, in this study, I have found that their contribution is more complex and multi-faceted than that outlined above. I have argued that the sisters' continuing way of being apostolic until the end of their lives is a constitutive aspect of apostolic religious life and, therefore, of the church's own mission.

I began this study by recognising and claiming a state of crisis in religious life. Returning to *Vita Consecrata,* on the topic of this crisis:

> [w]hat must be avoided at all costs is the actual breakdown of the consecrated life, a collapse which is not measured by a decrease in numbers but by a failure to cling steadfastly to the Lord and to personal vocation and mission.
>
> (# 63)

Considering the extent of breakdown of religious life, and the state of individual congregations was beyond the scope of this study. However, all of the sisters in this study are very deeply formed in their charism. The way in which they continue to be apostolic until the end of their lives, formed in and by their charism would suggest that the charisms of their congregation are not diminishing theologically.

A question not specifically addressed in this study but that has emerged is to what extent the sisters are in diminishment. I would contend that the sisters in this study are not "in diminishment" in theological terms. I accept that they experience social and physical diminishment, as do they. However, the sisters made a vowed commitment to search for God. The extracts from their transcripts in the final chapter of this study demonstrate that a central concern for them, up until the end of their lives is living out of this fidelity, in obedience, and articulating this through remaining apostolic until the very end of their lives. This constitutes a flourishing and fulfilling life (Vacek, 2010; Cottingham, 2012); they do not experience or indeed represent diminishment in terms of embodying their apostolic vocation and or charism.

Theology of religious life or practical theology?

In the introduction to this study I claimed that although this work engages with the theology of religious life, it is also located in practical theology and has resonances beyond the practical and theoretical implications for women religious. Its contribution to practical theology take three forms.

The first is through what Graham (2011, p.202) calls "an insistence on the primacy of lived experience". Both practical theology and feminist research methodologies justify such an approach, particularly where women's voices have not been brought to bear on a concrete situation which defines and shapes their lives and identities, as is the case with women religious and the Catholic Church. Bennett (2002) acknowledges this as a principle informing her work on feminist pastoral theology:

> …to start from life experience and to move to a theorizing of that experience and to a critique of existing theory.
>
> (2002, p.138)

This is the journey undertaken in this study. Although informed by theological theory, my perspectives have been rooted in, and formed by, the sisters' lived experience. I have brought existing theology of ministry in religious life into conversation with the sisters' theological perspectives, and used it to critique theory. This is a journey of practical theology.

The second contribution I make is to methodology and method. I have risked grounding my work in experience and I accept that this position demands "a high degree of methodological sophistication of knowing and hearing and a preparedness to live with the 'messiness' of existence" (Graham, 2001, p.202, after Ward, 2004). By working with both the VCRM and *Lectio Divina*, I have heard the sisters' theologies of ministry, recognised these as ways of knowing, and embraced the "messiness" both of existence, and method.

The third contribution is the finding that the sisters' orientation of being with and being for others continues late in their lives. The most immediate audience for this finding is their own congregations and the Church. However, I, like Woodward, claim a wider audience and consideration beyond the vowed life: "[a]s Practical Theologians we should be concerned to know more about how faith shapes us as humans. Does my faith help me to understand the world around me? Does faith contribute to my aspiration to age well…" (2008, p.190)? Vacek (2010) argues that the Christian tradition has a responsibility to contribute to thinking about "elderly spirituality" (2010, p.165) and to help "shape an ethical vision" for later life. However, although the works cited in this study which deal specifically with ageing (Woodward, 2008; Vacek, 2010; Cottingham, 2012) refer to continuing opportunities to engage with and give to others in later life, none open up the notion of self-gift as undertaken in this study. Whilst encouraging all elderly people to work towards the total self-gift achieved by religious is unrealistic and unnecessary, I believe the way in which the sisters continue to orient themselves towards others offers guidance for ordinary people of Christian faith and of none. This study, therefore, contributes to discussions about the role and realistic possibilities for either continuing to be or becoming oriented to the presence and needs of others. Many of the issues faced by sisters in relation to old age certainly affect the wider ageing population (Eldred, 2002; Vacek, 2010). The meaning the sisters have found in ageing, which is separated from a need for purpose, and the way in which they continue to be with and for others until the end through the gift of time, availability and presence, have much to offer others.

First, the sisters show that moral growth over a lifetime does not end with old age: later life is more than sitting back and reflecting over a life well-lived, if indeed it has been. In being offered, and taking up, opportunities to be present to others, life can continue to be generative in providing continued moral and spiritual growth. I do not dispute Woodward's (2008, p.195) nor Schneiders' (p.171-72 of this study) insistence that the time comes for relinquishment but the sisters show that there is a period when relinquishment can be lived alongside continuing to love. Love is the purpose of human life, and the study has shown that love requires the giving of self in some form – whether we call that self-sacrifice or self-gift – and even in the final giving up of self to God, that giving of self to others can continue.

Second, although this study does not specifically treat suffering, it is not unreasonable to ask whether we can expect to give of ourselves whilst becoming dependent on others, or undergoing the suffering and debilitating illnesses of old age. Again, the study provides a very concrete example of possibilities of love amidst suffering, in how the sisters understand themselves as ministering to their carers, identifying the reciprocity and mutuality in giving and receiving care.

What we see in the sisters is the fruit of *sequela Christi* lived to the end, even through their suffering. Christ's own suffering and passion, totally centred on self-gift, is a model for the women and indeed for any Christian. We may not be able to prevent the failings, pain and ill-health of old age, but they can be lived with love, and in a way that constitutes a continuing generative and flourishing life.

The sisters' voices demonstrate how God's grace is encountered right until the end, experienced through the careful, prayerful attentive listening through and with presence to others. There will come a time of dependency for most of us, when we have to "undergo" and in that time, these experienced guides have much to teach us about finding meaning when we may experience loss of purpose.

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APPENDIX ONE: Participant Information Sheet

Dear Sr [name]

Re: Participation in the research project: *Apostolic to the very end; hearing a theology of ministry in retirement among English foundations of Roman Catholic apostolic women religious.*

I am writing to you to ask if you would be interested in helping me with my PhD research, and willing to be interviewed as part of that research.

In my research, I am exploring the understanding that Catholic apostolic women religious in England and Wales have of their apostolic vocation and of their identity as apostolic/professional sisters. I am also exploring what 'retirement' means for vowed apostolic religious and their identity as 'apostolic' women, and what this might tell us about their theological understanding of a vocation to apostolic religious life. I hope to interview between 15 and 20 apostolic women religious aged 65 and over, who are either nearing or actually 'retired' from formal, full or part-time or paid ministry/employment.

The Research Project

As you may be aware, there is currently a lot of interest in and discussion about the future of religious life and specifically, a debate among theologians about how to define the purpose and nature of apostolic religious life. In following these discussions and writings, I have noticed that many of the voices in the discussions are male theologians/academics, and that many of those writing about religious life are American. I am aiming to bring the voices of women religious themselves into these discussions, to speak to the context in the UK, as they explain what they understand by an apostolic vocation, how this is lived out as ministry and how they understand and experience ministry in retirement. After listening to your own voices through interviews, I hope to offer some theological commentary and therefore contribute to the church's understanding and appreciation of the nature women's apostolic vocation.

I will be working as the sole researcher for the research project and will be carrying out the interviews myself. I have a significant amount of experience of working with and interviewing women religious. At an earlier stage in my studies, I interviewed several Provincial Superiors about a related topic, and in my work as an independent consultant with women's religious congregations. I also work as a researcher on the Vitality in Religious Life Project, managed by the Religious Life Institute at Heythrop College, the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology in Cambridge and the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University. I also have personal experience of being a religious, having been a novice in an apostolic congregation and also then, several years later, in a monastic community. Prior to working as a consultant, I worked in CAFOD for many years.

Your Participation in the Research Project

I am contacting you now because[30]: you had either already expressed an interest through a conversation with my supervisor, or directly with me, or a conversation with another member of your congregation about the role of apostolic ministry amongst older women within your congregation, led me to ask if you would be willing to take part.

