

Changing God, Changing Bodies: The Impact of New Prayer Practices on Elderly Catholic Nuns' Embodied Experience

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Abstract I focus this study on changes in the prayer lives of U.S. Catholic nuns following Vatican II; widespread institutional change in the Catholic Church that, among other things, transformed U.S. Catholic nuns' lives. In the article, I combine a phenomenological model of embodiment with narrative analysis to show how institutional linguistic prayer practices transform elderly nuns' embodied experience as they age. Drawing on naturalistic video- and audio-recordings gathered over three years in a Catholic convent in the Midwestern United States, I show how changing communicative and embodied prayer practices following Vatican II have impacted U.S. Catholic nuns' (1) understanding of the divine, (2) relationship with the divine, (3) embodied experience of the divine, and (4) how these changes have impacted their experiences of and interpretation of physical states including illness and pain. Overall, I offer insight into how changes in the nuns' linguistic practice of prayer impact the nuns' documented success in managing loneliness and chronic pain at the end of life. [chronic pain, embodiment, religion, prayer]

Sister Theresa is an 83-year-old nun with a soft round face and a tremendous laugh.¹ When she was 17 years old (in 1944), Sr. Theresa left a large German Catholic family in the rural U.S. Midwest to join the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart convent. After becoming a nun, Sr. Theresa spent decades teaching and working as a missionary. In the 1960s, she was one of the first five sisters from the convent to travel to Oceania to work as a missionary. While in Oceania, she developed an amoebiasis, an infection of amoebas that spread throughout her body. The condition went untreated for years, and by the time she returned to the United States in the early 1970s, her infection was incurable. For more than 30 years, Sr. Theresa had trouble walking as a result of the amoebiasis. She retired early and spent the rest of her life at the convent. Now, with significant effort, she can walk only a few steps, and uses a motorized wheelchair to move through the convent. She has had a number of surgeries to remove infected areas of her body, and in 2009, one of her feet had to be amputated because of the amoebiasis.

Sitting in a plush easy chair in her small room in the assisted living wing of the convent, Sr. Theresa told me that for years she interpreted the pain as God's will and she used to ask God why she had had to endure such physical and mental suffering. She used to curse the amoebas infecting her body, and pray to God to heal her. What occurred next in Sr. Theresa's narrative, I argue, was afforded by changes in convent prayer life following Vatican II and the ideological shift that accompanied these changes. She said that a few

decades ago, while she was praying, she realized that “if everything in the world is divine,” as she’s been taught in the convent after Vatican II, “if every single creature is not only made by God but *is* God” then, she said, it seemed only logical that the amoebas infecting her body must be God as well. On realizing this, she said, “I called a meeting of all the amoebas in my body and apologized.” She spoke to them, saying “the same creator made us all.” She said that now she loves “her” amoebas as she loves God, and every morning she stands in front of the mirror and addresses all of God within herself. Each morning, she includes the amoebas in this daily prayer. She says that although she still experiences pain, this pain is no longer as significant as it once was. She no longer interprets her pain as divine punishment. Sr. Theresa says that when she let go of the idea of divine punishment and began to interpret the pain as a natural part of God’s world, the force of her pain decreased.

I argue that this radical shift in Sr. Theresa’s thinking and in the trajectory of her chronic pain experience was a result of the institutional changes implemented in the convent over the 20th century. Like the majority of her peers, prior to the institutional change in the Catholic Church (hereafter, “Church”) referred to as Vatican II, Sr. Theresa saw God as an authority responsible for her suffering, to whom she addressed her problems and concerns about her illness. After Vatican II, she came to see God as so thoroughly integrated into every creature on earth that she came to address the amoebas infecting her body as part of a loving God. Through this process, Sr. Theresa’s concept of her body was transformed such that she began to experience the divine within the bounds of her physical body, even in the amoebic cells infecting her. Her epistemology of pain changed as she stopped associating her pain with divine punishment and began interpreting her pain as an index of the oneness of the God with the world. Sr. Theresa’s narrative exemplifies contemporary arguments that the experience of pain is deeply tied to the cultural and individual interpretations of illness and pain. Or, as David Morris articulates: “pain is experienced only as it is interpreted” (1991:29).

Studies conducted in the past two decades have shown that Catholic nuns at the end of life experience less anxiety, depression, and pain than their lay counterparts (Butler and Snowdon 1996; Snowdon 2001). Quality of life questionnaires administered in the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart Convent confirm that,² like the nuns in Snowdon’s 2001 epidemiological study, these elderly nuns report experiencing greater physical and mental well-being than their lay peers. Although research has shown that prayer, faith, and local ideologies contribute to the nuns’ overall well-being and decreased chronic pain (Koenig 1999, 2003), little research so far has shown how communicative practice, such as prayer, impacts psychological and somatic states. In this article, I aim to shed light on the process through which the nuns’ linguistic and embodied practices impact their experiences of pain, specifically outlining the connection between prayer and the nuns’ successful management of chronic pain.

The Franciscan Sisters of the Heart convent is home to more than 200 nuns.³ Approximately 100 of them, having worked as teachers and missionaries outside the convent walls, have

returned to the convent to retire. They now reside in the convent full time, where they have access to nursing care. I draw on data I collected in the convent over ten months beginning in 2008.⁴ During the summers of 2008, 2009, and 2010, I lived in the convent with the nuns for a period of one to two months each summer. For a period of five months in the winter and spring of 2011, I lived in an apartment near the convent with my infant son and spent my days in the convent with the sisters.⁵ The ethnographic research focused on elderly nuns in their late seventies, eighties, and nineties who lived through the changes of Vatican II. The corpus of data includes over 100 hours of recordings of naturally occurring events in the convent such as meals, social events, and care interactions. In addition, I conducted 30 person-centered life-history interviews (Levy and Hollan 1998) and 18 interviews focusing on prayer. The narratives I present in this article were chosen because they reflect the themes and experiences present in the majority of the data sample and are representative of the corpus.

