

## **Serving humanity during the tumultuous 20th century: 'Trailblazers in Habits'**

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### **A review of the documentary film 'Trailblazers in Habits'**

European religious orders of the Christian faith were initially and essentially orders of monks and friars, historically known for having started foreign missions around the 16th century. For a long time, the primary aim of such missions had been to 'evangelize' and convert to Christianity those remote populations, in Eastern Europe as well as beyond the Mediterranean Sea and Gibraltar, who were not yet aware of the existence of the 'only and true God', and who were therefore considered in need of religious indoctrination.

The order of the Maryknoll Sisters was founded by Mother Mary Joseph Rogers in 1912 in Boston. It was the first order of Catholic Sisters founded in the United States specifically for service overseas. China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam and Hong Kong were among the first countries which benefitted from the Sisters' services.

The documentary film Trailblazers in Habits retraces the beginnings and the evolution of the great work accomplished by this new congregation of innovative nuns over the past century. The documentary is the result of five years of work, with old film clips selected from the Maryknoll archives professionally re-edited in accordance with modern movie-making standards. These clips were integrated in the documentary in order to provide historical evidence to the testimony offered by the several sisters who took part in the project. While sharing memories of their duties, the interviewed sisters also mentioned other sisters, including those who lost their lives on a mission; through their words, they contributed to the authenticity of the documentary.

The first few minutes of the film focus on the innovative approach adopted by the order of the Maryknoll Sisters since its early days and underlines its revolutionary spirit, not only from a religious point of view, but also in terms of the emancipation and self-determination of its members. For the Maryknoll Sisters, working abroad in missions was a way to prove that they could serve God and people in equal capacity as their 'male counterparts'. Being part of such a modern and forward-thinking order for those times, meant empowerment for all of them. They felt they were not women to be protected and who were to 'follow the path'. Rather, they could choose to do something different and unconventional with their lives. Their vocation was not about praying to God in seclusion or reclusiveness, but concretized into being 'on the field', close to the real world in support of people in need of help. They saw themselves as women in action who could play an active role in relieving contemporary needs. They were indeed emancipated women and innovative Sisters. Their life was one of contemplation in action.

In one of the several interviews included in the documentary, sister Maria Rieckelman, who entered the order in 1945 and served for 15 years as a medical doctor in Korea and Hong Kong, explains how the Maryknoll missions did not aim at converting people, but purely addressed local needs. She remembers a man dying of liver disease. He said to her: "If you want to baptize me, if you think that would help me, it's fine". She replied, "What I need is not to baptize you. What I need to do is help you to get better." She continues her explanation, "I didn't try to convert him. I was never big at conversions. I was good at healing." Being a specialized psychiatrist as well, Sister M. Rieckelman's contribution included mental health services, which became very important tools of support and rehabilitation as this kind of care was hardly known in those days and almost unavailable in Asia.

The documentary reveals that many of the Maryknoll Sisters on mission in Asia were highly educated and proactive women, with a profound sense of social justice and solidarity and motivated to work towards the enhancement of human dignity. They were called to engage in social, paramedical and educational services. While they were required to possess a variety of skills beforehand, they still had to learn and develop new skills, such as budgeting, administration and a great capacity for adaptation.

Before arriving in China and other eastern countries, the Sisters received no 'orientation' about the cultural and social backgrounds in which they would operate. As many of them point out during their testimony, part of the challenge also included the development of intercultural mediation skills and the understanding of local habits. In order to be more helpful and conquer the reticence of the most remote communities, they also had to learn the local dialects.

Different nuns remember with irony how long it took to simply learn ordinary Chinese characters, and the years it took to start 'getting' jokes. At times, hearing the sisters speaking Chinese, villagers would instead think that they were speaking English!

When the Maryknoll Sisters first arrived in China, their main goal was to provide a series of services to poor communities in remote areas, rather than to establish an institutional church. Their services and skills were offered to sick people, the elderly, neglected children, orphans, women, the poor and homeless people. Providing food, medical assistance, shelter and protection to the needy ones had always been their priority. It was never like, "read the Bible and then you'll get some food".

In 1922, a group of six Sisters entered Victoria Harbor aboard a small steamboat, in complete amazement at the amount of bustling activity before their eyes. Ten years after the foundation of their order, the Maryknoll Sisters began their work in Hong Kong, which over the next two decades, brought about the establishment of six schools and a hospital for the poor.

