

[Opinion](#)

[News](#)

[Religious Life](#)



Benedictine nuns are pictured in 1900 before the completion of St. Anthony's Hospital in Bemidji, Minn. The image appeared in a 2011 documentary titled "Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America," which chronicled the 300-year contribution of U.S. women religious. (CNS/Courtesy Benedictines of Duluth)



Tom Roberts

[View Author Profile](#)

troberts@ncronline.org



Joan Chittister

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@joanchittister](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

October 30, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Gone are the convents filled with sisters draped in long, dark dresses called "habits," clothing from much earlier centuries often topped with starched wimples that squeezed the wearer's face and allowed only a view of chin to just above the eyebrows.

Gone are the Catholic elementary schools filled with children of the baby boom taught almost exclusively by the sisters, who worked for a pittance.

Gone are the motherhouses where young women flocked to be educated and trained in the disciplines of particular religious orders.

Gone, for the most part, are the habits and the women, many of whom left, as did their male counterparts in religious life, in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The much smaller and aging corps of women remaining is often, understandably, viewed as the final remnant of religious life. It is easy to conclude, from that view, that religious life is over.

"Wrong," says Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister, in this episode, a discussion that emerges from her classic book, [The Fire in These Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life](#).

The old forms of religious life, the "shape" of it, is certainly a thing of the past. "What's left," she says, "is a culture of young people looking for a way to live out their spiritual life, their contemplative understandings, their need to serve and their commitment to Jesus." Religious life isn't dead. It is changing.

"Risking the Questions" is a joint project of [Benetvision](#) and NCR. This podcast has been made possible in part by the generosity of Bill and Jeanne Buchanan. In episode 3, Chittister and her friend and [biographer](#), former National Catholic Reporter editor Tom Roberts, discuss changes to religious life.

Advertisement

How to Listen

Click the "play" button inside this article to start the show. Make sure to keep the window open on your browser if you're doing other things, or the audio will stop.

From your mobile device:

You can listen and subscribe to "Risking the Questions" from any podcast app. If you're reading this from an iPhone or other Apple mobile device, [tap this link](#) to listen in Apple Podcasts. The podcast is also available on Spotify, [at this link](#).

If you prefer another podcast app, you can find "Risking the Questions" there.

This story appears in the **Risking the Questions** feature series. [View the full series](#).