Most of the sisters joined the convent, an active rather than contemplative order, as 16–19-year-old girls. They worked all their lives as teachers or missionaries, and have now retired to the *motherhouse*, the central convent, as elderly women who, for various physical, and usually age-related reasons, can no longer work outside the motherhouse. Now, living at “home” in the motherhouse, these sisters spend the majority of each day in prayer. They also contribute as they can around the convent by serving others individually, providing pastoral care, for example, or by helping with the general tasks of running a convent.

In this article, I explore the radical institutional and personal transformations that afforded the profound linguistic and embodied shift as nuns like Sr. Theresa began to address God as a divine being within their bodies instead of as an authority outside of or above them. I explore how these transformations altered the nuns’ cultural and moral interpretation of pain as they began to experience chronic illness as unity with the divine instead of pain and suffering delivered by God. I combine linguistic analysis of nuns’ narratives to show how their prayer practices were central in changing the nuns’ somatic modes of attention, the processes through which they attend to and experience their bodies and the embodied presence of others (Csordas 1993). I draw on Thomas Csordas’s work on embodiment and somatic modes of attention (1993, 1994, 2002), Tanya Luhrmann’s work on prayer as learning (2005; Luhrmann et. al. 2010), and Elinor Ochs’s work on language and experience (2010, in press) to show how linguistic practices can transform the embodied experience of the divine and of illness and pain.

Vatican II

For centuries, in convents across the world, Catholic nuns were taught to pray on schedule, rising before dawn to meet God in language that they had memorized as young novices. Nuns were trained to silently recite memorized prayers even as they completed each of the tasks of the day. As the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart from the U.S Midwest descended the convent steps in their wool habits to begin work each day in the sweltering summer humidity and in the frigid January cold, they were to recite “meek and humble Jesus, who didst descend to

the lowliness of the tomb, grant that I may always descend below all creatures by practicing true humility.”⁶

These prayers, memorized from the community’s prayer manual, inscribed every act, from washing and eating to moving through the convent. When they bathed, they spoke the words “Crucified Jesus, cleanse me from sin through Thy Precious Blood flowing from Thy sacred wounds.” When they dressed, they spoke a silent prayer for each piece of the habit as they put it on. Tying on the girdle they prayed, “Jesus, unite me as closely to Thee that I may remain Thy faithful bride forever.” Just as the details of their days, from what they ate to where they worked, were shaped by Church authorities, the nuns’ private conversations with the divine were designed to be scripted, and their relationship with the divine thus sculpted by the Church.

In the 1960s, all of this changed. In 1959, Pope John XXIII convened the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, or Vatican II, a meeting of Church authorities, for the purpose of “renewing” the Church in a quest to promote “unity and grace” across Catholic communities worldwide (O’Malley 2008). Vatican II took place in Rome in four sessions from 1962 to 1965. For many Catholics worldwide, including the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart, Vatican II seemed to break open the Church, letting in light, flexibility, and the freedom to work and pray as they chose. At the conclusion of Vatican II, the Church had undergone the most radical change in its history since the Protestant Reformation (Wilde 2007:2).

Joan Chittister O.S.B., a Benedictine nun and author, writes that nuns experienced far greater institutional change than anyone else in the Church (2003). Chittister describes the lives of nuns in the years following Vatican II as a “maelstrom of massive social change” and “the vortex of an institutional storm” at “ground zero of organizational meltdown” (2003:23). Although the majority of the nuns in the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart convent describe the changes following Vatican II in a positive light, Chittister’s description provides insight into the scale of the change as it affected the lives of nuns as well as the speed of its implementation. One sister in my study who left the community for ten years and rejoined following Vatican II told me that when she reentered, she was shocked by the scope and scale of the changes in the convent during that decade. She called the scale of the changes in the convent “phenomenal.”

Only one document that issued from Rome dealt directly with the changes to be effected in monasteries and convents. Given the significance of the changes that were made in religious life, the document was surprisingly brief. In Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*), the Vatican Council declared that in convents:

The manner of living, praying and working should be suitably adapted everywhere . . . as required by the nature of each institute, to the necessities of the apostolate, the demands of culture, and social and economic circumstances. Therefore let constitutions, directories, custom books, books of prayers and ceremonies and such

like be suitably re-edited and, obsolete laws being suppressed, be adapted to the decrees of this sacred synod. [Vatican Council 1965]

The decree emphasized a return to the inspiration or *charism* of each community giving each convent the power to decide which changes would be appropriate to make. So although Vatican II commanded extensive changes, it did not dictate these changes in detail, and sisters in each religious community were allowed to modify their convents' practices as they saw fit according to the history and values of each community. This resulted in a great diversity of practices in modern convent life. Some convents saw no change while many, like the convent explored in this article, saw significant transformations in virtually all aspects of the sisters' lives. The massive changes following Vatican II were only slowly instituted, and many of the sisters have said that it wasn't until many years after Vatican II that they realized the scale of the changes that were occurring. In the 30 life-history interviews I conducted in the convent, Vatican II is rarely described. In narratives, it is constructed as a hinge—both binding, and acting as a divider between, the time periods that straddle it. These narratives illustrate Mary Jo Weaver's claim that, "American Catholicism in the twentieth century divides neatly down the middle" (1999:154).

