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Gender, Monastic Life, and the Lay Community During the Pandemic

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Gender, Monastic Life, and the Lay Community During the Pandemic:

THIS TEACHING MODULE INCLUDES:

- A summary of main issues on the relationship between health, gender, and monastic communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Articles from the WMU Scholarworks Database discussing the main issues and case studies from the topic.
- Links to additional material related to Monastic Communities and the pandemic.
- A student activity that uses case studies based on the main issues detailed in the module.



A Tibetan Buddhist Nun giving other Nuns at the monastery initiation nectar at the Tharlam Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism located in Kathmandu, Nepal. This photo by *Wonderlane* is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Fact Page and Resources for Students:

Key Definitions:¹

Nuns: Nuns refer to women across a variety of religious traditions who live a life of asceticism and renunciation in community with other women on the same religious/spiritual path. The main focus of this module will be on nuns living in monastic communities.²

Monasticism: *Monos* is Greek and means “one, alone”. Monasticism describes those who live in seclusion, but typically in community with other members of their religious group who have chosen a religious and secluded lifestyle. Monastic communities can serve and be dependent on the greater community, but not all monastic groups are dependent on larger society.³

A distinct feature of monasticism among both Catholic and Buddhist nuns are their “discipline of life”. Monastics are required to follow certain lifestyles, daily schedules, and patterns of behaviors that are based on doctrine and center around the “why” or purpose of their monastic life.

Christianity: In Christianity, the deepest why is “for the greater glory of God” and for Catholic monasticism this includes subordinating the individual to the community life and rules in order for them to be fully devoted to God and the religious community. Monastic members take vows including vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to their superiors. Monasticism in Catholicism is a lifetime commitment and devotion. The key word here is devotion. Monasticism for women has evolved since the founding of Christianity and has shifted from being a secluded place for virgins and widows to organizations in which the monastic communities serve the lay

Issue 1: Communities, such as monasteries, that promote a separate communal life are not entirely cut off from the larger society. Their contacts with others outside of the community can bring the pandemic to the community. How do community members deal with illness in the community under ordinary circumstances? What **different** responses are required by COVID-19?

Issue 2: Discuss the interdependent relationship between monastic communities and the secular world amidst the pandemic. How have monastic communities supported the lay community during the pandemic?

Issue 3: How has the pandemic and social distancing impacted the daily schedules, patterns of behavior, and worship practices of monastic communities? Amid social distancing and lockdown orders, how have nuns handled rituals which require the participation of males (priests/monks) in order to be legitimate? Does the lack of physical attendance impact the legitimacy of religious worship and practices?

¹ Weckman, G. 2005. “Monasticism: An Overview.” In *L. Jones (Ed.), Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed., Vol. 9, p. 6121). Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA.

² King, U. 2005. “Nuns: An Overview.” In *L. Jones (Ed.), Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed., Vol. 10, pp. 6756-6759). Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA.

³ Weckman, G. 2005. “Monasticism: An Overview.” In *L. Jones (Ed.), Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed., Vol. 9, pp. 6121-6126). Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA.

community.⁴ However, it should be noted that only males can be priests and perform the sacraments.

Page and Resources for Students:

Key Definitions:⁵

Buddhism:

Monastic life entails “the Middle Way,” a concept formed by the Buddha in which monastic members live an ascetic lifestyle compared to the lay community and those who practice extreme asceticism. Monastic life in Buddhism requires non-attachment to things the lay community partakes in, including, marriage, sexual relations, and having a secular career. In Buddhism, monasticism can be a relatively brief period of one's life of a few months to several years. This varies a great deal from one group to another. The goal of the monastic life in Japanese Zen, for example, is primarily to train young monks in ritual practices, doctrine, and meditation so that when they return to the home temple they can perform rituals for the laity correctly and deliver sermons. In all Buddhist monastic settings a few choose to remain at the training temple to teach others and maintain the monastic community.⁶

Both Religions:

One thing that links both religions in monastic life is the importance of their daily routines and schedule. The schedule of work, sleep, meditation, and ritual is constant, relentless, and never changing. The purpose of the schedule helps the individual surrender their attachment to their ego or their self-importance. Additionally, both Buddhist and Catholic female renunciates and nuns often operate under the authority of a hierarchy of male renunciates.⁷

For the reasons stated above, COVID-19, which is spread through social interaction, threatens the foundation of monastic life: the daily round of ritual, communal work, and communal meals. Unlike a church or other place of worship oriented around lay participation once a week, the daily rituals of monastic life are truly "essential" since they help to define that institution.