You can, of course, decide at this stage that you would rather not take part. If you do decide you would like to take part, I will ask you to sign a consent form so that I and the University have a record of your formal consent. Please be aware also though, that you are free to withdraw at any point of the process.

If for any reason you later decide you no longer wish to take part, please let me know of your decision via the contact details below, and using the lower portion of the Participant Consent Form. If you should decide to withdraw, please do so by no more than 3 weeks in advance of the interview, if possible, so that I am able to make alternative arrangements.

The interviews

I will prepare outline questions in advance, but as I wish to allow for other topics to arise during the interviews, I will keep the questions open-ended and flexible. We will arrange to meet in a place which is convenient for you. I will ask your permission to record the interviews on a small hand-held digital recorder, and then I will download the recording to a laptop and save it for analysis.

What will happen to what you tell me?

I will type up and analyse the interview personally, with no other assistance. I may discuss the original interviews with my supervisory team, but only once the information has been anonymised, as described above. I will analyse the interview transcripts and try to identify common themes and meanings in what you have told me, in relation to apostolic religious life. . It may be helpful for me to discuss my overall response, to all the interviews, with my Supervisor, and ask them to reflect on the conclusions I am drawing from it. From an academic point of view, this can give greater validity to my findings.

 After transcribing all of the interviews, and having carried out some initial reflection on what I have heard, I may ask you to meet me for a second interview. The purpose of this possible second interview is not so much that I can ask for further information from you, but more so that I can share my thoughts at that stage, and ask for your response to what I am saying. This second interview will however, also give you a chance to clarify or add to, or change, anything you said in the first interview.

I would hope that taking part will also be of some benefit to you; that it will give you a structured opportunity to reflect on how you and others in your community and congregation experience ministry as you retire from full time or paid employment. You

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[30] I will cite just one reason from the list, whichever is appropriate to the participant

may already have done much reflection on this issue, but I would hope that taking part will still add to your congregation's thinking about this.

Confidentiality and anonymity

I will save the recording of our interview on my computer, with a code e.g. Participant Interview A, so that neither your, nor your congregation's name will be used at any point afterward. I will keep the interviews until I have used them in the writing up of my thesis and then I will destroy them. I may wish to make use of direct quotes from the interviews, but again, they will not be attributed to you or your congregation. However, as you yourself will be aware, the world of religious congregations in England and Wales is quite small and many people know each other and each other's congregations, therefore I do need to point out that there is a possibility, however small, of the congregation being recognised, even if your comments are anonymous.

You may wish to know that I have been awarded a bursary for my PhD studies, from a private Catholic family foundation, who wishes to remain anonymous, but them awarding the bursary demonstrates their own interest in the issues currently affecting women religious.

If you wish to request any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me via my email address: XXX or by telephone at XXX or XXX.

I will follow up this letter with an email and/or phone call, to give us a chance to discuss this further and so that I can explain anything, or answer any questions you might have.

<div align="center">

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS TO KEEP,

TOGETHER WITH A COPY OF YOUR CONSENT FORM

</div>

APPENDIX TWO: **Participant Consent Form**

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

Title of the project: Research being conducted as part of a PhD in Practical Theology, entitled: '*Apostolic to the very end; hearing a theology of ministry in retirement among English foundations of Roman Catholic apostolic women religious*'.

Researcher name and contact details: Catherine Sexton.

Email address: XXX

Telephone: XXX or XXX.

1. I agree to take part in the above research. I have read the Participant Information Sheet for the study. I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.

3. I have been informed that the confidentiality and anonymity of the information I provide will be safeguarded as far as possible and in line with the slight risk of recognition of the congregation, pointed out in the paragraph on Confidentiality and anonymity in the Participant Information Sheet.

4. I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.

5. I give consent for our interview conversations to be digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher and used in the production of the research thesis.

6. I have been provided with a copy of this form and the Participant Information Sheet.

Data Protection: I agree to the University[31] processing personal data which I have

supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the

Research Project as outlined to me*

Name of participant

(print)………………………….Signed…………….….…Date………………

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP

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[31] "The University" includes Anglia Ruskin University and its partner colleges

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If you wish to withdraw from the research, please complete the form below and return to the main investigator named above.

Title of Project: Research being conducted as part of a PhD in Practical Theology, entitled: '*Apostolic to the very end; hearing a theology of ministry in retirement among English foundations of Roman Catholic apostolic women religious*'.

<div align="center">I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY</div>

Signed: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX THREE: Interview questions – Round One

Interview Guide

Research Questions

1. What does the "apostolic impulse" mean to apostolic women religious and how they express their identity, their understanding of their vocation and the purpose of their ministry within that vocation?
2. When apostolic religious women are no longer able to be involved in external, paid or congregational apostolates – what is their understanding of how they continue to "minister" and be apostolic in retirement?
3. What does this tell us about the theology operant in their understanding of their apostolic vocation?

Question Group 1	**What was/is the nature of your vocational call?** **How important is being "apostolic" to your vocation?** **What's the relationship between being "apostolic" and your call?** **What do you understand as the purpose of ministry?**
Source/inspiration	Hemer (2013); Collins (2012, p.36); Wittberg (1996) re: mission statements and ministry as purpose.
Theme being explored	RQ1 and 2 and 3.
Information sought	Background information re: their personal vocation, whether it was a call to love God, or a call to a particular professional or social context; to meet a particular need; to consider whether their congregation/life does speak to a particular context (prophetic).
Possible answers	
Challenges	Begin with this question? As a warm up? Some might give a long answer – tell a story.

Question Group 2	**What does it mean to you to be an apostolic religious?** **What do you understand by "apostolic" in this sense?** **Ask for some examples.**
Source/inspiration	Sweeney's idea of the impulse to apostolic life (2012, p.139).
Theme being explored	Addresses RQ1; What motivates the apostolic work? What's the driver? How do they express this?
Possibly elicit	A range of interpretations of the term "apostolic" Beginning to explore identity.
Challenges	Confusion? Better not to use the term "apostolic impulse" – will it be helpful? Sweeney himself: What is the fundamental impulse of the apostolic religious life; can this be expressed on an individual level? It's "the life" – or "the life form" (Schneiders) that is prophetic or apostolic – not individuals.

Question Group 3	Do you have/have you had what you would regard as a "profession"? what is it? Tell me about it? How many professions have you had? (what if already retired?)
Source/inspiration	Wittberg (1996, p.240).
Theme being explored	RQs 1 – 3; professional identity and how this fits in with identity as a religious.
Possible answers	Might be long and descriptive re: all the different jobs they have held.
Challenges	Differing understandings of "profession" – how might this be understood/received?

Question Group 4	How do you describe yourself to people outside of religious life or the church? e.g. are you a teacher or a religious? What are the different elements that make up your identity? (prompts...gender/nationality/origin/religion/occupation/personality)
Source/inspiration	Wittberg (1996, p.240).
Theme being explored	RQ 1 – identity as a religious. Professional v religious identity?
Information sought	
Possible answers	

Question Group 5	Tell me something about the original founding charism of your congregation? Were you founded for a particular ministry/apostolate? What came first, adopting/developing a rule of life or determining the mission?
Source/inspiration	Schneiders (2010, Part 3 p.3) – discussion of the understanding of prophecy and speaking into a particular situation; Coffey (2012).
Theme being explored	Addresses RQ 1 – 3; The role of the apostolate in the congregation's identity; how are mission and the identity of the congregation linked? Continuity of mission and identity?
Possibly elicit	Details of the early history; the role of a particular apostolate in the congregation; something about the journey ad fontes?
Challenge	Possibly elicit a lot of historical detail?

Question 6	How do you describe your congregation to other congregations/people in the church and also to people outside of the church? Do you think the loss of corporate ministries/institutions has affected the identity of your congregation? What now creates a common sense of identity?
Source/inspiration	Wittberg (2006 p.68).
Theme being explored	RQ1; the identity of the religious and the congregation.
Information sought	Words used to describe congregation.
Possible answers	
Challenges	Will they be aware of/able to articulate identity as such?