In the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart convent, Vatican II resulted in changes in authority structure and in the concept of obedience, a progressive elimination of the habit, a total restructuring of the nuns' daily schedules, and a significant shift in almost all of the linguistic practices in which the sisters participated. Liturgy, which had been spoken in Latin, was now spoken in English. Prayer books were edited to accommodate a new intimacy with the divine and to be more "inclusive" of all people. Daily prayers transitioned from highly structured and scripted forms to free, individually designed forms of "communion" with God. Before Vatican II, the sisters were required to follow a uniform schedule, praying from set texts at set times throughout the day. Since Vatican II, sisters have been encouraged to set their own daily schedules, and they pray however and whenever they choose. For the nuns who still work, this means that they have more flexibility in scheduling their prayer life around their work responsibilities.

The changes following Vatican II also included an elimination of rules restricting the sisters' interactions with each other. Rules forbidding social interaction and conversational exchanges were abandoned, allowing the sisters to cultivate closer relationships with each other in the convent. Finally, the convent moved from a hierarchical structure of authority to a more democratic model of shared responsibility (Ruether 1991).

In addition to these changes, the nuns were affected by ideological changes embraced by the Church after Vatican II, including the signification of pain and suffering. The Franciscan Sisters of the Heart participating in my study described a dual notion of pain similar to that described by Robert Orsi in his writing about Catholics' sense of suffering in the early 20th century. Pain was understood to have the character of a sacrament, helping one achieve closeness with the divine, and simultaneously was interpreted as an act of punishment sent down from the divine (Orsi 2005:22–23). These ideologies have changed in the decades

following Vatican II. The nuns now speak of a time when they “mistakenly” understood pain to be punishment sent down from God in response to human sin. They say that they now “understand” that God does not cause pain and suffering; rather, He is a companion helping them endure it. Although they used to accept pain as “God’s will” for them, and pray for him to change His “will” and take away the pain, they pray now for acceptance and communion with the divine in the face of pain.

This change comprises a major shift in the concept of divine agency in human suffering, away from concepts of the divine as the arbiter of pain to a that of a companion who helps the nuns endure pain. Many of the nuns said that they felt they were “no longer alone” in their pain, and, like Sr. Theresa in the introduction, a number of them reported that this feeling of companionship helped lessen the impact of their chronic pain. I will explore the specific changes in ideologies of pain in more detail later in this article.

Prayer

In the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart Convent, prayer is the central activity in the nuns’ everyday lives. The nuns pray to fulfill a number of practical and ideological goals. They pray to connect to the divine; to strengthen communal bonds; to better themselves, or “purify” the body and soul (Lester 2005; Norris 2009); and to ask the divine to intercede in worldly affairs. As a daily ritual practice, prayer organizes their days; it is a means for spiritual growth and it has a significant role in representing and shaping the moral and ideological world of the convent. In this article, I focus on prayer as a ritual practice in which the nuns connect with the divine through linguistic and embodied modalities.

At its most basic, prayer is a dyadic or multiparty interaction between the divine and one or more individuals (Ochs and Capps 2001). Through prayer, individuals try to “creat[e] an encounter” with the divine, who is a subjectively experienced yet invisible presence (Hanks 1996:171; James 1982; Keane 1997). Prayer is therefore designed not only to communicate with a divine interlocutor, but also to facilitate an experience of the divine (Capps and Ochs 2002; Ferguson 1985; Hanks 1996).

Webb Keane argues that:

language is one medium by which the presence and activity of beings that are otherwise unavailable to the senses can be made presupposable, even compelling, in ways that are publically yet also subjectively available to people as members of social groups. [1997:49]

It is through the remarkable power of language that individuals render an invisible interlocutor subjectively real. Prayer, therefore, makes the divine both publically and subjectively accessible.

Communication with the divine is not exclusively verbal, but also involves the body on a number of levels. Here, I outline three ways in which prayer involves the body: first, as a semiotic resource to communicate with the divine and other congregants; second, as an object of prayer; and finally, as embodied intersubjective interaction with the divine.

One: The Body as a Semiotic Resource

Through embodied communication, the body is used as a semiotic resource to communicate with the divine (see Capps and Ochs 2002). When entering a Catholic church, for example, congregants kneel, bow to the altar, and inscribe the sign of the cross over their body, bringing the fingers of one hand from the forehead to the breast, and then from the left shoulder to the right to index the cross, Jesus's suffering, and to communicate humility and reverence toward the divine. These embodied practices and other similar practices across religious contexts are linked to particular ideologies such as order, discipline, or moral selfhood (Simon 2009; Starrett 1995; see also Yafeh 2007). Although this is an important aspect of prayer, I do not analyze this aspect of embodiment directly here.

Two: The Body as an Object of Prayer

The body is implicated as an object in many types of healing and intercessory prayers. For example, when individuals pray for healing through a laying-on of hands (Csordas 1994, 2008), incanting God's name (Dein 2002), or petitioning for intercession, the divine is called to act on a patient's body, thus making the body the material object of prayer. Sr. Theresa exemplifies this relationship between prayer and the body in her prayers to the divine to heal her from the amoebas infecting her body.

Three: Embodied Prayer

Finally, the body is involved directly in prayer as individuals experience a divine presence. Csordas describes how individuals come to experience the divine through various sensory modalities (1994), and Luhrmann explores how individuals learn to attend to their experience and understand it as evidence of the divine (2005; Luhrmann et al. 2010). Many of the nuns describe prayer as an experience of communion with God in which the divine is experienced through somatic modalities. Some of the nuns describe the experience of holding Jesus's hand, of engaging in a divine embrace in which they feel His arms around them, or of experiencing the divine as a calming or loving presence in the room with them.