⁴ Kaelber, L. 2005. “Monasticism: Christian Monasticism.” In *L. Jones (Ed.), Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed., Vol. 9, pp. 6131-6136). Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA.

⁵ Weckman, G. 2005. “Monasticism: An Overview.” In *L. Jones (Ed.), Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed., Vol. 9, p. 6121). Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA.

⁶ Nietupski, P. K. 2005. “Monasticism: Buddhist Monasticism.” In *L. Jones (Ed.), Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed., Vol. 9, pp. 6126-6131). Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA.

⁷ King, U. 2005. “Nuns: An Overview.” In *L. Jones (Ed.), Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed., Vol. 10, pp. 6756-6759). Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA.



An image of Catholic Nuns near Xuan Loc, Vietnam 1968. This photo by *Capt. Auerback MC*, provided by his son *Dr. Andy Auerbacki* is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Activities for Students/Classroom Implementation:

This teaching module can be presented in four lectures/classes:

First Class: Go over key terms and concepts. Ask and discuss the question, "what is monastic life like?" Discuss monastic life for Buddhism, focusing on the daily lives, practices, health, and rituals before the pandemic. Use the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd Edition) as your main source.

Second Class: Discuss monastic life for Catholicism, focusing on the daily lives, practices, and rituals before the pandemic.

Third Class: Present and discuss the key issues relating to Buddhist and Catholic monastic communities and the impact COVID-19 has had on their daily lives, practices, and rituals. Have students get in groups to discuss their homework.

Homework: See above prompt for student homework assignment.

Fourth Class: Instructor will put students into groups. Pair students with those who were assigned to a different religious tradition. Based on their homework assignments, students will discuss within their groups the main issues for monastic communities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. If time permits, a larger class discussion can take place. If class is online, group discussions may be switched to student led discussions involving the entire class led by 1-2 students. If the instructor chooses, a response paper can be assigned requiring

PROMPT FOR STUDENT HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT:

Present both case studies to students. Split class into an equal number of groups. Assign each group one of the case studies.

1. What happened?

Summarize one of the case studies in your own words. Discuss monastic life before and during the pandemic.

2. Covid-

19 Response. Identify how monastic communities, specifically nuns, have adapted and responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider issues such as ritual, daily routines, and community outreach. It will be helpful to use the "issues" section above as a foundation for thinking about the ways in which monastic groups have adapted to the pandemic.



students to critically engage with one of the issues or case studies presented. The response papers can be submitted to a dropbox provided by the instructor.

Homework: Response Paper

Case Studies:

The following case studies/articles can be found on Western Michigan University's Scholarworks database found at link: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion-pandemic/>

Sample Case Study: Buddhism- Sravasti Abbey

Who are they: The Sravasti Abbey is a Tibetan Buddhist monastery founded in 2003 in Newport, Washington. The monastery is home to 14-15 nuns, one monk, and a lay community which allows the nuns and monk to provide spiritual services for the lay people while the lay community provides food and other material goods for monastic members. The mission of this monastic community is to teach and practice the teachings of the Buddha, primarily wisdom and compassion. The monastic community's mission also centers around gender equality and social service. Their website provides their entire daily schedule as well as the social outreach that monastic members participate in.

What Happened: Due to COVID-19 and social distancing policies, the daily schedule of the Order, in addition to the services, teachings, and other spiritual services provided to the lay community were suspended. Examples include in-person meditation classes, overnight stays, retreats, and *Puja* or ritual offerings. Although impacted, donations and services provided by the lay community have continued amidst the pandemic (See Photos section of website for images of lay members wearing masks while bringing donations to the community). Separation and isolation have caused anxiety and distress for many during the pandemic, but leader and founder of the Sravasti Abbey, Abbess Venerable Thubten Chodron believes that the monastic community and the lay community need each other more now than ever. Consider the efforts of Sravasti Abbey to keep its members and the lay community safe. Are the monastic and lay communities still interconnected? How has the pandemic impacted the interconnectedness between the monastic community and the lay community?

Response: Due to the pandemic and the desire to keep their community safe, the Sravasti Abbey has decided to continue their spiritual services, events, and practices virtually. The shift in worship practices has impacted the members of the monastic order, in addition to the lay community. The Sravasti Abbey website (see links below) features the virtual practices and services offered by the community. Additionally, virtual podcasts and teachings are provided that

discuss how monastic members are responding to the change in worship practices, in addition to advice for the lay community on how to worship and remain connected during the pandemic.

