

Article

Discipline, Resistance, Solace and the Body: Catholic Women Religious' Convent Experiences from the Late 1930s to the Late 1960s

Christine Gervais ^{1,*} and Amanda Watson ²

¹ Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa, 120 University Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5, Canada

² Institute of Women's Studies, University of Ottawa, 120 University Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5, Canada; E-Mail: amanda.watson@uottawa.ca

* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed; E-Mail: christine.gervais@uottawa.ca; Tel.: +1-613-562-5800 (ext. 8962); Fax: +1-613-562-5304.

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Abstract: This paper examines the corporal forms of discipline and techniques of resistance exercised through and by Catholic women religious (sisters/nuns) in Ontario, Canada. Borrowing from Foucault's conception of controlled activity as a technique for disciplining the body, as well as Cvetkovich's notion of repetitive activity as imbued with possibility for knowledge and hope, this paper demonstrates how Catholic women religious, due to their unique position as both leaders and subjects of the institutional church, have been agents of, and subjected to particular forms of disciplinary ritual, both in the Church and in their lived religion. Drawing on the experiential accounts of thirty-two current and former women religious in Canada, the paper demonstrates more or less overt forms of embodied, ritualistic discipline and the extent to which women have resisted this disciplinary power both in convent life and in their later years. The paper sheds light on how women's perception of discipline is related to disobedience and compliance, nuancing the well-known "old norms" of convent life before the Second Vatican Council.

Keywords: women religious; gender; corporal forms of discipline; resistance; solace

1. Introduction

“There were hard moments you know ... but overall ... we made ... simple joys.” (Sister Noreen).

Scholarly work on convent life in the early and mid-twentieth century has tended to focus on the discipline and subservience of women religious at the hands of their unrelenting superiors. This paper demonstrates how Catholic women religious have been agents of, and subjected to particular forms of disciplinary ritual, both in the institutional Church and in their lived religion. Here we examine the corporal forms of discipline and techniques of resistance exercised through and by Catholic women religious¹ in Ontario from the late 1930s until the late 1960s². In making space to consider techniques of corporal discipline alongside forms of resistance and moments of solace, we shed light on women’s experiences of the “old norms” of convent life before and shortly after the Second Vatican Council.

As part of a broader project exploring the evolution of women religious’ spiritual development, governance arrangements, and societal involvement, this article draws on experiential accounts conveyed by 32 participants through qualitative in-depth interviews³ carried out by the first author between December 2008 and June 2011. The participants in this study ranged in age from 49 to 91 and consisted of 26 women religious and 6 former women religious from eight active religious orders in the province of Ontario⁴.

Women religious’ experiences are markedly absent from androcentric historical and contemporary accounts of the Roman Catholic Church [1]. These accounts, like the historical accounts of many religions, have routinely omitted, and have sometimes trivialized, the experiences of women religious [6].

¹ ‘Women religious’ is the term scholars use to refer to vowed women in the Catholic tradition who are commonly known as “sisters” or “nuns” ([1], p. 8). We use “woman religious”, “sister” and “nun” interchangeably.

² While this paper focuses on women religious’ experiences of discipline from the late 1930s until the late 1960s, it is essential to note that the strict disciplinary practices referred to in this paper no longer exist within the religious communities of which the participants are a part. In fact, the sisters only shared details about earlier convent life in order to illustrate how far their congregations have moved beyond such stifling contexts and customs. In realizing long ago that “there is such a thing as a spiritual life that is deeper ... than simply the routines of religious discipline” ([2], p. 5), the participants’ religious orders have been engaging in major processes of renewal since the 1960s. Sister Marian proudly describes the changes from the past to the present: “Oh it’s a difference of day or night you know!” For more on how the participants’ religious communities have evolved since the 1960s into organizations that exemplify democratic, inclusive, feminist and circular models of governance, see Gervais [3,4].

³ Interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed by research assistants. In order to guarantee anonymity and to respect confidentiality, pseudonyms have been employed and all identifying information has been removed. The data were organized thematically and analyzed qualitatively. We conducted a round of open coding beginning with the broad topical areas covered by the open-ended questions and moving toward the development of initial thematic categories [5]. We then conducted a round of selective analytic coding in order to identify and organize the major themes of discipline and resistance. Finally, we used these discourses as described by the sisters to interrogate Foucault’s conceptions of discipline, supplementing Foucauldian notions with affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich’s theorizing of repetition and the body.

⁴ We acknowledge that 49 year old Sister Sarah entered religious life in 1985; thus, her novitiate and convent experience occurred outside of the time period represented in this article. Nevertheless, as her quotation on page 9 reveals, she encountered a hierarchical structure that seemed unique to the religious order into which she first entered in the mid-1980s. Sister Sarah’s experience reveals how some hierarchical dimensions have remained in some religious communities’ structures long after the Second Vatican Council.

This paper takes seriously these experiences as related through narrative accounts, and as such, constitutes an important contribution to scholarly inquiries that seek to bring to light the complexities of women's spiritual and religious realities [2,7,8]. This study provides women religious with a rare opportunity to relate their concerns, encounters and goals on their own terms [7–10]. Our approach is widely respected by feminist scholars who endeavour to privilege women's standpoints and material realities in scholarly research, especially those women whose voices have been particularly marginalized in historical accounts [10–12]. Through this set of oral histories, we are able to gain insight into a perspective that is rarely documented [13–15] and to establish meaning of this collection of sisters' reported experiences [16]. Nevertheless, we recognize the limitations of this method, including issues of validity around memory, life stage, and self representation [17]. Still, our effort to include women's voices in this paper through direct quotation also reflects an established feminist commitment to recognize the voices of participants as more than the data abstracted from dehumanized research subjects, but rather as the voices of generous informants whose perspectives are of utmost value and worthy of respect [18,19]. To honour our participants' contributions, the first author invited⁵ the sisters' input at multiple stages of the project, from formatting the interview guide to sharing feedback about their interview experience, reviewing transcripts⁶, contributing analysis, and approving papers before publication and conference-based dissemination [18,19]. It was in listening to the sisters' stories and feedback so closely that we felt compelled to nuance Foucauldian conceptions of discipline, since their detailed narrations of convent life could not readily be explained using conventional notions of institutional discipline and punishment. We are indebted to the sisters for their meticulous accounts.

This paper is guided by the following questions: (1) How was the corporal discipline of convent life experienced by women religious between the 1930s and mid-1960s? (2) In what capacity did women resist corporal discipline, and/or what was made possible for these women when discipline failed to serve its intended consequences? We begin by outlining our theoretical framework using Foucault's disciplinary power and Cvetkovich's utopia of everyday habit [20]. Second, we identify the forms of discipline indicated by the sisters' reports on convent life: discipline as corporal regulation (e.g., structure, rules, ritual, penance); discipline as punishment (e.g., public apology); and discipline as directive (e.g., vows, vocations). Third, we detail the corporal forms of resistance by sisters, and elucidate how forms of both resistance and compliance have co-existed with reported feelings of comfort or relief within the disciplinary confines of convent living and in later religious life. We conclude by discussing the moments when discipline was resisted, and nuance Foucault's conception of monastic discipline with examples of how disciplinary structure could also contain opportunity for solace. Given that some of the sisters in this study condemned the rigidity of convent life while others reflected on the benefits of its structure, we argue that disciplinary power, particularly monastic discipline, is experienced differently by subjects and is complicated by the affect of ritual and habit.

Nearly all of the sisters in this study recalled moments during convent life when they resisted disciplinary power, some recalling playful times when they disobeyed or bent the rules. Some sisters

⁵ While they were all invited to contribute, not all the participants chose to be involved in all phases of the research process.

⁶ The review of their transcripts was an important opportunity for those participants who preferred to provide their approval on the use of quotations prior to the dissemination of the research results.

presented the nuances of discipline as repetition and ordinary habit⁷ as peaceful when responding to the rigidity of convent life with ambivalence. Rules and rituals were experienced as both bizarre and comforting. The following section situates these findings in Foucault's notion of disciplinary power and Cvetkovich's conception of the "utopia of everyday habit" ([20], p. 189).

2. Discipline and Repetition

Our theoretical analysis of corporal discipline and resistance as articulated by the sisters is informed both by Foucault's notion of disciplinary power and by Ann Cvetkovich's understanding of repetitive practice as having the capacity to relieve spiritual and mental impasse. Sisters referred to routine and ritualized practice in convent life and later religious life as "highly regimented," "pointless," "controlling," and "childish," while several others recall the rigid structure of convent life as necessary, helpful, and unremarkable. Our analysis moves forward with the notion of corporal discipline, especially as it takes the form of temporal rigidity and structure, as a disciplinary tactic that is also imbued with possibilities for resistance and hope. Below we invoke Foucault's understanding of "monastic discipline" and Cvetkovich's understanding of "practice".