All three of these modalities are central to the nuns' prayer practices. As the nuns pray, they attend to the body as a semiotic resource used to communicate to the divine, as an object to be acted on by the divine, and as a resource with which they experience the divine. This process can be understood using Csordas's concept of somatic modes of attention, in which individuals attend to and objectify the body and attend to phenomena with the body including the "embodied presence of others" (1993:139).

Luhrmann argues that this process of recognizing the embodied presence of the divine requires repeated practice (2005). Luhrmann and colleagues show that through the repetitive practice of prayer, people “acquire the cognitive and linguistic patterns that helped them to identify God’s presence.” Through this learning process, they argue that individuals “come to see differently, to think differently, and above all to feel differently” (Luhrmann et al. 2010:67, 68). In this article, I argue that this prayer practice can impact not only how individuals learn to think and feel, as Luhrmann outlines, but also how they embody the experience of illness and pain. Crucial to this relationship between prayer and the body is a phenomenological understanding of the body in which the body is analyzed within the context of lived experience. So framed, chronic pain and illness are understood not to be an “external attack on our biochemical organism, but rather a subjectively profound . . . variation in our embodiment” (Turner 1997:17). Work in psychological and medical anthropology over the past two decades has shown that bodily experiences such as pain are social, and are influenced by “meanings, relationships, and institutions” (Good et al. 1992:7). Central to this argument is the conception of pain as both culturally and experientially shaped.

Although this connection between the experience of pain and sociocultural factors shaping its interpretation have been well established, recent work has only begun to untangle the process through which this occurs. Rebecca Seligman, for example, argues that changing patterns of attention are central to Brazilian Candomblé healing. In her work, Seligman describes an embodied process in which individuals engaging in Candomblé trance healing practices transform their patterns of attention and behavior using embodied cultural and spiritual practices to “deconstruct” the self and to “repair” the self in ways that ameliorate distress and physical suffering (2010:314). She argues that psychophysiological and embodied mechanisms of Candomblé healing are central to the participants’ successful alleviation of physical distress and pain.

Cognitive psychologist, Lawrence Barsalou, argues that the subjective states associated with religious experiences are achieved through embodied ritual. He suggests that performing embodied rituals such as taking communion “help drive people’s cognitive systems into appropriate religious states” and that these embodiments “help entrench religious ideas in memory” (Barsalou et al. 2005:49). Barsalou and his colleagues argue that experience is shaped by repetition of embodied acts and that specific acts influence an individual’s subjective experience. For example, he argues that the embodied acts of bowing or stilling the body in meditation aid in creating the subjective experiences of humility or mental stillness. As Talal Asad argues, “experience is a function of teachable bodies” (1997:50). These studies support my claim that the embodied metaphors that Catholic nuns cultivate during prayer impact their subjective experience of the world. In a learning process similar to that described by Seligman, embodied religious ritual enables the alleviation of chronic pain.

I argue that this process, through which individuals direct somatic modes of attention to the embodied presence of a divine interlocutor, is a fundamentally linguistic process. As

Ochs argues, linguistic enactments are experienced as they are produced and perceived (2010:5). I argue that as the nuns pray, they are experiencing the utterances that they are producing and hearing. This practice, repeated for them many times each day, impacts the ways in which they experience the world, their bodies, and their experience in the world. As Ochs writes, “perfectly ordinary enactments of language in everyday life” become crucial “experiential moments” in individuals’ lives (2010:7). In this way, it is the language the nuns use to communicate with the divine that shapes their embodied experience as they pray. I argue that when the language of the nuns’ prayers changed following Vatican II, their somatic modes of attention were redirected such that the nuns’ relationship with the divine, their embodied experience of the divine, and their experience of their own bodies, including illness and pain, were profoundly transformed.

In the Convent

The convent authorities schedule a number of activities throughout the week in which the retired sisters can participate. These activities include spiritual development programs, lectures, prayer meetings, exercise classes, and social activities. In the summer of 2009, the sisters in the convent adopted a new prayer book, or breviary. For the previous two decades, they had been using a book published by Carmelite nuns, but the then-recent release of a Franciscan breviary motivated a conventwide change. As part of this institutional change, a local priest was invited to give a lecture about the new prayer book to the elderly sisters living in the assisted living and infirmary wings of the convent.

At 3:00 p.m. on a humid summer afternoon, nearly 30 of the elderly sisters gathered on the second floor of the convent in a recreation room where they were seated in wooden chairs facing a podium. Father Frank, a priest in his fifties, stood at the podium in traditional brown Franciscan robes and lectured in a jovial tone. The podium faced a closed-circuit video camera on the back wall. The lecture was a topic of conversation at meals for the following few days. Father Frank’s lecture included an outline of the changes in prayer following Vatican II. During Vatican II, he said, the Vatican Council entirely reworked the rules of prayer for vowed members of the Church. The nuns had lived through all of this and knew well the changes he described.

In his lecture, Father Frank described the historical tradition of referring to God as a “He.” He notes that many modern prayer books, written in the past few decades, do not follow this pattern. In the following example, he rhetorically drills the sisters about the subject of God’s gender:

FF—Father Frank

SS—Sisters in Unison

- 1 FF Is God a He?
- 2 SS No
- 3 FF Is God a She?
- 4 SS No

- 5 FF No! God's beyond that.
 6 He and she are this big. ((makes one small circle in the air))
 7 Here's a he, here's a she, ((makes two small circles in the air))
 8 God is like this! ((motions with his arms in a huge circle in all directions))
 9 All right? God is He and She and They and It and everything
 10 And all beauty and all goodness and beyond and beyond and beyond.