Question Group 7	How much do you work outside the congregation? What impact do you think this has on your connection with the wider congregation? Does it connect you more deeply with the wider members, or impede a connection?
Source/inspiration	RQ1 Wittberg (2006, p.190) and Respondent A's interview.
Theme being explored	How is collective identity being formed? Does work become the identity and individual work interfere with forming a collective identity?
Possible answers	
Challenges	
Question Group 8	What do you think you have in common with other apostolic religious? Do you think there is anything about being an apostolic religious which has not changed since Vatican II?
Source/inspiration	CS reflection on Paper 2 interviews.
Theme being explored	RQ1 – the apostolic impulse – identity and meaning? Jones (2013) – from "witnessing to the world" to "solidarity with the world"
Information being sought	Possible common elements across apostolic religious congregations? Pointers towards a common identity
Possible answers	
Challenges	Depends on the level of contact they have had with other congregations. May answer on a general, spiritual level in terms of seeking God, relationship with God, following Christ.
Question 9	What factors guide ministerial/apostolic choices in your congregation?
Source/inspiration	Schneiders (2010, Part 4 p.3).
Theme being explored	Addresses RQ4.
Information sought	To lead into the issue of RQ4 and how it's being affected by the lack of new members (do I ask if they have any?)
Challenges	Not sure where this fits? It may lead into the issue of lack of new members without asking. If it doesn't, ask that question (re RQ 4) explicitly.
Question Group 10	Do women in your congregation "retire"? What might that mean? What promotes it? Who decides? What are the challenges?
Source/inspiration	CS and Respondent C (Professional Doctorate Stage 2 interviews).
Theme being explored	RQ 2; role of obedience.
Possible answers	Where there have been problems – differences of opinion; no, we don't retire; we keep going.
Challenges	Their understanding of the concept of "retirement".
Question 11	Obedience and ministry as you age...what role does obedience play in determining what you do with your time once you "retire" from formal apostolic ministry?
Source/inspiration	O'Murchu (2005).

Theme being explored	RQ2 The role of obedience in letting go...being obedient unto death and whether this engenders more activity or the ability to let go.
Possible answers	Show their understanding of obedience now; where the challenges have been for them personally; where they have had to let go of something they didn't want to.
Challenges	
Question Group 12	**Is there anything in your congregation's constitutions which talks about being apostolic or the role of ministry as you age or as you approach death (e.g. in illness?) What does it say? How do you understand that? How do you see elderly/infirm sisters living this? How do you hope to live it? What challenges might you face?**
Source/inspiration	The Congregation B Constitutions (apostolic to the end).
Theme being explored	RQ2 and RQ1 –the nature of apostolic life – could be enshrined in the Constitutions; identity without ministry? Identity in letting go; understanding of ministry.
Information sought	The congregational meaning of "apostolic".
Possible answers	Will they all know? If there is, and they do know, it should tell us something about the congregation's own theology of ARL.
Question 13	**What do you think ministry means as you age...when you are elderly and infirm, or simply sick? How is it possible to be apostolic in those circumstances?**
Source/inspiration	RQ2 and 3; Respondent A interview (Prof Doc round – Stage 2).
Theme being explored	RQ2: understanding of ministry in diminishment; exploring the question of whether it is possible for apostolic women to be "without ministry".
Information sought	Could this take us into the issue of caring for their own elderly and whether/when that is considered as an apostolate/ministry?
Possible answers	
Challenges	Maybe I need to ask the question: Do you think it's possible for an apostolic religious to be without apostolate/ministry? Could the same be asked of any Christian? Definition of terms – apostolate/ministry???
Question Group 14	**If part of your identity/charism/vocation is to minister to those less fortunate or your neighbour...who is that as your age? How do you understand yourself as an apostolic religious when you are no longer able to undertake external/formal/paid ministry? How do you serve the poor as you age?/To whom can you minister? What gives ageing a religious meaning?**
Source/inspiration	CS; Respondents A and B interviews.
Theme being explored	RQ2: understanding of ministry in diminishment; exploring the question of whether it is possible for apostolic women to be "without ministry".
Possible answers	This could cover a whole range of things.

Challenges	Maybe I need to ask the question: Do you think it's possible for an apostolic religious to be without apostolate/ministry? Could the same be asked of any Christian?
Question Group 15	**Returning to the question of ministry as you age and are less able to do physical/paid or even voluntary work....? Are you familiar with discussions among religious about "a ministry of presence"? What does this mean to you?**
Source/inspiration	Swinton (2008); various RLVP respondents (a ministry of presence); Vanstone (1988); Poulsom (2012).
Theme being explored	A ministry of presence for the ageing, infirm - an apostolic ministry of ageing.
Information sought	Whether this idea means anything to the respondents; has any currency? As a hermeneutic for RL?
Challenges	They may not be familiar with this language of "presence" and not able to engage; disagree with it as an approach.

APPENDIX FOUR: Second round of interviews

Outline of initial findings from Catherine Sexton's PhD research, based on interviews with participants

Theme 1 - Apostolic: What it is and what it isn't

Sisters who participated expressed a range of responses to the word 'apostolic'; offering a variety of meanings:

- *"Bringing others with you and showing them the Kingdom"*
- *"I understand apostolic to encompass a way of living which is rooted in the models that are given to us in the letters of Paul, particularly, in the teachings of the Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, specifically"*
- *"It's not a question of what we can do"*
- *"It's being the best you be…no matter where we end up…over the years I've come much more to think of being apostolic as being a sort of human, Christian, Religious, just person, just me – to try and – spread a bit of peace and comfort and light and encouragement – all those good things that people need"*

However, there were some common characteristics in what you (collectively) understand by 'apostolic' at this stage in your lives:

1. That a Religious can 'be' apostolic without having a job, a ministry or indeed without 'doing' at all
2. I heard most of you describe what 'apostolic' means to you in terms of: relationship; becoming and embodying – three themes which I will go on to explore
3. Although explicitly linked by some to the model of the Apostles, and a personal experience of 'being sent', you don't generally describe it in terms of converting, evangelising or preaching, and even express a dislike of those terms. The emphasis for you seems to be much more on HOW you are with people, and also on how you are as yourself.
4. Many of you presented in your interviews a narrative thread of how your understanding of your 'apostolic' call/vocation has changed. Several of you said you felt your congregations and Religious in general used to understand 'apostolic' in a very narrow way, and that now your understanding of it has broadened away from 'doing' to 'being'; away from 'going out' in order to 'help' to a focus on relationship with all whom you encounter; from a formal apostolate or ministry to being with/for others and extending this to how you are with your sisters in your community. Some of you very definitely did not experience your main ministry when younger, especially teaching, as apostolic
5. Several of you spoke of the danger inherent in placing too much emphasis on 'doing' – in that it could be to satisfy a personal motivation, and hence the need to reflect on your motivation through prayer
6. Some also saw taking part in my research as an apostolic encounter, and I also have come to understand and experience my encounter with you in this light

> *"the call is to BE the Good News of Jesus Christ"*

- *"I was really the Catholic presence on the staff. Looking back over my life, that is time that I think, if you like to use the word apostolic, I think I was – I don't – I'm not saying, maybe I should – if I was really apostolic, I would have converted lots of these men but does it sound awful to say I was God's presence among these damaged people and that's what I mean by being apostolic – it's being, just bringing God to people isn't it, not so much in words"*
- *"the word 'impulse' actually helps enormously because it takes away the sense of work, in the sense of a defined work, so that's why this is really helpful because the apostolic impulse of our charism is to take out the good news that Jesus lives– he lived the human life that we live; he died a real death and he lives in the new way that we are all being invited to enter into and to use the word 'impulse' rather than work, frees me enormously because we live with that all the time and that's with us in the supermarket, at the checkouts, how we relate to people on buses, anywhere and everywhere"*

Theme 2 – Being in relationship: being-with; being-for

In this second theme I set out to describe what I heard you say about the place of relationship; an understanding of what it means to have and live out an apostolic vocation to Religious Life primarily in terms of 'being' and specifically being-in-relationship, so being - with and being-for other people.