2.1. Corporal Techniques of Monastic Discipline

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault [24] details the disciplinary tactics of monasteries and armies and their expansion to modern factories, schools, and prisons. In contrast to the forms of discipline found in armies or factories, where disciplinary techniques aim to produce mechanically efficient and functional bodies, monastic discipline was primarily concerned with obtaining "renunciations rather than increases of utility, and which, although they involved obedience to others, had as their principal aim an increase of the mastery of each individual over his own body" ([24], p. 138). In other words, for Foucault, techniques of monastic discipline were aimed at installing in subjects a sense of self-sacrifice and dedication to the broader aims of the institutional church, whatever these may be in various contexts. Religious scholars have criticized techniques of monastic discipline, which we will explore in future sections [25].

Recognizing space and time as the most basic organizing elements of human life, Foucault demonstrates how the regulation of these elements orients the affective and behavioral domains. Especially pertinent to our analysis, his work traces the modern division of time back to monastic life. Many of the sisters in this study echoed a temporal-corporal discipline in their descriptions of, and control through, time and space common in their convent life from the late 1930s until the late 1960s. Of particular interest are the temporal elements of corporal discipline; most of the sisters characterized

⁷ By habit, we are referring to an acquired pattern of behaviour, but we recognize that within the context of religious life, the term 'habit' refers to the distinctive style of clothing (typically including a dress and veil) that women religious wore and some continue to wear [21]. Expected to be "an outward mark of consecration to God" (Perfectae Caritatis), the 'holy' habit rendered nuns readily identifiable in public and while it is scarcely worn today, it still remains the most recognizable symbol of religious life for women [21–23]. Our use of the term 'habit' departs from the uniform-based connotation, but, as other scholars have noted [1], the term can serve as a double-entendre; we acknowledge this double-meaning as we draw upon Cvetkovich's understanding of habit as routine and repetition, of which dress is certainly a part.

convent life as intensely structured. For Foucault, strict control of time originated in monastic communities, taking such forms as an exact timetable, the connection of the body to temporal rhythms, and the correlation of the body to gesture (e.g., training for good handwriting). As explicated in the sisters' interviews, convent life—its routines, regulations, and punishments—was differentially experienced: met and remembered with mixed feelings.

On space and discipline, Foucault helps us understand the physical organization of convent life in terms of its corporal regulation. He explains how the architectural organization of bodies into individual lodgings, which he calls the “monastic cell,” is particular to the religious method. As Foucault accounts, “Even if the compartments it assigns become purely ideal, the space is always, basically, cellular” ([24], p. 143). Under the monastic model, common space is also corporally regulated. The sisters gave several examples from their early convent experiences that fell in line with Foucault's monastic model of “work and meals in common,” but “under the rule of absolute silence” or “[speaking] in low voices” ([24], p. 238). We explore these regulations and the sisters' techniques of resistance through this concept of the monastic cell.

We also attend to the ways in which discipline is enacted through the regulation of gestures and minute behaviors, which featured strongly in the sisters' accounts of convent regulations. For Foucault, whereas bodies are more subtly coerced at the mechanical level—through “movements, gestures, attitudes, and rapidity” ([24], p. 137)—discipline maintains “infinitesimal power,” establishing bodies at “the caprice” of “the master.” In our analysis of the sisters' experiences with discipline, we take these “ritual marks of allegiance” ([24], p. 137) to be mechanisms of monastic discipline that encourage political puppetry and a caprice-master relationship between the sisters, on the one hand, and the institutional church and its leadership members, on the other.

The above disciplinary techniques frame our research participants' comments, and as such, demonstrate how we depart from the notion of corporal discipline as only involving bodily mortification. We also include the various embodied forms of practice and ritual embedded in convent life. Nevertheless, however wide our conception of corporal discipline may be, it appears that within religious life, as sister-scholar Joan Chittister ([22], p. 119) contended, “[t]he body ... [was] always to be disciplined.” Pre-Vatican II convent life enacts both the historical discipline of treating bodies en masse and the modern disciplinary technique of producing docile bodies. The early disciplinary methods of the monastery are explicit in convent life, as are the disciplinary techniques of creating docile bodies, which, for Foucault, may be subjected to “small-scale models of power” as “political puppets” ([24], p. 136). Using Cvetkovich below, we elucidate the extent to which the structures of convent life involving “puppetry” by the sisters in service of the institutional church was complicated and differently experienced; the sisters' compliance with convent structures did not necessarily involve a simple relationship of allegiance to the church [3].

2.2. *The Utopia of Ordinary Habit*

To supplement Foucault's presentation of discipline, we turn to affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich, specifically her chapter “The Utopia of Ordinary Habit” [20]. Here, Cvetkovich frames routine and repetition in terms of their affective possibilities. For her, public or political feelings, especially of depression or despair, are often experienced in the private domain, embedded in familiar, everyday

rituals like domestic chores. Reminiscent of Foucault's "practices of the self," which lend "new ways of inhabiting disciplinary regimes" in modern life, Cvetkovich posits that the habitual subject can create hope and a sense of self through repetitive practice or ritual. Cvetkovich refers to the writing of the fourth-century Christian John Cassian on the spiritual crises of desert monks, as well as the work of feminist textile artists Sheila Pepe and Allyson Mitchell on craft and domesticity, to unpack the potential for corporal repetition (which we might call a technique of discipline) to provide mental release from depressive or stagnant impasses of the soul or mind. Drawing on the monk's use of practice to relieve "spiritual despair" ([20], p. 86) and the crafter's re-articulation of the domestic through small, localized gestures, Cvetkovich calls this potential of repetition or ritual "the utopia of everyday habit." Although her analysis is particularly concerned with feelings of depression, her sense that ritualized daily living might "soothe the mind and even raise the spirit" ([20], p. 189) is helpful for framing the sisters' reflections on the benefits of structure and discipline. Here we acknowledge that domestic practices emerge "from the ambivalent status of women's culture as a site of both struggle and renewed opportunity," and relate the repetitive and regular motion of the body to political and creative sensibility, and also to a sense of collectivity ([20], p. 168).

For Cvetkovich, the concept of *spiritual practice* as a type of *utopia of everyday habit* is a possible response to political depression⁸, which Cvetkovich imagines as the loss of hope to bring about change. For the sisters in Gervais' [3,4] study, many of whom expressed resentment of, and impatience with the institutional church amid a deep devotion to their church communities and to the Christian teachings of Jesus, we argue that these spiritual and domestic practices might be seen as both disciplinary and harboring potential for hope and pleasure. Insofar as convent life required the sisters to practice bodily and sensory discipline, the nexus of temporal-spatial-corporal regulation—in conjunction with spiritual practice and habit—might be imagined as both restrictive and liberating.

Invoking Cvetkovich alongside Foucault, we approach the sisters' experiences with corporal discipline as complicated, nuanced, restrictive, and sometimes even generative. Perhaps responding to and anticipating critiques of prayer and meditation as complicit in institutional regulation or as escapist, Cvetkovich argues that embodied practice is not necessarily a "form of transcendence or escape," but rather serves to tie the body to the "ordinary and the repetitive" in places where "feelings of despair and hopelessness" are "powerfully present" ([20], p. 197). We allow our research participants to be read as both restricted and imbued with empowerment. As Cvetkovich helps us understand, even under restricted physical circumstances, "meaning resides in the process" ([20], p. 197) of intimate, embodied, repetitive movements; the body and spirit may engage in disciplinary rituals and find inspiration. We share the sisters' concern with representing practices of corporal discipline fairly—as disciplinary, mandatory, sometimes punitive, and potentially restoring.

In convent life, the sisters were subjected to strict timetables, cellular dwellings, and corporal forms of discipline and punishment. Parallel to or, oftentimes, within these routinized, embodied practices, however, the sisters' spiritual and intellectual dimensions were often encouraged. As a result of this

⁸ Political depression "emerge[s] from the necessity to find ways to survive disappointment and to remind ourselves of the persistence of radical visions" ([20], p. 6). Cvetkovich presses this conceptualization of depression as political in order to resist the secular tendency to medicalize feeling bad, and to consider the spiritual disheartenment and radical potential that is grounded in religious life.

imbrication of spiritual reflection, meditation, discipline, and corporal punishment, the sisters' experiences with convent life are nuanced and complex. The corporal effects of discipline should be understood in relation to spirituality; as Cvetkovich explains the spiritual relief of corporal repetition, "because spiritual practice involves forms of embodiment or rituals with physical dimensions—lighting a candle, chanting a mantra, sitting in silence—it can be described in sensory and affective terms" ([20], p. 197).