Here, Father Frank argues that by referring to God with a gendered pronoun (He), as was common before Vatican II, the divine is being contained or imagined as limited in some way. Only by referring to God without these gendered pronouns, as has become more common since Vatican II, can one recognize the size and scope of the divine (ll. 8–10). This new vision of God as “all beauty and all goodness and beyond” is strikingly different than the vision of God portrayed by the Church in the centuries before Vatican II.

The prayer texts used in the convent before Vatican II indeed refer to the divine as a “He,” as Father Frank points out. This male God was portrayed as an authority figure to be obeyed. In the pre-Vatican II days, the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart used a didactic prayer text by Adolphe Tanqueray. Tanqueray's book, *The Spiritual Life*, published in English in 1930, gave instructions on how to pray. The Franciscan Sisters of the Heart convent, like many other convents in the United States and Europe, used this text through the first half of the 20th century. In Tanqueray's prayer instructions, God was portrayed as a “father,” a “master,” or “benefactor.” The book emphasizes “humility” and “dependence,” and encouraged readers to “elevat[e] [their] soul to God” (Tanqueray 1930).

The nuns' daily prayers before Vatican II were consistent with Tanqueray's instructions on how to pray. For example, one of the daily prayers from the community prayer manual included the prayer:

Holy Father Saint Francis, keep me faithful to thy holy rule, obtain for me the spirit of sorrow in prayer, patience in trials, and purity in body and soul. . . . And let me copy from thee the spirit of obedience, humility and denial of self.

These prayer directions characterized the divine as a male authority figure and the text created an embodied map of the location of God in space in relation to humans. The divine was outside of the human body, and positioned above it. The nuns were encouraged to “bow before God” and the divine was described as “stoop[ing] down to us” (Tanqueray 1930:243–252). I argue that this repeated linguistic practice shaped the nuns' somatic modes of attention. As Csordas (1993) outlines, this process includes attention to their bodies as objects in space, here below the divine, and as embodied persons in intersubjective relationship with the divine. As the nuns repeated Tanqueray's words each day, they voiced and experienced Tanqueray's call to be humble before God, to bow to Him, and to depend on Him as a father, master, and benefactor. Sr. Rita's narratives below, exemplify how these pre-Vatican II prayers were deeply incorporated into the nuns' embodied understanding of the divine.

Sr. Rita: Before Vatican II

Sr. Rita, who joined the convent as a young woman in 1947, taught high school and worked as a hospital chaplain for years before retiring to the convent. In the narrative below, she describes her experience of an authoritative God before Vatican II, and she foreshadows the changes that occurred after Vatican II. This first narrative is contrasted with a second narrative that occurred later in the interview. (See Appendix for transcription key.)

Sr. Rita:

1 So I went to the college then,
 2 I was (.) put into (.) uh classes for theology,
 3 of which Church history was part.
 4 I began um: seeing that the Church was rather rigid for me
 5 It was pretty much just as our home environment was one of authority,
 6 It was still in the Church
 7 They had not come to Vatican II yet.
 8 Rather very legalistic,
 9 and I would sense that as I did years later in a paper that I wrote
 10 that in my early days God was a judge
 11 and He'd be up in some place
 12 keeping track of what I was doing and when I was good and when I was bad,
 13 and it's h- int(h)er(h)esting because even when I entered here in '47,
 14 there was a picture in the dining room of an eye,
 15 which is a symbol of the eye of God
 16 and that you know
 17 was that same image coming to me that indeed God is watching us,
 18 you know,
 19 and I think the Church had not yet come out of that shell
 20 when I enter- we lived a rather struct-
 21 a very structured life.

In this first narrative, Sr. Rita describes God as a judge (l. 10). She says that she pictured him “up” some place keeping track of her behavior (ll. 11 and 12). In this description, Sr. Rita positions God as the surveyor and herself as the object of surveillance. She goes on to describe a picture of the eye of God that was painted on the wall in the dining room, watching her (ll. 14–17). This image still exists in the convent in a stained glass window in the chapel (see Figure 1, online supporting information).

This image of God is one of a panopticon, an authoritative, omnipresent, all-powerful judge in relation to which Sr. Rita constructs her past self as an object of surveillance. She describes a spatial distance between herself and the divine. This image of God is consistent with the characterization of God in Tanqueray's prayer books, in which God is a “father” and “master,” to whom individuals must bow down (1930). Sr. Rita had read and repeated scripted prayers like Tanqueray's for the years between her entrance into the convent in 1947 until the transformation of prayer practices two decades later. Her embodied experience of being surveilled by an authoritarian God above her corresponds to this repeated linguistic practice, structured by the Church, that has shaped her embodied experience of the divine.

Sr. Rita: After Vatican II

Now that Vatican II is decades in the past, the sisters no longer read Tanquerey's books on prayer. Most of the sisters spend part of each day or week engaged in spiritual reading. They are free to choose books from the convent library, which has a number of shelves of books by contemporary Catholic authors. The most represented authors on the shelves include Joan Chittister, Thomas Merton, Henry Nouwen, and Joyce Rupp. I informally surveyed ten of the nuns, asking which prayer books they read now. One of the most cited books was Joyce Rupp's book *Prayer* (2007). In Rupp's instructions for prayer, there is a marked difference in how the divine is characterized and in the relationship she outlines for people to have with the divine. She never mentions God as a "father." Instead, Rupp consistently refers to the divine as, simply, "God." She encourages "mutuality," urging readers to "be with God" and to be in a "committed union with God." Rupp writes that God is someone who "dwells within and among us," who "breathes with us." This description of God as "with" the reader, "dwelling within and among" her, and "breathing" with her creates a spatial proximity, even intermixing, between the individual and the divine. The close spatial proximity here is in direct contrast to the spatial distance described in Tanquerey's work, and in Sr. Rita's image of God's eye looking down at her from above.