Within this, I have heard expressed the concept of self-gift as in the giving of all that/who you are and have including your time, your gifts and yourself. Overall you use the language of 'listening', 'helping' and 'welcoming' and 'hospitality'. Related to this is something of an emphasis on intentions as in intentional being-for and with others, and on your motives for this. There is some discussion as to whether something/one is apostolic only if the motive is 'right'.

You have spoken about being apostolic for/with others whereby you wish to be seen as ordinary, and are specifically open to 'ordinary' people and 'ordinary' lives. This shows an (increasing) self-understanding of being ordinary women, and a desire to be seen as such by others, rather than a Religious/someone who is, or who thinks she is special because of her vocation.

In the interview transcripts, I have heard a strong sense of mutuality – not that sisters share and serve in order to receive, but that sisters do receive in return. This is not based on a purely transactional need, but a Christian need and recognition of one another as a mutual means of bringing about the Kingdom. There is evidently a strong desire to share with others gifts received from God, and from the individual congregations which have invested in you, and that because you have received so much, you are able, and even longing to share this with others. For some this 'mutuality' is expressed as a sense of being a channel for the Holy Spirit, in passing on what you have received, for others the emphasis is on sharing the Gospel and the Good News, and receiving from others in return.

Many of you talked about the 'best' or most 'life-giving' apostolic (as in ministerial) experiences and these were inevitably focussed on relationships with and for other people, and many contained an element of learning and receiving from those others. Much of the above is situated in response to the perceived needs of the world today

Theme 3 - Becoming - Claiming your identity

> *"It means for me… following in the footsteps of the apostles in that you follow and you try to preach, not try to preach but you try to live the word of God, in a world that isn't always open to it, you know, so you have to become all things to all people, to try to get the message across that what you are saying and what you are living has relevance, and has an ultimate purpose that you that you feel you could… that your ultimate goal is the kingdom of God and that you really believe that is where your ultimate destiny will be and that you've got to do your best to express that in terms of your living, your being"*

It seems to be of great importance that you are able to 'be' apostolic as yourselves. First this is in accordance with your own understanding of 'apostolic', as formed through charism, vows, Constitutions etc. Second, it is expressed and lived through your own identity and personality/sense of self, drawing on your own gifts and talents, and not as someone else or as how someone else sees you or wants you to be - whether that is the Church, your congregation, others in the parish, family or society more generally.

For many of you, identity as 'yourself' has been or is being formed/expressed through ministries you loved, and/or were outside of the stereotypes of work nuns were 'supposed' to be involved in. For others, it has involved some disappointment, thwarted desires and years of struggling in congregational apostolates not in line with your gifts or interests e.g. teaching.

For some, identity has been formed and is expressed as part of the group i.e. the community or congregation. One or two others seem to be trying to express an individuality which is independent of the rest of the congregation.

For all, religious life seems to have been a journey of growth and development, lived through obedience and discernment (both individual and joint/communal). The degree to which you describe yourselves as Religious (nun/sister) first and foremost, or a teacher (in terms of a profession) or simply as 'a person who…' varies.

My overall interpretation is that your journey has been lived in relation to and entwined with the journey and recent lived history of your congregation, and has involved finding a voice, questioning and even asking for things for yourselves - something which in earlier forms of religious life would have been unthinkable.

The mutuality of 'being-with/being-for' seems to have contributed to the growth in vocation and Christian understanding and love and a greater sense of identity in Christ. For some of you 'enjoyment' has always been a criteria and factor e.g. in your initial attraction to their congregation and for others, appreciating that enjoyment can be part of being apostolic has come at a later stage.

The words 'free', 'freedom' and 'choice' appear a lot in the transcripts – as in 'free from' (conformity/rules and regulations) and 'free to' – choose; to be myself; to be apostolic 'as myself'. This seems to reflect the move away from an understanding of apostolic religious life for women as instrumentalised i.e. a utilitarian understanding of women

religious as existing to staff and deliver the apostolates of both the Church at diocesan and parish level, and of the Congregation.

For all the participants, your understanding of what it means to live an apostolic vocation or to 'be apostolic' has evolved along with an evolved understanding of 'obedience' as something which entails with listening for/to what God wants of you at each stage of and context for your lives.

Theme 4 – Embodying as 'Being apostolic'

Many of you spoke about your call to BE the Good News for and to others:

At the time I suggested to this sister (above quote) that she was 'modelling' something, but actually I think the word 'embodying' is more appropriate:

1) It suggests a lifelong growth/journey into your vocation
2) It captures the sense I had from you as a group of individuals who have integrated your call, your identity (who you are); your gift of self; as a movement away from doing towards a point of just being who you are, in obedience and in a listening stance.

I asked all of you about what – if anything – you understand by the term 'a ministry of presence' – a term I hear used a lot, along with 'ministry of prayer'. Some of you were uncomfortable with the term – particularly in applying it to yourself.

For me the word 'embodying' captures how I interpret many of things you have said to me better than 'presence' as it incorporates this sense of you, as individual Religious, embodying or being the ministry and mission – of bringing and being the Good News.

It also incorporates and describes the idea of 'ministry beyond ministry'. I asked all of you the question of how religious women who are no longer in full time/formal or external ministry continue to live their apostolic vocation. I also asked if Religious at that stage in their lives can still be described as having a ministry. You gave no easy answers and for me this leads to a very interesting question. One sister talked about doing spiritual direction as her one remaining "recognisable ministry", but then went on to talk about how Religious never retire from being in community; from serving others through welcoming and hospitality and from supporting and loving their sisters – often those in great need. If these ways of being do not represent 'recognisable ministry', then either we haven't broadened out the understanding of what it means to be 'apostolic' as much as we thought, or we are not valuing the small, small ways of loving and serving through being who we are really called to be – and serving in that way to the very end of our lives.

One elderly sister explained away all the visiting of other sick sisters and caring for each other that goes on in her care community as "just ministry for old age" but to me it is much more than 'just' and highlights the extra-ordinary in your ordinary ways of being the Good News as ordinary women caring for ordinary people. As you yourselves emphasise, Sisters don't 'retire' from being sisters, wherever and however you find yourselves towards the end of your lives. If we accept Sandra Schneiders' understanding of ministry as "freely proclaiming the Kingdom of God"[32],

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[32] Schneiders, S. 2013. Buying the field: Religious Life in the new millennium. New Jersey: Paulist Press. Ch.5.

rather than 'work' and that "it is not a human enterprise", then I would suggest that it truly does continue until the very end and ought to be valued as such.

Some questions to consider: (if time)

➢ Would you recognise Sandra Schneiders' description of how women Religious since Vatican II have experienced religious life as moving on a journey from self-abnegation or self-denial, through self-development/realisation or to self-gift/donation[33] as a way of describing this journey?

➢ How do you think those outside your congregation or community see you at this stage in your life? Do you think they see you as 'retired' or as an active sister who still has something to contribute?

➢ If you are or other sisters who know are no longer involved in 'recognisable' ministry, does this mean that what they continue to do is not ministry, or simply part of their being apostolic? What for you constitutes 'recognisable' ministry? Do we limit the meaning of 'ministry, or give more meaning to the elements of life which are indeed outside of or beyond 'recognisable ministry'

➢ (If not already discussed) – Ref Theme 1, point 6: has this experience of being involved in my research been 'apostolic' in any way for you, and even in any way 'transformative'?