Following Cvetkovich, we aim to "suspend the [academic] tendency to dismiss spirituality" (at the risk of supporting its "new age" manifestations) in order to "reckon with the resources it has to offer Public Feelings" ([20], p. 199). While part of her aim is to make space for spiritual practice to be taken seriously in academic scholarship, Cvetkovich's treatment of spiritual practice as habitual, ordinary, and embodied helps complicate the rituals and routines carried out by the sisters during and beyond their convent years. Resisting the potential to see corporal habit as solely a disciplinary mechanism toward docility, we contend that corporal practice can serve as both a disciplinary mechanism and a rest from experiences of apathy, sadness, or despair. The corporal element of structure is paramount, as Cvetkovich explains: "The ways of living cultivated by spiritual practice may entail significant social transformation, but they are also practices of the body, which are available in the here and now. Spiritual practices consist of attention to the present and awareness of, or orientation toward, it as immanently meaningful or sufficient" ([20], p. 200). Embodied practices can bring knowledge and hope to the domain of the spirit. This conception of ritualized corporal practice helps us explore and analyze the ways in which the sisters in our study have continued some forms of embodied practice while moving away from, or in some cases entirely rejecting, the disciplinary mechanisms of convent life.

3. Disciplinary Tactics

3.1. Reports on Convent Life before the Second Vatican Council

While there have been multiple forms of discipline on women's bodies within Catholic doctrine as well as Canadian public life more broadly, we focus on the specific disciplinary tactics that emerge from the sisters' accounts of early convent life. The majority (72%) of the sisters from this sample entered convent life between the 1930s and 1950s⁹, meaning that most of the sisters in the sample trained in and/or lived in a convent in the time prior to the Second Vatican Council¹⁰.

Within the Roman Catholic tradition, prior to Vatican II and its eventual implementation, convents consisted of expansive buildings within which communities of women religious resided and worked.

⁹ The earliest year of entry into the convent among the sisters in this study was 1937 and the latest was 1985. Across the decades, 1 out of 32 of this study's participants entered the convent in the 1930s; 5 out of 32 entered in the 1940s; 17 out of 32 entered in the 1950s; 8 out of 32 entered in the 1960s; none entered in the 1970s; and 1 out of 32 entered in the 1980s.

¹⁰ The Second Vatican Council, or "Vatican II," took place in the mid-1960s, and was seen to modernize the Catholic Church. For Catholic women religious in particular, modernizing took forms of alternative living arrangements to convent life, less emphasis on traditional dress, less emphasis on conformity and obedience, and more wide-ranging vocational opportunities, beyond careers in education and health care. Given that the participants in Gervais' study felt that the changes brought about by Vatican II were necessary and overdue, we acknowledge that their recollection of the discipline that occurred prior to and slightly after Vatican II was biased against the punitive dimensions of it.

The dimensions of the edifices varied depending on the community size, but they generally housed between dozens and hundreds of sisters in dormitory-style cells. Convent settings were structured institutionally and characterized by strictly regimented communal living. The sisters' lives were governed hierarchically by an authoritarian pyramidal model based on rigid monastic rules and incontestable obedience [23,25]. Sister Adele explained how the vertical dimension was experienced: "it was pretty well the Superior spoke and you said yes [chuckles] and so the discernment you know was theirs pretty much to begin with, at least that's how we were taught [obedience]."

The seemingly intransigent stricture of "layer upon layer" of petty rules that controlled sisters' lives until approximately the late 1960s was derived from monastic customs from previous centuries ([2], p. 19; [26]), and fashioned by "medieval standards" "from another age" ([22], pp. 4, 106). Sister Penelope explained how the cloistered¹¹ regulations became entrenched and unquestioned traditions over the years:

"It was a training ... that was ... very controlled. ... there wasn't a whole lot of leeway for creativity in that sense 'cause things were done in a certain way and they were expected to be carried on with tradition. You know tradition was a big thing. ... So it was a lot of ... conforming to models that were there ... we would often question 'why does it have to be that way?' [and the answer was always] 'Well that's the way it's always been' ... that was about the only reasoning at any time."

Sister Penelope also remembered that her superiors expected "conformity to rules that have been written up years and years ago." Sister Josephine explained how this expectation not to question regulations in the cloistered environment extended to the spiritual dimension: "we had specific prayer times and specific manners of prayer at that time there was no experimentation on how you should meditate or contemplate...One method for all and that [...] kind of provoked me." Sister Kelly reflected on how the rules and attitudes became particularly exasperating when contrasted with living and working in the community: "it was a very difficult life because you were out in ministry ... then you came in and you were [sigh] back into the cloister." Former¹² Sister Naomi conveyed how she felt "totally shocked" by what she describes as the "religious boot-camp" with an "autocratic" regimentation of the cloister-like context¹³. She recalled receiving her handbook:

¹¹ In Christian or Ecclesiastical terms, "cloistered" refers to the living arrangements in monasteries or nunneries. Implied here is the seclusion of monks and nuns in the enclosed religious order. Historically, the cloistered religious could not leave the enclosure without permission.

¹² One may assume that former sisters were more critical of the disciplinary regime than current sisters; however, while the former sisters in our sample did not hesitate to critique past institutional arrangements, many current sisters also did so, just as, and in some cases, more incisively. We also found that while former sisters criticized some aspects of their former orders' old ways, they also spoke respectfully of their former communities and one participant even longed to still be part of her congregation, or at least some aspects of it. Among those who remained in touch with their former communities, they cherished the long-lasting friendships and appreciated participating in their former communities' celebrations and anniversaries. Where some critiques may seem harsher than others, we found that the extent and expression of the critique to be more reflective of a participant's personality, rather than related to whether they are a current or former sister.

¹³ We acknowledge that the negative dimensions recounted here were not universally experienced and tended to vary depending on the leadership. In a subsequent section, we present examples of how the strict routine was experienced positively by some sisters because it represented a "common rhythm of life" (Former Sister Naomi).

“When we entered in 64 ... we were handed a postulant’s manual, and so, that was a type written mimeographed booklet that described every aspect of life ... Every moment ... we got up at the sound of a bell, and we went to bed at the sound of a bell, and it was wild ... for me personally ... everything was controlled. Oh! ... I think I was so shocked throughout the whole experience that I never felt in control of my life...”

Sister Marian echoed Naomi’s assessment, referring to the convent structure as “militaristic,” and though she explained that the “fast and neat and over and done with” approach was the “name of the game” and reflected the “tenor of the times,” she remembered it as “verbally abusive,” “constraining,” and outside of “a normal way of life.”

Many sisters reported on the rigidity of convent life, though not all of the sisters found the structure to be so repressive. As we will elucidate in a later section, routine, regimentation and “rule keeping” formed the foundation of convent discipline ([2], p. 19), but it was variously experienced, received, and resisted.

3.2. Impressions and Impacts

The sisters’ experiences in our study parallel those of women religious in other congregations who suffered under past authoritarian leadership that encouraged immaturity through child-like treatment that often resulted in dependence and docility [22,25,26]. Several sisters referred to the infantilizing restraints they experienced, particularly during their training as postulants and novices ¹⁴:

“I found it really restricting. I found that we were treated as children and so we regressed... into kind of a boarding school mentality ... it was difficult ... at the end of the first or second week, all of a sudden I lost it at mass in the morning, and I couldn’t stop crying through breakfast... it’s a real adjustment process...” (Sister Joelle)

“I found it difficult because... it wasn’t what I expected ... To me it was kinda childish... It wasn’t for mature women.” (Sister Kelly)

“It was very hierarchical ... and it was actually fitting into a model of obedience that basically ... it kind of went along with what I experienced in my family like a parent-child kind of a relationship almost ... [It was] stifling, frustrating. I felt like I did not have a voice.” (Sister Sarah)

In addition to finding the environment stifling, some sisters recalled feelings of sadness and despair upon entering the cloister-like environment. Sister Loretta recalled, “some people really broke under the strictness of it,” and Sister Kelly’s reflection affirms: “when I entered [spoken softly] I lost my soul.” Former Sister Naomi depicts the fallout of the environment as well, conceding, “Yes it was stifling, ya I mean I think if anything happened, I do say that my spirit got crushed” ¹⁵. Such accounts

¹⁴ It is important to note that the sisters in this study recalled that the regimented routine was stricter while they were postulants and novices (sisters in training), and that the strictness seemed to lessen when they lived within the wider convent and in the community as fully professed sisters.

¹⁵ Sister Naomi also noted that her negative response to the institutional dynamic was partly a result of her lack of awareness and readiness when she entered: “... that was not entirely the fault of the institution ... I was totally unprepared...”

provide empirical evidence for Chittister's ([2], p. 23) claim that "the structures that weld the habits and disciplines of the soul ... can also ... smother the very spirit they intend to shape."