There is a distinct similarity between the description of God in Rupp's text and nuns' descriptions of the divine post Vatican II, as is manifested in Sr. Rita's narrative below:

AC—Anna Corwin

SR—Sister Rita

- 22 AC I would love to hear,
 23 if you don't mind, (a little more about)
 24 So if God is no longer this authority figure how do you see God now?
 25 SR I'm glad you asked.
 26 I see God for me (.) as my mother.
 27 He is my belov'd (1.0)
 28 and I see Go:d (.) as (.) no longer the judge (.)
 29 no longer the eye (.)
 30 but He lives within me (.)
 31 and dwells within me (.)
 32 and walks with me (.) when I go out.
 33 there is a loving relationship. (.)
 34 one of tenderness.
 35 one of unity
 36 and one that's accepting
 37 God for me is a God of love-
 38 unconditional love.
 39 He takes me as I am.

In this second narrative, Sr. Rita describes how she relates to God now. She describes God as her "mother" (l. 26), and, although this is clearly a female category, she continues to use male pronouns, saying in the next line that "He" is her "belov'd" (l. 27). This relationship is

one of “love,” “unity,” and “tenderness” (ll. 33–35). This description directly contrasts with the relationship described in the first narrative. Here, instead of constructing herself as the object of judgment and surveillance, Sr. Rita is the implied daughter to God as a mother. She is the beloved partner to He who is her “belov’d.”

Sr. Rita’s narratives show that she experienced a dramatic shift in her relationship with God after Vatican II. This shift is evidenced not only through the different descriptions of God, outlined above, but also through Sr. Rita’s linguistic performances of the two narratives. In these narratives, Sr. Rita not only represents two distinct relationships with the divine, she also brings these contrastive relationships to life, performing them using distinct linguistic structure, cadence, genre, and spatial deixis. These are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Genre of Sister Rita’s Narratives, before and after Vatican II

	Pre Vat. II	Post Vat. II
Genre	Conversational	Biblical Poetic Form
Meter	Unmarked conversational prosody	Rhythmic, Deliberate, Slowed Tempo
Lexicon	Standard English	Archaic English
Rhetorical Devices	Simile (“Just as it was at home, it was still in the Church”)	Grammatical and Climactic Parallelism
Heteroglossia	Quotes past self as author of paper	Re-voices Biblical Passages

Sr. Rita’s second narrative is performed with a number of rhetorical devices that make it more similar to poetic performance than ordinary conversational interaction. The first of these is parallelism that occurs in lines 30, 31, and 32 (“[1] He lives within me [2] and dwells within me, [3] and walks with me when I go out.”) and again in lines 34, 35, and 36 (“[there is a loving relationship] [1] one of tenderness, [2] one of unity, [3] and one that’s accepting.”). Parallelism occurs in poetry throughout the world and adds dramatic intensity to the speech or text (Jakobson 1987). As J. M. Atkinson notes, three-part lists, like the two in Sr. Rita’s narrative, are common in public oratory like political speeches and are used as devices that strengthen the performance of a speaker’s message (Atkinson 1984).

Psalms, which are biblical poems and hymns expressing thanksgiving and lament (Ralph 2003), use similar poetic devices. Parallelism in psalms can be seen to invoke the poetry of human breath, and mimic the order of divine creation (Vos 2005). Sr. Rita’s use of parallel three-part lists makes her second narrative distinct from the first, making each line in this second narrative sound like a verse from a poem in the genre of a biblical psalm. This genre is also evident in the lexicon of the second narrative. Sr. Rita says that God “dwells within me” and “walks with me when I go out.” These markers of poetic, biblical genre stand in direct contrast to the everyday conversational language of the first narrative. Whereas the language of this second narrative is succinct and poetic, the first narrative is more conversational.

Sr. Rita also performs this poetic genre through a distinct rhythm or cadence. The delivery of the second narrative is much slower and more rhythmic. She takes a micro pause at the end of each utterance to add poetic weight and she systematically stresses certain words

throughout the narrative. For example, she stresses the verbs in parallel lines 30, 31, and 32 “He lives within me (.) and dwells within me (.) and walks with me (.)” as well as the ultimate word in the utterance “when I go out.” creating a poetic cadence not present in the first in the narrative. Through these performative features, Sr. Rita not only describes how God changed for her after Vatican II but also she embodies this change. She performs the relationship of unity and love that she experiences with poetic grace, channeling the affect she describes. As she speaks, she exudes love, peace, and joy. Through the cadence, rhythm, and affect of her performance, Sr. Rita embodies her loving and unified relationship with the divine. As her audience, I was moved by Sr. Rita’s narrative.

Finally, Sr. Rita situates herself and the divine in space differently in each of the narratives, a spatial difference also present in the prayer books written before and after Vatican II discussed above. In the first narrative, Sr. Rita situates God as “up” somewhere, which places her at a distance from the divine, looking up from below. After Vatican II, God is as close to Sr. Rita as is possible, mapped in space as next to her or within her body. In these two narratives, the divine for Sr. Rita has not only changed in character but also God has moved in the map of Sr. Rita’s lived space from a distant place above her, to extreme proximity, existing within her. As this spatial relationship has changed, Sr. Rita herself has moved from a place below the divine, looking up, to a place where they are together such that she is next to, or containing him.