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[33] Schneiders, S. 2011. The radical nature and significance of consecrated life. A paper presented to the UISG. Available at: http://www.uisg.org/public/Attachments/doc_semteol_schneiders_2011_en.pdf

APPENDIX FIVE: Initial list of thematic codes identified pre-VCRM readings

1	Saying yes
2	Love of God and trust
3	Impulse to keep doing
4	Apostolic
4a	Being with/listening (later became listening and attention/hospitality of the heart)
4b	Evangelisation/conversion
4c	Best
4d	Apostolic as being sent
4e	Help
5	Freedom
6	Right intention
7	Ministering in old age
8	Context - Diminishment of the congregation
9	Motivation
9a	Missionary
9b	Attracted to a profession or ministry
10	Attitude to teaching
11	Selfhood
12	Obedience
13	Prayer
14	Ministering to the rest of the congregation
15a	Satisfaction/frustration in ministry
15b	Frustration in ministry
16	Link with charism
17	Change in ecclesiology
18	Identity
19a	Time
19b	Wasting time/guilt
20	Call to do something useful
21	Understanding of apostolic – changing?
22	Community
23	Ordinary
24	Kenosis/self-surrender
25	Enjoy (yourself)
26	"They" – the congregation
27	Presence
28	Separation from/response to the world
29	Self/true self
30	Influences on vocation – a category?
31	Justice
32	Friendship
33	Call to be a contemplative/contemplative – part of 30?
33b	Age and contemplation
33c	How I was put off being a contemplative
34	Identity – ascribed identity
35	Disappointment
36	Reciprocity

37	Being apostolic as we age
38	Relating to carers
39	Ideal for old age
40	Sense of self – related to being apostolic; it's who I am
41	Discernment
42	Context – future of the congregation
43	Constitutions
44	Apostolic – experience for the participants
45	Novitiate
46	Don't want to get involved – done enough
47a	Apostolic – reaction to the word
47b	Ministry – the word
48	Teaching not apostolic
49	Being and doing – a binary
50	Age and integration
51	Go on till the very end - narrative
52	Do your best
53	Use your gifts
54	Choice/choose
55	Interconnectedness/relationship
56	mutuality
57	Be useful
58	Understanding themselves in retirement
59	With no formal recognisable ministry
60	Finding a voice/questioning (Becoming)
61	Habit - identity
62	Projecting an identity
63	Obedience - acceptance

APPENDIX SIX: List of final sub-themes (Braun and Clarke 2006)

Arranged by the four Gathering Themes

Final list of sub-themes

	Label	Total number of comments	Total number of affirmative comments	Total number of contra/challenge comments	Total number of women to comment
1. Apostolic: what is it? Early and continuing understanding of					
13	Apostolic ministry and link with prayer/prayer as ministry	19	19	0	6
4d	Apostolic as being sent (positive)	6	6	0	3
4g	Apostolic as following/as apostle or disciple	7	0	0	5
31	Awareness of justice (changed understanding of apostolic)	43	43	0	6
21a	Changed understanding of apostolic – see above	60	60	0	10
6	Intentions matter	28	26	2	8
49	It's not about doing	37	37	0	11
4	Response to the word apostolic	26	9	15	10
4c	Response to the word ministry	17	3	14	9
52	*Motivation for entering*				*12*
52a	Early impulse to be apostolic/serve *6 out of 12 sisters*	13	12	1	6
52b	Existing/prior call to a profession – *6 out of 12 sisters*	32	18	14	12
52c	A call to teach – *4 out of 12 sisters*	35	9	22	12
52d	Call to monastic life – *no. of comments*	13	2	11	6
52e	Missionary	16	16	0	6
52f	Love of God	19	19	0	6
52g	Family influence	16	16	0	8

52h	Entered with congregation from school	22	10	12	12
2.	**Being in relationship - Being with/being for**				
4b	Apostolic is evangelising or converting	11	7	4	4
24	Apostolic = Bringing Christ to others	26	26	0	6
27	Apostolic = Spreading the Gospel	13	13	0	4
4a	Listening	47	47	0	11
22	Hospitality of the heart	67	67	0	12
52	Do your best (a variety of motives/categories)	21	21	0	9
4e	+ enabling/helping others become (in Becoming)	24	24	0	7
65	Gift (include 19a; gift of time)	31	31	0	8
4f	Hospitality/welcoming	10	10	0	4
15	It's **how** you are	45	45	0	11
32	Interviews as transformative in some way (2nd interviews)	11		2	7
25	Judging and not judging	7	7	0	5
21b	Narrow understanding of apostolic	32	32	0	7
23	Ordinary	43	37	6	10
26	Share it with others	12	12	0	2
2	Relationship with God/love of God and trust – central to being apostolic	11	11	0	4
30	Service (apostolic as?)	20	20	0	7
19b	Wasting time	7	7	0	3
34	Work ethic	11	11	0	4
3.	**Becoming – Claiming their identity**				
41	Change of obedience into discernment	27	26	1	9
16	Charism	26	26	0	8
38	Desire to be individuals	16	8	8	4

75	Encouraged to be individuals	11	5	4	6
60	Finding a voice/questioning	64	60	4	11
5	Free to/from	36	32	4	10
15b	Frustration in ministerial lives (Disappointment)	44	44	0	10
25	Good to enjoy yourself	9	5	4	4
4e	Helping others become (also in Apostolic)	24	24		7
49	Identity as a religious vs or profession	18	14	8 (person/prof)	7
50	Instrumentalisation	64	59	6	8
53	Invited finally to use your gifts	9	9		7
40	It's who I am – apostolic/religious	36	36	0	10
56	Mutuality/Reciprocity (Relationship)	54	54	1	12
54	Obedience as acceptance; it's just what you did	25	25	0	8
34	Resisting ascribed identity (as a nun)	66	66	0	8
15a	Satisfaction in ministerial lives	26	26	0	9
10a	Satisfied in teaching	55	30	25	12
24	Self-abnegation to self-gift (2nd interview re: Schneiders model)	27	15	9	10
4. Embodying in later life = being apostolic					
59	(Availability) – see gift of time				
8	Acceptance of diminishment as Paschal dynamic	39	34	5	9
79	Concern for others in suffering	28	25	3	10
59	Elderly still apostolic with no recognisable ministry	60	46	14	11
51	Go on till the very end	47	40	7	11
39	Hope to be apostolic till the end/– ideal for old age	18	18		8
3	Impulse to keep doing things – to activity	25	25	2	10
67	Ministering to each other	54	45	9	11
69	Ministering to their families	10	10	0	4
70	Ministry of prayer	26	26	1	7
38	Ministering to carers	32	31	1	10
46	Negativity/We've done our bit/Depression	11	11	0	4

58	Nuns don't retire (include Do others view you as retired? Second interview)	33	31	2	10
68	Older sisters ministering to the congregation	26	23	6	9
50	Obedience and age	19	17	1	7
27	Presence	66	61	5	11
1	Self-gift Saying Yes	16	12	4	6
57	Purpose/useful	27	27	0	8
64	Witness (and Witness as ourselves – Becoming)	12	12	0	4

Parked themes:

- Collaborate
- Commitment
- Community (in relation to freedom/conformity and Becoming??)
- Constitutions? In relation to what?
- Dislike of the novitiate experience – prevented them from becoming?
- Leadership of the Province or congregation
- Prayer
- Vows
- Ageing being discussed/addressed in the congregation?
- Negativity/we've done our bit

APPENDIX SEVEN: Themes arranged by their frequency of occurring in interviews within and across the four Gathering Themes

Gathering or global themes:

Theme 1: Apostolic: what is it? Early and continuing understanding of

Theme 2: Being in relationship: Being with/for

Theme 3: Becoming

Theme 4: Embodying in later life

Individual sub-themes by frequency:

22. Hospitality of the heart	67
34. Resisting ascribed identity (as a sister)	66
27. Presence	66
60. Finding a voice/questioning	64
50. Instrumentalisation	64
21a.Changed understanding of apostolic	60
59. Elderly apostolic with no ministry	60
55. Attitude to teaching	55
56. Mutuality/reciprocity in relationship	54
67. Ministering to each other	54
4a. Listening	47
51. Go on till the very end	47
15. It's how you are	45
15b. Frustration in ministerial lives	44
23. Ordinary	43
31. Awareness of Justice and Peace	43
49. It's not about doing	37
5. Free to/from	36
40. It's who I am: apostolic	36
8. Diminishment as paschal mystery	39
58. Sisters don't retire	33
38. Ministering to carers	32
21b.Narrow understanding of apostolic	32
65. Gift	31
6. Importance of intention	28

APPENDIX EIGHT: Table of narrative themes from transcripts

Index of themes:

NN1: Asserting and projecting identity

NN2: Thwarted in ministry (but overcame?) – Instrumentalisation

NN3: Saying Yes - Growth leading to new understanding of apostolic (through obedience?)