3.3. Corporal Discipline: Regulative, Punitive, and Directive

In their reflections on convent life, sisters detailed various forms of discipline, which we have broadly categorized as regulatory or organizational (related to controlling the habits of the body in convent life, and sometimes related to penance); punitive (rules extended as punishment); and explicitly directive (authoritative instruction mandating obedience or, for example, career paths). These forms of discipline have varying corporal dimensions, from the overtly physical expectation of sisters to voluntarily self-punish through self-flagellation, to more subtle means of organizing bodies by time and space as through the schedules and movements of daily life. Below we relate the sisters' comments according to these three disciplinary themes. Drawing these to the Foucauldian disciplinary tactics mentioned earlier, it becomes clear in the following sisters' comments that they recall the regulation of their bodies in ways that echo known techniques of monastic discipline.

3.3.1. Regulatory Discipline

In the interviews, when asked to reflect on convent life, sisters explained the disciplinary mechanisms that took the form of controlling the habits of the body in daily routine. Some of these were mentioned above in detailing the structure of convent life. Below we show that though the rules and regulations recalled sometimes overlapped with punitive forms of discipline, the regimentation of daily life itself was variously corporal. One of the very serious aspects of the training and living "in absolute physical restraint" involved custody of the eyes [26–28]. Karen Armstrong ([26], p. 22) refers to the practice as "the quaintly named monastic habit of keeping one's gaze fixed on the ground." Former Sister Carol recalled the expectation with considerable frustration: "we were told custody of the eyes was a value ... you kept your eyes down." Like Armstrong and other sisters in this study, Former Sister Carol struggled with the practice because it seemed anti-social and impolite given that they had been raised by their parents to look people directly in the eye when they spoke to others. This example is helpful for understanding how thoroughly imbricated the corporal tactics and psychological effects were, as well as how convent regulation conditioned social interactions in very specific ways.

Sister Penelope elucidates how regulatory discipline in the form of following tradition involved physical training down to the minutia of convent chores. Reflecting on the training within the context of tradition, she said that the convent regulated even the little things, which required adjustment and constant maintenance:

"... the way of doing things in a convent was so different from your family's way of doing things you know even just the thing of making a bed. Like when we made a bed in the convent, it had to be like a hospital bed ... and when you folded clothes, there was a certain way that things were folded ..."

Sister Rita, remembering how she enjoyed lessons on religious life and the discipline of the vows compared to mundane chores [28], sheds light on the intricacies of regulation that we can see as aiming for a sense of docility in the sisters: "going around and dusting the screws in the chapel and all that; we called it low dusting and high dusting and all that kind of stuff, that was unreal all that dusting."

Interestingly, Sister Rita reflected on how the ways in which conformity inundated convent life were insidious and thus often beyond recognition. Sister Rita said, “I often struggled ... with conformity ... that was drilled into us ... conformity was really drilled into us. And I think that probably got to a lot of us more than we knew.” Echoing this sense of inundation beyond their immediate awareness, Former Sister Naomi explained that she “didn’t offer a great critique” of the disciplinary tactics at the time. Rearticulating Foucault’s notion of sovereignty wherein many bodies are disciplined against the spectacle of the one, she described a sort of subtle exaltation of the ideal sister as a form of disciplining toward that norm:

“There was a model, for the perfect sister of [community name]...Well again, I was quite amazed at the complexity of it ... at the notion that there was a perfect [sister], but then again it quite suited my personality, I thought ‘oh wow that’s it, I’ll strive for it,’ you know.”

We can see from the sisters’ comments that regulatory discipline in convent life extended beyond the regulation of the convent through the domestic routine or chores. There were certain customs and practices built into the routine of the convent that worked to regulate bodies explicitly; these regulatory forms of discipline occurred, not as a consequence to disobedience, but rather as a regular ritual intended to maintain order, to some extent, proactively. The most predominant regulatory form was the rule of silence [27,28]; but within some convents, it also involved regularly scheduled self-flagellation [28]. For the purposes of this paper, consequential discipline encompasses penance-oriented practices intended to punish nuns for disobeying convent rules. Consequential discipline took the form of ‘chapter of faults’, kissing the floor, kissing the feet of the novice mistress or superior, eating breakfast on one’s knees, and praying standing up for an extended time [28].

It is important to note here that even the word “discipline” took on a corporal meaning in the historical context of religious life, as it referred specifically to the corporal practice of self-flagellation¹⁶. ‘The Discipline’ sometimes involved beating oneself (usually on the back) with a knotted rope or whip [28], a practice of corporal mortification that is considered symbolic of the scourging of Christ prior to the crucifixion. While self-flagellation may have been administered consequentially as a sanction during the medieval period dating back to the fifth century, it tended to be practiced within monastic settings in the twentieth century as a scheduled¹⁷ ritual and as a form of privately and ‘voluntarily’¹⁸ administered penance. A wider sense of the practice of ‘discipline’ within convents also involved the wearing of pronged armbands that caused discomfort (similar to the cilice worn on the upper thigh by Opus Dei members). Sister Penelope described “the discipline” as such:

“Well discipline ... comes from the cloistered communities that used to use it in the olden days—It was ... a chain thing that you were supposed to discipline yourself ... once a week or something for any ill doings or you know what you thought might be sin.”

¹⁶ Sometimes, the instrument used for, and the practice of, self-flagellation are both referred to as ‘the discipline’ [28].

¹⁷ According to the sisters in our study, it was most commonly scheduled once per week.

¹⁸ The extent to which self-flagellation was practiced ‘voluntarily’ is difficult to ascertain. While sisters in our study referred to it as ‘voluntary’, they also stated that it was expected; yet since it was allegedly done in private, at least in the case of the sisters in our study, it did not appear to be strictly supervised, and thus the degree to which it was practiced likely varied as the later examples on resistance suggest.

Sisters Colette and Josephine recall wearing the armbands as a form of the discipline. In Sister Josephine's description, she also noted the institutionalized obedience to authority:

"In the novitiate we did wear ... a thing around our arm for penance with knots in it. We did use ... the flagellation thing. But you know it wasn't like to bring blood or get blood or anything like that. It was no big deal. I kind of thought they were silly too....It was what it was ... I didn't really see any benefit in it....If you had to do it, you did it ... [but] it wasn't worthwhile."

3.3.2. Punitive Discipline

In addition to general regulation, discipline was often expressed in terms of the threat of punishment. Punishment took the form of penance, which could be explicitly corporal (as in the above example of self-flagellation) or more private and mental, which often overlapped with regulatory norms of the convent (in the form of private and often silent prayer, including the 'rule of silence'). This technique of discipline, discipline as consequence, whether or not the failure to comply with rules was intentional, took a range of forms, from kissing the floor upon breaking a dish, to being excluded from outings or other privileges in response to truancy. It served in conjunction with regulatory forms of corporal discipline to control the body for the maintenance of order in the daily operations of the convent. It also served to instill a sort of panoptic discipline for the sisters in later life.

Some of the sisters recalled these punishments as petty, yet they conformed with a sense that convent rigidity was a means to an end:

"We had ... kind of funny punishments; if you were late for chapel or ... if you broke things you ... had to go ask a penance. Things like that ... I got to realize these are kind of funny rules really ... You just put up with it because there's so much more at stake, being ... in my right place as I came to know it. This'll pass too!" (Sister Ella)

"... kissing the floor was another one ... I forgot all about that stuff you know! [spoken very softly] Yes I thought that was absolute madness you know. What else did we do? Well ... I remember we had the chapter of faults they called it ... we had to get down and accuse ourselves of doing something that was you know [wrong], ... It's supposed to keep us humble but it kept us anything but I think ... I always say I still have the scars but I survived!" (Sister Marian)

In recalling having observed another postulant confess to the novice directress that she had dropped plates, Sister Josephine remembered the punishments as trivial, adding that there was a sense of personal responsibility over the items of the dwelling:

"In the novitiate ... every night you'd go up to the novice directress and say what you did. ... a postulant, she went up to our novice director and said, 'Mother um I dropped seven platters.' And our novice mistress went 'Ah!' [gasp] And she said, 'But I only broke three.' 'Oh thank God!' You know so ... if you broke something, then it was yours ... that was another kind of stupid thing you know.... I thought they were kind of silly."

Again extending beyond the regulation of the domestic context of the convent, Sister Penelope recalled being subjected to a humiliating punishment after she accompanied another sister who stopped in to visit her ill mother after a meeting; the so-called disobedience resulted in a corporally-based consequence: "I remember the two of us, we had to kneel at the back of the chapel and ask the sisters

... to forgive us for disobeying 'cause ... they understood obedience was to return home from the conference." Kneeling in subservience in an expressly sacred place of worship worked to shame the sisters for their straying from orders.