The notion of the divine “dwelling within” is not new to Catholicism. St. Augustine stressed interiority as a means of experiencing God as early as the fourth century C.E. However, the nuns in the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart Convent had little exposure to these ideologies and prayer practices until the middle of the 20th century. So although an emphasis on interiority was not necessarily new to the Church, it was relatively new to the nuns’ everyday practices and their conceptions of the divine.

Sr. Rita’s embodied transformation mirrors that of Sr. Theresa, who transitioned from seeing God as an arbiter of her suffering to a loving presence within her very body, existing even within the amoebas that plagued her. Srs. Theresa and Rita are not exceptional cases; the majority of the sisters in the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart convent who lived through Vatican II describe a similar shift. They characterize their experience of the divine after Vatican II in new, more personal ways. As they understand and experience the divine in these new ways, they experience new emotions, including love and spiritual unity.

The majority of the sisters at the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart convent describe a similar amplification in their embodied experience of the divine following Vatican II. As the nuns pray to a God who inhabits the space near them and in them, a God who emanates love and tenderness, they describe themselves as being filled with the emotions of love, safety, and the knowledge that they are cared for by a benevolent companion. This new companionship, developed over the past few decades, has impacted the nuns’ interpretation of their illnesses and chronic pain trajectories.

Suffering in the Convent

As Robert Orsi (2005) writes, Catholic ideologies and experiences of pain and suffering significantly transformed over the 20th century. He describes that before Vatican II, “pain purged and disciplined the ego, stripping it of pride and self-love; it disclosed the emptiness of the world.” Indeed, before Vatican II, the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart were encouraged to welcome pain and suffering as valuable resources to humble the ego. They were instructed to see their own pain and suffering as small reflections of the suffering Jesus endured for them. The nuns describe pain and suffering as something they understood God required of them. Suffering was, and for some nuns still is, “offered up” to God. As they offered their suffering to the divine, they asked him to use their pain as He saw fit. The divine was seen to be the arbiter of their pain and suffering. As Sr. Rita told me, suffering and pain were understood at that time as things God “wanted you to have.” Through the process of offering up one’s pain through prayer, the nuns created something virtuous out of their pain and suffering, but it was nevertheless seen as necessary punishment for the sins of humanity. Suffering and virtue were deeply connected for the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart before Vatican II. Many Catholic convents have maintained a similar ideological connection between suffering and virtue since Vatican II. For example, Rebecca Lester writes that postulants in a Mexican convent learn that suffering, albeit suffering with an “intention behind it” is the “path to sanctification” (2005:194). This connection between pain and morality is not unique to Catholic cultural contexts (see Throop 2008). Since Vatican II, however, the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart have largely rejected the notion that suffering is virtuous or holy, and the sisters have made an explicit effort to break this connection in their local ideologies and prayer practices.

In describing “old” ideologies of pain in the convent, Sr. Rita says that the sisters used to think God “needed” human suffering to “be God.” Now, she says, they believe “just the opposite.” She says, “God doesn’t give us suffering. He’s present in our suffering, but He certainly [isn’t] doling it out.” The concept of God’s presence in one’s suffering is key to the change that the sisters describe. Although the pre-Vatican II God was the distant, authoritarian who oversaw the distribution of pain and suffering to individuals in the world, for the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart, their post-Vatican II God is a God who is present as supporting companion as they endure pain or suffering. As God has moved “down” to “dwell within” them, the sisters have come to experience Him as a caregiver. Sr. Rita describes this relationship:

He goes with me throughout whatever it be. If it’s pain, I know that He’s there to support me. I think that that’s a strong thing for our sisters, particularly in the infirmary, because, most of them have pain, of some type. And yet I marvel that they’re not cranky, they’re not complaining, um they get wonderful care, which certainly helps them, but they’re able as you say to somehow, God, Jesus, is very close to them. And He walks with them.

Indeed, as Sr. Rita describes, the majority of the sisters in the infirmary, even those living with significant pain, use prayer and their relationship with the divine as a mode to garner

comfort and support and to mitigate the pain they are experiencing. They also receive robust social support from nursing staff and a significant team of sisters giving pastoral care who pray with them and remind them “Jesus loves them.”

In pastoral care interactions in the infirmary, the sisters often called on the divine as a caregiver. Sr. Irma, for example, a nun who gives foot massages to the sisters in the infirmary, regularly suggested that the sisters call on Jesus to comfort them, “walk with them,” or “hold them.” In one recorded interaction, for example, she suggested that an elderly nun who was suffering from tachycardia and anxiety “relax” and “let Jesus hold [her] in His lap.” Through this embodied directive, and others like it, she encourages her fellow sisters to draw on the embodied presence of the divine to comfort them in times of need. The nuns’ prayer practices and imagery vary. Some describe prayer as a physical embrace with the divine. Others describe a more metaphorical “dwelling” together or copresence. Some of the nuns describe detailed images. Sr. Carline, for example, a nun suffering from advanced ovarian cancer, described an image of a teardrop held within a beautiful crystal goblet. She said that the teardrop represented her pain, suffering, and fear, and the goblet represented the beauty of God, which held her with love, representing for Sr. Carline the all-encompassing love and compassion of God. She described meditating on this image. Almost all of the 30 nuns I interviewed describe prayer practices in which they experienced a close proximity or complete envelopment of the divine within their own bodies.