NN4: Change in sisters' understanding of what it means to live an apostolic vocation

NN5: Call or vocation narratives

NN6: Being in relationship with/for

NN7: How they give meaning to later life

This table sets out the seven main narrative themes which emerged from the analysis of the texts. These were identified through the VCRM method, in particular through the first reading. One of the aims of the first reading is to highlight any themes and sub-themes identified in the transcripts. These were each given a number and noted in a short report on each participant. The reports were then compared, to identify a set of common narratives emerging from all the participants. Under each main heading, there is a short introductory note about the nature and content of each theme. This is followed by a section identifying where the contents of the narrative met with, and confirmed, the main codes and themes which emerged through the thematic coding exercise. The rest of the table notes where the main theme was gathered from the individual themes occurring within the narrative text of each individual participant from P1 to P12.

NN1: Asserting and projecting identity

Articulating who she is throughout the interview through the use of: self-descriptors; what others say about her; anecdotes; experiences and relationships with others/the institution.

This is sometimes done in response or reference to "who others say I should be – as a "nun""? This may be "the public"; family (P11); their congregation (P10) and the Church (P4).

Some: P1; P4; P5; P6; P11 have emphasised that either their school or congregation placed value on their individuality as a person – not on making them all from the same mould. However, a) they may be the only 1 of their congregation (among those interviewed) who has experienced this (P1 as opposed to P2) or b) this may or may not then relate to their need to assert their identity.

Can this theme integrate or combine with their understanding of their vocation as "being apostolic" in the sense that their current identity is that they are now able to live this as themselves? Relates to those for whom this is the case.

Cross-over with codes:
Discernment; enjoying yourself; family influence; finding a voice/questioning; free from/to; It's who I am; instrumentalisation; obedience/acceptance; ordinary; resisting

	ascribed identity; satisfaction or frustration in ministerial lives; self describes as; self-gift/saying yes; They – othering the congregation.
P1	N1 - Asserting and projecting her self – identity. In order to do N2; assert N4; result of N7 – her family's influence on her. N2 - Resisting an ascribed identity. N4 - Her identity – a sister not just a teacher. N5 - Her attraction to her congregation – ties in with her narrative of herself as someone who doesn't fit easily into stereotypes of nuns and her commitment to justice.
P2	N1 – her growth – towards freedom: freedom from and to/be herself and make her own choices. N9 – her identity in relation to the group (charism). (could also incorporate N2; N5; N6; N9; N15 and N16 (embodying = apostolic = her identity).
P3	N1 - Desire to go on the missions and misled (thwarted and her response to it) – frustration? N5 - Finding and asserting her voice (asking) – away from self-denial to self-realisation to self-gift/donation. N11 - Saying Yes – assent (see N7). *This is part of her Saying Yes to God – asserting her desire/call to be herself almost in the face of the Congregation (see also P10) and so resisting instrumentalisation.*
P4	N10 Non-fulfilment – agency and choice rather than discernment and obedience Makes a lot of use of I statements. Unfulfilled potential – vocation to be a priest/minister: Thwarted? Anger? Sees herself as an outsider (and yet this was why she was attracted to her congregation) and ground-breaker but couldn't break the ground? Anger with the Church and religious life in general. She doesn't accept the idea of "presence" for herself – or others? See also P10 – either now or in later age. An outlier/contradiction.
P5	N10 - Identity of (and her in relation to) the group – monastic/apostolic. N11 - her identity – and public recognition as a religious – resisting an ascribed identity – wants to be heard. Obedience to self-assertion - she wants to be heard/wants a voice (see N6 – coming together). *Her concerns in response to others' stereotypes and negative prejudices. Uncertain how to describe herself but wants to be seen as herself, before people see her as a "nun".*
P6	What You See is What You Get nun (WYSIWYG).
P7	Appears very integrated – identity also strong as part of the group and their charism.
P8	Appears very integrated – identity also strong as part of the group and their charism.
P9	N12 - Her identity – sees herself as family plus overseas experience. Remains something of an outsider in the congregation?

	N13 – Trying to assert her individual identity when younger e.g. as a soccer nun.
P10	N1 - Struggling with an ascribed identity and way of being (escaping?) – freedom from – conformity and others' judging her. How she self-describes – sister or not. N2 - A self-identity as being with ordinary people – especially Africans (is it not about helping?) says it's no longer about helping… also N10 – how helping has changed.
P11	N5: it's who she is; she's there for others. Her family also.
P12	N5 – Resisting an ascribed identity and projecting/asserting her own: the self-image she portrays as in breaking the mould (soccer nun).

NN2: Thwarted in ministry (but overcame?) - Instrumentalisation

Either wanted to be a missionary, or taught but never felt called to it – or very unhappy. Joined the congregation either believing she would be able to go on the missions (felt misled), or her overriding sense of call to the congregation or community was greater and they were prepared to do what they were told, or realised that their ministry would be that of the community/congregation. Or they were led to believe that the work/apostolate itself wasn't important, but rather how you do it….	
Crossover with codes: Discernment; enjoying yourself; family influence; finding a voice/questioning; free from/to; helping others become; It's who I am; instrumentalisation; obedience/acceptance; resisting ascribed identity; satisfaction or frustration in ministerial lives; self describes as; They – othering the congregation.	
P1	
P2	
P3	N1 - Desire to go on the missions and misled (thwarted and her response to it) – frustration? Spent her life in domestic service and eventually nursing. Overcame it her sense of loss? N3 - her joy; seeing the positive in everything; love of God – desire? Sees beauty. N4 - attitude to her congregation (see N10 – confused? See N2 – context and class?) – her own experience of "service" and nuns being sent to teach "when they've nothing in them for teaching".
P4	N1 – Identity as not belonging. N2 – Missed opportunities. Unfulfilled potential? Didn't teach.
P5	N4 - A narrative of "difficult" re ministries; didn't like teaching but taught until retirement age. N5 - (A second strand of) Overcoming – thwarted/self-denial (instrumentalisation). N6 - N4 + N5 = N6 – feel the fear and do it anyway. Obedience as acceptance and/or Saying Yes.
P6	Not thwarted – loved teaching.

P7	N3 – Taught because the community/congregation taught but didn't enjoy and felt liberated when able to leave; her discernment away led the community away from teaching.
	N6 – Contradiction with her call – tension – desire for God and to make a complete gif of herself but not to teaching, even though the community taught; how she overcame this.
	N9 - what helped her address the double pull and the shift in understanding apostolic.
P8	N2 – from obedience as acceptance to obedience as listening – her and the community Also the context of religious life and e.g. the change in understanding of the vows.
	N4 - her relationship with teaching – duty? Self-denial? Acceptance? Delight at being liberated.
P9	Not thwarted but obedient and enjoyed teaching.
P10	N15 – small comment – would have liked to go to college but not allowed; even to request it would have been frowned upon.
	Wanted to go on the missions but family discouraged it, despite family tradition of RL, priesthood and "going out".
P11	N5 – Was pulled out of her teacher training course mid-way and sent to Ireland. Heartbroken.
	A narrative of self-denial but growing agency and choice in later life.
P12	N? - Wanted to go on the missions (join a missionary congregations) but family (including priest-uncle) wouldn't allow her.

NN3: Saying Yes - Growth leading to new understanding of apostolic

Strong theme of personal growth often leading to a changed/broader understanding of "apostolic" and their apostolic vocation. Initial acceptance followed by questioning of their ministry and religious life, through discernment, leading to growth (through obedience?)
Do we see here Schneiders' model of self-denial to self-development to self-gift?
Saying Yes = often being obedient/listening to God rather than (or rather than only) their Congregation/Superior. Journey reflected in the changed understanding of "obedience" and reflected in the change in their congregations and religious life more broadly.
Finding a voice
A lot of overlap with NN2 – trying to distinguish between growing through difficult ministry and more general life experience?

Crossover with codes:
Becoming/claiming their identity codes: Discernment; do/be your best; finding a voice; free to; Obedience/acceptance; Self-gift/saying yes; purpose/call to useful.