3.3.3. Directive Discipline

Discipline also took the form of explicit direction, to which sisters were largely expected to comply without negotiation. For example, as many sisters reported, they received vocational directives with regard to their career paths. This directive-based discipline, where commands were delivered and presumed to be unquestioned, was also exercised through the practice of taking vows. We define this form of "discipline as direction" as the practice of commanding behaviour that is explicitly announced and oriented toward future behaviour. Failing to comply may result in punitive outcomes, but the focus of this type of discipline was the way it took form as an announcement or declaration that was unquestionable, and therefore, remained unquestioned. It could also be thought of in terms of obedience, or the expectation to obey authoritative direction.

Sister Penelope conveyed sisters' understanding of obedience¹⁹: "... obedience was almost like a blind obedience. What the formation people said ... what was rule was to be obeyed and that's what your obedience is." Sister Josephine recalled one of the most striking ways in which this obedience-oriented discipline was manifested: "we used to get a white envelope ... out on the 15th of August and that will say 'you're gonna teach in such and such a school.'" Sister Colette, remembering this form of obedience as "extremely difficult," vividly recalled receiving the envelope with her obedience: "I can still feel myself walking down that long hallway from her office and just thinking 'oh my God!'" Sister Loretta reflected on how their compliance to such directives was absolute:

"If you wanted to be a sister, that's what you did. It didn't always make sense to me ...but that's what you did and so we all did it you know. When I look back on it today, I say 'oh my! We were kind of crazy to do that you know!' However, you did it and ... you went where they sent you. There was no consultation certainly in those days ... about where you went and what you did. You were just told you were going here, and this is what you're going to do and that's it."

For Sisters Shannon and Nellie, this type of directive discipline forced them both into careers for which neither of them felt suited; both had wanted to be nurses, but they were directed to a lifetime of teaching which led to experiences that were both painful and to some extent, regrettable. Sister Nellie recalled how the decision was made abruptly for her by a priest²⁰:

"I went to teachers' college after high school ... I left after first year because I knew teaching wasn't for me ... after the novitiate ... with the same desire [to be a nurse], they [sisters] advised me to go to Toronto and

¹⁹ Obedience is one of the three main vows that women religious profess; the other two are poverty and chastity; historically, obedience implied complete compliance to hierarchically-based authority, and remained unquestioned until the more liberating conditions fostered by the Second Vatican Council, at which time sisters' choices were, and continue to be considered through dialogue and negotiation.

²⁰ While decisions were most often made by the mother superior, they were often influenced by male priests or bishops who often determined the needs of parishes and parish schools, which sisters were expected to serve subserviently.

get that training and I had my trunk all packed but Father [name removed] came over; they needed a Grade 1 teacher and I was the one chosen.”

While her heart was not at all into the teaching career, Sister Nellie explained that she survived only because she focused her attention on the school children who were poor or orphaned; as a result, she was much more satisfied when she was helping the marginalized children with food, clothing and household chores on weeknights and weekends.

As the women religious’ illustrations of regulatory, punitive and directive discipline have shown, the sisters’ lives were highly regimented and their bodies were highly controlled by the patriarchal and hierarchical systems that governed their religious communities up until the late 1960s [25]. Chittister’s ([22], p. 98) interpretation of the context and consequences of such a highly regulatory arrangement summarizes the sisters’ examples: “the spirituality of the past degenerated into codes and canons, rules and regulations, exercises and rituals, however good, however well-intentioned.” As we show later in the section on solace, not all sisters claimed that their spirituality was completely ‘degenerated’ as Chittister implies; nevertheless, as we demonstrate next, the critiques and resistance raised against rules and rituals reflect the sisters’ concerns with the regulated routine.

3.4. Verbal Critiques within the Context of Compliance

There is no doubt that disciplinary tactics were circulating within an entrenched culture of expected compliance. Several sisters shed light on how, despite their verbal critiques against obedience and discipline, the context of control and conformity prevailed:

“A lot of it was, I think, imposed down ... just from customs and rules [that] were just written up at a time and never questioned.” (Sister Loretta)

“It’s the way things were done ... When you entered, you might not have liked it ... [and it was] pointless in some ways ... but ... if you wanted to be a nun, that’s what you did.” (Sister Josephine)

“It was a non-essential, it was petty.” (Sister Mabel)

“Some of it I thought was really kind of silly ... and a little tight ... but I was sort of willing to do it and put up with it ... “I tolerated it for the cause kind of thing you know, because I was doing a good thing.” (Former Sister Darlene)

“The rules and some of the very silly things that we did you know from, as I say inherited, they were supposed to make you good and humble and all the rest of it you know. You put up with that, I did anyway because there was this conviction that this is where I needed to be.” (Sister Kelly)

Sister Marian relayed that she “used to kind of resist” the strict prayer schedule which often interrupted the completion of other tasks, including kitchen duty. She explained that sometimes after having to unpin their aprons, rush to the chapel, then take the “displeasure of the mistress of novices” for not having completed their chores on time for prayer, the sisters would return to the kitchen, put their uniforms back on, and finish their work. Sister Marian found these interruptions to be “absolute nonsense, you know, idiocy” and she claims that she challenged them, at least verbally: “I did buck a lot of that stuff.” Sister Adele reported being unable at the time to resist the dogma that was institutionalized: “But that had become institutionalized. I think it’s the institutionalization of things and

the fact that they were, those things were treated as if they were just as important as church dogma I think you know. They were really sacrosanct...And I just think I knew they weren't. But I mean I did them..."

As these quotations suggest, many sisters did not blindly accept these rules and their associated consequences as commonplace. Yet, given their ultimate goal of becoming vowed women religious, and despite their reluctance and occasional scoffing, in most instances, the sisters seemed to tacitly accept the prevailing discipline, at least for a while.

4. Resistance

While the aforementioned examples shed light on the sisters' acquiescence to strict regulation, the next examples illustrate their resistance against it. Many sisters articulated the creative ways in which they either partially or fully resisted discipline during convent life, whether in public or private, and more or less corporally. These took the forms of breaking rules explicitly, failing to comply with rules accidentally or unintentionally, negotiating with authority, refusing to ask permission or omitting behaviour, as well as psychological or internal resistance.

The examples of resistance presented below pertain specifically to the sisters' early experiences with convent life. For this analysis, we understand resistance as the practice of going against an order by action, argument or critical reflection. By extension, this includes the ability not to be wholly affected by a disciplinary tactic. Our conceptualization is more complex than a simple "refusal to accept or comply," definition, as our look at resistance encompasses multiple and more or less overt forms, as well as individual actions and collective efforts [29]. The following examples of resistance are organized into forms of overt and covert resistance to corporal discipline, tactical resistance to anticipated discipline through bodily modification, open defiance to corporally-based penance, strategic resistance to silence and segregation, creative resistance against segregation from the outside world, negotiation with authority, psychological resistance in post-novitiate contexts, as well as innovative resistance through humour, fun and solidarity.

4.1. Overt and Covert Forms of Resistance to Corporal Discipline

Through both physical and verbal tactics, some sisters refused to participate in the practice of self-flagellation. Former Sister Carol's resistance was covert and involved deception whereby she gave the novice mistress the impression that she was participating physically within the privacy of her own cellular space:

"...there were disciplines ... there's beating ... of the body ... we were the last class ... I never did. I'd hit my bed you know ... I mean we would say things like, 'this is stupid.' ... it was done privately in your bedroom. But the novice mistress would walk down the halls and be saying the prayers ... I'd be like this [hits the table during the interview] hitting the bed. And we'd be laughing. I mean it was just ridiculous. I just could not buy into it. Sins of the flesh".

While Former Sister Carol resisted partially through duplicity, Sister Mabel's and her peers' refusal to self-flagellate was absolute: "My class, we said no we're not doing that and so they [superiors] didn't know what to do with us. [...] And then the next class that came along just absolutely refused."

Sister Penelope was part of that next class²¹; she explained her cohort's outright rejection of the physically self-abusive practice:

“A lot of things seemed ridiculous at the time. And actually our group was quite a rebellious group because ... there were certain things like discipline and that sort of thing that we threw out! Our group threw it out, like refused to ... participate in it you know. ... We refused to use it. We handed them [knotted whips] back in when we were given them!”

For other sisters, the resistance expressed against the beating of the body within the convent setting was extended to other spaces and relations. Sister Edith explained that when she was a school principal, she avoided corporally punishing students by covertly preventing herself from seeing children's problematic behaviour that would have warranted physical discipline according to the regulations at the time. In a way that contrasts some of the stereotypes of sisters as unrelenting disciplinarians, she explained how she strategically blocked her view through the window: “I used to fold the drapes in the office so I wouldn't see the kids if they were fighting.”

