

OP-ED COLUMNIST

# The Nuns' Story

By [MAUREEN DOWD](#)

Published: October 24, 2009

WASHINGTON



Maureen Dowd

Once, in the first grade, I was late for class. I started crying in the schoolyard, terrified to go in and face the formidable Sister Hiltruda.

Father Montgomery, who looked like a handsome young priest out of a 1930s movie, found me cowering and took my hand, leading me into the classroom.

Sister Hiltruda looked ready to pop, but she couldn't say a word to me, then or ever. There was no more unassailable patriarchy than the Catholic Church.

Nuns were second-class citizens then and — 40 years after feminism utterly changed America — they still are. The matter of women as priests is closed, a forbidden topic.

In 2004, the cardinal who would become Pope Benedict XVI wrote a Vatican document urging women to be submissive partners, resisting any adversarial roles with men and cultivating “feminine values” like “listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting.”

Nuns need to be even more sepia-toned for the über-conservative pope, who was christened “God’s Rottweiler” for his enforcement of orthodoxy. Once a conscripted member of the Hitler Youth, Benedict pardoned a schismatic bishop who claimed that there was no Nazi gas chamber. He also argued on a trip to Africa that distributing condoms could make the AIDS crisis worse.

The Vatican is now conducting two inquisitions into the “quality of life” of American nuns, a dwindling group with an average age of about 70, hoping to herd them back into their old-fashioned habits and convents and curb any speck of modernity or independence.

Nuns who took Vatican II as a mandate for reimagining their mission “started to look uppity to an awful lot of bishops and priests and, of course, the Vatican,” said Kenneth Briggs, the author of “Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church’s Betrayal of American Nuns.”

The church enabled rampant pedophilia, but nuns who live in apartments and do social work with ailing gays? Sacrilegious! The pope can wear Serengeti sunglasses and expensive red loafers, but shorter hems for nuns? Disgraceful!

“It’s a tragedy because nuns are the jewels of the system,” said Bob Bennett, the Washington lawyer who led the church’s lay inquiry into the pedophilia scandal. “I was of the view that if they had been listened to more, some of this stuff wouldn’t have happened.”

As the Vatican is trying to wall off the “brides of Christ,” Cask of Amontillado style, it is welcoming extreme-right Anglicans into the Catholic Church — the ones who are disgruntled about female priests and openly gay bishops. Il Papa is even willing to bend Rome’s most doggedly held dogma, against married priests — as long as they’re clutching the Anglicans’ Book of Common Prayer.

“Most of the Anglicans who want to move over to the Catholic Church under this deal are people who have scorned women as priests and have

scorned gay people,” Briggs said. “The Vatican doesn’t care that these people are motivated by disdain.”

The nuns are pushing back a bit, but it’s hard, since the church has decreed that women can’t be adversarial to men. A nun writing in *Commonweal* as “Sister X” protests, “American women religious are being bullied.”

She recalls that Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, who heads one of the investigations, moved a meeting at the University of Notre Dame off campus to protest a performance of “The Vagina Monologues.” “It is the rare bishop,” Sister X writes, “who has any real understanding of the lives women actually lead.”

The church can be flexible, except with women. Laurie Goodstein, the *Times*’s religion writer, reported this month on an Illinois woman who had a son with a Franciscan priest. The church agreed to child support but was stingy with money for college and for doctors, once the son got terminal cancer. The priest had never been disciplined and was a pastor in Wisconsin — until he hit the front page. Even then, “Father” Willenborg was suspended only because the woman said that he had pressed her to have an abortion and that he had also had a sexual relationship with a teenager. (Maybe the church shouldn’t be so obdurate on condoms.)

When then-Cardinal Ratzinger was “The Enforcer” in Rome, he investigated and disciplined two American nuns. One, Jeannine Gramick, then of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, founded a ministry to reconcile gays with the church, which regards homosexual desires as “disordered.” The other, Mary Agnes Mansour of the Sisters of Mercy, headed the Michigan Department of Social Services, which, among other things, paid for abortions for poor women.

Marcy Kaptur, a Democratic congresswoman from Toledo and one of Bishop Blair’s flock, got a resolution passed commending nuns for their humble service and sacrifice. “The Vatican’s in another country,” she said. “Maybe people do things differently there. Perhaps the Holy Spirit will intervene.”