The film notes that in the early 20th century, neither the Colonial Government of Hong Kong nor the authorities in London assumed their social responsibility for the poor, sick or homeless. Therefore, it soon became clear to the Sisters how much needed to be done in the city. Old clips of the early 1920s give testimony of the exceptional assistance provided to the hundreds of poor Chinese migrants and refugees who were increasingly crossing the border and arriving in Hong Kong. The Maryknoll Sisters established the very first primary school for refugees, where children were not only provided with basic education, but were also given milk and food, as a further way to sustain the children in their physical growth and mental development, and also as a way to help their families.

Those Sisters who had previously worked in mainland China could also provide extensive help in terms of counseling and guidance, as they could communicate in some of the local Chinese dialects. As the Hong Kong Government began to slowly invest in the welfare of its people, the sisters were able to use its support to deliver a great deal of social services, mainly education, shelter and health assistance, among the most disadvantaged groups in the city. The Sisters adopted a motivational approach, aimed at encouraging people not to lose hope and to be willing to reconstruct their life. With Chinese women in particular, brought up within patriarchal mindsets and expected to be obedient to their menfolk and devoted to their family, the Sisters tried to stress their potential and to make them realize their value as women equally capable as men.

In schools also, the educational approach was very proactive and children were taught to believe in themselves, to be self-confident and articulate, and to realize and develop their potential. The Sisters always tried to give their students the tools to develop their talents. Miss Nancy Tong, the director and

producer of 'Trailblazers in Habits', is a former student of the Maryknoll Convent School, in Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong, and she remembers the motivation and encouragement received in the pursuit of her aspirations. Nowadays, she is a successful documentary film maker in New York and she is glad she did not become a physiotherapist, which is what her mother wanted for her, in order to earn a regular salary.

The Sisters also used to invite their students to share their gifts in a way beneficial to others. Volunteerism was a great part of their school values, with the idea that students could give back to society what they had received. It is important to point out that not all the pupils enrolled in the Maryknoll schools were or became Catholics. School was not about learning to be religious or being introduced to the Sacred Scriptures; it was about becoming good persons. The Sisters never provided their services to help, support or educate Christians only. They were flexible, taking care of people regardless of their beliefs, origin or ethnicity. They were respectful of other faiths and even willing to learn from other forms of spirituality.

The Maryknoll Sisters, despite being a religious congregation for missions overseas, were very engaged within the United States, too. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Japanese Americans living in the west part of the States were ordered to move into internment camps for 'security reasons'. Film clips of the time offer testimony of the commitment of two Maryknoll Sisters in particular, who were themselves American citizens of Japanese origin, and who decided to voluntarily accompany these families to one of the biggest camps in California, in order to assist them during the internment. In particular, the two Sisters took care of the education of those American-Japanese children who were discriminated against in state schools during those years. The church in the camp was not primarily a religious place of worship, but a referral point for the entire community, a place where they could feel like a family.

In documenting the great work undertaken by the Sisters 'at home', the foundation in 1955 of the 'Queen of the World Hospital' in Kansas City, Missouri is also included. It was the first integrated hospital in the United States where African-American doctors and nurses were trained and also worked with 'white' medical personnel to cure patients regardless of the colour of their skin, with no segregation or discriminatory policies in place. This was quite ahead of the times, considering that the Civil Rights Act was passed nine years later. During the 1960s, in fact, the Maryknoll Sisters showed their solidarity with those American citizens marching in the streets making claims for social and civil rights. Photos and clips document how, particularly in the streets of Selma in Alabama, they marched in the forefront to prevent the police from opening fire on the human rights leaders and helped those who were injured during the clashes. They were known both within and outside their home country for their belief in justice and freedom. They are renowned for being women engaged with the world, who act and speak up.

During their service as nuns, they had to fight against the initial distrust of people, and at times the aversion of local authorities. As women, they had to deal with moments of discouragement, in which they questioned themselves about motherhood and other aspects of a woman's life that they had chosen to give up. There were times when even their faith was strained, but their strength and determination 'gained the upper hand'.

They have been women ahead of their time, even in the taking of photographs of their missions and writing journals from the early 1920s, which today makes their archives extremely rich. The portrait that emerges after watching the documentary film 'Trailblazers in Habits', is one of courageous women, with strong personalities and a marked individuality, which was by no means reduced or hidden by the habit they used to wear, as many people may tend to believe when thinking about nuns.

During the 20th century the 'face' of the Maryknoll Sisters has changed. Today they count approximately 500 members from 18 different countries. Yet, the challenges and the missions are still the same. It's a circle and a continuous struggle for social justice. The Maryknoll Sisters now serve in Albania, American Samoa, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Brazil, Cambodia, Chile, China, East Timor, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Japan, Kenya, Myanmar, Namibia, Panama, Peru, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, the United States and Zimbabwe.