4.2. Resistance to Anticipated Discipline through Bodily Modification

While the aforementioned examples shed light on the sisters' attempts to avoid physical forms of discipline against themselves and others, the following account by Sister Mabel reveals how some sisters “resisted” anticipated exclusionary consequences to their disobedience by altering their own physical appearance:

“There were so many times that Hilda [a novice²² from the same cohort] and I were going to be sent home ... we got into everything together ... the councilors used to meet ... the novice mistress gave a report on the novices to the council ... we knew we were going to be sent home. Do you know what we did? Went in the trunk room and shaved off our heads and put on the linens again and we were called up and we said, ‘no you can't send us home, we don't have any hair!’ So we didn't get sent home ... They couldn't send you out with no hair ... you had to leave your hair a certain length ... It was devious ... But you know what they did, I

²¹ This shift from class to class reflects the winds of change of the time period. Former Sister Carol entered her order in 1964 while Sister Penelope entered in 1965, and there is no doubt that the 1960's revolutionary societal context influenced the novices' courage to contest the rigid structures compared to the novices and sisters of previous generations. Yet, as Sister Adele suggested, critical questions were also being posed in the late 1950s: “The people who came even the next year, they questioned more than we did ... Yeah, ‘cause I remember thinking aren't they smart ... they just were more vocal. So there was already a change in who was coming... Oh we could resonate with their questions for sure. But they asked them ... we didn't ... so ... already there was probably just all that much change ... society was, just [at] the beginning of the 60s. I came in '58 and when they came along in '59 there was another breed beginning, already.” We also acknowledge that concomitant to the wider societal shifts that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, some institutional reforms within convent settings and among religious orders had already begun in the 1950s—a decade before the Second Vatican Council and its initial implementation [23]. Thus, the sisters' contestation must be understood within an atmosphere of change both within and outside of the convent structures.

²² Postulants are candidates who are still considering, and/or are being considered for religious life [28]. Novices have been admitted into the religious order, but have not yet taken final vows.

heard after, they laughed like crazy. They said two people that would create that ... I guess they have a vocation. So they kept us”²³.

Such a bold, yet rare tactic by Sister Mabel and one of her closest peers from the novitiate sheds light on the lengths that some sisters were willing to go to, including risky and potentially embarrassing bodily changes, in order to circumvent presumed discipline.

4.3. Open Defiance to Corporally-Based Penance

One of the forms of penance that some sisters resisted included the expectation to eat a meal on their knees in full view of all other sisters in the dining room area after their admission of a wrongdoing. Whereas Sister Penelope challenged this penance verbally, Sisters Kelly and Mabel refused completely to submit physically:

“We would have to take things up to head table ... if you were working in the kitchen and you broke a dish or a cup, we’d have to go to head table with it during the meal and you would just kneel and just tell them what happened, you broke this dish and you would be given a penance, to kneel and eat your breakfast on your knees, that sort of thing ... we spoke out; I know I did. I would say to her ‘Well I just didn’t see anything wrong with it’ you know [and the response would be] “Well there is nothing wrong with it but ... that’s the rule still’ ... and as long as the rule is in existence ... you’re expected to follow it.” (Sister Penelope)

“One of the cloistered heritages was to ask penances for whatever you know. I wouldn’t do it. I wouldn’t do it ... I thought it was crazy. I thought it was nuts.” (Sister Kelly)

“This one time, I broke a mop or something and you had to [go to] ... head table with the mop and ask a penance. And Mother Maria, God Bless her. I love the woman ... she said quietly to me, ‘Take your breakfast on your knees.’ And I said, ‘What?’ and she said, ‘Take your breakfast on your knees.’ I said ‘I’m not going to take my breakfast on my knees.’ She looked at me and she didn’t know what to say. So I came back and sat down!” (Sister Mabel)

Yet, while Sister Mabel’s own resistance against the mother superior [the top authority] was audacious and absolute, the spirit of obedience prevailed among the collective of sisters. When she returned to her seat, the mistress of novices sitting beside her felt compelled to comply under the circumstances. She quietly questioned Sister Mabel: “aren’t you supposed to [kneel down]?” and Sister Mabel replied “No I’m not taking my breakfast on my knees, it’s not good for my digestion.” So, out of a sense of obedience and for the purpose of setting an example, the mistress of novices knelt down and ate her breakfast in the place of Sister Mabel. Yet Sister Mabel’s resistance remained resolute:

“[She] tried to shame me into it ... I thought good for her, I’m not doing it. Well I was called in after and I was told I didn’t know how to spell obedience, let alone live it [but] I didn’t take my breakfast on my knees!”

²³ In some religious orders, decisions about whether or not postulants, novices or sisters were to remain within the community may have been made at chapter meetings. However, within the religious communities represented in this study, the decisions were more often made at regularly scheduled meetings among novice mistresses, councilors and the mother superior because chapter meetings were held too infrequently (sometimes every 4 or 5 years) for such matters to be addressed in a timely manner. As Sister Mabel noted, the decisions revolved around issues pertaining to postulants’ or novices’ religious vocation.

While we have seen how some other sisters have also exhibited Sister Mabel's courage to contest consequences, not all women religious share such an adamant attitude of resistance. As Sister Kelly clarified, differing personalities and varying levels of confidence influence one's tendencies towards either obedience or resistance:

"I think if you didn't know who you were when you entered, you were more moulded into that pattern ... I think if a person entered with some idea of her own person and her own autonomy, she could survive with that ... and the inner resistance was there."

Sister Kelly's reflection on her own motivation to resist interrogates Foucault's work on docile bodies, bringing attention to the agency of sisters who were seeing disciplinary tactics for what they were at the time.

4.4. Strategic Resistance to Silence and Segregation

The silence imposed within the convent setting required both physical and psychological restraint [26,27]. There were restrictions not only on where and when one could speak, but also to whom [28]. As Former Sister Judith explained "even canon law said sisters in training couldn't speak to the professed sisters without permission ... even just the sisters in the house." Some sisters found it "stupid" (Sister Josephine) and "hard" (Former Sister Judith), yet still complied with the rule. Yet, Former Sister Carol²⁴ recounted how she maneuvered physically and playfully around such a stifling rule with other compliant peers:

"One of the rules was that you couldn't talk in the halls [...] I had the novitiate charge with this gal that was totally scrupulous and still is. Well I would talk to her and she'd run to a door—you could answer in a doorway—course we had these long halls with doorways every ten feet. So I'd ask her a question, she'd run to a doorway. So I'd ask her another question, she'd run to the next door! We just did that! [...] But if you didn't keep a sense of humour about it, you'd be nuts."

Some sisters also resisted the silence and segregation by being in close physical proximity and communicating to one another. Former Sister Carol recalled giggling with peers in their dormitory rooms, despite the inevitability of the consequences: "We were supposed to be silent at night and of course we broke some of those [rules] and had little gatherings and stuff. But we'd get caught and get killed for all of that."

Sister Mabel referred to a similar scenario in her convent that further illustrates sisters' resistance to the isolation they experienced in their cellular space: "We'd sit up and watch the lights downtown and we'd talk all night and you weren't supposed to talk after 9 o'clock, eh. And we'd talk each other into staying another day." While Sister Mabel's example points to the ways in which women religious disobeyed the rule of silence, her mention of the sisters' watching the city lights from within the confines of their convent building underscores their physical disconnection from the wider society and their local community. The next section sheds light on how the sisters overcame such segregating circumstances both imaginatively and courageously.

²⁴ Former Sister Carol's account is similar to one given by former sister and author, Joanna Manning, who recalled how she and her peers used sign language to communicate during periods of canonical silence [27].

4.5. Resistance against Segregation from the Outside World

The sisters' formerly semi-monastic and semi-cloistered lifestyle involved their physical separation from the people in the areas within which their convent was situated [28]. Former Sister Carol explains the rationale and context: "You're in the world but not of the world and those literal understandings of scripture ... were forced on us." One of the ways in which this expected physical disconnection to the outside world was controlled was through the strict regulation of family visits. While postulants and novices could receive visitors either weekly or monthly (known as 'visiting Sundays') at the convent, they were prohibited from returning to their family homes or attending family functions (such as weddings or funerals) for the first five years after they entered the convent. Such familial deprivation led to overwhelming emotional hardship for many postulants, novices and sisters. Sister Carmen explained her struggle: "I was so lonesome ... I suffered from loneliness. It was a sacrifice for me to enter." Sister Nellie recalled tearfully how difficult it was being away from one particular family member: "I would go to bed crying at night, you know, missing my baby sister ... I just lived for the day that I'd be back and have my baby sister again."

While Sisters Theresa, Rita and Colette reminisced emotionally and even angrily about how seriously they were reprimanded through humiliating public penance, after they were caught visiting relatives, other sisters illustrated how their strategic resistance to the ban on family visits was successful. Former Sister Carol explained her frustration with the rule and how she defied it privately and confidently: "... if you were living in [the same city] and passing your family home, you couldn't drop in! But I did every now and then ... I wouldn't get caught! ... sometimes we'd drive by the house and I'd run in kinda thing but it was an absolute ...'no no' of course ... we weren't allowed. Jeez. No."