Abbess Venerable Thubten Chodron in her virtual message references the Buddha by saying that more spiritual *merit* or spiritual blessings will occur if an individual practices the teachings of the Buddha during hardships as compared to under ordinary circumstances. Will "virtual" services and rituals, such as meditation, provide a legitimate or genuine experience for the lay community without their physical presence? Will the nuns performing meditation sessions or other rituals have a legitimate or genuine experience without the presence of the lay community?



Two Tibetan Buddhist Nuns and a Monk walking along a city street in Kathmandu, Nepal. This photo by *Wonderlane* is licensed under CC BY 2.0.



A group of Catholic Nuns waiting for a Bus in Rome, Italy. This photo by *Stephan Rosger* is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Sample Case Study: Catholicism- Nuns and Ministry

Who they are: The following articles illustrate the experiences of nuns during the COVID-19 pandemic. The monastic communities featured in the following articles are located in the Philippines and around the United States. Each article details the diverse impact COVID-19 has had on monastic communities, specifically around ministry and rituals. For instance, Catholic sacraments require a male priest to celebrate and perform. One of these sacraments are known as the Eucharist or Holy Communion. The Eucharist, or lack of, will be discussed throughout the following case study. Prior to COVID-19, a priest outside the monastic order would visit the convent to celebrate the Eucharist.

What Happened: Due to COVID-19 and social distancing, many monastic orders around the world were forced to close their doors to the public including visiting members of the religious community. This impacted the Mass along with the sacrament of Holy Communion. During the pandemic, priests around the world celebrated the Eucharist without a congregation due to different policies and restrictions (For more on Law and Policy, see Teaching Module: *Public Policy and Religion in the Pandemic: U.S. Constitution and the First Amendment*). In fact, many



Catholics, including nuns who were facing isolation, were only allowed to watch Mass virtually or on T.V. This impacted nuns all over the world, including the United States and the Philippines. The following case study will illustrate how different monastic orders responded to the lack of participation in the Eucharist.

Another ministry which is related to the sacrament of Holy Communion that has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic is the Altar bread industry, or more specifically, the nuns who make the wafer and bread loaves used for Communion. Many religious orders, such as the Carmelite Nuns in Alhambra, California, produce and distribute communion wafers as a way to maintain their monastery financially and to provide a necessary service to the Catholic diocese located in California. With COVID-19 and the decrease in participation from the sacrament of Holy Communion, the need for communion wafers declined.

Response: Many nuns and religious communities have responded to the lack of participation in the Eucharist by seeking God through other religious means. In other words, nuns have been spending more time on other activities and ministries due to the lack of receiving the Eucharist, which is an important part of the spiritual life of a nun. Nuns have been focused more on prayer and works of charity, although many nuns have had to be creative due to the restrictions put in place by many governments (See teaching module: *Public Policy and Religion in the Pandemic: U.S. Constitution and the First Amendment*). One form of prayer that many nuns in the Philippines have increasingly partaken in is Eucharistic Adoration. This is a form of prayer and worship in which Christ is believed to be present in the communion bread and those in attendance worship and pray. Prayer during Eucharistic Adoration is viewed as powerful due to the presence of God existing when the ritual takes place.

This type of prayer increased during COVID-19 when outreach and charitable programs were reduced. This was seen with the several religious orders in the Philippines, including the Sisters of Charity of St. Charles Borromeo and the Daughters of St. Anne. Both monastic orders increased Eucharistic Adoration to pray for the people and ministries that were cut back due to the restrictions set in place. These efforts were taken a step further by orders such as the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, among several others, who opened their doors as temporary housing for frontline workers who were facing stigma from their communities.

In South Bend, Indiana, the Nuns from Holy Cross and Notre Dame have responded to a lack of participation in the Mass, specifically the liturgy of the Eucharistic, in a different way. The Nuns from Holy Cross have begun holding community worship services via Zoom for fellow sisters around the world, in addition to the lay community. A traditional mass requires a priest and in-person worship. However, due to the lack of a priest and in-person worship, adjustments had to be made as a traditional Mass would not be able to be performed under such circumstances. These online worship services without the presence of a priest, do not replace the

Mass, but they serve as a way to bring the community together. These virtual worship services included many aspects of a traditional Mass, such as singing, reading from the Bible, and preaching based on what was read. However, the liturgy of the Eucharist was not attempted due to the lack of a priest.