P1	N3 – Her experience of vocations ministry which changed her and led to her further spiritual development (see also N16).
	N16 (see N3) – part of the narrative of how she has grown spiritually and in relation to their charism (otherwise a very positive experience of ministry).
P2	N1 – her growth - towards "freedom".

	N8 – her growth - towards "freedom".
	N13 - a narrative of change in the understanding of ministry/being apostolic.
P3	See NN2.
	N5 - Finding and asserting her voice (asking) – away from self-denial to self-realisation to self-gift/donation.
P4	N8 – her projected identity – as a ground breaker? (See N1).
P5	See NN2.
	N4 – "difficult" re ministries – lack of self-confidence.
	N5 - (A second strand of) Overcoming – thwarted/self-denial (instrumentalisation).
	N6 - N6 - N4 and N5 = N6 – feel the fear and do it anyway – Obedience as acceptance and/or Saying Yes.
	N11 - her identity – and public recognition as a religious – resisting an ascribed identity – wants to be heard.
	Obedience to self-assertion - she wants to be heard/wants a voice (see N6 – coming together).
P6	N1 (call narrative); N2 – Apostolic as myself – in her own skin; very much herself
	N6 – Making meaning of being beyond "recognisable ministry".
P7	See NN2.
	N1 - An integrated view of "apostolic" – part of a larger whole.
	N2 – Her understanding of her response to her call – response to impulse? More of a "spiritual" response than her response to the experience of teaching?? Growth to, rather than moving away from teaching.
	N5 – "Squaring the circle" – becoming convinced re Justice and Peace.
	N8 - Broadening of her understanding of "apostolic"
	N1 and N8 = integration of all as she ages. Strong sense of embodying of being apostolic – articulated through sense of integration and identity.
P8	Strong sense of embodying of being apostolic – articulated through sense of integration and identity.
	See NN2.
	N1 – her call narrative.
	N2 – from obedience as acceptance to obedience as listening – her and the community Also the context of religious life and, for example, the change in understanding of the vows.
P9	N2 – A positive relationship with teaching (but discernment and questioning led to her moving out of teaching).
	N5 – Strong narrative of accepting what happens to you (obedience) then questioning and discernment and coming to a new understanding and experience of apostolic.
	N6 – Heavy workload – doing too much/work ethic = not living religious life – contributed to her questioning (see N5).
	N9 - Her mother as a role model for her apostolic service through love.
P10	Positive experience of teaching, but growth away from it (response to local needs) and growth despite the congregation – through her experience of therapy.

	N3 – Her understanding of what apostolic is and how that has changed/developed (has it? Still talks about "helping" asylum seekers) – include her growing awareness of the role of justice. N4 – Her "othering" of the congregation. N9 – Discerning God's will for her – a lifelong search –increasing call to simplicity. N11 - Listening – to God (see N9) and other/ordinary people (use of positive language in relation to this).
P11	N5 – Finding her voice.
P12	N2 (by combating the strong work ethic in her congregation).

NN4: Change in sisters' understanding of what it means to live an apostolic vocation

Change in their understanding of what it means to live an apostolic vocation. Overlap with NN2 and NN3 but strong theme in many of the interviews, and closely entwined with/reflected in change in their congregations. For most, the change (story of connected events and experiences) has led to a new current experience of "being apostolic" which is tied up with their current identity and what meaning they are able to give to being without recognisable/external/formal ministry (see NN6).
Crossover with codes: Changed understanding of apostolic; awareness of justice; awareness of justice; response to the word apostolic; it's not about doing; motive for entering; narrow understanding of apostolic; ordinary; (category – context of change in the congregation); relationship.

P1	Unclear. Influence of her family – especially her father – on her understanding of what justice is and its role in an apostolic vocation/her call.
P2	See NN3. N1 – freedom to be herself. N13 - a narrative of change in the understanding of ministry/being apostolic.
P3	N8 – apostolic as doing for God but through people.
P4	Unclear
P5	N8 – Coming to understand apostolic as "being" apostolic with no formal/recognisable ministry.
P6	N6 – Making meaning of being beyond "recognisable ministry". N2 – apostolic as herself. N3 – apostolic through relationship. N4 – change within congregation.
P7	N2 – Her response to her call – response to impulse? N5 - Squaring the circle and the rise of Justice and Peace. N8 – Broadening of her understanding of "apostolic" and growth of awareness of the role of "justice". N1 and N8 = integration of all as she ages – (see NN2 and NN3). Closely linked with change in her community/congregation.
P8	See NN2 and NN3 and link with change in her community/congregation.

	N9 – from obedience as acceptance to obedience as listening – her and the community Also the context of religious life and e.g. the change in understanding of the vows.
	N15 – ways in which the community is apostolic.
P9	See NN3.
	N5 - Strong narrative of accepting what happens to you (obedience) then questioning and discernment and coming to a new understanding and experience of apostolic.
	N9 – Relationship with her family and her mother in particular, who influenced her understanding of apostolic service.
P10	N2 – how this has changed – in discovering the importance of seeking/fighting for justice, and also trying to understand what 'justice' means in our own context/situation
P11	N4 - A narrative of self-denial but growing agency and choice – thwarted. A narrative of obedience – through obedience to choice?
	N6 - Meaning making of "retirement"; How she understands what she does now – is it ministry? apostolic?
P12	N1 – story of work ethic in the congregation.
	N3 - Opportunities for apostolic thrust anywhere = the apostolate of a presence.
	N4 – religious life is apostolic through relationship.
	N7 - Ageing – a narrative of apostolic all the time, and to the end – without the ability to do.

NN5: Call or vocation narratives

Narrative (story not always at the beginning of the interview) about how each sister first met the congregation; factors influencing decision to join; motivation.	
Crossover with codes:	
Motive for entering; what matters is why you do it/intention; purpose/usefulness/call to useful; discernment.	
P1	N5 - Her attraction to the congregation – ties in with her narrative of herself as someone who doesn't fit easily into stereotypes of nuns and her commitment to justice.
	N7 - Her family influence in her life and on her.
	N10 - Foresight of the congregation in promoting individuality, choice and a sense of freedom.
P2	
P3	N1 - Desire to go on the missions and misled (thwarted and her response to it) – frustration?
	N2 - Historical context (her telling of it and how it relates to her story).
	N4 - attitude to her congregation (see N10 – confused? See N2 – context and class?) – her own experience of "service".
P4	N4 - A theme of lost opportunities – regrets? The missions; monastic community; the call to go to foreign places – despite a call to "do something purposeful".
P5	N9 - To be useful – for God – give something back.

P6	N1 Call narrative – Influences on her vocation: a) to religious life; b) to an active congregation; c) to her congregation. These often can't be separated. Role of her personality – a key factor in influencing all three but particularly on choice of order. She chose an order who would invest in her.
P7	N2 – Her understanding of her response to her call – response to apostolic impulse?
P8	N1 - Her "call" narrative (what might be useful/distinctive? That she now understands her motives for entering differently? But trying to tell the story of then through where she is now).
P9	N1 - Her call story – the only sisters she knew (category?) – drawn to them somehow – happy teaching. N2 - A positive relationship with teaching. Now re-interpreting her motives for joining - see N1 for P8.
P10	N3 - Initial call narrative - How she saw herself when she entered – re-interpreting her motives with hindsight (also P8 and P9). N4 - Family influence on her choosing religious life and choice of congregation. N11 - Attraction to and experience of the missions.
P11	N1 - Call narrative – attracted to the sisters- fun and enjoyment – hard but fun. Didn't know other congregations.
P12	N2 - Attitude to/experience of the congregation. N9 - Wanted to go on the missions but family wouldn't allow her: family influence on joining.

NN6: Being in relationship with: being with/for

As an understanding of what it means to live out an apostolic vocation. Includes reciprocity and mutuality (see below). There's a lot of crossover with identity and the theme in the codes of "embodying"; in fact these are hard to separate out in some cases.
Originally I thought that relationship with family could be included in this, but there are very few comments, and they relate more to the motive for becoming a religious in the first place.