By contrast, Sister Josephine's resistance against the ban involved her creatively 'obeying' the rule while still being able to see her family. Sister Josephine ensured that she was obedient by not physically setting foot in her family home, which was located behind their family-run business within the same building:

"You couldn't go home for the first five years. Okay! Well I got inventive again. I told my mom, 'Put the dinner table from the kitchen at the door of the back of the store. I'll sit in the store and have dinner. You sit in the kitchen and have dinner.' We did that. I was not disobedient. I still had my visit."

The sisters' efforts to remain connected with their families are indicative of the paralyzing impact of the physical segregation, as well as of the sisters' longing for communication and contact with relatives. The sisters' accounts certainly suggest that the physical disconnections were profound and painful enough for some sisters that they were actually willing to disobey and be subjected to other consequences in order to overcome them.

4.6. Resistance through Successful Negotiations with Authority

While some sisters' expressed disagreements with compliance and consequences either fell on deaf ears or resulted in further reprimands, other sisters' efforts led to positive and less punitive changes. For example, Sister Joelle recalled how her questioning of the prayer methods bore fruit:

“Where I did [resist] was, interesting enough, in the method of prayer and reading. Because ... there was sort of a prescribed method of prayer that didn’t work for me... and so I remember discussing that with the novice mistress and got the go ahead ... to pray as I wished.”

Sister Penelope shared a similar experience about her cohort’s refusal to participate in the public spectacle of admissions of errors and its corresponding penances:

“There used to be what they called “chapter of faults” ... where ... sisters would ... profess publically ... that they might have ... said something wrong or did something that they shouldn’t have done ... We did it for ... a few months and then we kind of just, and actually ... our formation director at that time ... she was good because she was one who was pushing for change ... so you could dialogue with her ... I found her very open to dialogue ... like we felt like she was ready to listen ... to hear us and that ... we weren’t going to be sent home because that’s what ... we were told by the previous ones ... like the novices that were ... before us. You know, ‘You do that, you could be sent home’ ... But we never felt that threat from her.”

In contrast to Sister Mabel’s rather dramatic example of resistance, Sister Joelle’s and Sister Penelope’s accounts shed light on the potential progress for both individuals and groups that was sometimes achieved through quieter forms of resistance based on peaceful negotiations among open-minded and inclusive authorities.

4.7. Post-Novitiate Resistance

Compared to the examples we explore later through Cvetkovich’s analysis of the possibilities of everyday habit, Sister Josephine shed light on how strict daily routines were stifling for some sisters. She relayed how annoyed she was with the early start to the day while she was training in the novitiate:

“We had to get up at 5:20. Even today if I have to get to a plane, I’ll put the alarm for 5:19 or 5:21 but I will not put it on for 5:20. I hated it so much! ... I didn’t see any reason to get up that early when we weren’t doing much during the day except classes and sewing and cleaning.”

While Sister Josephine complied with the day’s start time during her novitiate years, her intentional setting of her alarm at a different time ever since then is indicative of the long term impact of such strictures and of her psychological resistance against it, albeit seemingly belatedly.

4.8. Resistance through Humour and Fun

Humour served many sisters well, not only as a coping strategy, but also as a tactic of resistance. Before we explore some examples related to resistance, we first present Sister Loretta’s account of how certain sisters reacted amusingly to what they thought was the ‘silliness’ associated with the penances inflicted against other sisters:

“Sometimes it was so foolish you know you’d laugh at people going up and what they broke and get into trouble over that but anyway. Laughing! Laughing when you shouldn’t laugh! But sometimes you couldn’t help it; it was so funny you know. [Former Sister] Mildred ... She burnt a whole ... thing of buns. She was making buns in the oven and they came out as little black balls ... and she had to bring them up to head table and ask for a penance. I mean everybody broke up, I mean it was so funny! ... Oh! There’s some things like

that that kind of stand out ... We had lots of fun. We really did have a lot of fun in spite of the [austerity] ... Sometimes we got into lots of trouble over having fun but we had fun anyway.”

While certain sisters, like Loretta above, would react laughingly to punishments, other sisters actually created amusing scenarios in order to ‘cause’ other sisters to be subjected to a corporally-based discipline. For example, Sister Mabel recounted the diversion that she and members of her cohort created in the dining room when they would intentionally breach the rule of silence so that the older sisters, who were already familiar with the expectation, would accept the physically-based penance on behalf of the collective:

“One would get down and take her breakfast on her knees, another one would get up and [do it] and you know [we thought] what the hell was going on, they never told us. So then we connected it with noise. So if we’d hit our spoon, one of the novices would pop down to kiss the floor. It was crazy. But we got a big kick out of it eh because they hadn’t even told us about it so we’d make a little noise and ... they were so holy you know; they’d get up and go down...”

As we saw earlier when another sister took her breakfast on her knees on behalf of Sister Mabel who refused to do it herself, the acceptance of physical forms of penance by others for others seemed to be a widely expected exercise. Their sense of loyalty extended beyond the institutional church to one another. It was also one that some sisters, including Sister Mabel, who defiantly resisted consequences herself, inflicted mischievously and ironically against others for their own enjoyment.

As has been shown from the sisters’ accounts, forms of resistance were numerous and varied, from head shaving to critically pondering and disagreeing with the mandated state of isolation. This breadth fits well within a Foucauldian analysis, as his conceptualization of discipline and resistance takes many forms. In the future, we might expand our lens to view subtler forms of resistance, for example, the use of humour when recounting stories from the past, or the practice of emotional intimacy to build solidarity and resist isolation.

5. Solace in Habit

As mentioned above, sisters reported different responses to the disciplinary tactics of convent life, ranging from finding the convent nearly unbearable, to appreciating the structured lifestyle. Key to our nuancing Foucault is the notion that within the repressive structure of cloister-like early convent life, customary daily practices, or “the common rhythm of life” as Former Sister Naomi described it, also allowed space for reflection and instilled a sense of belongingness and community [30,31]. Joanna Manning ([27], p. 21), author and former sister from the United Kingdom, alludes to the crafting that Cvetkovich draws on as providing a sense of relief: Manning recalls, “I loathed the sewing but loved the silence.” While for Manning the relief within the habit was not a result of the repetitive sewing motions themselves, the silence surrounding the regulated ritual provided her the sense of solace.

While the sisters in this study were not asked to comment on their positive experiences of habits and rituals in particular, the way the sisters offered their memories of moments of joy and solace within structures of discipline provided some interrogation of Foucault’s theorizing of monastic discipline toward unquestioning loyal subjects [30]. Below we detail how some sisters reconciled ritualistic practices with happiness, through humour, relief, solidarity, and peaceful moments. The

sisters also offer reflections on the leadership styles of particular superiors as contributing positively to their experiences of discipline.

Former Sister Carol explained that some sisters found the convent regulation comforting for its “projection.” Sisters responded with mixed reviews of specific corporal regulations in convent living, with some expressing ambivalence about particular tactics. For example, with regard to the rule of silence, some reported coping more than others, and among those who admitted to struggling with keeping silent, some sisters reported learning its value in later religious life. Here we detail these ambivalent reports, as well as sisters’ reported sense of appreciation for convent life amidst the strict corporal regulations [30,31].

Sister Clara expressed ambivalence as she reflected on how she realized later in life that despite the “absolutely insane rules” of convent life, which at the time she found “very difficult,” she “learn[ed] discipline that [she] needed...” Whether or not the sense of “needing discipline” is learned as a result of being inundated with the cultural norms, it is clear that Sister Clara appreciated the reasoning, and maybe the outcome, of what she sometimes found to be trivial. She reflected this same ambivalence when recalling corporal rituals of punishment:

“Oh you had to kneel down ... and publicly [confess]. That really bothered me. That was nuts! And confess what you did, even if you broke something. Those were the kind of things ... I didn’t mind, I just thought it was foolish [chuckles] ... but you see there was a discipline in it I guess... like ... [for] order.”

Sister Adele also reported a sense of appreciation for the formal structures of convent living, what she called a “natural” way to organize big groups. Sister Marian echoed appreciation, as she acknowledged that convent life “fashioned” and “groomed” her. Sister Shannon shared Sister Adele’s reasoning for what she called the “common regulations” of group living that are required for the “benefit of all.” Sister Corinne went beyond the sense of mere appreciation for the reasoning of the disciplinary structure as she remembered the communal aspect of being disciplined as individuals in a group. On finding relief and comfort within the regulation, she explained:

“It was a strict time table ... but there was a lot of you know sharing, helping one another. Let’s say we had to do ... the cleaning, there were many of us, we were helping, we were sharing, we were enjoying a lot ... we had a lot of joy ... there were jokes. There was a sense of humour.”