Without in-person Mass and Catholics receiving the Eucharist, the nuns in charge of baking the loaves used for communion bread face a serious issue. Their livelihood and income for their convent is at stake when there is no demand for communion wafers. The Carmelite Nuns of St. Teresa received aid from the lay community who put together a donation website in which several donors have donated to keep the convent up and running while they lack their usual income from communion bread.

However, not every religious community has been lucky enough to benefit from such a generous lay community. The Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde, Missouri, officially ended their production of communion bread, which is a ministry the sisters have performed since 1910. Additionally, the nuns had to lay off 13 lay people who helped in the production of communion bread. Despite the clear economic repercussions, the sisters have been able to aid other convents in their production of communion bread to recover some of the lost income.

For more on ritual, see teaching module: *Ritual During COVID-19*.

See website/link discussing the above case studies:

- <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/coronavirus/blog/vibrant-zoom-liturgy-during-covid-lockdown-leaves-lessons-church>
- <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/coronavirus/column/how-sisters-philippines-found-new-ways-doing-ministry-during-covid-19>
- <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/coronavirus/sisters-adapt-covid-19-pandemic-amid-nationwide-lockdown-india>
- <https://aleteia.org/2021/05/12/altar-bread-industry-another-victim-of-covid-19/>



Resources for Instructors:

The following resources/articles can be found on Western Michigan University's Scholarworks database found at link:

<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion-pandemic/>

The following resources and links are related to the topic of health, gender, and religion in the COVID-19 pandemic, but are separate from the issues presented above. The following articles may be used by instructors who wish to include additional case studies/examples into their teaching:

Religion, Gender, and Health:

- https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/414015/2004-side-by-side_faith-gender-covid19-statement.pdf
This statement from various religious organizations around the world calls for gender equality and sexual violence prevention amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.
- <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.06.15.20125450v1>
This study analyzes the relationship between gender, religion, and COVID-19 among healthcare workers.
- <https://www.deseret.com/indepth/2020/6/13/21273906/coronavirus-faith-religion-health-science-link-prayer-study-longevity-covid-19-substance-use>
This article discusses the relationship between religion and health, with an in-depth discussion on the Coronavirus.

Further Reading:

For Buddhist Monastic Orders, see:

- <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/07/05/886043783/the-kung-fu-nuns-of-kathmandu>
 - Monastic order of Kung-Fu Nuns located in the Himalayans
- <https://tnp.org/category/buddhist-nuns-life/>
 - A list of Tibetan Nunneries in Northern India and their response to the pandemic.
- <https://daihonzan-eiheiji.com/en/practice.html>
 - Monastic order of monks in Japan

- <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320995598> Bowing to the Dharma Japanese Buddhist Women Leaders Healers
 - Research article by Dr. Arai of LSU on Japanese Soto Zen Healing practices before the pandemic. Can be used to give students an idea of monastic life pre-COVID-19.
- <https://www.sojiji.jp/english/>
 - Another monastic order of monks in Japan

For Catholic Monastic orders, see:

- <https://www.thefencepost.com/news/rocky-mountain-nuns-rise-above-covid-19/>
 - The Sisters of St. Walburga in Colorado and how they have adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- <https://cruxnow.com/covid-19/2020/04/around-the-world-nuns-on-front-lines-of-coronavirus-pandemic/>
 - Article detailing the efforts of Catholic Nuns around the world in aiding those suffering from COVID-19.
- <https://www.startribune.com/cloistered-minnesota-nuns-share-thoughts-on-handling-social-isolation/569966082/?refresh=true>
 - Advice and insight from The Poor Clare Sisters on living in isolation amidst the pandemic.
- <https://www.google.com/amp/s/amp.cnn.com/cnn/2020/07/21/us/felician-sisters-covid-deaths-trnd/index.html>
 - Article discussing the COVID-19 related deaths of 13 nuns from a Detroit convent.



A Nun kneels before a priest before receiving the Eucharist, pre-pandemic. This photo by *Mateus Campos Felipe* is licensed under the *Unsplash* License.

Note: This module focuses on Catholic and Buddhist monasticism. Buddhist monasticism is diverse and consists of different schools or branches. Examples include Theravada Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Vajrayana Buddhism. Since all Buddhist communities have been impacted by COVID-19, this teaching module discusses the response of more than one school of Buddhism. This should be kept in mind as instructors and students learn about Buddhist monastic communities and COVID-19.