Crossover with codes:
Relationship (sub-codes – How; being-with; Being with/being for; Bringing Christ to others; Helping others become; help; Hospitality/welcoming; How; Judging and not judging; Share it with others; Spread the Gospel; Listening; Service; Time; mutuality; reciprocity; ordinary.

Mutuality
Giving to others what we have received as religious; Saving my soul and that of others and how these two complement each other (P2?) – Part of one movement; Link to sharing and spreading the Gospel; She gains by helping others (P2 – 118 –

121); We need each other (particularly Religious); Exchange – P2 (842 – 848); sharing the Gospel and people sharing their life experiences (see Reciprocity above) – Presence and exchange (901 - 911). Yes – its presence, but she is still looking for something – to gain something; a reward? A change for the better in or for that person? (What exactly do they gain from others – the poor, disadvantage people – or ordinary people – in sharing their experiences with them? See P2 (842 – 48). Also P10 (539) and also "presence" – is giving and receiving – role of the Holy Spirit. Return to the Lord for what he's given me (P5) – the idea that God can use them – do something useful (P5 972 – 965). You can only give what you have received – become a channel of the HS (599) and link to prayer – "it's all part of one movement".

P1	N8 – how she continues to be active post "retirement"; how the elderly in her congregation live now – embodying (through ministry of presence) and how they continue to serve. N11 – Apostolic is about being in relationship – reciprocity? – passing on what we have received.
P2	N2 – apostolic = reciprocity (and balance?). N5 – apostolic as "being with" – walking with and N16 (embodying) - apostolic as relational – for and with people. N6 (reciprocal) - Apostolic as giving herself (no notes – combine with above). N15 – (embodying) - her identity - as a religious? A mystic? Living in the present? (See N2 and N5 and N6 – her "being" coming together with her apostolic "ministry").
P3	N8 - Apostolic = doing for God but through people. It's also about intention and motive – not doing it for yourself.
P4	N4 - (Apostolic = being with/being for) - People – liked being and working with – rewarding apostolic opportunities – with adults. Liked being with and making a difference to people with little sense of their own self-worth.
P5	N8 (in ageing) - Being apostolic with no formal/recognisable ministry.
P6	N2 – Being apostolic. N6 - The HOW of apostolic (USP of religious e.g. in teaching) i.e. how you are with people matters more than what you do. N7 – Without formal or recognisable ministry – apostolic to the very end: how SHE is apostolic now; the theory/theology of being apostolic in old age and how she sees others as being apostolic in old age. N8 – Time – having time for people – welcoming/hospitality – being for.
P7	N8 - Broadening of her understanding of "apostolic". N1 and N8 = integration of all as she ages – the Paschal mystery. N10 - Theme old age and the future of religious life – diminishment and re-birth – the Paschal mystery. Tied up here with her understanding of being beyond 'recognisable ministry' in old age and being-in-community.
P8	N5 – a narrative – of what it means to be apostolic and yet have no external apostolic ministry/in retirement – it's about how we are with people. Being apostolic and not doing – link with the self/herself?

	N9 and N10 - from obedience as acceptance to obedience as listening to – both her and the community. Also the context of religious life and, for example, the change in understanding of the vows. N13 – Integration – all part of one movement – contemplation/action – being and doing. N14 – 15 – Availability and hospitality of the heart – how both she and the community practise this.
P9	See NN3. N8 –What it means to "be" apostolic at this stage in life. Apostolic – doesn't have to mean being active.
P10	N3 – Her understanding of what apostolic is and how that has changed/developed (has it?) – include justice. N11 – Listening – to God (see N9) and other/ordinary people (use of positive language in relation to this). N13 - Apostolic = people, and direct contact with ordinary people (family influence?).
P11	N7 - How she understands what she does now – is it ministry? apostolic? What she tells herself about this – how does she give it meaning?? Listening, giving of herself, and being with "People" = who she is now, what she is giving and what it means to her.
P12	N3 – Opportunities for apostolic thrust anywhere = the apostolate of a presence N4 – religious life is apostolic: it's about relationship. You are there for others. Being for.

NN7: Making meaning of later life

> To date, with this theme, and in the codes, I have focussed on this as a narrative of Christian hope and trust in God – not knowing what will come, but believing that all will be well; a sense of handing oneself over to God and accepting that true dependency.
>
> Giving meaning or how they give meaning to that stage in later life when they are no longer involved in "recognisable" ministry might offer a wider range although, to an extent, this is a category, as there are within it a variety of sub-themes and responses such as whether or not they consider what the elderly sisters do to constitute ministry and their own hopes for their later years.
>
> "*Recognisable ministry"* itself is an interesting/contested term as for them, it seems to mean formal, or external – not necessarily paid, but certainly with others outside the community/congregation – primarily not religious. However, using it in this particular context, devalues the smaller level, community-based activities which many sisters do continue to carry out, in playing their part in the community and caring for each other in care communities.
>
> The other point of interest in this theme is that although many of the sisters invest these community-based activities with meaning, and find that prayer is in itself a ministry, their ideal for themselves is to carry on as many external activities as possible for as long as they can. Look out perhaps for personal and canonical narratives (shoulds).

	Crossover with codes:
	It's who I am; embodying (presence); ordinary; go on till the very end; ways of being apostolic as we age (to each other; ministering to the congregation; to families; prayer and to carers); purpose; retirement; suffering; with no formal/recognisable ministry; do the elderly have a ministry?
P1	N6 – Narrative of how she lives out her apostolic vocation and ministry at this age. N8 – Re how she continues to be active post "retirement"; Re: how the elderly in her congregation live now – embodying (through ministry of presence) and how they continue to serve. N13 – the impact of diminishment on the congregation?
P2	Being present and embodying the presence of God. N10 - Presence, time and the present moment (N10 and N11). N12 – Theme of herself and of religious life in old age. N15 - her identity - as a Religious? A mystic? Living in the present? (See N2 and N5 and N6 – her "being" coming together with her apostolic "ministry".)
P3	N6 - Her ministry in retirement – does she value it as ministry or not? – It's just ministry for old age. N9 - Impulse to continue doing – it's who she is - identity.
P4	She resists having the conversation about herself – some small comments about other sisters – N11 – ministry in later life. Rejects the term ministry of presence.
P5	N8 - Being apostolic with no formal/recognisable ministry (ageing).
P6	N7 – The HOW of apostolic (USP of Religious). N8 – having time for others – to be with others. N11 – Diminishment and its impact. Sisters are "missioned" to their care community – *gives it substantial meaning.*
P7	N1 – An integrated view of "apostolic" – part of a larger whole. N8 – Broadening of her understanding of "apostolic". N1 and N8 = integration of all as she ages – the Paschal mystery. N10 - Narrative of old age and the future of religious life – diminishment and re-birth – the Paschal mystery.
P8	N3 – A Sister of X never retires – her current ministry. N5 – a narrative – or is it just a description – of what it means to be apostolic and yet have no external apostolic ministry/in retirement – it's about how we are with people. Being apostolic and not doing – link with the self/herself? N6 and N7 - Her ideal – how she herself would want to be able to cope when she is older.
P9	N8 – Apostolic – doesn't have to be active – what it means to her now. N10 – the congregation's attitude to their elderly – how they try to include them. N11 – She thinks she will be able to cope when she becomes that elderly and possibly bedridden – and how.
P10	N16 - Age/old – what is she saying? To keep going as long as possible – partly so she doesn't have to go back into community. Little time for the concept of "presence".

P11	N8 - How she understands what she does now – is it ministry? apostolic? What she tells herself about this – how does she give it meaning?? Says all sisters in the house have a ministry – no matter how small. And they are all missioned.
P12	N6 – The congregation's attitude to aging/illness. N7 – Ageing – a narrative of apostolic all the time, and to the end – even without the ability to do. This is rooted in sayings of their foundress, who encouraged this (espoused theology) but she notes that many older sisters find this difficult and need a sense of purpose. N8 – The elderly need to be made to feel useful and to have a sense of purpose. N9 - Future of religious life – realistic but not depressed – trust? Hope? Facing the unknown – could be a gift.