I suggest that following Vatican II, the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart have altered their cultural experience of pain and illness through their prayer practices. The “affective valences” (Throop 2008:276) the nuns associate with pain are no longer tied up in virtue, suffering, and sin. Through the repeated practice of praying post-Vatican II prayer, pain, for the sisters, has now become affectively associated with God’s supporting, calming presence. As they experience pain and pray with the divine, they experience Him as a caring, loving presence that “walks with them” and supports them. These new subjective states impact the nuns’ experiences of pain and illness by mitigating it or making it more bearable. In this way, institutional changes in prayer practices have afforded new somatic patterns in the nuns’ experiences of pain, illness, and old age. Pain no longer carries the pre-Vatican II associations with a punishing God. As Sister Theresa was able to begin to love and forgive the amoebas infecting her body, seeing them as one with God, a loving, although perhaps difficult and painful presence, the majority of the sisters have learned to patiently accept their pain and call on God as a caring partner who helps them endure worldly suffering.

The role of the body in prayer has shifted for the nuns. In the first half of the 20th century, the nuns’ prayer lives focused primarily on the body as an object of prayer as the nuns called on the divine to intercede in the material world to heal their ill or painful bodies. In the second half of the 20th century, after Vatican II, the nuns have increasingly focused on the body as a means to experience the divine. Embodied prayer has become much more common than individual requests for the divine to intercede in the material world to affect an individual body.

Conclusion

Change in Catholic nuns' prayer lives has impacted religious sisters lives in many ways. Changes in prayer schedule have reordered their daily lives and changes in the language and imagery of prayer have influenced their characterization of the divine. God has been transformed from a male authority figure, located above the sisters looking down at them to a more intimate companion, a being who resides next to them, supports them, and even exists within their bodies. This shift in the characterization of God has resulted in a new relationship with the divine. Even more profoundly, this transformation has afforded new subjectivities. This changing notion of who the divine is, and how the nuns relate to Him has impacted more than the nuns' ideological relationship with God. This transformation has also influenced their experiences of the world, their experience of their bodies, and ultimately their ideologies and experiences of illness and chronic pain. David Morris argues "pain is not just blindly felt or reflectively endured as a series of biochemical impulses. It changes with its place in human history" (1991:45). As I show in the current study, the history of the Church as an institution has profoundly affected the ways in which the nuns experience their bodies as they age.

The story of Vatican II is one in which institutional authorities and the individuals within the institution moved together in conversation to create profound change. Pope John XXIII responded to changing times and the work of various theologians to set in motion major institutional changes in the Church. These changes, owing in part to the way the documents were written, afforded each convent its own interpretation and implementation of the changes. As prayer books were edited, and as local ideologies of the divine changed with them, Catholic nuns across the country had the opportunity to reshape their own relationship with God. The change can be seen as coming both from the "top down" and the "bottom up."

Analysis of the nuns' narratives about this institutional transition exemplifies the intimate connection between language and experience. As the nuns spoke new prayers, they experienced a new relationship with the divine. In Ochs's terms, linguistic enactments were experienced as they were produced (in press). The nuns' new prayer practices also integrated the body in new ways. Through newly embodied relationship with the divine, they began to incorporate embodied prayer, and ceased to emphasize the body as an object of prayer. For the nuns in the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart convent, changes in the words they speak to God have ultimately impacted their own interpretation and experience of pain, suffering, and old age; how they move through the world, respond to their aging bodies, and how they experience the divine.

As a group, nuns experience greater physical and mental well-being at the end of life, enduring less physical and mental pain and loneliness than their lay counterparts. In this article, I have drawn on psychological and linguistic analysis to show that as the divine has moved "down" in the nuns' prayer, accompanying them for walks and "dwelling" within their bodies, the nuns in my research have reported experiencing less loneliness

and decreased chronic pain. I hope here to have offered insight into the process through which elderly nuns use communicative interaction with the divine to manage their physical and mental well-being at the end of life. In addition, I hope this work will spur on those researchers dedicated to clearer understanding of the relations of mind, spirit, and body.

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Appendix: Transcription Key

(.)	A dot enclosed in brackets indicates a short pause
.	Period indicates falling intonation.
,	Comma indicates continuing intonation.
<u>underline</u>	Underlining indicates emphatic speech.
-	Dash indicates a halting, abrupt cutoff.
:	Colons indicate sound lengthening (the more colons the longer the sound).
hh	Indicates aspirations (as in laughter).

Adapted from Jefferson (2004), Sacks and colleagues (1974).

Notes

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1. All names, including the names of persons and of the convent are pseudonyms. The Franciscan Sisters of the Heart are an active, or “apostolic” order. The technical term for these sisters recognized by the Church is *Women Religious* instead of *nun*. The term *nun* technically refers to contemplative orders. The women in this article, however, refer to themselves as “nuns” as do women from most apostolic sisters in the United States. For this reason, I chose to use the term *nun* throughout the article. This choice is also consistent with Rebecca Lester’s (2005) work with apostolic sisters in a Mexican convent.

2. I administered the McGill Quality of Life Questionnaire (see Cohen et al. 1997 for validity studies in palliative care context)

3. All research was conducted with IRB approval and individual and institutional consent.

4. Written consent from all participants was obtained following IRB protocol.

5. During this five-month period, my son joined me at the convent once or twice a week for mass and a meal. The majority of the days, I went to the convent alone.

6. These prayers are quoted from the community prayer manual printed in the mid-19th century. I do not include this manual in the bibliography to maintain confidentiality of the community.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article:

Figure 1. Photograph of the Eye of God in the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart Convent, online.