Similarly, Sister Mabel remembered that, “in spite of it all, I was happy.” Joining a sense of solidarity to the routine [30], Sister Noreen explained “we stood together ... it was amazing...you know simple joys, simple fun.”

Important to note is how the sisters reacted differently to the particularities of routine depending on their experience with discipline prior to entering the convent; the lifestyle seemed less repressive for those who were accustomed to these models of living in their home or school. Sister Edna compared convent living to boarding school:

“when I entered the convent, for me it was like a transition from boarding school ... we got up early in the morning and went to school. And then you had time for your homework. And you did charges in the house you know different little things. And then you went to bed early ... It wasn’t a big change at all. It was like a continuation.”

Sister Corinne explained how simply accepting the sometimes-trivial rules of convent living was easier when she was less reflective as a young person, but it became more difficult in her later years: “And it becomes more difficult as you grow old. When you were younger you know you just accept it more easily. You don’t reason too much. But when you’re older you start thinking, you start reasoning ... you experience life ... then ... it becomes more difficult.”

As mentioned above, another recurring comment with regard to experiences of discipline involved the style of particular leaders in the convent. Sister Ella humanized her superiors, challenging the stereotype of the unsympathetic Mother Superior and affirming the value of a sense of belongingness:

“I found our ... leaders ... had a heart. They were half decent ... we did keep the rules. But you know when we [community name] would go to summer school and mingle around other [community name], we came home saying, “Thanks be to God I belong to [city name of congregation]!” They were much more strict some of them ... we didn’t ... make big to do’s about some rules sometimes that others did. Ah so ... I found my community life very wonderful ... those early days were great!”

Former Sister Carol, upon remembering the monitoring of self-flagellation, recalled: “I could tell when they were teaching it that they didn’t, that their hearts were not in it. They didn’t really believe it themselves yeah. It was something they had to do.” Sister Jeanette found the leadership to be kind, and recalled that the disciplinary routine fit with what she was accustomed to at home. Convent discipline did not detract from her experience of community, though she admitted that the cloister-like norms were changing around the mid-1960s when she entered. She reports:

“No. No. No I didn’t find them very strict. No I found they were very ... caring, very concerned because I was a younger member of the congregation. I’m sure for them they felt they had a responsibility to me as I had one to them ... I didn’t find it, maybe because at home we had rules ... Certain things that we were allowed to do, certain things that we weren’t allowed to do. Ah and that way I didn’t find it difficult ... And when we entered, that was in 1965. So things I think the norm was starting to change ... from what I could gather from other sisters ... I couldn’t say I experienced what they experienced ... because Vatican II was just ... like ... I entered when these changes were just starting to take place. ‘Cause we didn’t wear the habit, we wore the habit for a year, that’s all”²⁵.

Sister Penelope shared this gratitude for the community, while also reflecting on how she found challenging the communal space and being denied private time, practices which she recognized as tactics of conformity:

“I found convent life ... gave you a security for sure ... Also there was that ... sense of belonging to a family, like [it] gave you the sense of family and there was always somebody there ... But on the other hand, you didn’t have a whole lot of time to yourself or your own space ... Like you were always trying to conform to the way of living of others ... so I found the convent life is good but relationships are very hard.”

Sister Loretta credited the sense of belongingness for helping her to cope with the rigidity of the communal living environment: “But having friends like being able to have friends, close friends, I find

²⁵ Sister Jeanette’s account also sheds light on the differences of experience between older and younger nuns at such a critical historical juncture circa Vatican II. It is apparent that, for the most part, sisters who entered in the late 1950s and in the 1960s experienced less harsh discipline compared to sisters in former decades.

that really has helped a lot.” Sister Mabel echoed the sense of finding joy within the confines of the convent, citing her spiritual connection with God as her motivation for continuing: “In spite of [strict rules and discipline] I was happy. ... I knew it was God’s will for me.” Sister Marian’s experience resonates with Sister Adele’s sense of joy and appreciation, as she acknowledged: “I’ve been living in gratitude for all I was exposed to and for all I met. I would never have ... had that experience had I not entered and I’m always grateful for that.” Similarly, Former Sister Naomi partly attributed her ability to cope with convent discipline to her rich friendships with other sisters, nuancing this sentiment with a sense that, with some regret, she was not in a headspace to resist convent discipline in her early years:

“Actually we had great times; I formed strong bonds, which were really wonderful, so they mitigated the effects ... so personally, I made it through quite well; I developed my own survival tactics, but I was totally unable to critique, and to stand my own ground, to do all those things that it would have been important to do.”

Sisters Joelle and Edith, and Former Sister Judith expressed their gratitude for the opportunities of convent life, despite the challenges:

“At 67 [years old] you begin to look back and yeah, I’m very grateful.” (Sister Joelle)

“I’ve had a very good life and I just feel really deeply grateful, grateful to God, grateful to the community, grateful for the opportunities I’ve had ... I think that ... a lot’s been given to me ... and because I was a Sister of [name] there have been opportunities.” (Sister Edith)

“My experience as a sister was absolutely wonderful. The bad parts I hardly ever even think about ... There’s not too much that I resent or feel bad about.” (Former Sister Judith)

It is clear from the sisters’ collective responses that they remember the novitiate and convent life with mixed feelings: joy and struggle [31]. Cvetkovich ([20], p. 209), in theorizing solace from depression, offers her friend’s simple epithet to “keep moving” and “help other people”. In the context of what is often described as rigid and oppressive convent life before the Second Vatican Council within which “spirituality found itself to be more discipline than joy” ([22], p. 147), the sisters reported finding peace through each other and within corporal ritual [30]. For this reason, we employed Cvetkovich’s understanding of daily habit to nuance Foucault, as the tension between fiercely loyal subjects and radical resistance manifests in the ritual of monastic living.

6. Conclusions

In drawing upon the sisters’ voices to interrogate Foucault’s conception of discipline, we found that through all of the corporally regulated structure and discipline of convent life from the 1930s to the late 1960s, the sisters often ensured that their portrayals were nuanced. Their various experiences with discipline are telling of the fine distinctions between religious community leaders, and overall, the variations of experiences based on personality, past life experiences, community expectations, or convent leadership. This is an important consideration, both theoretically and historically. As we mentioned in the introduction, historical recollections of this time period often minimize the experiences of women religious. Theoretically, the sisters’ stories insist that examinations of monastic, often corporal, discipline make space for survival, resistance, and even solace within rigid corporally-based

disciplinary structures. As we have illuminated, even some former sisters who have since left the church entirely were sure to give a nuanced portrayal of the structure of convent life. Some of them reflected on forms of corporal resistance, or solace within corporal habit.

Future research might push the themes discussed here even further by formulating an interview guide with the nuances of solace and joy in convent life in mind. As mentioned above, the sisters in our study mentioned their experiences in convent life in response to an open-ended question about convent structure. Deeper understandings of more complex experiences²⁶ may emerge along a different line of questioning.

For Foucault, institutional discipline becomes self-discipline through the process of panopticism. We did not infer aspects of panopticism into the voices of the sisters as they reflected on convent structure because their positive experiences, however derived, were the focus of our theoretical nuancing here. Whether conformity or obedience was performed as a result of self-discipline is less relevant. Future work on monastic discipline might consider panoptical self-surveillance as it relates to the feelings of regimentation. Future research on pre-Vatican II²⁷ discipline might also consider direct reflections from the sisters on how discipline “failed” to restrict or regiment their embodied experiences in the convent setting. In other words, how do the sisters conceive of, and experience their resistance to certain corporal regulations, and what does their resistance suggest about the nuances of discipline and self-discipline, especially from the perspective of embodied feelings of solace?

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Author Contributions

The first author conceived of the research project, articulated the project aims, collected the data, conducted the analysis and co-wrote this article. The second author assisted with the transcription of

²⁶ Future studies may also explore the regulation of sex and the rejection of carnal experience, as well as the construction and control of asexuality and the dismissal of femaleness, all of which were imposed by the male hierarchy of the institutional church against women religious in convent life ([22], p. 148). Along the same lines, the prohibition of ‘particular friendships’ may also form the subject of a critical and compassionate analysis in the future (Former Sisters Carol and Judith, as well as Sisters Loretta and Maureen).

²⁷ As noted above, this article has focused on sisters’ experiences from the 1930s to the late 1960s. While the “cloister and habits and schedules and convent customs” have been readily associated with religious life during that time period, relatively little is known or understood about religious life today ([22], p. vii). Thus, given the democratic, inclusive and circular nature of many religious communities’ current forms of governance [3,4] future research should explore how, comparatively, sisters now conceive of, and experience regulation, negotiation and solace.

the interview data, developed the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this article, conducted the analysis and co-wrote this article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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